



## Between Nationalism and Women's Rights: The Kurdish Women's Movement in Iraq\*

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### Abstract

This article explores an aspect of the micro-politics of the 'new Iraq' by examining the under-studied topic of the Iraqi-Kurdish women's movement. Drawing on interviews with women activists in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, we describe and analyze their activities, strategies and objectives in relation to Kurdish nationalism and feminism, focusing on the period since 2003. Rather than conceptualizing nationalism and feminism as either contradictory or compatible frames of reference for these activists, we understand debates among women activists as attempts to 'narrate' the Kurdish nation, particularly in response to the realities of the 'new Iraq'. We contend that nationalism per se is not an obstacle to women's rights in Iraqi Kurdistan. Rather, it is the failure, until now, of women activists to engage with the disjuncture between nation and state that could limit the achievements of their struggle.

### Keywords

Iraq, Kurds, nationalism, feminism, women's movement, citizenship

### Introduction

One of the neglected issues in the literature on Iraq has been the role of women and gender historically and within the 'new Iraq'. Much of the recent literature has focused on the macro-political and political-strategic issues of violence, the US role in post-invasion political processes, oil, constitutional revisions and federalism, or what the International Crisis Group has summarized as the

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struggle over the distribution of power and resources (International Crisis Group 2008). This struggle is generally represented as taking place among political elites and their militias. Yet, the decisions and actions of politicians and armed groups are dependent upon their ability to mobilize civilian populations to support their political projects, through the construction of notions of ethno-nationalism or religious identities. Notions of 'appropriate' gender relations and gender identities constitute an important element in this mobilization and open spaces for resistance or accommodation among women (and men) at the local level. In order to understand these micro-politics, this article examines the activities, strategies and objectives of Iraqi Kurdish women activists as they negotiate the gendered and ethno-national politics of the 'new Iraq'.

In order to analyze the activism of Iraqi Kurdish women, we engage in the debate over the relationship between nationalism and feminism. The question of whether nationalism and feminism are compatible or mutually exclusive has been a source of contestation among feminist scholars (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1989; Cockburn 1998; Jayawardena 1986; Yuval Davis 1997, 2004, among others). Many feminists, particularly in Europe and North America, view nationalism as antithetical to feminist aims and struggles (Cockburn 2007: 192–202). However, in colonial and post/neocolonial contexts, the picture that emerges is more complex. First, due to the stigmatization of feminism in the Middle East, the terms 'feminist' or 'feminism' are rarely used and women adopt a variety of labels to describe the objectives of their activism (al-Ali 2000: 47). Here, we refer to those women struggling for a greater role for women in the public sphere, a greater allocation of resources and/or opportunities for women or the end of gender discrimination in legislation as 'women's rights activists'. Second, we find a diversity of experiences concerning the relationship between 'feminism' and 'nationalism' in the Middle East. Sophie Richter-Devroe (2009) argues that most Palestinian men and women alike view anti-nationalist feminist politics and attitudes as antithetical to their struggle for Palestinian rights. Moreover, Frances Hasso's study of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine demonstrates that nationalism can facilitate women's agency and 'empowerment' in a context where grassroots mobilization, rather than military struggle, is the key movement strategy and the movement's ideology supports women's equality as illustrative of the movement's modernity (Hasso 1998).

However, in the Middle East, we often find nationalism entwined with religion, and hostile to the notion of women's 'liberation' within a modernist paradigm. For example, Islamist movements struggling against nominally secular authoritarian regimes and/or foreign occupation often advocate





conservative gender norms, including veiling for women and reform of family laws in line with conservative interpretations, while simultaneously mobilizing women as part of those movements (Moghadam 1994). On the other hand, Margot Badran demonstrates that Egyptian feminists in the early twentieth century worked within the framework of Islam and advanced the national cause (Badran 1995). Shahrzad Mojab (2004, 2009), referring to the Iraqi Kurdish context, argues that Islamist-nationalist movements and secular nationalism both stand in the way of transformative gender politics and hinder a feminist analysis of and struggle against gender-based violence and inequalities.

In Iraq, a multi-national and multi-religious state, state nationalism has challenged national fragmentation and sectarianism, as well as being an important catalyst for resistance and opposition to the US-led occupation and, in some cases, to the various governments since 2003 (al-Ali and Pratt 2009). Yet, historically, Iraqi nationalism has politically, economically and culturally marginalized the Kurds, who have demanded autonomy since their incorporation into the Iraqi state in 1923. Iraqi nationalism has also undermined Iraqi women's rights activists, who have been accused of imitating 'western agendas', betraying the nation and detracting from 'more important' political issues. This is an accusation that has plagued feminists and feminism in the Middle East since the beginning of the twentieth century and is not unique to Iraq.

The type of 'feminism' or 'women's rights' demands may be significant in terms of defining its relationship to nationalism. Women's rights activists that focus their demands on bringing women into the public sphere, through education and employment, may often find significant overlap with nationalist demands to 'modernize' the nation (as Frances Hasso (1998) finds in the case of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine). However, women's rights activism that focuses on issues such as violence against women or family laws may face a more uphill battle, as male nationalist leaders struggle for sovereignty over their home life as well as their nation. This struggle for control is also linked to the construction of national identities, which, in turn, mobilize nationalist movements. Partha Chatterjee argues that nationalist elites construct an 'authentic' national identity and culture that is *different from the West*. This difference is located in the sphere of culture and, related to this, the private sphere of gender relations, rather than the 'outer domain' of technology, the economy, or the military (in which the West can always claim superiority) (Chatterjee 1993).

Attempts at creating 'authentic' national identities are therefore linked to the construction of particular gender norms. In the Iraqi Kurdish context, difference is constructed in relation to Arab Iraqis as well as in relation to





the West. This opens up a number of paradoxes regarding the attitude of Kurdish politicians in relation to women's rights struggles in Iraqi Kurdistan, as this article demonstrates. However, it is not only (male) nationalist elites that construct national identities but ordinary people too are involved in 'narrating the nation' (Bhabha 1994: 145). We argue here that women's rights activists in Iraqi Kurdistan are involved in 'narrating the nation' through their claims for particular rights and resources. Toward that end, this article examines the objectives and activities of women activists in Iraqi Kurdistan not only as attempts to claim women's rights but also as instances of shaping Kurdish nationalism and women's rights.

The article is based on over 60 semi-structured interviews carried out among civil society activists, politicians and professionals in Erbil (called Hawler in Kurdish) and Sulaymaniyah (called Sulimani in Kurdish) in the spring of 2007 and fall of 2010. All women quoted were interviewed by the authors, unless otherwise referenced, and their identities have been anonymized. We draw on these interviews to present an in-depth case study of the women's movement in Iraqi Kurdistan and we analyze their statements in relation to Kurdish nationalism and feminism/women's rights claims. In the course of our research we talked to women who are members of the Kurdistan parliament or associated with the women's unions linked to the main Kurdish political parties: The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), associated with Massoud Barzani, is based in the area in and around Erbil and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) associated with Jalal Talabani, the president of Iraq, is based in and around Sulaymaniyah. Other women activists associated with political parties whom we met included members of the Kurdistan Communist Party, Islamic Union of Kurdistan and the Assyrian National Party. We also talked to women who were founders of or involved with one of the numerous civil society associations, such as Zhin Organization, Pery Organization, al-Amal, Breeze of Hope Organization, and Women's Empowerment Organization—all based in Erbil; and Asuda Organization for Combating Violence Against Women, the Kurdistan Social Development Organization, the Civil Development Organization, Ghassem Organization, Reach, Rewan Women's Centre, Children's Nest, the Democracy and Human Rights Development Centre, and the National Center for Gender Research in Sulaymaniyah, in addition to women lawyers and journalists.

These women activists are involved in a range of activities spanning welfare and humanitarian assistance; education and training; publishing and journalism; developmental projects; politics; legal aid services; support and protection of victims of gender-based violence; and political lobbying related to women's legal rights. Women activists are well-represented in civil society organizations





in urban areas and, to a lesser degree, in political parties. For the most part, these women are urban and middle class and do not necessarily represent the views or desires of rural and/or working class women (Mojab 2009; Fischer-Tahir 2010: 1391). Historically, and up to the present, the majority of Kurdish women's rights activists work within a secular framework. A rejection of political Islam has been an important element of distinction between Kurdish and Arab identity in a context where Islamist political parties and movements play a significant role in post-invasion central and southern Iraq. However Kurdish Islamist women's rights activists do exist and are largely in opposition to the main political parties (KDP and PUK), which are increasingly perceived to be corrupt and out of touch with people's aspirations and needs. However, Kurdish Islamist women regard their political activism as contributing to Kurdish rights and are working from within an ethno-nationalist as opposed to (Iraqi-) national or transnational Islamic framework.

### **Kurdish Women and the Struggle for Kurdish and Women's Rights Before and After 2003**

Iraqi Kurdish women have been involved in the struggle for Kurdish rights for many decades. However, until 1991, their struggle was mainly focused on gaining national rights for the Kurdish people rather than pursuing any sort of gender-specific agenda (Mojab 1996, 2000, 2003). This has led some scholars to argue that Kurdish nationalism mobilized women without transforming the existing patriarchal relations of Kurdish society (Mojab 2004; Begikhani 2003). The creation of the 'safe haven' in 1991 enabled the formation of new political organizations, the return of previously-exiled women and the establishment of international NGOs, creating new spaces and opportunities for Kurdish women to promote a women rights' agenda (Mojab 2004; Begikhani 2005: 223; al-Ali 2007: 205–208).

However, Kurdish women's gains in the safe haven were not uniformly positive. Following the elections in 1992, only five of the 105 elected members of parliament were women (Mojab 2004: 119). The political leadership of both parties tried to incorporate tribal leaders, leading to the emergence of 'neo-tribalism' in Iraqi Kurdistan after 1992 (McDowall 2000: 385). In this context, women's initiatives were frequently regarded suspiciously and were even actively opposed by conservative Kurdish male political actors (Mojab 2004; al-Ali 2007: 207). In May 1994, the PUK and KDP went to war against one another, leading to the division of Iraqi Kurdistan in 1999 and the deaths of hundreds of Kurds. Simultaneously, Kurdish Islamist groups gained





influence and, sponsored by Iran, attempted to Islamize Kurdish society (Mojab 2004: 129). Many Kurdish women marched between Sulaymaniyah and Erbil in 1994 to demand peace and reconciliation between the two parties. Nevertheless, Kurdish women also became divided in line with the political and administrative division of Iraqi Kurdistan.

A significant issue for many women activists after the creation of the safe haven was the increase in so-called honor killings and other crimes against women, labeled 'gendercide' by Shahrzad Mojab (2003). Both the KDP and PUK claimed that women's oppression, including 'honor killings', was part of Kurdish 'tribal and Islamic culture' (Mojab 2004: 122). This reification of Kurdish culture and tradition was an example *par excellence* of the historical and cross-cultural tendency to use women and gender issues to construct 'authentic' national identities in nationalist struggles and processes (Yuval Davis 1997).

Despite the hostility they faced from some quarters, Kurdish women's rights activists campaigned to annul the provisions within the Iraqi penal code that allowed lenient punishment for the murder of women in the name of 'honor'. They were successful in achieving these changes in 2000 in the PUK-controlled areas and 2002 in the KDP-controlled areas. Despite this achievement, the prosecution of honor crimes is reported to be low (Amnesty International 2009). During the 1990s, Kurdish women's rights activists also lobbied for reforms to the Iraqi personal status code of 1959 in order to introduce greater equality in marriage and divorce. In the PUK-controlled region, Jalal Talabani signed Resolution 62 (2000), which made taking more than one wife punishable by up to three years in prison and a fine of up to 10,000 dinars. However, like the outlawing of so-called honor crimes, the implementation of Resolution 62 has not been consistent.

Between 1991 and 2003, women in the 'safe haven' were not necessarily safe from 'honor' crimes or other forms of discrimination, as Shahrzad Mojab argues (2004). She observes that this period saw 'the forging of alliances between nationalism, religion, and tribal-feudal male power' (Mojab 2004: 130). However, she goes on to argue, '...at the same time, this alliance has invited resistance from women and men who are interested in democratizing gender relations in Kurdistan' (Mojab 2004: 130). In other words, the rise of conservative nationalist forces and the women's movement are two sides of the same coin of Kurdish nationalism. The period of the safe haven opened up political space for Kurdish women activists to redefine Kurdish nationalism in a way that gave greater space to (some) women and their demands.

The fall of the Baath regime in 2003 was a relief for people in Iraqi Kurdistan, but the re-integration of Iraqi Kurdistan into the rest of Iraq has





brought new issues to the fore and led to diverging opinions among women activists. The issues that we discuss here are: relations between women activists and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG); measuring progress in achieving gender equality; and responses to the constitution, including the relationship between Iraqi-Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq. Exploring the different views of women activists toward these issues highlights the point that feminism and nationalism are not necessarily in tension in the 'new Iraq' but rather that there exist contestations over the nature of Kurdish nationalism, as well as the relationship between the (Iraqi) state and (Kurdish) nation.

### **Women's Rights Activists and the Kurdistan Regional Government**

Above, we note that Kurdish nationalism is seen by many women activists as positive for the development of a Kurdish women's movement. However, the development of the women's movement within the framework of nationalist struggle and the domination of the PUK and KDP in that struggle has led to a situation in which civil society organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan are, for the most part, far from independent and have the financial and political support and protection of one of the political parties. Large numbers of women's activities, organizations, initiatives or events are sponsored by one of the main political parties in the KRG, principally the KDP or the PUK (al-Ali and Pratt 2009).

Since 2003, the dominance of the political parties over civil society has increasingly become an issue for some women activists. Shilan A., who works for an independent women's organization in Erbil, complained in an interview in 2007:

Those of us who are not backed by political parties are struggling to have a voice. It is difficult to focus on women's issues as other national political agendas related to Kurdish independence, the struggle around Kirkuk and federalism are always perceived to have priority.

This view was articulated by several other women activists and seemed to be even more accentuated in September 2010 in the context of the long-running failure to resolve the status of Kirkuk and the territories disputed between Arabs and Kurds.

While some women activists view 'national political agendas' as undermining women's rights, other women, particularly those linked to the political parties, claim that both issues are equally important. For example, Riham Q., an elected member of the Iraqi-Kurdistan parliament and part of a campaign





for women's equal rights in personal status issues, explained in an interview in April 2007, 'My ambition is a democratic, secular Kurdistan and the return of Kirkuk; to have a real civil society and understanding of women issues'.

We found that many Kurdish women activists with links to one or another of the main political parties still view one another suspiciously, despite the KDP and PUK having signed an accord to end their rivalry in 2002 and, subsequently, unifying their administrations within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The emergence of a serious opposition in the form of the 'Goran' movement (or Movement for Democratic Change), founded in Sulaymaniyah in 2008 by former members of the PUK, has had some impact on how activists linked to the main political parties relate to one another. Goran has challenged the monopoly of political power by the two established parties more than the Islamist political parties were previously able to do. Many women activists close to the KDP and the PUK felt threatened by the reformist activists and politicians, although some women we interviewed claim that the Goran movement lost its cutting edge once it became a political party and entered formal politics. While the actual significance of the Goran movement is debated among the women we talked to, in 2010 we found less tension between women linked to the two main political parties but more tension between those women working within government and parliament, on one side, and those working within civil society organizations, on the other.

### Measuring Progress in Achieving Gender Equality

To some degree, relations between women activists and the KRG are shaped by their views on the achievements of the political parties/KRG with regard to gender equality. Some women, particularly those linked to the political parties, believe that the political parties have played an important role in improving women's rights in Iraqi Kurdistan. For example, Nazdar S., who used to be a militant *peshmerga* struggling for Kurdish independence and then became a prominent figure in the Kurdistan Women's Union linked to Massoud Barzani's KDP, said:

I am very proud of what we have achieved since 1991. Women have advanced greatly in Kurdistan and our political leaders have played an important role in helping women's rights. They have supported us in educating women, encouraging them to work and to get involved in politics. But our problem is culture and traditions. Some women listen to clerics more than they listen to university professors. We need to start in schools and educate our children about equality and human rights. Despite all the problems we have, every day is better than the







previous one and we become more and more modernized (al-Ali and Pratt 2009:143).

Many women activists point to the issue of so-called honor crimes as a measure of commitment among Kurdish political leaders to improving women's rights. Unlike the south and center of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government has removed the 'honor' motive as a mitigating factor in murders. Nevertheless, during a number of interviews in 2007, activists complained that nobody had been prosecuted for killing their female relatives. Several activists interviewed blamed religious and tribal practices and 'backward' cultural attitudes as the main obstacle to women's rights. Others were not convinced by this argument. According to one women's rights activist in Erbil:

It is too easy to blame culture. The truth is that politicians view honor killings as a family problem. Yes, according to the new Kurdish Constitution honor killings are criminal and need to be punished. But the law is not implemented. Instead they prefer family and tribal mediation instead of proper laws and courts, especially when political and economic interests are at stake (al-Ali and Pratt 2009: 144).

We agree with this particular activist's analysis that 'culture' is used to gloss over the failure to systematically prosecute 'honor' killings. The political rivalry between the main parties and their co-optation of tribal and religious leaders through patronage, which has become institutionalized within Iraqi Kurdistan (Leezenberg 2005) undermines accountability and justice as well as reproducing, rather than challenging, hierarchical-patriarchal relations in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Yet, some of those who had been critical of the KRG in 2007, in retrospect, by September 2010, characterized the previous parliament and cabinet in a more favorable light. Many women activists expressed their disappointment with the current parliament and cabinet, which they perceived as abandoning the more serious commitment to women's rights displayed by the previous government (2006–2009). As one woman activist, Vian A. in Erbil, described:

The last parliament and cabinet made a big effort to promote women's issues. Even if it was propaganda at times, they sent a clear message to the community that they believe in women's rights. They had a special committee dedicated to women's issues in the council. There was a Ministry of Women's Affairs. And even if they did not do much, it sent out the right signal. There was also a huge media campaign against gender-based violence. There were lots of programs on TV about women's rights. The prime minister gave many speeches about this. And all this in turn opened the door to numerous women's organizations to do work and to get support.





When asked about the reasons for this shift, answers ranged from the perceived more pressing political issues related to ‘national security’ to the unresolved issues of Kurdish autonomy and the status of Kirkuk. However, several women looked less to ‘bigger political questions’ and referred to the lack of institutionalization of women and gender-related issues: ‘Too much still depends on individuals and the good will of specific people, rather than a more transparent and continuous establishment of relevant institutions and processes’, argued Sawsan G., who has been actively struggling against gender-based discrimination for two decades. A former head of the Kurdistan Women’s Union told us that male politicians in leadership positions are often very supportive of women’s rights, but it was men in lower positions who frequently felt threatened by women and the idea of change. Other women interviewed gave the current government the benefit of the doubt or even praised it. A commonly expressed sentiment was that things are taking their time but that good and promising initiatives were on the way, such as activating the newly established Council for Women’s Issues.

Another measure of achievement of women’s rights held up by the activists with whom we spoke was the issue of the Constitution of Iraqi Kurdistan. Most activists with whom we talked, with the exception of those members of the Kurdistan Islamist parties, argued that the Iraqi-Kurdistan Constitution was better with regard to women’s rights than the Iraqi Constitution (passed in 2005) because it does not stipulate that Islam should be ‘a fundamental source of legislation’. Kurdish women activists (with the exception of members of Islamist parties in Iraqi Kurdistan) believe that using Islam as the main source of legislation does not guarantee women’s rights. These include changes to outlaw polygamy and introduce equality in inheritance. Derin J., a lawyer based in Erbil, said in 2007:

I argued with some people in a seminar because they said, ‘we can’t do that, because it is against our religion and our traditions’. I say there must be stronger laws to protect women. If it’s useful for men, they use the argument of culture against women rights. There is a movement for changing laws for women’s rights but we face a struggle to do it.

In the summer of 2008, women activists opposed the KRG’s proposal to bring personal status laws in line with Islamic law, which they feared might be interpreted as allowing polygamy and being against equality of inheritance (Khalil 2008). Of course, personal status codes vary greatly across the Middle East and the wider Muslim world. There is a wide range of interpretations of Islamic family laws on marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance, from the conservative Wahhabi interpretations in Saudi Arabia





to the more progressive and egalitarian interpretations on which the Moroccan *moudawana* (personal status code) is based. Yet, given the developments in central and southern Iraq, where conservative interpretations of religion have become widespread and have been used to justify discriminatory practices (al-Ali and Pratt 2009), it comes as no surprise that many Kurdish women's rights activists equate Islamic law with inequalities and social injustice.

In September 2010, when Kurdish women activists were asked about their campaign for gender equality in the Iraqi-Kurdistan Constitution, especially in relation to the personal status code, women were divided over whether to see it as a success or not. On the one hand, they failed to achieve new gains, such as the outlawing of polygamy and enshrining equality in inheritance. However, unlike the rest of Iraq, Kurdish women did at least manage to hold on to previously existing legislation which they perceive to be more equitable than Article 41 of the Iraqi Constitution, which canceled equal rights for all Iraqis in personal status matters and devolved judgments related to marriage, divorce, inheritance and child custody to the authority of religious leaders. Nevertheless, many women also stated that much effort would have to be put into implementing those rights. This is no more obvious than with regard to so-called honor crimes as discussed above.

### **Kurdish Women and the Rest of Iraq**

After 2003, it was a relief. Before, we were afraid that the Baath could come back at any time. It was like being in a prison. After 2003, we were no longer afraid. We were able to meet women from the rest of Iraq. There were conferences and these were good for networking. We exchanged experiences and formulated united demands.

Chiman A., working for an Iraqi development NGO, spoke, in an interview in 2007, about the importance of women working across ethnic and sectarian lines to achieve progress in women's rights. The defeat of Iraqi Governing Council Resolution 137 of 2003, which attempted to place family law under the authority of religious leaders, and the success of achieving a 25 percent women's quota in parliament, represent examples of such success. Chiman also rejected the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 on the grounds that it was against women's rights, despite the fact that it was endorsed by the Kurdish political parties due to its provisions for Kurdish autonomy within an Iraqi federal system. Of particular concern to Chiman and other women in Iraq was





Article 41, which, similar to Resolution 137, threatened equal rights in personal status matters for all Iraqis, regardless of religion or sect.<sup>1</sup>

Although some Kurdish women's organizations and activists, like Chiman, have been involved in the campaign around the Iraqi Constitution, particularly with respect to what was Article 41 (concerning the personal status code), a large number of Kurdish women activists state that they are not very concerned with the Iraqi Constitution and, instead, focus on ensuring women's rights within the Iraqi-Kurdistan Constitution (al-Ali and Pratt 2009: 138).

However, many Kurdish women experienced a rude awakening when they discovered that there are elements of Iraqi national legislation that override the Iraqi-Kurdistan Constitution and legislation.<sup>2</sup> This only became obvious with the announcement of a new administrative decree by the central government in April 2007, according to which women need the permission of a male guardian (*mahram*) to be able to apply for a passport. Although no article in the Iraqi Constitution actively stipulates this policy, the Iraqi Constitution does state that Islam is a fundamental source of legislation and that no law may contradict Islam. Given that conservative Islamist parties form the majority in the Baghdad parliament, this allows for decrees and policies based on conservative interpretations of religion to be enacted.

The predominance of conservative Islamist parties in central and southern Iraq led many of our respondents to perceive Iraqi women as living in a drastically different context. Consequently, many Kurdish women are not interested in working with women in the rest of Iraq, believing that they have different objectives from women in Iraqi Kurdistan. Amira S., working with an international NGO in Sulaymaniyah, echoed the attitudes of several Kurdish women activists when she said in an interview in April 2007:

In the Iraqi Constitution, they talk about the role of sharia and allowing polygamy. In the south of Iraq, they don't think that this is a problem. Only in the north are we asking for women's rights in the constitution. Only the Kurdish parties are

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<sup>1</sup> Decree 137 was an attempt by conservative Shii Islamists to replace the existing and relatively progressive unified personal status code (a set of laws governing marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance) with a more conservative interpretation of Islamic law. Iraqi women's rights activists managed to stop the decree from being passed by the Coalitional Provisional Authority. However, in the Iraqi Constitution, Article 41 effectively means replacing a unified personal status code with different legislation according to different regions and according to different religious sects. While the article is still under review, it is not a priority issue for most Iraqi politicians.

<sup>2</sup> The Iraqi Constitution stipulates those areas of legislation that are devolved to the regions (i.e., the Kurdistan Regional Government) and those areas that are decided by the central government in Baghdad. For more details, see Brown (2005).





asking for women's rights. Women in the south are not asking for their rights. Or maybe they want their rights but they can't ask because of pressure from men. In Sulaymaniyah, we faced opposition to women's rights but the women's movement fought for them.

Many views expressed by women in Iraqi Kurdistan were based more on hearsay than any in-depth knowledge about the actual struggles of women's rights activists in central and southern Iraq, who have been fighting for women's legal rights for years (al-Ali and Pratt 2009). However, as noted above, Kurdish Iraqi women activists tend to reject Islam as a frame for their demands and agendas, whereas a large number of Arab Iraqi women who are either members of one of the Islamist political parties or are merely pious women advocate women's concerns through a framework of Islam.

Some Kurdish women directly expressed reservations about being part of Iraq. Helima I., head of an NGO in Sulaymaniyah working on children's rights, said in an interview in 2007:

The impact of the fall of Saddam Hussein is positive for Kurdistan. But recently the situation is negative. One of the problems is being part of Iraq again and under the control of the central government. We worked hard for a Kurdish Constitution, to separate religion and state, for women's rights and child rights. Now, we are under threat from the Iraqi Constitution. Religion plays a bigger role in the Iraqi Constitution.

The issue of Kirkuk<sup>3</sup> was a particular bone of contention for several women activists, particularly those close to the political parties. They viewed the return of Kirkuk to the Kurds as central to achieving Kurdish rights. Even women activists who work across ethnic and sectarian lines in Kirkuk stress the importance that Arabs and Turkmen must recognize that Kirkuk is a Kurdish city.

## **Conclusion**

Historically, Kurdish nationalism has played a significant role in mobilizing women and supporting their public roles, despite the conservative nature of much of the Kurdistan region. Many Kurdish women were able to build on their roles in the Kurdish national movement to launch a women's rights

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<sup>3</sup> The issue of Kirkuk refers to the dispute between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central Iraqi government over sovereignty of the city. For more details about this and other issues of difference between the KRG and the central government, see International Crisis Group (2008).





agenda after 1991. Since then, for the most part, Kurdish women's rights activism has been framed in terms of contributing to the democratization and modernization of an autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan.

With the fall of the Baath regime in 2003, many Kurdish women activists initially joined with women activists in the rest of Iraq to promote women's rights for all Iraqis. However, the violence that has engulfed central and southern Iraq as well as the Islamization of politics there, mean that a large number of women activists in Kurdistan have put their efforts into supporting autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan as a means of defending women's rights there. Moreover, many Kurdish activists tend to emphasize their difference from Arabs through reference to their desire for women's rights (as opposed to what they perceive as a lack of desire for women's rights in the rest of Iraq). Even those women in Kurdistan who believe that it is important to work with women in the rest of Iraq are largely prevented from doing so due to the practical difficulties of traveling to/within the rest of Iraq. However, some women's rights activists from central and southern Iraq travel to Iraqi Kurdistan for meetings and workshops as it is much safer than other parts of the country.

The comparison with the rest of Iraq has made some Kurdish women more optimistic about the gains that they have made within the Iraqi Kurdistan region, while others remain critical of politicians within the KRG. Some women activists believe that Kurdistan politicians are marginalizing women's rights to concentrate on the 'bigger national questions' of Kirkuk, oil and federalism. Other women activists believe that these questions of Kurdish rights are also inseparable from achieving women's rights in Kurdistan. However, both the critics and the optimists believe that autonomy for Kurdistan must be respected by the government in Baghdad.

With regard to the relationship between feminism and nationalism, the Iraqi-Kurdish case demonstrates that the tensions between these two 'isms' cannot be resolved *per se*: they require an intersectional and in-depth empirical approach to grasp the full complexity and nuances of a specific context in a specific historical moment, including the configuration of social and political forces that make up nationalist parties and women's movements and the types of nationalism and feminism articulated by these different forces. Differences between women activists in Iraqi Kurdistan not only relate to debates over strategies to maximize women's rights (between accommodation of and resistance to the domination of the PUK and KDP; cooperation with women in the rest of Iraq; and the role of Islam, among others) but also to different notions of Kurdish nationalism (patriarchal versus egalitarian).

Iraqi-Kurdish nationalism has been transformed over the last few decades as the Iraqi-Kurdish movement has changed from a movement of



self-determination, struggling against the Iraqi government, to the institutionalized leadership of a 'quasi-state' (Natali 2010), involved in protracted struggles over power and resources within Iraq. Alongside this, women activists in Iraqi Kurdistan have continued to expand their demands for gender equality, perceiving this as part of building Iraqi Kurdistan rather than in opposition to this process. However, post-2003 developments pose a challenge for women's rights activists in Iraqi Kurdistan. A lack of systematic and consistent engagement with the wider political field of the 'new Iraq', and focusing all activities in the narrower political field of Iraqi Kurdistan, might backfire against women's rights activists in Iraqi Kurdistan in the long run due to the disjuncture between state and nation in Iraq. The Iraqi Constitution overrides the Kurdistan Constitution in many areas, and laws in the Iraqi-Kurdistan region should not contravene the principles of the Iraqi Constitution, which are implemented through legislation decided by the Baghdad-based parliament.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, women's rights activists' reliance on the KRG to champion and support gender equality and social justice might prove to be problematic in the long run. It has already become obvious that Kurdish politicians are prone to compromise women's rights in order to shore up support among socially conservative constituencies as well as sidelining gender-related issues in the context of negotiating other political issues with the Iraqi central government. Here, they are not different from politicians elsewhere in the region, including in the rest of Iraq.

Furthermore, as feminist scholars have documented across the region, authoritarian regimes may implement measures to increase gender equality and social justice as long as these are perceived to be harmless to the regime and the status quo (Kandiyoti 1991; Joseph 1991, 2000; al-Ali 2007; al-Ali and Pratt 2009; Hasso 2011). An exaggerated belief in the ability of the KRG and the main political parties to promote women's rights could limit the strategies of Kurdish women activists and possible achievement in the long run. A closer engagement with women's rights activists and organizations in central and southern Iraq might help to diversify alliances and strengthen, rather than weaken, women's rights claims against the Iraqi state as well as the KRG.

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<sup>4</sup> Article 13 of the Iraqi Constitution states: 'First: This Constitution is the preeminent and supreme law in Iraq and shall be binding in all parts of Iraq without exception. Second: No law that contradicts this Constitution shall be enacted. Any text in any regional constitutions or any other legal text that contradicts this Constitution shall be considered void'. (<http://www.mofa.gov.iq/documentfiles/IraqiConstitution.pdf>).



Another potential risk of too closely relying on the KRG stems from the fact that women's movements regionally have experienced significant backlashes in those contexts where women's rights organizations or gender equality agendas have been seen to be co-opted by the state. Growing dissent and political protests in Iraqi Kurdistan illustrate how lack of political freedom and widespread corruption have seriously undermined the credibility of the KRG. By too closely allying themselves with political parties in government, Kurdish women's rights organizations and activists risk being associated with a corrupt regime. It is important to note that a growing number of women's rights activists have already distanced themselves from the main political parties and are part of the wider protest movements against corruption and for better services within Iraqi Kurdistan, which are occurring at the time of writing this article. In this respect, women's rights activists are articulating some of the main demands of non-elite women regarding a fairer distribution of resources within Iraqi Kurdistan but they are also challenging the institutionalized patronage that helps to perpetuate discrimination against women.

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