

**Women and War in the Middle East**

**TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

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## THREE

'Post-war Reconstruction, Imperialism  
and Kurdish Women's NGOs

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Destruction and reconstruction are integral components of life in the Middle East. While destruction is by no means a uniquely Middle Eastern phenomenon, it has been, for quite a long time, the rule rather than the exception in the region. What distinguishes the region is a rather unique relationship between reconstruction and destruction. Here, (re)construction lags behind destruction, and seriously constrains the enormous resources available for renewal and survival. This situation, I will argue, reproduces the conditions of destruction.

A host of factors are at work in the contemporary dynamics of destruction and reconstruction in the Middle East. The state, including Western powers and their inter-state organ, the United Nations, as well as non-state actors such as oppositional political groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are all involved in the process of destruction in complex ways that are not difficult to comprehend. This chapter looks critically at the reconstruction projects in Iraqi Kurdistan. The evidence for this study is based on my three decades of close involvement with Kurdish women in the region as well as diaspora and, in part, on field research in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2000 and 2005. I will use the evidence to reflect on

## 100 WOMEN AND WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

both the theory and the practice of 'post-war' reconstruction, and offer ideas that are relevant for the renewal of progressive, feminist and anti-imperialist nation-state building in the Middle East.

I will argue that 'post-war' reconstruction projects reproduce, and even embody, conditions of violence against the majority of the populations. Democratic and effective state structures have not been allowed to emerge in most of the Middle East, in particular in Iraqi Kurdistan. When NGOs are encouraged, as in the case of northern Iraq, to play a significant role in reconstruction, they fail to act effectively. In the case of the Kurdish region, the NGOs are, in fact, promoted to constrain the evolving of an effective, sovereign, Kurdish state. In Iraqi Kurdistan, some NGO and even UN-based agency operations have created conditions of dependence, and even destruction of the indigenous agriculture and local orders of production and consumption. More significantly, in Iraq today a regime of fragmented religious-feudal rule subverts serious efforts at constructing democratic state power and civil society.

Destruction/reconstruction occurs in the context of changing international relations, aspects of which are conceptualized as 'transnationalism', 'postcolonialism', 'post-nationalism' and 'globalization'. While the literature on the nature of this changing world is diverse, it highlights a set of widely shared claims about the institution of the state. One claim is the withering away of the state, which is weakened by emerging sub-national and supra-national entities. A related claim is the retrogressive nature of the state and the progressive nature of private property, free enterprise and free markets. These theories often treat the market as the source of life – that is, democracy, freedom, transnational cooperation, prosperity and peace. However, the evidence from the Middle East casts serious doubt about the validity of these claims.

Drawing on a critical transnational feminist analytic, this chapter opens up new ways of thinking about nationalism, citizenship, homeland and the conception of gender as the layered subject in the nation-building project. It brings into focus contemporary conjunctures and disjunctures in the materialization and historiciza-

## RECONSTRUCTION AND KURDISH WOMEN 101

tion of women's lived experiences of militarism, colonialism and imperialism. Through this analytic, I will attempt to interrogate forms of colonial/imperial feminism with goals to 'liberate' and promote 'democracy' through women's NGOs and argue that this feminized 'rescue' mission has re-orientalized Kurdish women and has failed to challenge structural-patriarchal violence and the ways in which war, occupation and imperialism have impoverished them. The main argument is that destruction is a trend in the changing international order based on the supremacy of capital and 'free' markets. Far from withering away, the institution of the state, both in the West and in the Middle East, leads, plans and thrives on expanding markets. I will argue that violence is embedded in, rather than alien to, the rule of 'free' markets. A transnational 'free' market regime thrives on stability, which is difficult to achieve under conditions of widespread poverty. Disparities, famine, poverty, despotism, corruption and injustice generate conflict. The management of international and regional conflicts in the Middle East is increasingly conducted by the United States, which uses military intervention frequently in order to move towards the desired political stability. Very simply, but not simplistically, the maintenance of the 'world order' demands violence, and thrives on it. Harvey aptly conceptualizes this process as a contradictory feature of neoliberalism by naming it 'creative destruction' and 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003, 2006). Quite often reconstruction or development projects involve violence – political, social, psychological and economic – in so far as they maintain a political order which has produced destruction.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, people cherish the fall of Saddam Hussein. However, Ba'ath power has been replaced by a regime of political, economic, psychological and physical violence in which the two Kurdish political parties, the UN, the NGOs, the Turkish army, the US-led occupying forces, as well as Iranian, Syrian and Turkish state power, play diverse roles. Under these conditions, the political structural order that produced destruction and violence in the past has been replicated in more complex ways in Iraqi Kurdistan.

## Iraq: a state born in war

The Iraqi state is a product of World War I and colonial rivalry. Before the war ended in 1918, the territories that now constitute Iraq were provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Britain and France, the two powers that led the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, decided to create a Kurdish state. Provisions for this state-building project were inscribed in the Treaty of Sèvres, which was signed by the defeated Ottoman government in 1920. Western plans changed, however, largely due to the revival of the Turkish army under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) and the establishment of Soviet power in the Caucasian region by 1921. The Kurds of Iraq resisted integration into the Iraqi state, but Kurdish rebellions were put down by the British-Iraqi army.

The Kurds revolted in 1961, and conducted an armed struggle for autonomy, which continued until the Gulf War of 1991. Western powers, Israel and Iran, among others, supported or opposed it during its long history. In 1970, the Kurds reached a settlement with Iraq, which, if implemented, would have created an autonomous Kurdish region by 1974. However, the United States, Israel and Iran encouraged the Kurdish leadership to reject the settlement. The USA was concerned about Baghdad's close relations with the Soviet Union, and its border disputes with Iran. Baghdad declared war on the Kurds by the end of the four-year truce. The USA, Israel and Iran provided the Kurds with arms and logistics. However, they abandoned the Kurds after a year of destructive war when Iran and Iraq resolved their differences. The Kurdish side was defeated. This war inflicted extensive damage on life and property. It created waves of refugees, estimated at more than 100,000, who fled to Iran, Turkey and Western countries.

After the defeat of the Kurds, the Iraqi government created a buffer zone on its borders with Iran. This was done through the destruction of mountain villages along the border. All village buildings and springs of water, which were the lifeblood of the community, were destroyed; millions of landmines were planted in

the villages and their farms so that no one, peasants or guerrillas, could resettle there.

The Kurdish armed resistance resumed, however. The government pursued a policy of revenge rather than amnesty and reconstruction. State violence led to armed revolt, and to more violence and destruction. In the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iraq attacked the Islamic state, and unleashed the longest war of the region, which led to enormous destruction in the two countries. The United States intervened by helping Iraq.

The two major Kurdish political parties leading the armed struggle continued their war against Baghdad, although one of them, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), tried in vain to negotiate a deal. During the last phases of its destructive war with Iran, Iraq conducted a genocidal campaign against the Kurds in 1988. The genocide, known as 'Anfal', eliminated an estimated 180,000 people and resulted in the destruction of about 4,000 villages in Kurdistan. Iraq also used chemical bombs against the Iranian army and its own citizens in the Kurdish town of Halabja, which led to the killing of about 5,000 (for a comprehensive history of modern Kurdistan, see Bird, 2004; Hiltmann, 2007; McDowell, 2000).

The Gulf War of 1991 was a war of the colonial type to the extent that the major Western power, the United States, led its European allies and some of the states in the region in punishing a disobedient state. The fact that it was conducted under the banner of the United Nations cannot disguise its (neo)colonial mission. The war did not end when the two sides declared its ending. Saddam's army violently attacked the Kurds and the Shi'a, and almost the entire Kurdish population fled to the mountains in the cold days of April, trying to escape into Turkey and Iran. Although Washington initially ignored the conflict, it soon intervened, and declared a major part of the Kurdish region a 'no-fly zone', banning the deployment of the Iraqi army and its air force (Schorr, 1991). The result was the creation of a 'safe haven', to which the refugees returned. The creation of the 'safe haven', protected by the US and its European allies, was for Kurdish nationalists like the realization of the dream

for autonomous or independent status. Within a year, there were elections for a provincial Kurdish parliament, and a government was established.

Since the second US war on Iraq, in 2003, the USA has failed to install a stable government in Baghdad, leading to speculation about the parcelling of Iraq into three mini-states – one of which would be Kurdish. However, Western powers and the UN recognize the sovereignty of the Iraqi state, and are officially committed to protect its 'territorial integrity'. Therefore the Kurdish state, as a sovereign entity, may not emerge under the current circumstances. The present regime established in the northern parts of the Kurdish territory has been called a 'de facto UN state', 'de facto autonomous state', or 'Regional Authority' (Ahmed and Gunter, 2003, 2007; Nahai, 2005; Stansfeld, 2003; van Bruinessen, 2005).

#### The (re)production of destruction: the case of the 1991 war

In telling the story of my visit to Iraqi Kurdistan in 2000, I have often said that all sides – including Iraq, Turkey, Iran, the USA, Kurdish political parties in power, the NGOs – are in one way or another involved in the destruction of the social web of life in this region. This was my impression based on intensive observation and detailed discussions with people from all walks of life (Mojab, 2001). In 2000, the majority of the Kurdish population expressed deep concern with UN agencies. The problems identified were poverty, huge bureaucracy, corruption and lack of accountability. There was a lack of coordination among UN agencies, a lack of sufficient authority and technical capacity among the UN staff, and intimidation of the UN staff by the Iraqi government in particular, if they seemed to be friendly with Kurds.

In order to illustrate the seriousness of these problems, I quote from a report by Alastair Kirk and Gary Sawdon entitled *The Household Economy: Understanding the Situation of Kurdish Livelihoods*:

More households are extremely vulnerable to external shocks, including unplanned changes in the sanctions system.... Many poor people are reliant on the economic activity of the richest groups, and are vulnerable to changes in their income....

The sanctions and ration regime created by the UN Security Council has undermined and distorted markets and livelihoods and destroyed normal economic life for the vast majority.... The rations system instituted by UN Security Council Resolution 986 has created unprecedented levels of dependency. Sanctions have undoubtedly impoverished the Iraqi population: the SCR986 Programme, however, has not overcome that impoverishment, but rather has raised dependency to internationally unprecedented levels. In the many near-destitute households, up to 90% of food comes from the SCR986 ration.... Poor people could not afford to feed themselves if the SCR986 ration was suddenly removed.... SCR986 rations have destroyed the livelihoods of most people, and diminished their capability to develop new livelihoods....

The SCR986 ration system has facilitated state domination of food supply ... SCR986 relief rations have allowed the Government of Iraq to reassert its dominance over food systems, and seriously undermined the development of sustainable agriculture in Northern Iraq. Although rations in Kurdistan are distributed by the UN's World Food Programme (WFP), the Government of Iraq (GOI) is responsible for importing most staples and milling flour. That means the GOI is able to control the content of the ration; carbohydrate staples and tea and sugar instead of protein – both in Northern Iraq as well as in the South. (Kirk and Sawdon, 2002: 43-5)

Kirk and Sawdon's research supports my observations of structural constraints on reconstruction in Iraqi Kurdistan. In 2000 there was at least a consensus that something was seriously wrong with international humanitarian assistance. One must admit, however, that in spite of the enormity of problems facing both the Kurdish political parties and individuals, there was considerable effort to rebuild the destroyed Kurdish region. And some of this rebuilding was the work of devoted individuals, in particular women. A prominent case is the protest of women against the civil war of 1994 between the two rival parties sharing government, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)

and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. A group of women marched from Sulaimaniya to Irbil in protest against what they called a fratricidal war (thirkujî). Another grassroots initiative was women's protests against the violence that was unleashed against them in the aftermath of the war. There was an unprecedented rise in killing women for reasons of 'honour' (for a detailed account of these cases, see Mojah, 2002). The Kurdish government refused to criminalize these atrocities and arrest or punish the murderers. Government authorities justified their policy by arguing that they had to abide by the personal status laws of the Ba'hist regime in Baghdad. Women demanded a repeal of these laws, but the parliament, dominated by males and especially the conservative KDP, refused to initiate new legislation. While killing continued, women expanded their struggle against this violence. They established shelters and exposed the gender politics of the two ruling parties. In 2000 the PUK was forced, by the rising oppositional voices of women in the diaspora and the pressure of women in the homeland, into issuing two resolutions that treated 'honour killing' as a punishable crime. The PUK government was not, however, in a position to implement the resolutions, especially in villages where tribal and kin organizing is strong and where the PUK relies on the loyalty of tribes and feudal lords.

While poverty and violence against women were serious problems, the transfer of power from the Ba'ih to the Kurdish political parties led to other changes. For example, mass media proliferated in the Kurdish region. Intellectuals have for a long time struggled for communication rights such as the right to publish and the right to read. Under Saddam's rule, all media, including the press, were state-owned. By contrast, in the 'Safe Haven,' political organizations were allowed to launch their own broadcasting; there was an unprecedented growth of print media. The situation had the semblance of a public sphere, although the two parties dominated the media and other public outlets.

To the extent that there was a civil society in the Kurdish region, it was largely the achievement of social movements. The two ruling Kurdish political parties have strong statist tendencies. Moreover,

the UN and even the NGOs do not rely on or even recognize the social movements. Much could be achieved in reconstruction efforts if people were allowed to participate in changing the conditions under which they suffered. For instance, in the case of the clearing of landmines, if the people who were potential victims of the landmines were allowed to participate in the de-mining effort, much progress could be made within a few years. This observation was, in fact, made in a project proposal that I received in 2000 from an organization called Hoshar. The draft proposal stated that

Currently there are de-mining activities in Kurdistan but they are not properly organized. Each organization's priorities is set according to their understanding. Sometimes a specific minefield is cleared by one of them, then after a while another organization will start working in the same minefield. So to avoid these problems it is necessary to have a network in Kurdistan. The network will establish priorities for the minefields depending on previous data, which has been collected by survey teams and the government plan for the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation of Kurdistan.

Ala Noori Talebani, who was advocating this plan, told me in an interview:

I am planning to involve women in this project. Women are the victims of landmines, whilst the burden of care-giving to disabled family members as a result of landmines is on their shoulders. Therefore, if they learn about how to avoid landmines and learn how to visually identify them it would be great for the community. But the response of NGOs and the government to my proposal of engaging women and mobilizing the community in de-mining activities has been disappointing. They argue that the information on landmines, their pattern of distribution, and their types constitute military information which cannot be made available to civilians. This response is heartbreaking for me! (October 2000, Sulaimaniya)

The picture offered here is obviously a disturbing one. The Iraqi state under Ba'hist rule committed genocide against its people, destroyed thousands of villages, and used chemical weapons. It also destroyed

the marshlands of southern Iraq in an attempt to control the population. This level of destruction would not have been possible without the use of new technologies of destruction provided by Western powers. Until the Gulf War of 1991, the authorities committed genocide and ecocide with impunity. As Leo Kuper argues, 'the sovereign territorial state claims, as an integral part of its sovereignty, the right to commit genocide ... and ... the United Nations, for all practical purposes, defends this right' (1981: 161).

The formation of the 'Safe Haven' has been treated by many observers as a radical breach of the principle of state sovereignty which is to be protected by the United Nations. In other words, the UN itself violated its foundational principle by allowing the United States to create such a state within the state. The UN also sanctioned the destructive war waged by the coalition forces in 1991. However, rather than indicating that the UN is prepared to override sovereignty in the name of protecting human rights, these developments point towards the formation of an interstate order controlled by one power – the United States.

Iraq, like much of the Middle East, has enormous resources, human and natural, to build a viable democratic society that can readily solve the problems of poverty, illiteracy and disease. Indeed, Iraq under the Ba'ih regime was, alongside Turkey, the most secular nation in the Middle East and its treatment of the Kurds was, overall, better than their treatment by Turkey (for a useful discussion of this issue, see the documentary by McKiernan, 2000). Similarly, by most measurement indices, Iraq was a leader in the Middle East in terms of healthcare and education, especially for women (Al-Ali, 2007; Zangana, 2007). No doubt a host of factors prevented the realization of this potential in the aftermath of the 1991 war in the Kurdish region. It is important, however, to emphasize that destruction, much like war, is a source of capital renewal – that is, profit-making – in part through the creation of investment opportunities. It is also important to note that the market, much like the state, thrives on both war and destruction and, therefore, at its core is the logic of the 'Shock Doctrine' (Klein, 2007).

### Disentangling contradictions in women's NGOs: the context of the 2003 war and occupation

So far, I have attempted to establish the links between construction, deconstruction and reconstruction in the context of the 1991 war in the Kurdish region of Iraq. In 2003 the United States launched a war of 'regime change' in order to install in Baghdad a regime of its own. The Kurdish leadership played an active role in this project, which led to the fall of the Ba'hist regime and further consolidation of the status of the Regional Government of Kurdistan. The USA devoted greater resources, economic, military and diplomatic, to its second war. The process itself and its outcomes were destruction on a much larger scale.

My focus in this section will be on Kurdish women's NGOs, which are thriving following the 2003 occupation of Iraq. The detailed analysis of the role of women's NGOs in the 'post-war' reconstruction will assist us in explicating the interconnectedness of an imperialist gender project, one which is constructed on notions such as 'democracy', 'freedom', and 'civil society', and its link to the larger imperialist agenda of regional and global domination. I invite readers to rethink and reconsider the contexts in which notions such as 'civil society', 'NGOs', 'freedom' and 'democracy' are used uncritically. Under the condition of war, occupation and imperialism, we need to develop a more sophisticated theoretical understanding of social relations, local and global institutional structures and powers, divisions of labour and habits of life. I intend to open spaces for a more critical engagement with the role of women's NGOs in war zones and their participation in what I prefer to call assembling spoils of war, rather than the euphemism of 'post-war reconstruction'.

As a result of my fieldwork in war zones and in diaspora communities and women's NGO in contexts such as Palestine, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Egypt, I deeply appreciate the resiliency of women, their sacrifice and their absolute devotion to their just cause. This acknowledgement, however, has never prevented me from critical engagement

with women organized in NGOs. Inspired by Cynthia Enloe's (2004) idea of 'being curious by our lack of feminist curiosity', I have been curious about women and therefore have been able to see patriarchy in collusion with capitalism, militarism, racism, colonialism and imperialism. This means that my critical transnational feminist framework aims at rupturing the normalcy in neoliberal notions of the 'inevitability' of capitalism and imperialism, in civilizational privileging of the West over the East, and in the 'naturalization' of the separation of political rights – that is, democracy and freedom – from economic rights (for further articulation of this point, see Meiksins Wood, 2006).

My main focus in this section will be on unravelling the ideological underpinning of the project of imperialist powers in the 'post-war reconstruction' of Iraq through drawing on the results of my fieldwork among women's NGOs in the Kurdish region in 2005. My aim is not one of evaluation or assessment of the NGOs operating in the region; I will, rather, attempt to track the US 'reconstruction' policy and the role that NGOs, knowingly or unknowingly, play within this project. I believe that it is critical for the left, anti-war, anti-globalization activists to understand the intricacies of the specific project of reconstruction in Iraq, and how it fits into a larger neo-liberal agenda that is transnational in scope. A perfect summary of this policy can be found in the description of the US Department of State's 'Middle East Partnership Initiative' (MEPI). MEPI operates in a 'four pillar structure': '(1) political governance and participation (2) economic liberalization and opportunity (3) educational quality and access (4) the empowerment of women'. Under the 'women' pillar, four initiatives are listed: 'Fostering Empowerment', 'Women's Survey', 'Women and the Law', and 'Women Business Summit' (see MEPI, 2008).

It is also important to keep in mind that I differentiate between women's NGOs and the women's movements in the region. The women's movements, as opposed to NGOs, encompass a diversity of positions and relationships to the state, are often more politically oriented, and allow for a more critical assessment of external involve-

ment in the region. In some cases, women's NGOs are mobilized by the state and external actors to weaken, depoliticize, or even crush the women's movements (for a similar argument in the context of the USA and Palestine, see Smith, 2007b).

It is difficult to make sense of NGOs if we do not look at the historical context of the idea and practice of NGOs. By historical context, I mean raising questions such as: When and why did the phenomenon of NGOs emerge? Where do NGOs stand in the structure of power relations, locally, nationally, internationally and transnationally? Whose particular interests do NGOs serve or address? Why is there so much academic and political interest in this set-up? My argument is that if we do not pursue these questions, we are more likely to miss the social, political, historical and economic ties that bind colonialism and imperialism to the rise of nationalisms, fundamentalisms and racism.

While non-governmental organizations have existed since the beginning of the formation of modern nation-states, in the current political environment they are a rather new phenomenon. They can be traced to the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet bloc. Western governments and many liberal and conservative intellectuals hoped that West European or American style democracy would reign in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Thus 'civil society', 'the public sphere' and 'NGOs' were promoted as venues for establishing capitalist democracy, in which the absolute rule of the state would be replaced by the absolute rule of the market. In much of this discourse, whether one calls it neoconservative or neoliberal, 'market' and 'democracy' are used as synonyms (for a critical survey of these concepts, see Meiksins Wood, 1990; and Elyachar, 2005, for an extensive analysis in the context of Cairo, 2005).

Meiksins Wood, in 'Democracy as Ideology of Empire', raises a pertinent question: 'How is it that freedom, equality, and universal human dignity can seem a convincing justification for imperialism and war?' (Meiksins Wood, 2006: 11). Her response is in what she calls the coexistence of economic and non-economic powers:



Both capital and labour can have democratic rights in the political sphere without completely transforming the relation between them in a separate economic sphere; and much of human life is determined in the economic sphere, outside the reach of democratic accountability. Capitalism can, therefore, coexist with the ideology of freedom and equality in a way that no other system of domination can. (Melkins Wood, 2006: 11)

Now, let me apply these ideas and concepts in the context of the Middle East, where colonialism followed by pro-American dictatorships has devastated the lives of citizens for decades. The violence of these dictatorships led to resistance by many, especially women, workers, peasants, indigenous peoples, students, religious leaders, intellectuals, human rights groups and journalists. However, the USA and Western powers treated these resistances as communist and 'terrorist' and therefore went as far as engaging in military or paramilitary interventions to eliminate them. Focusing on the history of the Middle East in the twentieth century, we see the peoples of the region engaged in extensive and relentless struggle to change the difficult conditions of their lives. They had many successes, but in every step towards independence and economic development, they were suppressed through the intervention of Western powers that allied with local feudal, tribal and religious leaders, and the emerging capitalist class. This history is a history of unceasing struggle, success and defeat. Today, the people of the Middle East are subjected to more violence and more poverty. There are more theocratic states, more imperialist wars and greater violence against women. Not surprisingly, US wars have helped the re-traditionalization and re-tribalization of society, terms that are appearing in Amnesty International (2005) and Human Rights Watch reports (2003).

Under the rubrics of 'reconstruction' and building 'civil society', the USA has opened up a new front in its expansionist desire in the region. Elite, educated, skilled and activist women are absorbed into numerous and often well-financed NGOs. Hafsa Zangana, an Iraqi woman novelist, activist and writer, sees in today's Iraq diverse colonial sources; they include 'NGOs, missionaries, and women's

organizations. Unlike military invasion and violence, the work of these organizations is directed at the very fabric of society and has received much less publicity' (Zangana, 2006a, see also 2006b).

Women NGOs that I have studied in the Kurdish region of Iraq manifest the same symptoms as other NGOs studied in Latin America, Palestine and Europe (e.g. Alvarez, 1999, 2000; Hammami, 2000; Jad, 2004; Lang, 2000; Mendoza, 2002; Roy, 2000). They have a short-term agenda and their contribution is often piecemeal, curative, limited and dependent on the agenda of donors. By contrast, women's movements pursue long-term goals such as reform or radical change of patriarchal relations in both civil society and the state. While the two should not be seen as mutually exclusive, states in the Middle East as well as the USA and other Western powers are more tolerant of women's NGOs than women's movements. It is not surprising, therefore, that the United States takes the promotion of NGOs as a pillar of its foreign policy. According to Barry Lowenkron, the US Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (Lowenkron, 2006):

When NGOs are under siege, freedom and democracy are undermined. How then can we best support and defend the work of NGOs in countries across the globe? The United States must continue to stand up for what President Bush calls 'the non-negotiable demands of human dignity' and that includes the exercise by individuals of their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly through their membership in NGOs... Second, we need to ensure that NGO protection is an integral part of our diplomacy. We must highlight the protection of NGOs as a legitimate issue on our government-to-government agenda... The Secretary raises our concerns in her bilateral meetings as do I and many of my colleagues at the State Department. When I travel, I insist on seeing NGO representatives, as does the Secretary.

It is interesting to contrast the statement above with the results of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) 2005 report entitled *10 Years After Beijing: The Role and Contribution of the Arab NGOs*, which states that

the number of NGOs working in the field of development in the Arab World has increased from 175,000 in 1995 to 225,000 in 2003. ... While considering the diverse political climate in the region, Arab NGOs can rarely be regarded as powerful players capable of influencing the development and future of their societies. (UNIFEM, 2005: 8, 10)

Even if the NGOs are not yet 'powerful players', they are increasingly becoming venues for the implementation of the foreign policy of the USA (and other Western states), ostensibly at 'arm's length'. As we will see, this occurs through funding arrangements and through the co-option of progressive and/or elite women into NGOs. The cultural ideology of neoliberalism is promoted through this hegemonic process that equates the notion of democracy in civil society and the market, a locus not hospitable to political rights and social justice. NGOs, while in appearance autonomous from the state, end up acting as its appendage. Let us closely consider the case of women's NGOs in Iraqi Kurdistan.

#### Kurdish women's NGOs under US occupation

Following the creation of the 'Safe Haven', as detailed above, Iraqi Kurdistan was soon flooded by NGOs of all kinds. UN agencies, the European Union and NGOs based in European countries provided funding. My data indicate a limited involvement of the USA in funding NGOs in the period 1991–2003, a fact to note when we discuss the relationship between the US 'democracy' plan for Iraq and the role of Kurdish women's NGOs in this project.

I visited Iraqi Kurdistan for the second time in 2005. I began my research by visiting women's NGOs in the Sulaimaniya region, with the objective of understanding the inner dynamics of women's NGOs at three interrelated levels: organizational structure; the social and political location of women leaders of NGOs; and the transnational sphere of relations and connections, in particular the link with diasporic Kurdish women's activism. I slightly changed my research plan, as early into the fieldwork I was able to map out a pattern indicating

the history, actors, connections, sphere of influences, funding and the inner dynamics of the NGOs, especially the class locations and political affinity of women leaders. Therefore, instead, I decided to engage with NGO workers and activists at the level of analysis: to interrogate deeply what is going on; to turn the moment into a feminist transnational praxis where the production of knowledge become relational and feminist desire for change the interlocutor of the conversation. So, I mapped out my analysis and pointed to how, where and what I saw as challenges and problems. We engaged in some deep and often difficult conversations, and amazing contradictions became apparent. I engaged in this frank discussion with women involved with the following NGOs: Aram Shelter; Asuda (Organization for Combating Violence Against Women); The Cultural and Social Centre of Khanzad; Women's Information and Culture Centre; Civilization Development Organization (CDO); and Rasan, which publishes a Kurdish women's newspaper under the same name.

In discussing the role, function, structure and status of women's NGOs with those intimately involved with them, we agreed on the following points. First, there is a lack of feminist consciousness, by which I specifically mean the absence of the notion of patriarchy as a system entangled with other imposing forces such as militarism, capitalism, fundamentalism and nationalism. Therefore, after more than a decade of hard work on women's issues, patriarchy, in its harsher form of religious–feudal nationalism, has remained intact, and indeed has taken a new, harsher form in response to external forces of militarism and occupation. In a comprehensive report released in 2007, the Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP) concludes that

[A]lthough some positive changes may have occurred for the better in the lives amongst a select group of elite women, usually with strong tribal and political ties, the majority of the population has seen a regression in terms of freedom of movement, right to life and the ability to live free from violence. (KHRP, 2007: 49)

The report documents the rise of violence against women in the form of suicide, 'honour killing' and self-immolation in the Kurdish

## 116 WOMEN AND WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

regions of Turkey and Iraq. The report concludes: '[I]t became clear during the course of the mission that discussion of women's rights has been limited almost exclusively to that of stopping violence, but not about women's rights in their entirety' (KHRP, 2007: 75).

In my discussion with these women, I asked them about an extensive survey conducted by the Rural Rehabilitation and Community Development Program of the Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) in 2002 in the Kurdish region. To my astonishment, they either were not aware of the existence of this massive survey or did not bother to learn from it. This survey, to my knowledge, is one of the most comprehensive studies on the social, economic and political situation of women in northern Iraq. To collect the data, twenty-three organizations and five ministries were involved; 20,134 women of 15 years and above were interviewed; and the result is a two-volume report of 1,546 pages of data and analysis. The study covered eleven areas of education and learning; culture; health; psychology; women's status in the family; human rights and legal awareness; marriage; political participation; violence; economic independence; and widows. The research undertaken and the data collected for this expansive survey and the lack of awareness of its results all show that most women's organizations and NGOs in Kurdistan have little or no informed awareness of the situation of Kurdish women. They do not have much contact with people at the grassroots level; nor do they rely on concrete evidence about women. The elites, or 'pioneers' as they are called in the report, rely on information generated by mainstream intellectuals, other elites or the political parties with which they are often associated. These two streams of the women's movement, the grassroots and the elite, are completely disconnected. According to this report, women are the 'great losers' of the last decades in Iraq. Despite the claims of the elite women's organizations that they have addressed the concerns of Kurdish women, the patriarchy prevailing in Kurdish society has not been addressed. This is evident in the statistics presented in the report: 37 per cent of women in Kurdistan are illiterate; most women marry under the age of 19 because women over 23 are considered past their prime for marriage, and

## RECONSTRUCTION AND KURDISH WOMEN 117

consequently few women move on to higher education; the few women who manage to gain higher education, participate in politics or have a job that does not revolve around the family are no longer respected in their communities; 50 per cent of women do not possess adequate knowledge about women's health – there is no health education in school or at home, and there is no structural or systemic means of obtaining information; 14 per cent of women face violence on a daily basis; and 7 per cent of women have been threatened with 'honour' killing, the majority of which threats (64 per cent) come from family members. In all aspects of women's lives, it is evident from the data presented in this report that Kurdish women are far below the average when it comes to the quality of life and provision of basic needs and services for women. Most distressingly, there has been no successful intervention by NGOs on behalf of the 'Anfal widows', the widows of victims of the Ba'hist genocide. After a decade, these women still have no inheritance, property or custody rights, let alone the right to remarry. Borzou Daragahi, in a report in the *Los Angeles Times* (9 September 2007) under the title 'Kurdish Widows' Lives Frozen in Time', captures their despair:

Patience, the mothers begged their children. Saddam Hussein will fall. Liberty will come. Your father will return. Years went by. The regime fell. Prison doors were opened. Mass graves were unearthed. Still, the women wait.

Furthermore, there has been little change in terms of the representation of gender relations in textbooks or in media portrayal of women.

The results of the NPA study reflect the conclusion of a survey published by the Brussels Tribunal in 2007 that states (Al-Azzawi, 2007: 27):

The major conclusion is that the USA occupation of Iraq has intentionally created a catastrophic collapse in the social inter-related structure, infrastructure services, education and healthcare system, and security. All of which have a direct detrimental impact on women's living conditions and women's rights in Iraq. The

occupation of Iraq has taken women back to the dark ages. By ending the occupation, Iraqi women have a better chance to earn back what they previously accomplished.

In August 2005, at the time of my visit, almost all women's NGOs were preoccupied with discussing the draft of the Iraqi constitution. They complained about 'being workshoped out' of the constitution. This constitutional rousing was a response to the US administration plan to legitimize its own rule in Iraq. The then Secretary of State Colin Powell, in announcing the recipients of grants for reconstruction of Iraq, said that each of the grantees 'will work with Iraq partners on the ground to prepare women to compete in Iraq's January 2005 elections, encourage women to vote, train women in media and business skills, and establish resource centres for networking and counselling'. Kurdish women were seriously concerned about the 'religious nature' of the constitution. Despite their efforts in lobbying the Kurdish Regional Government to write to the drafting committee, and discussing the constitution in the Kurdish media and women's press, the current constitution of Iraq is based on Sharia, confirming the creation of a theocratic state in Iraq. The Kurdish leadership even made concessions on the issue of women's rights versus federalism. Isobel Coleman writes,

As the arguments dragged on, US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad finally intervened to avoid a stalemate. To gain concessions in other areas, he supported provisions that strengthened Islam's influence. Ultimately, the Kurds acquiesced too, both because they had other priorities to defend and because they recognized that conservative Shiites were not going to capitulate. (Coleman, 2006)

Article 2 of the constitution makes Islam the official religion of the state and the basic source of legislation. What became apparent was that the presence of women in the public sphere, such as NGOs, does not necessarily guarantee a progressive change in gender relations; there is a need for feminist consciousness, a women's movement and a collective struggle. For Kurdish and Arab women of Iraq undoubtedly this will be a long and arduous struggle. Noga Efrati,

tracing women's participation in changing the Personal Status Law, depicts a bleak future when she writes:

Women's rights activists have been forced to channel energies under chaotic war-time conditions into preserving a law which ignored many of their long-sought demands: outlawing polygamy, equal rights in divorce and inheritance, and further extending maternal child custody. Thus preoccupied, feminists were hindered from advancing personal status issues as they had in the past when regimes perceived as favorable had assumed power. A valuable opportunity was lost. In the 'new Iraq' women have found themselves running just to stay in place. (Efrati, 2005: 594-5)

Second, in discussing my observation with Kurdish women's rights activists, we engaged in a heated debate on the notion of NGO 'autonomy'. Their definition of 'autonomy' was limited to independence from political parties or the state. The Kurdish women activists consider themselves part of the growing civil society in Kurdistan. They refused to see the ties between the civil society sector and the larger political, military and economic projects of capitalism, imperialism and globalization. These women acknowledged, but willfully ignored, the connection between their personal privileged location and the sources of power in social and political structures of Kurdish society. The Kurdish political parties may have an arm-length relationship with these NGOs, but there are many ties that bind them to forces in the state, the market and the transnational imperialist gender politics. These include funding sources, the political composition of their board of directors, and their connection to the international donor and women's communities. A case in point is Asuda (Organization for Combating Violence Against Women), whose coordinator is among a handful of Kurdish women from Iraq dominating the international scene of conferences, workshops and training provided by the World Bank, UNIFEM, Women for Women International, Independent Iraqi Women and Independent Women's Forum, among many others. The Asuda board of directors includes politically and socially well-connected women, among them Narmin Othman, former minister of education in the PUK administration and

## 120 WOMEN AND WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

currently Iraqi minister of environment; Roonak Rauf, mother of Dr Barham Salih, prime minister of the Kurdish Regional Government (under the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), deputy prime minister of the Iraqi Interim Government, the minister for planning and co-ordination in the Iraqi Transitional Government, and deputy prime minister in the government of Nouri al-Maliki (Roonak Rauf is also the president of the Women's Information Center); and Shirin Amadi, secretary general of the Kurdish Women's Union and the highest ranking politician in the Kurdish Democratic Party. The argument here does not concern the merit of these women. Quite the contrary; these are women who have earned their status as 'leaders' in their own right, mainly through long-standing involvement in supporting and providing services to women and waging a difficult fight for women's rights in Kurdistan. They have shown extraordinary courage and their gains have been significant and symbolically important ones. The point that I am trying to make is, rather, related to the very nature of NGOs. James Petras's articulation of the structure of NGOs as 'internally elitist, externally servile' is relevant here. He argues that NGOs are hierarchical, non-democratic, with a 'self-appointed elite' of directors whose role is to 'supervise and ensure conformity with the goals, values and ideology of the donors as well as the proper use of funds' (Petras, 1999: 433-4).

As an example of positive action, one might mention Asuda, which has produced an impressive array of educational materials and has been ingenious in producing anti-violence materials. A matchbox-sized card with the full contact information and street address of Asuda was distributed among the taxi drivers in the city of Sulaimaniya to direct women passengers in distress to the organization. The act of distributing the cards was used as a method to raise awareness on violence against women. My point, however, is that these remain isolated initiatives which fail to reverse the rise of patriarchal violence against women. These acts, in other words, are not being turned into a tool for mobilizing women and men, activists and politicians, to change the structural conditions conducive to the (re)production of violence.

## RECONSTRUCTION AND KURDISH WOMEN 121

Asuda has been one of the regular receivers of funds from the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute and USAID, all funded by the USA. Most of the Kurdish women in the leadership of NGOs have taken part in conferences, meetings or workshops organized by the Independent Women's Forum, also funded by the USA, in Iraqi Kurdistan or Amman, Jordan. The Independent Women's Forum (IWF) was the recipient of a portion of the \$10 million grant from the US State Department in 2004 to implement the 'Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative', aimed at providing leadership training, democracy education and coalition-building assistance to Iraqi women. Strong opposition was expressed to this deal by US feminist groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Feminist Majority Foundation. NOW, the largest American women's organization, in their 15 October 2004 communication, called the IWF 'Haliburton in a Skirt', and Kim Gandy, the NOW president, stated 'If the United States really wants to educate Iraqi women about issues as important as democracy and civil rights, the IWF is an embarrassing place to start.' The mission statement of the IWF reads: 'IWF builds support for a greater respect for limited government, equality under the law, property rights, free markets, strong families, and a powerful and effective national defence and foreign policy' (IWF, 2008). The IWF has strongly opposed the US affirmative action and Violence Against Women Act, and the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), on the grounds that they mandate governments to enforce laws guaranteeing equal pay for equal work, maternity leave with pay, and childcare facilities.

The question we need to ask is, what are the 'democracy' lessons that Kurdish women have to learn from an anti-feminist organization? Why are Kurdish women's national and feminist aspirations being harnessed by a colonial, racist and anti-feminist agenda? As long as Kurdish women remain devoted to the cause of the nation/nationalism and its dream of building a masculine, patriarchal and bourgeois modern state, they will inevitably compromise the cause of women's emancipation. Women in leadership positions in NGOs

## 122 WOMEN AND WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

are not leaders of a women's movement; they, rather, constitute a new transnational technocratic elite class with the power to create the best local conditions for transnational capitalist reconstruction projects (Robinson, 1996: 372).

Third, the point over which we were able to reach the most consensus was on the future of NGOs and long-term gender projects in Kurdistan. Women activists collectively expressed a sense of social fatigue, fragmentation, chaos, competition and corruption in the process of 'NGOization' of women's movements and the gender justice agenda in the region. They were quite conscious of the fact that they have become the femocrats of the reconstruction industry, though were not willing to accept it as such and did not see any other alternatives. Each organization is fighting for a piece of the reconstruction dollar pie, and is thus surviving on short-term, piecemeal, project-by-project plans. Critical feminists reviewing the experience of women's movements globally since the rise of neoliberalism in the early 1980s have conclusively argued that the outcomes of the NGOization of the women's movement were bureaucratization, professionalization, institutionalization and depoliticization of the movement. In the absence of strong state-based public policies and social cohesion, NGOs, in particular women's NGOs, provide social services which also function as a mechanism of control of social dissent. In the context of Palestine, Khalili Nakhleh argues that development and reconstruction through NGOization is a form of 'coercion and persuasion', which takes economic, military, political and cultural forms (Nakhleh, 2004: 7). Thus, no wonder that the younger generation of Kurdish women was complaining about being excluded from the activities of NGOs or any opportunities for being trained as the next cadres of the women's movement.

My study concurs with Sarah Roy's observation (2000: 30) that NGOs are a response to 'burning issues' and they act as a 'fire-extinguisher' of burning social problems. Kurdish women's NGOs have produced numerous reports and volumes on the issues of 'honour killing', female genital mutilation (Rahimi, 2004) and 'suicide' as forms of crimes against women, all of which certainly

## RECONSTRUCTION AND KURDISH WOMEN 123

require immediate action. Asuda has produced powerful posters and flyers for raising public awareness on the issue of male violence. Women's groups have initiated the setting up of several life-size statues of women in major squares in the city of Sulaimaniya depicting images of women breaking their chains of oppression. Despite these limited actions and public pedagogical instances, these forms of violence against women have been on the rise since the 1991 war and are regularly being reported in the Kurdish press.

#### Concluding remarks: women's NGOs, anti-feminism and colonial feminism

The Kurds of Iraq have lived since 1961 in one of the most enduring war zones of our time. Here, war constructs colonies, nations and states through enormous acts of destruction, massacres, genocide and ecocide. However, the particularity of the Kurdish case reveals, rather than conceals, universal trends in the theory and practice of women's NGOs. In spite of the diverse contexts of Latin America, Asia, Africa, it is difficult to find visible variance in the goal and outcomes of NGOization.

NGOization, in the Kurdish case, is a direct outcome of the US-led war of 1991. In Iraq, under the Ba'ith Party, where the state was the ultimate power, there was no room for non-government initiatives beyond the confines of the home or a small private enterprise. Once the Ba'ith regime was driven out of the no-fly zone of Kurdistan in April 1991, the Kurdistan Regional Government took over the administrative structure that was left vacant.

Relieved from the patriarchal gender politics of the Ba'ith regime, Kurdish women were now in conflict with the traditional patriarchy of Kurdish society and the new government. Decades of war, and especially the Anfal genocide of 1988, destroyed the very fabric of Kurdish society and unleashed patriarchal violence everywhere. However, Kurdish nationalism, calling for the unity of the nation regardless of gender and class differences, acted as a political and ideological obstacle to conscious feminist intervention. Nationalism

was in conflict with feminist consciousness. The Kurdish government, which claimed to be a negation of Ba'athist political power, continued to uphold Saddam's personal status law, which sanctioned 'honour killing'. The women's NGOs, which emerged in the wake of the Ba'ath Party's departure, were now in the shadow of the emerging Kurdish government. If ideologically women's NGOs were more nationalist than feminist, they were logistically rather insignificant in the prevailing no-war-no-peace environment.

The Bush Jr administration conferred on women's NGOs an active role in promoting US foreign policy objectives. Equally significant was the gender politics of this administration. In gender relations, anti-feminism was the rule. Through funding an anti-feminist group such as the Independent Women's Forum, Washington provided training for Iraqi women and made other interventions in Iraq's gender politics on the basis of one of the most conservative anti-feminist agendas in the United States. The project was to train Iraqi women leaders as anti-feminist neoconservatives capable of shaping gender policy in the country.

This study, much like previous critical literature, has demonstrated the limitations of NGOization: their short-term, piecemeal agenda; their failure to engage in long-term planning; their elite and non-grassroots leadership; their role as alternatives to women's movements and as agents of depoliticization and control. While one may add to this list, the main limitation is the politics that guides their agenda – they do not turn their political and intellectual energy vigorously against patriarchy as a system. They deal with the products of patriarchy, with its effects and its consequences, only. Even when they address violence against women, they do not see it as the product of a regime of gender relations, as a system that is social, economic, political, cultural, religious and ideological; and as a system that not only produces male domination but is able to reproduce itself.

Women's NGOs are not the only loci of reformist or reductive gender politics. Some women's movements, also, may not pursue radical encounters with patriarchy. More than two centuries of feminist and women's struggles in the West have visibly democratized gender

relations. However, patriarchy still rules. Critical transnational feminist analyses argue that the co-optation of women's NGOs into the state gender agenda has depoliticized the women's movement worldwide. Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttab show that in the post-Oslo era in Palestine international donors shifted resources away from the highly political women's movement towards absorbing women leaders into ministries and channelling funds away from women's organizations whose goals were political transformation and the national liberation struggle (Johnson and Kuttab, 2001). Darwiche shows how this process of depoliticization is not limited to Palestine but stretches across the entire Middle East (Darwiche, 2001). Indeed, we can argue that since the release of the Beijing Platform in 1995, women's movements that were associated with national liberation and anti-colonial struggles shifted their activities towards gender training and advocacy based on this platform. In reviewing the 1995 Beijing conference, Spivak terms it a 'global theater' and 'repressive ideological apparatus' (Spivak, 1996). She notes how the framework of such conferences does not deal with the internal divisions within nations and the power differences between North and South. It is this power divide that urges some feminist scholars to caution us about the unproblematic use of the term 'transnational' in feminist scholarship. Delia Aguilar asserts that using the word 'transnational' when referring to feminism has a 'falsely leveling effect' between imperialist and non-imperialist countries and between women of different class backgrounds. Aguilar is critical of transnational feminist analysis that culturalizes ruling relations of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism and reduces resistance against them to 'everyday spontaneous individual acts with not much political deliberation' (Aguilar, 2006).

The 2003 war brought market-centred anti-feminist politics to Kurdish women active in the NGOs and government. The introduction of this brand of colonialist feminism into Kurdistan, where feminist theoretical inquiry is of recent origin, calls on feminists and women activists to engage in struggle over the interplays of patriarchy, imperialism, capitalism, religion and nationalism. Kurdish women in Iraqi Kurdistan have already experienced living under

the rule of 'their own' nation and are being exposed to colonial feminism. One can only predict that many Kurdish feminists will rise up against both national and colonial patriarchies.

#### Note

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## 128 WOMEN AND WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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