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**Sexual Violence in Iraq:**

**Challenges for Transnational Feminist Politics**

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### **Abstract**

The article discusses sexual violence by ISIS against women in Iraq, particularly Yezidi women, against the historical background of broader sexual and gender-based violence. It intervenes in feminist debates about how to approach and analyse sexual and wider gender-based violence in Iraq specifically and the Middle East more generally. Recognizing the significance of positionality, I argue against dichotomous positions and for the need to look at both macro structural configurations of power pertaining to imperialism, neo-liberalism and globalization on the one hand, and localised expressions of patriarchy, religious interpretations and practises and cultural norms on the other hand. Finally, the article reflects on the question of what a transnational feminist solidarity might look like in relation to sexual violence by ISIS.

### **Keywords**

Yezidi women; Kurdish region of Iraq; gender-based violence; ISIS; positionality.

## **Introduction**

Recent developments in Iraq, in neighbouring Syria and elsewhere in the region where the so-called Islamic State (known as ISIS as well as daesh)<sup>1</sup> has taken foothold, clearly raise the bar in terms of dehumanizing atrocities. The accounts of survivors of sexual violence at the hands of ISIS are beyond horrific. However, sexual violence, as we are witnessing now, did not emerge in a vacuum but Iraqi women and men have been confronted with sexual and broader gender-based violence<sup>2</sup> pre-invasion Iraq and, as well as in the post-invasion period. Without wanting to belittle the carnage and cruelties committed by ISIS, I have felt uneasy about the limited interest displayed by the media, policy makers and the general public with respect to the broad continuum of sexual and gender-based violence in present day Iraq, but also prior to the appearance of ISIS in Iraq. As feminist IR scholars like Cynthia Enloe (1987, 1990, 2000), Cynthia Cockburn (1999, 2004, 2007) and Annick T.R. Wibben (2004, 2011) amongst others, have argued, we need to recognise a continuum of violence before and after conflict and wars and from the personal/household to the international. More concretely, perpetrators of sexual and gendered violence exist on a broad spectrum in Iraq, including militia linked to the Iraqi government and other political parties, various insurgent groups who fought against the government and the former occupation, criminal gangs, family members and, until a few years ago, also the occupation forces.

My uneasiness also stems from a growing ambivalence in terms of feminist tactics and strategies at this historical juncture. It has been increasingly difficult for me to decide what a transnational feminist solidarity should look like in a context where many Iraqi feminists and the Kurdish resistance to ISIS fighting in Rojava (northern Syria) and elsewhere in the region, asked for military intervention in the form of air strikes. Having vehemently argued against the idea that military interventions could bring women's liberation in the context of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent occupation (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2003), I have found it impossible to articulate the same clear position in debates about targeted air strikes in Rojava (western Kurdistan/northern Syria) and Syria more broadly where my reactions were far more ambivalent and mixed.

In what follows, I will argue that it is important to historicise and contextualise the extreme forms of sexual violence associated with ISIS, not in order to belittle its scale and detrimental consequences but to deepen our understanding about its roots, context and ways to tackle it. With my article I aim to intervene in recent feminist debates of how to approach and explain sexual violence in relation to the Middle East, while also paying attention to the various ways that sexual violence has been instrumentalised by a range of relevant constituencies and political actors. On a broader level, my intention here is to contribute to the discussions about challenges for transnational feminist politics.

The article is based on my on-going research into the gendered implications of Ba'athi dictatorship, war, invasion, occupation, militarism and Islamist extremism in the context of central and southern Iraq and the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI). Over the

past 15 years I have aimed to document and analyse changing gender norms and relations in Iraq, the KRI and its diasporas. To this end, I have engaged in both participant observation and have so far interviewed mainly Iraqi women but also some men. In this article I am drawing on both previously published material (Al-Ali, 2007; Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009) as well as unpublished and new empirical material gathered more recently in informal interviews with women's rights activists based in Baghdad, Amman, Erbil, Sulimaniya and London. In what follows I will discuss sexual violence and how it has been instrumentalised and/or ignored during the Ba'ath regime and in the post-invasion period, before addressing more recent ISIS-related atrocities. However, I will start out reflecting on the significance of positionality when addressing sexual violence in Iraq and finish the article by addressing the challenge to articulate a coherent transnational feminist politics and solidarity at this specific historical juncture.

### **Intersectional positionality**

I am frequently faced with a conundrum when talking about sexual violence in Iraq. Sexual violence is rampant. There is no question about it. However, also widespread is the political instrumentalization of sexual violence, often sensationalised and exaggerated in terms of scope and threat. It is used as an othering and dehumanizing device, whether in relation to sectarian conflict, the fraud and complex relations between western and Middle Eastern political leaders, or the demonization of asylum seekers and migrants. For example, those of us living in Europe are familiar with the obsessive discussions of honour crimes in the European politics of immigration. Without doubt honour-based crimes and killings are a serious problem, particularly in

relation to the Kurdish region and Kurdish diaspora communities in Europe (Alinia, 2013; Beghikani, 2005, 2010; Mojab 2001, 2003). Yet, media and policy narratives around honour-based crimes are often incredibly essentialising, stigmatizing and glossing over complex situations and variations. The more recent debates about sexual harassment of women in Cologne by apparently largely Middle East/North African migrants and asylum seekers on New Year's Eve in Cologne has revealed the difficulty of addressing sexual violence and racism simultaneously.

Discourses on sexual violence are frequently deployed as part of wider racist and sectarian culturalist discourses: where their 'barbaric' culture is essentially different from "our" civilised culture, and the way this difference is articulated most dramatically is over and with the bodies of women and the attitudes towards non-heteronormative sexualities. I agree with Lila Abu Lughod's (2013) assessment in her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* that blaming culture "means not just flattening cultures, stripping moral systems of their complexity, and hiding the most modern political and social interventions that no community escapes; it means erasing history" (Abu-Lughod, 2013: 136). I also concur with Abu-Lughod that what is often missing in discussions is the recognition of the dynamic historical transformations and specific political economies that are affecting women, men, families, and everyday life in all communities (ibid.).

In my earlier joint work with Nicola Pratt (2009), published as *What kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq*, we discussed how women in Iraq have fared since the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003. Official rhetoric had put Iraqi women at centre stage, but we showed that in reality women's rights and women's

lives have been exploited in the name of competing political agendas. We also tried to challenge the widespread view - even amongst some progressive anti-war and peace activists - that something inherent in Muslim, Middle Eastern or Iraqi culture is responsible for the escalating violence and systematic erosion of women's rights. We argued that it was not Islam or 'culture' that have pushed Iraqi women back into their homes. Instead, we blamed concrete and rapidly changing political, economic and social conditions as well as a wide range of national, regional and international actors (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009).

Over the past years, I have spent lots of time and energy as an academic and as an activist to argue against the "culturalization" of gender-related issues -particularly with reference to gender-based violence in the Iraqi context. For years, I have felt compelled to say and write: It's not about "their culture", but it is about political economies. It is about authoritarian dictatorships and conservative patriarchal interpretations and practices. It is about foreign interventions and invasions and their gendered politics (Al-Ali, 2014). I have made a case for the significance of intersectionality, i.e. that the struggle for women's rights intersects with the struggle against other inequalities, which, in Iraq translates into the struggles against imperialism, neo-liberal economics, authoritarianism, and, crucially as well, sectarianism.

Being based in London, my feminism certainly also intersects with the struggle against racism and Islamophobia. Throughout I have tried to not become an apologetic in terms of systematic human and women's rights abuses in Iraq and elsewhere. Yet I have to admit that I am personally frustrated by my own constant

compulsion to fight Islamophobia and racism and, in that process, sometimes gloss over forms of gender-based and sexual violence, the political marginalization of women and men who do not fit heteronormative ideals, as well as extremely socially conservative attitudes towards gender norms and relations.

And here I would diverge from Lila Abu Lughood's position in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* While I agree with her critique of the use and abuse of the call for women's rights in the context of justifying military interventions and policies and attitudes towards migrants, we cannot stop here. I was very humbled by a former student and feminist activist from Lebanon, Leen Hashem, who despaired on several occasions while doing her MA in Gender Studies with us at SOAS: "Why are you western based feminist scholars stuck in your anti-orientalist and anti-Islamophobic discourses? Why are you privileging countering orientalism and imperialism to countering local and regional inequalities, including those linked to religious extremism?" Her frustration and despair was subsequently voiced by several other students and friends involved in feminist activism in the Middle East, and more recently articulated by Lama Abu Odeh (2015) in "Holier than though: The anti-imperialist versus the local activist". Abu Odeh breaks a taboo in forcefully critiquing anti-imperialist academics based particularly in the US who are critical of feminist and LGBTQ activists in the region.

In practice, what the tension often boils down to is the question whether we should look at neo-colonial and imperialist policies (particularly those linked to the US and Israel), as well as neo-liberal economics as root causes for gender-based inequalities and forms of oppression in the Middle East, or whether we should look to national and local cultures and local manifestations of patriarchy. The divergent positions

became very accentuated in the reactions to Mona El Tahawy's (2012) controversial and problematic article entitled "Why do they hate us?" published in *Foreign Policy* in April 2012. As I have stated previously, there were lots of things problematic in Mona El Tahawy's article, which appeared to blame Middle Eastern men as a group for the oppression and discriminatory practices against Middle Eastern women as a group (Al-Ali, 2014). Several authors provided excellent critiques, pointing to the historically-rooted and structural injustices and forms of oppression, such as colonialism, capitalism, authoritarianism, patriarchy and neo-liberalism, affecting *all* women and men in the region (Seikaly & Mikdashi, 2012; Malik, 2012). Yet, despite my own reservations of the packaging, content and tone of El Tahawy's article, I felt uncomfortable with the lack of serious attempts to look inward, name and confront those attitudes, norms, practices and relations that can not be simply explained away by external and structural patterns, forces and processes. I would argue that this dichotomous approach – focusing on patriarchal cultural attitudes and practices on the one hand and imperialist policies and neo-liberal economics on the other - is unhelpful and more reflective of specific, and often quite divergent, positionalities rather than the complex empirical realities we are facing as activists and academics.

Obviously I cannot escape my positionality and audiences, being based in London, which comes with certain responsibilities and points of emphasis. Yet, rather than contributing to the taboo and silencing of sexual and wider gender-based violence within domestic Iraqi politics on the one hand, and the sensationalising and essentialist culturalist discourses on the other, we need to find nuanced and truly intersectional ways to talk about it. Trying to avoid the straightjacket of location and positionality - however shifting that might be given people's multiple roles,



transnational involvements and contextual identities - calls for historicising to avoid essentialist notions of culture and identity. But it also requires attention to regional and local agencies, complicities, historically specific patriarchal articulations and practises, and, crucially, I would argue, a critical engagement with militarised and other newly emerging masculinities. In the Iraqi context today, this concretely translates into a recognition that US and UK actions and policies linked to the invasion and occupation have contributed to the deterioration of women's rights and the increase in gender-based and sexual violence, while simultaneously paying attention to and recognizing that local manifestations of militarised and neo-liberal patriarchal gender norms and relations are also rooted in regional, (trans)national and local power dynamics and struggles as well as historically specific contestations over resources, cultures and identities. Crucially, gender-based and sexual violence did not simply emerge post-2003 but have a history linked to the Ba'ath regime, which came into power in 1968 and lasted until 2003, and even further back the formation of Iraq as a nation state (Efrati, 2012). We also have to look carefully at the specific political and economic dynamics linked to the Kurdish Regional Government, particularly post-1991.

### **Sexual violence during the Ba'ath regime**

Despite its repressive nature, the first decade of the Ba'ath regime has been largely characterised by its secularising and modernizing policies. Women's education and labour force participation were integral to the regime's attempt at creating a productive population that could be governed through the centralised mechanisms of an increasingly authoritarian state. I have elsewhere discussed at length the state's active intervention in challenging prevailing gender norms and relations, largely to

address the expanding economy and needs of the labour market (Al-Ali, 2007).

Women's education and labour force participation was actively encouraged by the state which, throughout the 1970s and 80s, provided free childcare and an

infrastructure that facilitated women's entry into the expanding labour force (ibid.).

An in-depth analysis of the 35 years of Ba'ath regime does point to contradictory and changing policies and attitude towards women and gender, challenging any and

generalised and often simplistic assessments.

Clearly women living in urban areas not involved in opposition politics benefitted

much more from the modernizing state policies than either women in the country-

side or those in opposition of the regime, in fear of their lives. Reports and personal

accounts by Iraqi women and men who were in opposition to the regime reveal that

sexual violence was integral to the horrific regime of torture in Iraqi prisons during

the Ba'ath era (Amnesty International, 2005; Al-Ali, 2007; Human Rights Watch,

2014). However, there appear to be more documented cases of women having

experienced sexual violence in prisons than men, which might be a result of the

greater social stigma attached for men experiencing sexual torture, abuse and rape.

From the 1980s onwards, in the context of the Iran-Iraq war and the atrocities against

the Kurdish population, women were increasingly used to demarcate boundaries

between communities and carry the heavy burden of honour in a society that became

more and more militarized. Women's patriotic duties shifted to producers of loyal

Iraqi citizens and future fighters. Their bodies became progressively the sight of

nationalist policies and battles (Rohde, 2010). During the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988),

a series of legal decrees were introduced to control women's marital and reproductive

freedoms. In December 1982, the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) issued a decree forbidding Iraqi women to marry non-Iraqis as well as another decree prohibiting Iraqi women married to non-Iraqis to transfer money or property to their husbands as inheritance (Omar, 1994: 63). At the same time, Iraqi men were encouraged to divorce their Iranian wives while Iraqi Arab men were encouraged to marry Kurdish women as part of the regime's Arabization policies in the north. During this period, Islamist and Kurdish women were tortured and sexually abused, humiliating not only the female victims but 'dishonouring' their male relatives as well (Al-Ali, 2007: 168-169).

The most known systematic killing but also sexual abuse took place during the 1987-1988 *Anfal* campaign, nominally a counterinsurgency operation against Kurdish resistance, but in reality a carefully planned and executed programme of ethnic cleansing in which 50,000 - 200,000 people are estimated to have been killed, most of them men and adolescent boys<sup>3</sup>. Thousands of Kurdish villages were systematically destroyed, and over a million and a half of their inhabitants deported to camps with no water, electricity or sewage. Others were executed on the way out of their villages. Under the leadership of Ali Hasan al-Majid, a cousin of Saddam Hussein, the *Anfal* campaign has been particularly associated with the use of chemical weapons, such as mustard and nerve gas. Long-term effects have included various forms of cancer, infertility, and congenital diseases. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss at any length the scale and depth of sexual violence carried out against Kurdish women at the time. Choman Hardi (2011) as well as Karen Mlodoch (2009) have written in great depth about women's experiences and memories of Anfal. Hardi's moving book *Gendered Experiences of Genocide: Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq* (2011)

addresses systematic sexual abuse, including rape, of women in camps. She also stresses that despite the large body of documents, and evidence available, outside the immediate media coverage, Anfal “remained largely unrecognised by the international community” (p. 33).

While the systematic rape and abuse of Kurdish women as part of the Anfal campaign and political prisoners or relatives of suspected opposition activists accounts for the largest scale of sexual violence, other high profile incidents on a smaller scale led to widespread fear and panic amongst the population, particularly in Baghdad. Most notorious are the crimes committed by Uday, the son of Saddam Hussein, who regularly kidnapped and raped young Iraqi women and girls for his sexual gratification. Several women I interviewed over the past decade remembered vividly stories of young women having been kidnapped and the widespread fear these incidents triggered in their families. Alya G., for example, of middle class background, who was a teenager in the 1980s and a young woman in the 1990s growing up in Baghdad, bemoaned that her freedom of movement was severely curtailed by the fear of Uday:

My mother had much more freedom growing up in Baghdad in the 60s and 70s than what myself and my sisters had when we grew up. My family was quite open and liberal, but my parents were very worried about us being seen by Uday or one of his entourage. We knew a family whose daughter had been kidnapped and raped by Uday. It was horrible. The family was supportive of her, but she never really recovered from that ordeal and she experienced lots of stigma because of it. After that

happened, my parents became very strict with us, and we were not allowed to go out on our own. My father was also much more strict about what we could wear.

Uday and his notorious militia are also linked to the wave of killings of alleged sex workers and panderers in 2000. Resonating the accounts of several Iraqi women I talked to, who told me of their horror when they heard about the beheading of several hundred alleged women, an Amnesty International report (2001) states:

In October dozens of women accused of prostitution were beheaded without any judicial process in Baghdad and other cities. Men suspected of procurement were also beheaded. The killings were reportedly carried out in the presence of representatives of the Ba'ath Party and the Iraqi Women's General Union. Members of Feda'iyye Saddam, a militia created in 1994 by 'Uday Saddam Hussain, used swords to execute the victims in front of their homes. Some victims were reportedly killed for political reasons.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as the regime increasingly resorted to violence, including sexual violence, to keep control of the progressively disaffected population, Iraqi human and women's rights activists in the diaspora, particularly those based in the UK and the US, tried to raise awareness and obtain support amongst western politicians and the media. Layla G., a London-based leftist women's rights activist told me:

During and after the Anfal campaign against the Kurds, we tried many times to get this government's attention. When Saddam was using chemical weapons on the Kurds, did any politician do anything in this country? Our Kurdish sisters were beaten and raped by soldiers. We wrote to our MPs, we wrote letters to the government, we tried to organize events. Hardly anyone wanted to listen and pay attention. All of a sudden, after 9/11, the British and American politicians are very eager to hear about women being raped by Saddam's regime. Also, everyone started to talk about the beheading of prostitutes even if that happened 10 years before without any western politician protesting.

Layla, as many other Iraqi women activists I talked to over the years, acknowledges that sexual violence took place during the Ba'ath regime. Yet, at the same time, she questions the timing and the way that American and British politicians and the media started to focus on sexual violence in the aftermath of 9/11 and in the run up to the invasion. However, a handful of women whom I interviewed shortly after the invasion vehemently denied the atrocities committed against Kurds by the Iraqi regime and Iraqi soldiers. It was not always clear to me whether they genuinely believed that these atrocities did not happen but it seemed to me that they had willingly bought into regime propaganda despite the fact that a large part of the population seemed to have been aware that the regime's rhetoric was not to be trusted.

Nicola Pratt and myself (2009) have argued previously that Iraqi women were instrumentalised in the run up to the invasion, and during the occupation. For example, high-ranking US officials, including then National Security Advisor

Condoleezza Rice and Vice-President Dick Cheney, met with Women for a Free Iraq, a newly formed group of Iraqi opposition activists backed by the State Department post 9/11, to hear their personal stories and to discuss the future of the country (Al-Ali & Pratt 2009: 56). The US State Department publicized the abuses experienced by women at the hands of the Iraqi regime—including beheadings, rape and torture (Office of International Women’s Issues 2003). In the UK, Tony Blair met a delegation of Iraqi women in November 2002 (Russell 2002) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office listed the regime’s crimes against women as part of its dossier on human rights abuses in Iraq (Foreign & Commonwealth Office 2002).

The timing of this sudden interest in the plight of Iraqi women cannot be overemphasized. For decades, many Iraqi women activists in the US and UK had tried to raise awareness about the systematic abuse of human and women’s rights under Saddam Hussein, the atrocities linked to the Anfal campaign against the Kurds as well as the impact of economic sanctions on women and families (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009: 56). Yet, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, their voices remained largely unheard amongst western politicians who initially regarded Saddam Hussein as an ally in the fight against the Islamic regime in Iran. Later, after the invasion of Kuwait, when Saddam Hussein ceased to be regarded as an ally, the debate around economic sanctions and the broader humanitarian crisis subsumed more gender-specific forms of violence and human rights abuses. Yet, during the sanctions period (1990-2003), the combination of economic crisis, high levels of unemployment, changing state rhetoric and policies as well a shift towards greater religiosity led to an increase in social conservatism and a growth in discriminatory practices and sexual forms of violence, such as domestic violence, polygamy, and prostitution.

## **Post-invasion and occupation**

The US partly justified its invasion of Iraq by calling attention to the abuse of women by the regime of Saddam Hussein (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009). International agencies and NGOs received money (mostly from the US and the UK) to train women to enable their participation in peace-building, reconstruction and the transition to democracy (ibid.). Delegations of self-selected Iraqi women visited Washington regularly after the invasion, holding press conferences hosted by the State Department and meeting President Bush at the White House in November 2003 (White House Press Secretary 2003). When my colleague Nicola Pratt visited Washington, DC, in 2005, a number of officials were keen to stress the US administration's concern to support women in Iraq and to see them play a role in the country's future (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009: 57).

However, despite the rhetoric of supporting and liberating women, women and gender issues quickly dropped of the agenda of both the occupation forces and Iraqi politicians. Since 2003, Iraqi women and men have faced high levels of insecurity, coupled with the lack of rule of law, both contributing to increasing and wide-ranging forms of gender-based and sexual violence. Other main challenges relate to an on-going humanitarian crisis and lack of functioning and adequate infrastructure, widespread corruption and a non-functioning authoritarian and sectarian state that heavily relies on militia and repression. Rampant domestic violence, verbal and physical intimidation, sexual harassment, rape, forced marriage - as well as increases in *mu'tah* or so-called pleasure marriages<sup>4</sup> - trafficking, forced prostitution, female genital mutilation, and honour-based crimes, including killings, have been very much part of the post-invasion experience.



Several reports and interviews with Iraqi women's rights activists suggested already a few years after the invasion that in a context of widespread unemployment and poverty, women were particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. This view was also expressed by a leading women's rights activist from Baghdad who told me: "The fragility of state institutions and the failure of the rule of law has created room for human trafficking gangs, especially for the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation and prostitution." Women and girls from poor families in search of employment have been the most frequent victims of trafficking. It is not only Iraqi criminal gangs that have been involved in shipping women and girls to Syria, Jordan, Qatar and other Gulf countries but, according to Human Rights Watch (2011), some Iraqi police officers have also been involved.

According to a comprehensive report published in 2011 by the Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights, gender-based violence has been institutionalized: violence against women is not sufficiently criminalized and victims face harsh laws and practices that treat victims as criminals. Any protective laws that might exist have been rarely implemented as the police and judges treat gender-based crimes and sexual violence leniently and allow perpetrators to act with impunity. No doubt, and as I stated earlier, sexual violence existed before 2003. Yet, the failure to protect women and establish proper awareness mechanisms and procedures over the last years is one of the major failures and responsibilities of the international community, particularly the US and the UK, alongside the main Iraqi political actors, parties and governments. As early as 2005, an Iraqi women's rights activist stated in an interview with me:

The Iraqi army and police are not just failing to prevent violence against women, but they are part of the problem. They treat women who have been victims of domestic violence or rape during kidnappings, for example, without any respect and some even consider them to be guilty. Also we know of cases where women have been harassed and even raped at police stations and inside prisons. We have tried to raise this with our politicians, but they are not listening. The Americans and British are also busy with other issues and do not pursue our complaints.

Almost a decade later, a Human Rights Watch report (2014) addresses the systematic corruption and flaws of the Iraqi criminal system. While both men and women are affected, women are particularly vulnerable as they are frequently detained as a punishment for male family members who have allegedly committed a crime or have been engaged in political activities. Due to the stigma attached to imprisonment, particularly given the risk of torture and sexual abuse, women face further harassment and ostracising within their communities and families once freed. The report states that:

[...] women are subjected to threats of, or actual sexual assault (sometimes in front of husbands, brothers, and children.) Some detainees reported a lack of adequate protection for female prisoners from attacks by male prison guards, including those from adjoining male prisons. Two women reported that sexual assault by prison guards resulted in pregnancy. Women and officials reported that the likelihood of a woman

being subject to sexual assault is far higher during arrest and interrogation, prior to a woman's confinement in prison. "[W]e expect that they've been raped by police on the way to the prison," Um Aqil, an employee at a women's prison facility told Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch 2014).

According to several reports, US forces knew that detainees were being tortured and ill-treated at places of detention under the control of the Interior Ministry, which they frequently visited (Amnesty International 2006). Yet, British and American troops not only turned a blind eye to the violence committed by the Iraqi army, various militia and criminal gangs, but were also active perpetrators of sexual violence. Over the years, several of my respondents who are involved in human and women's rights activism, have talked about various instances and cases of harassment at check points and during house searches, torture, sexual abuse and rape in prisons, mainly as part of counter-insurgency campaigns. In 2005, Amnesty International reported that female detainees had been tortured, threatened with rape, subjected to sexual abuse, possibly including rape.

It is important to stress that gender-based and sexual violence does not only affect women and girls: men and boys are also targeted and impacted. Most visible have been the instances of sexual violence of male Iraqi prisoners at the hands of the US army in Abu Ghraib prison (Amnesty International 2006, Human Rights Watch 2004). The shocking images of naked hooded Iraqi men have become emblematic of larger human rights abuses and atrocities in the name of democracy and human rights at the hands of the occupation. However, men have also been attacked by militias

linked to political parties as well as insurgent groups for not adhering to heterosexual gender norms. Men “suspected” of homosexual conduct or not being “manly” enough have become increasingly at risk and have been harassed and killed by Islamist militia (Human Rights Watch 2009). In 2012, a wave of so-called emo killings targeted mainly teenage boys and young men whose hair- styles, clothes and music choice were perceived to be too effeminate by the attackers (Long, 2012). What emerges in central and southern Iraq is a toxic cocktail of Islamist sectarianism, authoritarianism and increased militarization of society, all exacerbating the glorification of militarized masculinities, often directly linked with ever more violent acts.

### **The Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI)**

In the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), *de facto* autonomous since 1991, the situation is generally much better in terms of security, an improved infrastructure, a working parliament with active participation of female MPs and numerous women’s organisations and rights activists who have managed to push through several relevant legal reforms. However, gender-based and sexual violence are also rampant, specifically in the form of honour-based crimes and killings, female suicides, self-burning and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). The KRG has used women’s and gender-based issues to demarcate itself from the central government in Baghdad, stressing its democratic and more secular and progressive values. This has helped women’s rights activists and female MPs to make some headway in relation to the legal protection of women and the criminalization of gender-based violence. Yet, as Begikhani (2005, 2010) and others have pointed out, in reality the KRG appears to be less invested in actually implementing new legislation and tends to pursue more traditional ways of addressing gender-based and sexual violence, using tribal and

family dispute mechanisms, often to the detriment of women receiving justice.

Despite the generally more secular and progressive context in comparison to central and southern Iraq, one cannot help but notice the way that Kurdish politicians instrumentalise gender issues.

Several authors have discussed and analysed gender-based and sexual violence in the KRI with reference to patriarchy, tribal culture, nationalism, militarism and Islamism (Mojab, 2001, 2004; Beghikani 2005, 2010). More recently, Minoo Alinia (2013) has provided an in-depth analysis of honour-based crimes, paying attention to the way that various power structures intersect to produce a “hegemonic honour discourse”. Looking at the intersections of ethnic and national oppression, economic marginalization, patriarchy, religion, tribal and kinship structures as well as displacement and militarization of society, Alinia also stresses the significance of prevailing notions of masculinity in controlling women’s bodies, their sexuality and “honour”.

While Alinia is moving away from the more generalised explanations pertaining to culture, religion, tribalism and nation, Mariwan Kanie (2015) provides further nuance and in-depth insight by pointing to shifts in social, political and economic norms and values as resulting in a “normative disorientation”, and the emergence of new forms of masculinities alongside the older hegemonic *peshmerga* masculinities, all contributing to an increase in gender-based violence. In my view, “normative disorientation” is an excellent analytical lens to explore the impact of more recent political, social and economic changes in the KRI. But I would also argue that an intersectional approach is key, and that we need to be very specific in terms of the

relevant intersecting oppressive structures as Alinia suggest. Patriarchy, nationalism tribalism and Islamism as well as hegemonic masculinities, shift in specific historical contexts and in line with changing political economies and require in depth empirical research to adequately delineate. This later insight is not only relevant for the KRI but more broadly applicable, and is certainly also poignant when analysing sexual violence in central and southern Iraq.

Throughout Iraq and the KRI, perpetrators of gender-based and sexual violence have cut across diverse ethnic, religious and class backgrounds and have ranged from the occupation forces, government officials and militants, resistance and insurgent groups, criminal gangs to relatives and families. The various forms of violence are working to reconfigure masculinities and femininities in the post-invasion context. But they are also actively employed as tools for new forms of militarised, authoritarian as well as sectarian politics. Despite its rhetoric, the occupation forces, particularly the US, quickly dropped any initial commitment to gender-based equality and justice. Similar to the largely sectarian and corrupt Iraqi political elite, the US and UK politicians and the military not only compromised on gender issues as part of their overall shift from human to national security, but also contributed to the increase and intensity of sexual violence since the invasion.

### **ISIS: Doctrinally justified sexual violence**

Grueiling images and reports of sexually violated Yezidi women and girls have circulated widely within the media and policy-circles since ISIS took over Mosul and key western cities in Iraq in 2014. Accounts of systematic and organized sexual

slavery, forced marriages, sexual assault and rape have shocked and shaken many people around the world. In addition to the enormity and scale of the abuse, what has made these sexual atrocities and forms of dehumanization particularly appalling are the sexual enslavement and treatment of religious minorities by ISIS fighters.<sup>5</sup>

Yezidis (Ezidis), an ancient religious minority with ethnically Kurdish background, have been most vulnerable, but other religious minorities such as Christians, Sabean, Shabak, Turkmen but also Shi'a and even Sunni women have been abused by ISIS fighters. There have been numerous accounts of widespread rape of religious minority women under the banner of *jihad al nikah* (sexual intercourse in pursuit of struggle) with fighters not waiting for unmarried girls to “volunteer” and offer themselves to the male fighters. The promise of sexual access to women and girls has been central to ISIS' recruitment strategy and propaganda materials (UN 2015).

The unprecedented scale and level of brutality by ISIS fighters has been documented widely (Amnesty International 2014, Human Rights Watch 2015, UNAMI OHCHR 2014, UN News Centre 2015). The accounts of the survivors, mainly young female Yezidi survivors of captivity, sexual enslavement, beatings, forced marriage and rape are heart wrenching and impossible to summarise here. According to my interviews, with Iraqi/Kurdish women's rights activists, many women seem to have been handed from one fighter to another, sometimes sold and sometimes given as presents. Rape and forced marriage appears to be part of a broader genocide of Yezidis and a systematic dehumanization of non-Muslim religious minorities. Regular occurrences of sexual violence are integral to ISIS' extreme form of asserting a militarised and dominant masculinity, embedded in a hyper-patriarchal system of rigid and polarised gender roles. Aside from the scale of the atrocities, what makes the violence so

particularly gruesome is the way that ISIS engages in doctrinal justifications. In October 2014, for example, ISIS' English language publication *Dabiq* stated that its fighters had given captured Yezidi women and girls to its members as "spoils of war." The publication justifies sexual violence claiming that Islam permits sex with non-Muslim "slaves," including girls, as well as beating and selling them (HRW 2015). In a later issue of *Dabiq* (no 9), in the section "From our sisters", a female ISIS member published a long essay on the role of female slaves within the so-called Islamic state, stressing the importance of conversion of infidels, including "slave girls" (Al-Muhajra, 2015).

Yet, while the atrocities against Yazidi women and girls as well as other religious minorities are discussed widely within the media and policy circles, very little seems to be done to actually support those who escaped and survived. Several of my respondents stressed that general living conditions for Yezidi and Christian refugees are extremely difficult at a time when the KRG is already overstretched due to its hosting of hundreds of thousand of Syrian refugees and Iraqi IDPs while being in an economic crisis due to a political stand off with the central government in Iraq. None of the European or North-American countries outraged by ISIS violence has offered to take in a substantial number of Yezidi refugees or to seriously help the KRG to deal with the refugee crisis.

Within the Yezidi community there is still a very strong stigma around rape, and, according to Amnesty International, and a number of Kurdish women's rights activists who have worked with Yezidi women, many families would speak of systematic rape but deny any of their female relatives were affected (AI 2014). At the



same time, AI researchers have witnessed that women and girls who escaped ISIS captivity are put under pressure to speak to the media, often without seeking informed consent (ibid):

One woman told Amnesty International that she went to a place where she thought she would be receiving medical care for her panic attacks, but instead found a television crew wanting to interview her. Two others said that they received a visit from a foreign man who said he was a doctor, but seemed to be a journalist: “He said that to cure our depression we should get out of the house and go for walks in the fields and sit in the sun. He had a large video camera and filmed us but said that our faces would not be shown.” Three other girls who received the visit of a television crew while they were being interviewed by an Amnesty International researcher said that they did not want to speak to journalists but that they felt they could not refuse because the family who hosted them had brought the journalists to them (Amnesty International 2014).

According to Human Rights Watch (2015), it is not clear that doctors have always obtained informed consent before conducting medical examinations to check whether a girl or woman has been raped. Some women also never receive the test results. It is clear that abuse does not necessarily stop after the escape from ISIS.

Deniz Kandiyoti (2007) challenges us to problematize the different modalities of sexual and gender-based violence in relation to diverse social actors in Afghanistan, differentiating between the ‘privatised’ violence within families as opposed to the

forms of violence used in conflict as a systematic tool intimidation, and finally the public performances of Islamic retribution we came to associate with the Taliban. The type of violence perpetrated by ISIS fighters and propagated by the group can be compared to the performative Islamic retribution referred to by Kandiyoti. But similar to the Afghani context, the extreme violence of ISIS exists within a broader spectrum of sexual and gender-based violence taking place within the private sphere of families, on streets, at work places and schools and used by various militias and armed gangs as forms of warfare.

### **Dilemmas for transnational feminist solidarity**

Sexual and gendered violence is not merely employed as a racist and othering discourse by imperialist powers, and right-wing constituencies in the west, but discourses about sexual violence have emerged at every single moment of political and sectarian tension in modern Iraq as a central polarizing and political device amongst politicians and activists. Theoretically and politically, as I have argued previously (Al-Ali, 2014), we need to recognise that sexual and gender-based violence underwrites much of the broader structural and political violence we are witnessing. It is central to sectarianism and to extreme forms of authoritarianism. Too often thought about as an add-on, sexual violence is, in fact, central to all forms and processes of delineating, controlling, oppressing, marginalizing and governing communities.

Historicizing sexual violence allows us to challenge both the “presentism” so widespread within media and policy discourses as well as essentialist notions about “their culture” or “their religion”. A historical approach reveals the complex interplay

of inter and trans-national, regional, national and local factors in shaping the specific political economies and socio-historical contexts in which sexual violence might become more widespread. In my view, and as discussed in detail above, a positionality rooted in transnational feminist politics needs to go beyond dichotomous positions of macro power configurations linked to imperialism, neo-liberalism and globalization on the one hand, and an attention to localised and regional inequalities and power configurations linked to patriarchy, cultural norms and religious interpretations and practises. Local practices of sexual and gendered violence are articulations not only of local patriarchies embedded in specific and often changing political economies but also transnational imperialism and neoliberalism. Crucially, however, I would argue that while macro processes clearly influence and shape local articulations and configurations of power, they cannot be collapsed into each other. Ironically, in my view, explaining away different forms of sexual violence solely by reference to the history of colonialism and imperialism, or in the Iraqi context, the history of the invasion and occupation, takes away agency of local actors, such as political leaders and militia, but also specific individual men, who historically have been complicit if not drivers of sexual violence as my historical discussion has shown.

Talking about the ways in which sexual and gender-based violence is embedded within and productive of broader authoritarian, patriarchal, and fascistic, trends is a challenge. Mobilizing against sexual violence and engaging in advocacy work is even trickier and remains fraught with tensions (Al-Ali, 2014). As I tried to illustrate in this article, any political mobilization and demands are complicated by the continuum of sexual and gender-based violence evident at any given time, but rendered even more complex when taking a historical lens.

Like many other feminist academics and activists, I feel extremely conflicted in articulating a coherent transnational feminist solidarity at this historical juncture. My previous political positions were clear in terms of rejecting imperialist and neo-colonial military interventions and the need to find non-violent political solutions. However, purist pacifist notions and the call for non-violent resistance are absurd in the face of the threats and atrocities linked to ISIS. My position does not translate into a sudden embracing of military interventions as a way to liberate women, but recognises that in certain situations targeted military interventions might help those who are putting their lives at risk while resisting fascist and genocidal organizations and ideas. And here I am of course speaking mainly of the Kurdish women and men linked to the armed wings of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), that is the People's Protection Unit (YPG) and the Women's Defence Unit (YPJ), as well as the PYD's sister party: the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Their armed struggle is motivated by the aim to defend themselves and the hundreds of thousands of civilians at risk from ISIS violence. However, crucially, for them, armed struggle is not an end in and of itself but rather a necessity in the context of their broader political project that puts gender equality and justice as its centre. It is too early to assess if and how an egalitarian Democratic Confederalism as advocated by the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan plays out beyond female fighters and female political leaders. Yet, it is clear that the stated politics and practises of these political parties and movements, also resonating in Turkey's HDP party, have not only moved beyond a narrow Kurdish nationalism but present the most progressive and gender-sensitive vision we have in the region today.

This specific context, I would argue is radically different from the air strikes on ISIS targets in Syria more broadly. Not only is the prolonged military intervention in Syria contributing to the massive scale of human casualties and displaced people, thereby potentially increasing the radicalization of people, but also the nature of the Syrian conflict is also far more complex. In the wider Syrian context, targeted air strikes on specific ISIS targets are far less likely than they were in ISIS-occupied Kobane in Rojava (northern Syria or western Kurdistan). Meanwhile, the opposition to ISIS is also extremely heterogeneous, including many radical Islamist, highly misogynist and violent militia and armed groups. Finally, the current ill-conceived military intervention in Syria appears to ignore the main source of most human casualties and violence in the current conflict, which is the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

There are many other concrete points that a transnational feminist solidarity can and should address, starting by putting pressure on their own governments to change their hypocritical positions towards regional players, most notably Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Erdogan's government, for example, has been actively supporting ISIS, supplying them with weapons, free mobility and fighters, and most recently bombing PKK positions, arresting Kurdish and leftist activists resisting ISIS and engaging in a brutal crack down on the Kurdish population in south-eastern Turkey. So far this has not led to an international outcry or much actual pressure being put on the Turkish government. Another important demand that feminists can advocate for is an end to impunity where sexual and gender-based violence is concerned, stressing both the historical context and the broad spectrum of gender-based violence and its perpetrators. At the same time, feminists in Europe and North- America have a responsibility to intervene in more and more right-wing discussions and policies

around immigration. Over the past years, migration and border control have increasingly become feminist issues, reflecting current intersectional configurations of power.

Finally, I would advocate for engagement, closer ties and cooperation with Iraqi and Kurdish women's organizations and activists in Iraq, in the region and in the diaspora. Women's rights activists in central and southern Iraq as well as the KRI have not only been providing humanitarian assistance, welfare and legal advice, but they have also been providing shelters for victims of gender-based and sexual violence, are advocating bravely against all forms of gender-based violence, are pushing for legal reforms and shifts in cultural attitudes, are raising awareness in media fora and are challenging the complicity of largely male politicians. Iraqi and Kurdish women's rights activists have also been at the forefront of challenging corruption, lack of transparency, political authoritarianism and sectarianism. Despite these concrete suggestions, I still hold that a dose of ambivalence, humility and doubt has to be integral to any transnational feminist solidarity at these troubling times.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The group was formerly called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and is frequently referred to as Da'ish or Daesh, the Arabic equivalent of ISIL). More recently, the group has renamed itself to the Islamic State (IS). In this article I use the ISIS, the term most commonly used in English media and academic circles.

<sup>2</sup> Gendered or gender-based violence (GBV) refers to violence against a person based on the normative roles linked to each gender contributing to and reproducing unequal power relations in a given society. GBV could lead to psychological, economic, physical or sexual harm and is often used interchangeably with violence against women (VAW). Men can also be victims and survivors of gender-based violence, often linked to their non-normative masculinity and/or sexuality. Sexual violence is

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one specific continuum of GBV that refers to a wide range of threats, behaviours and acts that are sexual or sexualized, unwanted and committed without consent. Sexual violence might exist on an individual level but is often used more systematically to control, dominate and reinforce gender-based oppression and heteronormativity.

<sup>3</sup> For more details, see Human Rights Watch (1993) *Genocide in Iraq, the Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*; and <http://www.womenwarpeace.org/iraq/iraq.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Within Shi'a Islam, *Nikāh al-mut'ah* (pleasure marriage), refers to an informal fixed term marriage that can be contracted without any witnesses. In practice, *mutah* is often used to legalise prostitution, but might also be used to sanction mutually consensual sexual relations. Particularly for women, there is a stigma attached to engaging in *mutah* marriages.

<sup>5</sup> In the fourth edition “Dabiq”, ISIS’ English-language digital magazine states said, according to sharia and verses in the Qu’ran, female members of the Yezidi sect may legitimately be captured and forcibly made concubines or sexual slaves. <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/islamic-state-isis-magazine-Issue-4-the-failed-crusade.pdf>

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