

Initial reflections from a research trip to the Kurdistan region of Iraq

Dr Zeynep Kaya, who is currently leading a **research project on the role of international actors in enhancing women's rights in the Kurdistan region of Iraq**, has recently returned from her fieldwork in Erbil and Sulaimaniyah. She gives here her first impressions on her research trip. As part of the project, the MEC will be heading to Erbil next week **to hold a workshop** bringing together local and regional experts on the topic. We will post some more updates on the outcome of the event as soon as we're back.

Beginning with the creation of a no-fly zone in 1991, and most notably since the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the transformation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has been dramatic and extensive. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has consistently adopted an open-door policy to international organisations, other states and international companies. The dramatic and rapid nature of change in the Kurdistan region following the 2003 intervention, the need to rebuild the state, and the willingness to include international actors within this process, all combine to render this region a particularly interesting case for exploring the relations between local governments and international actors in an institution-building context.

The **research I am working on**, undertaken at the LSE Middle East Centre in collaboration with the American University in Dubai, looks at women's issues in the Kurdish region and examines the impact of international organisations in enhancing women's status. This region provides an

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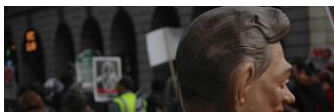


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invaluable context to study the distinct issues facing the integration of women into new democracies in hitherto patriarchal societies. Firstly, the involvement of international organisations in the promotion of the status of women in the Kurdistan region of Iraq is still ongoing and change and continuity can be studied as they unfold. Secondly, since the collapse of the Iraqi regime in 2003, the Kurdistan region has accelerated its attempts to develop a democratic and stable regime. Enhancing women's status has been a significant aspect of this development. In other words, Kurdistan is somewhat of a 'live laboratory' to examine these issues.



Meeting with Falah Mustafa, Head of the Department of Foreign Relations in the KRG

most rewarding and interesting experiences of my academic career to date. Over a two week period, I stayed in both Erbil and Sulaimaniyah, undertaking a series of interviews and observations as the first stage of data collection. Interview participants ranged from senior political elites, through to international organisations, down to local and international staff in civil society organisations.

I interviewed a range of female MPs, the head of Department of Foreign Relations, Falah Mustafa, and the head of High Council of Women Affairs, Pakhshan Zangana. I also met with members of staff and lawyers in international organisations, including UN Women, the UNDP, the UN Human Rights, UNAMI, International Rescue Committee and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Finally, I met with staff members working in key civil society groups.

Having returned to the familiarity of the LSE campus, now seems like an ideal time to offer some initial reflections on the direction of the research

I have very recently returned from my first visit to the Kurdistan region of Iraq and, simply put, this was one of the



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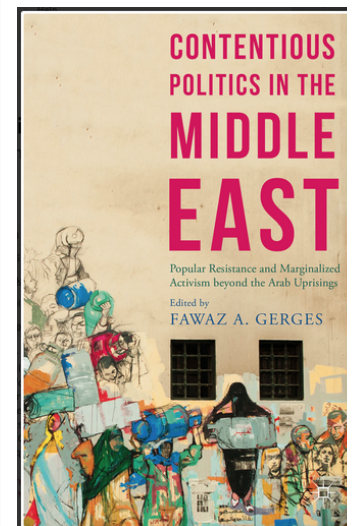
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to date and the experience of undertaking fieldwork in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Since 2003 the extent of change in key laws relating to women in the social and political arena has been immense. Perhaps the most significant of these has been the change in the Personal Status Law in 2008 which sought to improve the status of women in relation to marriage, divorce and inheritance. Another hugely significant piece of legislation was the Domestic Violence Law, passed in 2011, which specified ways to help victims and hold perpetrators accountable. The Kurdish regional parliament made the decision to increase the quota of seats allocated to female representatives from 25% to 30% (the equivalent quota in the Iraqi parliament remains at 25%). Female genital mutilation was banned in 2011. Lastly, the KRG established the High Council of Women's Affairs in 2012 to continue to promote the position of Kurdish women, to advise the government on key pertinent policies, and to develop strategies for the government and its ministries on women's issues.



Meeting with Tavga Rashid, DG of legal & Human Rights Protection HRC-KRG

Unsurprisingly there is no single viewpoint on the success or limitations of the policies to date and future directions are also contested. I heard optimistic as well as pessimistic assessments during my time there. Undoubtedly, there have been significant improvements. Important steps have been taken to protect the position of women and make them less vulnerable than women in some other regional countries. There is also a flourishing society of human rights groups promoting the position of women, led and maintained by motivated women and men, but inevitably some are less active and effective than others. Yet despite these positive changes, UN officials, representatives of women's organisations, and lawyers told me that a woman's position in society can still be a vulnerable one and there are many issues with the implementation of the new rules, laws and procedures by judges and the police. Women are still subjected to comparatively high rates of domestic violence and extensive discrimination remains. Honour killings still occur, there is a high rate of female suicide, there are cases of self-immolation, and female genital

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mutilation is still practiced in many communities.

Throughout my conversations, two key debates emerged in relation to changes in women's statuses and the role of international actors. Firstly, key challenges facing efforts to tackle the position of women are deeply entrenched within the traditions of the society, often permeating the political system, the education system, social perceptions about gender roles, economic relations, and religion. This clearly renders it immensely difficult to identify more specific causes and solutions. Therefore, for some respondents, the KRG's policies to date are relatively superficial compared to the sheer size and depth of the problem. The counterview to this is that more patience is needed and the pace of change can only ever be gradual – precisely because the issues are so deep-rooted, and given the conservative nature of the culture and strong pockets of opposition, enacting change is inherently difficult and slow. Another common refrain of the positive perspective is that the KRG has done far more than the Iraqi government in Baghdad to empower women and help women suffering from violence and other problems (although many would contest that the Iraqi government is a valid point of comparison). The work the UN and other organisations have put into tackling women's issues, monitoring government policies, and advising the government on future strategies is immense. However, in this context, some respondents argued that international organisations are not maintaining enough ongoing pressure on the KRG to enact further changes, with some international NGOs having already left the region since it became more politically stable. It should be noted, though, that many international NGOs continue to work through local organisations and UNAMI and UN Women are actively working with political groups and many sections of civil society.

The second aspect of the debate clusters on whether the government is prioritising the right policies in dealing with the issues that women encounter. High profile and extreme life-threatening incidents can have the propensity to eclipse more everyday quality of life issues, such as access to education, jobs, and healthcare. While many argue that so-called honour killings, violence against women and FGM are immediate issues and need to be eliminated first, others believe that while continuing to work on these immediate issues, other foundational changes should be introduced – such as changing the education system, empowering women through training programmes on opening businesses and leadership roles. This research, of course, is unlikely to

solve these debates but we certainly strive to understand their parameters and how they can be negotiated and reconciled in this political context.



Election flags in Erbil

On a less academic note, the trip to Kurdistan was fascinating. One of the most unavoidable observations to any first-time visitor like myself is the constant construction going on in Erbil. Even at 2am, in my taxi back to Erbil International Airport, we passed a huge construction site, fully lit with builders working in full flow. It is this ever evolving construction that explains the large number of modern

buildings throughout the city, the many 5-star hotels, big shopping malls, new government buildings, banks and universities, all juxtaposed against poor streets and houses. It also explains the ever growing number of new roads that don't appear on google or apple maps, which pushed me to the brink of my sanity during my numerous taxi trips in the city. The Erbil citadel, the world's oldest inhabited citadel, is in the centre of the city and, much like the politics and society of the Kurdistan region, it too is going through renovation. Erbil itself felt a bit more conservative compared to Sulaimaniyah though. I went to the Sulaimaniyah bazaar on my own and felt very comfortable. This city is also probably the more beautiful of the two cities, with pretty streets and houses surrounded by green hills.

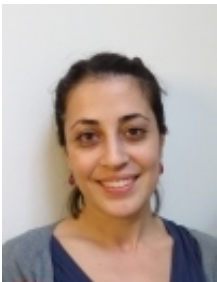
In the Sulaimaniyah bazaar, near the Great Mosque, I saw old men selling beautiful rosaries, and following a quick purchase, two of them agreed to pose for me. Although, neither Erbil nor Sulaimaniyah catered for tourists, this suited me perfectly. But the use of cultural artefacts to mark a Kurdish culture is clearly underway. For instance, the KRG General Board of Tourism declared the 'clove apple' to be the official first Kurdish symbol inherited from its past. As its name suggests, it is a natural apple completely covered in cloves. It smells wonderful and I was told that it lasts one hundred years. The clove apple is now boxed and sold as

representing an old Kurdish custom, where a clove apple was used for expressing love towards someone when the person couldn't say it through words or for sending a message of reconciliation between lovers.



Sulaimaniyah bazaar with rosemary sellers

Yet if the greatest asset of a region is its people, then both Erbil and Sulaimaniyah are well poised for the challenges that lie ahead. During my two weeks stay it was impossible not to be touched by the helpfulness and warmth of the people I met. Their openness, optimism about their future and their pride in their identity and achievements was remarkable.



Dr Zeynep Kaya is a Fellow at LSE where she completed her PhD in International Relations on the interaction between international norms and ethnicist conceptions of territorial identity with a focus on the Kurdish case. Zeynep is also leading the research project 'Understanding the Role of International Actors

in Enhancing Women's Rights after a Foreign Military Intervention: A Case Study of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq', in collaboration with the American University in Dubai.

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