

IRAQI WOMEN BEFORE THE INVASION

A few days after Laura Bush's visit to Afghanistan in March 2005, Nadjé was invited to speak about the situation of Iraqi women on National Public Radio in the United States. Also live on the air was Charlotte Ponticelli, then senior coordinator for the International Women's Issues Office within the State Department. Ponticelli spoke about Laura Bush's visit and the great achievements of both Iraqi and Afghani women since their respective liberations. Her very positive account of the situation of Afghan women differed drastically from the stories we had heard from friends and colleagues who had traveled to Afghanistan and reported that not much had changed for women since 2001. However, when it came to Iraqi women, the extent of Ponticelli's misconceptions became even more obvious when she stated that people were generally unaware that Iraqi women, just like their Afghan counterparts, had been prevented by Saddam Hussein from entering schools and universities.

When it was her turn to be interviewed, Nadjé tried to dispel this extreme misrepresentation of past realities: while there was no doubt about the numerous atrocities and horrors committed by the previous regime, Iraqi women were until quite recently among the most educated in the region and had been actively involved in Iraq's labor force until economic sanctions destroyed Iraq's economy.¹ Nadjé argued at the time that Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath regime had committed uncountable crimes while in power—crimes that should be addressed and recognized—but that with respect to women the picture was much more complex.

During the past years, as we have given numerous talks at universities, bookstores, and community centers in the United States, the United Kingdom, and various European countries, we often came across the perception of the passive, oppressed Iraqi woman who had been deprived of all rights including those of education, work, and freedom of movement. Often our audiences' views were based on stereotypes and generalizations about Islam and Muslim societies. In this chapter, we challenge these misconceptions and generalizations and provide a historical context for the current situation in Iraq by examining women's active involvement in political life prior to the fall of the previous regime in 2003. We show how prevailing gender ideologies and relations have been shaped by and, in turn, have shaped the evolution of political, economic, and social structures and state policies. We begin with a description of early reformists and feminists in the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly in connection to the revolutionary movement in the 1950s and early 1960s, before examining "state feminism" under the initial period of the Ba'ath regime. We then explore the turn toward greater social conservatism during the 1980s and 1990s as a result of wars (1980–88 Iran-Iraq War, 1991 Gulf War) and economic sanctions (1990–2003). In addition, we highlight the changing nature and significance of secularism, religion, and sectarianism within Iraqi society, challenging both primordialist accounts of the violent and fragmented "nature" of Iraqi society and glorifications of harmonious multiculturalism that gloss over tensions and violent state policies of exclusion.

THE FIRST REFORMISTS

Like the women's movements in other Middle Eastern countries, Iraqi women's rights activism emerged in the context of modernist discourses about the Iraqi nation and its "new women" (Efrati 2004; Kamp 2003). Male reformers such as the poets Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi (1863–1963) and Ma'ruf al-Rusafi (1875–1945) were inspired by the Egyptian reformist and champion of women's rights Qasim Amin and called for the education of women and an end to veiling, seclusion, and forced marriages (Efrati 2004: 155). Women were seen to be central to the project of progress and modernizing the country.

The first women's organization in Iraq, the Women's Awakening Club (Nadi al-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya, was founded in 1923 by a group of secular Muslim, educated, middle- and upper-middle-class women, many of whom were married to male political leaders and intellectuals. One of

the sixty or so members, Na'ima al-Said, stated at one of the group's early meetings: "It is clear that a nation cannot achieve progress unless men and women cooperate, and women can not help men unless they are educated. . . . Some people in the east mistakenly consider women to be incapable of undertaking any useful projects. . . . I hope we can prove by the success of this Club the fallacy of such thinking" (Ingrams 1983: 93). Projects aiming at women's "awakening" involved literacy courses, lectures on health, hygiene, and housework, and discussions on political, social, and economic issues. Elite women from upper-class backgrounds were the main beneficiaries of these educational programs while lower-class women became mainly recipients of charity. However, members of the Women's Awakening Club stressed the importance of education and organized classes for orphaned and illiterate girls. While male reformers and traditionalists were engaged in a fierce debate about "the veil," with reformists arguing that unveiling was a necessary step in the context of modernization, Iraqi women activists focused their efforts more on wider issues related to women's rights, education, suffrage, and entry into the labor force.

Under British occupation and later British mandate, Iraqi women participated in the nationalist independence struggle in the 1920s and 1930s. Although Iraq received its formal independence in October 1932, British meddling continued until the revolution in 1958, which transformed Iraq from a monarchy to a republic. Like their sisters in other colonized countries such as Egypt, Iraqi women gained political and social spaces through their commitment to their nation's independence (Efrati 2004: 164). Charitable organizations proliferated in the 1930s to deal with the main social ills at the time: poverty, illiteracy, and disease (166). These organizations stepped in where the state had failed to provide and established health centers, shelters for orphans, schools for the blind, and mother and child care centers. Women became actively involved in both gender-mixed organizations, such as the Red Crescent Society (*Jam'iyyat al-Hilal al-Ahmar*), and women-only groups, such as the Women's Union Society (*Jam'iyyat al-Ittihad al-Nisa'i*) (Efrati 2004: 166).

During the 1940s, these charitable organizations gained momentum while new religiously based groups and organizations with more political and feminist orientations emerged as well (Efrati 2004: 166–67). The Women's League against Nazism and Fascism (*Jam'iyyat Mukafahat al-Naziyya wa-l-Fashiyya*) supported democratic ideas and dedicated most of its efforts to eradicating women's illiteracy. It also published a magazine called *Woman's Liberation* (*Tahrir al-Mar'a*) and attempted to raise

women's cultural and social awareness (Efrati 2004: 168). After the end of World War II and the defeat of the Nazis in Germany, the organization was renamed the Women's League Society (Jam'iyyat al-Rabita al-Nisa'iyya) before it was suspended in 1947 by the government as part of a crackdown on leftist organizations and activities.

The Iraqi Women's Union, founded in 1945, was the most important feminist organization at the time. It was inspired by a major women's conference in December 1944 organized by the Egyptian Feminist Union (which had been founded by Huda Sharawi) (Efrati 2004: 169). The Iraqi Women's Union had been active throughout the 1940s and 1950s, not only in charity work, but also in women's education and networking between the various women's organizations inside Iraq and across the Arab world. Most significantly, however, members of the Iraqi Women's Union had addressed previously taboo issues such as prostitution, divorce and child custody, women's working conditions, and property rights (Efrati 2004: 169). But members were largely affiliated with the political establishment under the monarchy and did not share the revolutionary spirit of many of the younger women, who later became involved in the Iraqi Women's League (Rabitat al-Mar'a al-Iraqiyya).

WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTIES

From the late 1940s onwards, resentment against the established political regime grew. The major opposition force in the 1940s and 1950s was the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), founded in 1934. Notions of social justice, egalitarianism, class struggle, anti-British Iraqi nationalism, and secularism were appealing to an intellectual elite as well as impoverished workers and peasants, shantytown dwellers, and students. Not officially licensed by the government, members of communist-led organizations had to work underground and were regularly subjected to repression and persecution. Nevertheless their numbers grew.

In 1952, mass demonstrations initiated by student discontent, known as the Intifada (Uprising), resulted in martial law, increased repression, and mass arrests of political leaders. Many of the older women we talked to had become politicized in the context of the student movement in the late 1940s before they joined the ICP. Soraya K., who has been living in exile in London for over three decades, remembers with great enthusiasm the days of her political activism: "I was initially recruited by fellow students when I was at the university in the late forties. We were all politicized. After I graduated I started to become involved in the Com-

munist Party. We would spend a lot of time in the countryside talking to poor peasants, helping them out with food and medicines but also educating them and trying to get them to support our struggle.” Not all women were attracted to communism. Some slightly younger women Nadjé spoke to found it generally quite hard to admit that they had been initially involved with the Ba’th Party as part of their Arab nationalist orientation and admiration for the pan-Arab leader Nasser in the 1950s.² Women who had initially been attracted to the Ba’th Party were careful to stress the difference between the ideology of pan-Arabism rooted in Arab heritage and regional solidarity and the way political leaders, such as Saddam Hussein, had implemented it and acted when coming to power. Mona F., who became an outspoken critic of Saddam’s regime in the eighties and nineties, said:

At that period, in 1959, I joined the Ba’th Party. All my friends and my sister were in the Ba’th Party. This was my life, my teenage years. I was so much involved. I put all my passion, all my love into the party. My parents did not know about it. My mother once told me that someone told her that I went to someone’s house. She was very angry with me. My father heard that I went to demonstrations. He took my hand and for the first time he told me: “My whole family honour is in this hand. Please protect it. I respect you. And I don’t want to question you. I trust you, but please protect our family honour.” I was attracted to the Ba’th because of Arab nationalism and Nasser. My sister brought home lots of Ba’th Party literature. She was a librarian and she had access to books. She was highly educated. She had a strong personality and was very dominating, so I would do anything she would say. (Al-Ali 2007: 81–82)³

Different political orientations existed even within one family. What seems to have united the generation of young educated people across a range of middle-class backgrounds was their politicization rather than a specific political orientation. Mona and her elder sister left the Ba’th Party shortly after the first Ba’th coup d’état in 1963 in protest against the arrest and torture of their brother, who had been a leading member of the ICP:

My brother was moved from one prison to another. He was tortured, despite my sister’s connection in the Ba’th Party. We both left the party and that was the end of my political career. But I have no regrets. It made me read a lot. It made me think on a much higher level than what is usual for an ordinary teenager. I was thinking about the world, about the needs of people. The experience in the party formed my personality and made me grow up a lot. But leaving the party and knowing what I knew about the party was devastating. I suffered from depression for the first time in my life. I escaped into the world of books. (Al-Ali 2007: 84)

Both of the main political orientations at the time—communism and Arab nationalism—were essentially secular, and religious ideology did not play a significant role. Political ideology also cut across ethnic and religious backgrounds. Baʿthism promoted an Arab nationalism based on the idea of Arab “brotherhood” and attracted Iraqi Arabs of all religious backgrounds, including some middle-class secular Shiʿi and Christians, especially during the initial period of economic expansion (Davis 2005: 149). The Baʿth political leaders, including Presidents Hassan al Bakr (1968–79) and Saddam Hussein (1979–2003), were convinced of the superiority of Sunni Arabs (Tripp 2000: 195), but to secure support of other religious and ethnic groups they placed a few token Christian and Shiʿi in powerless positions (Davis 2005: 148) and stressed Iraq’s Mesopotamian heritage as a means to unify Iraqis of all backgrounds. Yet more Iraqi Kurds and Shiʿi were attracted to the more inclusive and egalitarian Iraqi nationalism promoted by the ICP.

THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN REVOLUTIONARY TIMES

Several women who had been involved in the student movement also became active in an emerging women’s organization that was closely linked with the ICP, initially called *Rabitat Difa’Huquq al-Mar’a* (League for the Defense of Women’s Rights), later changed to *Rabitat al-Mar’a al-Iraqiyya* (Iraqi Women’s League). One of the founders of the league was the famous pioneer Dr. Naziha al-Dulaymi, who inspired thousands of young women to join in the struggle for women’s legal rights. Dr. al-Dulaymi, who passed away as we were finishing this book in the fall of 2007, also played an important role in her profession as a medical doctor, where she was instrumental in improving public health in Iraq, and has been credited as the first woman in the Arab world to become a cabinet minister (she became minister of municipalities in 1959).

Soraya K., who has been in the midst of debates and campaigns revolving around changes in women’s legal rights, feels proud about the achievements at the time: “The most important thing we did in the *Rabitat* [Iraqi Women’s League] is the *Qanun al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiya* (personal status laws). We had a group of women lawyers working in the *Rabitat*. What we ended up achieving was not complete, but it was the best we could do. In the media and in the mosque, we were accused of not caring about religion. But our friends and family were happy and they appreciated the changes. Reactionary people and Baʿthists attacked

it” (Al-Ali 2007: 90). Despite widespread opposition and protest by conservative social forces, the revolutionary regime of ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim did take women’s demands for increased legal rights and equality seriously and passed one of the most progressive family laws in the region in 1959. A unified code replaced the previously differential treatment of Sunni and Shi‘i women and men with respect to legal rights in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Although still based on shari‘a (Islamic law), the personal status code of 1959 was relatively progressive in interpretation and entailed some radical changes to previous laws: women were given equal inheritance rights, polygamy and unilateral divorce (i.e., on the part of the man) became severely restricted, women’s consent to marriage became a requirement, and women’s right to *mahr* (bride-price) was stressed (Efrati 2005). Although these legal changes would not have been possible without the support of the male political leadership, it was women activists’ lobbying, campaigning, and participation in the legislative processes in the context of drafting a new constitution that led to the new more progressive personal status code.

THE SOCIAL CLIMATE IN REVOLUTIONARY TIMES

While the political establishment prior to the revolution was largely dominated by Sunni Arabs, largely because of the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and the choices of the British mandate authorities, the government of ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim (1958–63) was much more inclusive of the various ethnic and religious groups. Sectarian divisions did not significantly dominate Iraqi politics and social lives prior to and in the years following the 1958 Revolution. Social class and political and intellectual orientation, much more than ethnic or religious background, influenced people’s social circles. More than being Sunni, Shi‘i, Kurd, Christian, Mandaean, or Yazidi, or, until the early 1950s, Jewish, social class was the main marker of differences and commonalities. Most older Iraqi women we talked to stressed the sense of intercommunal contacts, coeducation of students of different religious and ethnic backgrounds, and the sharing of religious celebrations and everyday lives. As Hana N., a woman of Shi‘i origin, put it: “We grew up with all the ethnic and religious groups. We went to school with Jews and Christians. And we celebrated all holidays together” (Al-Ali 2007: 65).

Many contemporary commentators argue that Arab nationalism has not been appealing to the majority of the Shi‘i population, who feel alien-

ated by a movement that is dominantly Sunni. However, rather than thinking of themselves as Shi'i or Sunni, in the past people would think of themselves as Arab, or alternatively Iraqi, before anything else. Once the state of Israel was established, xenophobic attitudes toward minorities were most tragically in evidence with Iraq's Jewish population, but later on they also targeted the Kurds and increasingly the Iraqi Shi'is. However, only after the Ba'ath coup in 1963 did sectarianism deepen and become institutionalized (Davis 2005: 85).

Prior to the revolution in 1958, there was a wide rift between social classes: the majority of girls and women belonging to impoverished classes had no access to education or adequate health care facilities, and tribal and traditional patriarchal values circumscribed their lives, whereas educated young women activists of largely middle-class backgrounds experienced revolutionary changes and relatively liberal social values and norms. Soraya M., who had been a political activist since her high school years, told Nadje that as a young woman growing up in Baghdad she had never felt restricted or oppressed:

From the late 1940s, when we were students, we used to wear sleeveless shirts and shorts. We would go to the club, swim and play tennis or ping pong. Nobody would say: "Don't go out!" I would just inform my parents that I was going out. We had lots of freedom. I would be home by ten. And all activities were mixed. We used to listen to classical music together, both Arabic and Western. We read a lot. I would borrow books from my elder brothers and sisters. During holidays I would read all day. Sometimes we would go to the cinema. (Al-Ali 2007: 100)

Despite some incidents of prejudice and sectarianism, most of the urban middle-class women Nadje interviewed said they had lived in relatively multicultural and to some extent cosmopolitan environments that encouraged education, travel abroad, and cultural appreciation. However, the majority of Iraqis, especially girls and women, did not have access to education and were struggling to survive under harsh economic conditions. Social injustice and exploitation led to social unrest and later on to the revolution, but there was also an increasingly politicized class of educated young people who wanted total independence from Britain, the former colonizer, and a more just social system.

BA'ATHISTS CHALLENGING THE REVOLUTION

Tensions between Arab nationalists and communists heightened after the revolution, often resulting in street demonstrations and marches in sup-

port of or opposition to the government. Some of these ended up in violence and also brought out ethnic, sectarian, intertribal and economic antagonisms (Tripp 2000: 156). Throughout his rule, ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim maintained an ambiguous relationship with the ICP, needing its support against increasingly disgruntled pan-Arab nationalists but also fearing its influence. The appointment of Dr. Naziha al-Dulaymi and two known communist sympathizers to ministerial posts had been an attempt to bind the party closer to the regime while keeping it in check (Tripp 2000: 175). Yet by the end of 1960 Dr. al-Dulaymi, who was also the head of the Iraqi Women’s League, was dismissed, as were the two other ministers. This was in the context of an increasing crackdown on the ICP, as Qasim feared their influence among the population. Most significantly, the government closed down the main associations linked with the ICP, including the Iraqi Women’s League, which had to operate underground once again (Al-Ali 2007: 91).

‘Abd al-Karim Qasim was struggling at home with Kurdish political leaders of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) as well as regionally. Already tense relations with Egypt worsened after Iraq’s failure to recognize Kuwait’s sovereignty, and Iraq became more isolated from its neighbors (Abdullah 2003: 163–64). Arab nationalist forces within Iraq, especially members of the Ba’th Party, became convinced that the only way to bring the country back out of its isolation within the Arab world and to stop the influence of communists once and for all was to overthrow Qasim’s government. Yet when a coup was staged in 1963 by Ba’thist and Arab nationalist officers, it did not trigger support from significant numbers of the population. On the contrary: masses of people poured out onto the streets expressing their support for Qasim and fiercely resisting the coup, especially in the poorest neighborhoods.

The level of violence in the immediate aftermath of the coup is described by many Iraqi women as a turning point in the modern history of Iraq. Within only one week of the coup, about three to five thousand communists and sympathizers with the Qasim government were arrested, tortured, and killed. Soraya M., who had been a known figure in both the communist movement and the Iraqi Women’s League, managed to escape: “I put on the *abaya* and hid in the house of relatives. I hid there with my children for about ten days. My husband was arrested and tortured. It was a terrible experience for all of us” (Al-Ali 2007: 92). Ibtesam K., who had been living in Najaf, remembers the violence and atrocities committed by the Ba’th National Guard (al-Haris al-Qawmi), which not only arrested, tortured, and killed many commu-

nists but also was responsible for raping many young women (Al-Ali 2007: 93).

Widespread resentment against the thuggish and brutal National Guard linked to the Baʿth Party, as well as deep divisions within the party itself, eventually allowed the non-Baʿthist officer ʿAbd al-Salam ʿArif to install a military government in November, dissolve the National Guard, and arrest a number of leading Baʿthists. According to most women we talked to, the violence and repression receded dramatically once ʿArif had managed to contain the Baʿth and especially the National Guard. the two Baʿth coups of 1963 and 1968: “Although it was still a military regime, things started improving again after ʿArif took over. There was less violence and the rule of law started again. Many of us had great hopes of ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz,⁴ who was a civilian and became prime minister in ’65” (Al-Ali 2007: 94). Although dependent on the patronage and military support of President ʿArif, al-Bazzaz tried to ensure the respect of civil liberties and introduce some democratic structures into the state (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, 2003: 98). However, President ʿArif tried hard to present himself as a pious president to appease Sunni and Shiʿi religious leaders, who were outraged by some of the socialist laws and measures put in place after the revolution. For women activists, the most devastating measure was the amendment to the progressive personal status code, which introduced some changes regarding polygamy and inheritance and revoked the more progressive interpretation of 1959 (Efrati 2005: 581).

Meanwhile, the Baʿth Party had reorganized itself after the crackdown following the coup of 1963, allowing a faction controlled largely by members of Tikrit to take control. The Arab-Israeli defeat of 1967 weakened the pro-Nasserist Arab nationalists and left them in disarray and on the defensive while strengthening the Baʿth camp of Arab nationalism. In July 1968, three military officers together with their Baʿthist allies staged another coup, arrested the cabinet, put President ʿArif on a plane out of the country, and installed Hassan al-Bakr as president (Tripp 2000: 191). His kinsman Saddam Hussein controlled the various security apparatuses and key intelligence services and played a dominant role within the Baʿth Party before he became president of Iraq in 1979. The coup of 1968 started a dictatorial, repressive, and fascist regime that was based less on the political ideology of Baʿthism than on tribal and family connections as well as the whims of Saddam Hussein and his close entourage.

STATE FEMINISM OF THE EARLY BA'ATH REGIME

In the 1970s and early 1980s, a relatively large segment of the Iraqi population enjoyed high living standards in the context of an economic boom and rapid development, which were a result of the rise in oil prices and the government's developmental policies. Oil prices had shot up after the oil crisis in 1973, and oil-producing countries started to become aware of their bargaining power related to Western countries' dependence on oil. These were the years of a flourishing economy and the emergence and expansion of a broad middle class. State-induced policies worked to eradicate illiteracy, educate women, and incorporate them into the labor force (Al-Ali 2005: 744). Many women Nadjé interviewed remember this first decade of Ba'ath rule with great nostalgia and think of it as "the days of plenty."

In the context of the rise in oil prices and an expanding economy, labor was scarce. While the other oil-producing Gulf countries started to look for workers outside their national boundaries, the Iraqi government mainly tried to tap into the country's own human resources: women. Less motivated by egalitarian principles than by pragmatic economic calculations, the Iraqi government encouraged women to get an education and become part of the labor force. Another factor to be taken into account was the state's attempt to indoctrinate its citizens, whether male or female. A great number of party members were recruited through their workplaces. Obviously it was much easier to reach out to and recruit women when they were part of the so-called public sphere and visible outside the confines of their homes (Al-Ali 2005: 754).

Through the party's modernist and developmental rhetoric evident in political speeches, newspaper articles, and radio and TV broadcasts, the "good Iraqi woman" was constructed to be "the educated working woman." Not only rhetoric but concrete measures and legislation were introduced to encourage women's labor force participation. For example, in 1974 a government decree stipulated that all university graduates—men or women—would be employed automatically. Subsequently, working outside the home became for women not only acceptable but prestigious and normative.

Many Iraqi women, although extremely critical of the Ba'ath regime, especially with respect to its political repression, human rights abuses, and engagement in a series of wars, stress some positive policies regarding women. Several women Nadjé talked to gave accounts of the various ways the ideal of the "working mother" was not only widely accepted

but encouraged by the state and society at large. Dr. Rashad, for example, a pharmacist working in a Muslim charity organization in Baghdad, told Nadje:

I have four children. Two girls and two boys. We have to tell the truth. Not everything was bad under Saddam. We got maternity leave with full salaries. But the manager had to agree and sign. When I got my first boy, my boss called and said that they had no one to cover for me in the pharmacy. I asked my boss: "So where shall I put my child?" He said: "I will solve that problem." I was working in the pharmacy of a factory at an oil refinery in the south. My boss got me one of the Bangladeshi workers of the oil refinery to look after my baby. He got me a small bed for my son. I told him: "You must be joking!" But he was serious, and this is how we solved the problem. The worker would make the bottle, feed my baby, look after it while I was giving out medicine to the patients. I worked two shifts and took the baby with me both times. After about four months, there were other women with children, so they opened a nursery in the factory. (Al-Ali 2007: 133-34)

Free child care, generous maternity benefits, and transportation to and from schools as well as workplaces were all part of the regime's attempt to modernize and develop Iraq's economy and human resources. Despite the difficulties of juggling both child care and work, or even a career, middle-class women generally benefited from the double support of extended families and state provisions.

Hala R., whose family suffered from severe political repression by the regime, recalls:

We were always afraid of the government. But despite the fact that the Ittihad [General Federation of Iraqi Women] was a branch of the Ba'th, they did some good things. Everyone remembers the phrase "Rasheed yazra" [Rasheed is planting]. They taught peasant women how to read and write with examples from their own society. It was obligatory for all women of all ages to attend literacy classes. There were branches all over Iraq, including the countryside. They also opened large sewing centres all over. They taught women how to sew and they also bought them sewing machines so that they could make a bit of income. But in their ideas and ideology the Ittihad [GFIW] was Ba'thi. Women would have accepted them more if they would not have tried to get women to join the party. (Al-Ali 2007: 136-37)

Whatever the government's motivations, Iraqi women became among the most educated and professional in the whole region. Indeed, the Iraqi government won an award from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1988 for its achievements in literacy

eradication.⁵ How far this access to education and the labor market resulted in an improved status for women is a more complex question. As in many other places, conservative and patriarchal values did not automatically change because women started working (Al-Ali 2005: 745). The impact of state discourse and policies on Iraqi women was rather different depending on the class background of the woman, her place of residence (rural versus urban), and her family's attitudes toward religious and traditional values and norms. Moreover, even at its most revolutionary the regime remained ambiguous at best or even conservative where changes in traditional gender ideologies and relations within the family were concerned (Farouk-Sluglett 1993; Rassam 1992).

THE GENERAL FEDERATION OF IRAQI WOMEN

Although Iraqi women have a history of political participation and activism prior to Saddam Hussein's regime, their autonomous political participation came to an end in the 1970s. Women were encouraged to join the Ba'th Party and to run for the rubber-stamp parliament. The major vehicle for women's participation was the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW), founded in 1968 shortly after the Ba'thi coup.

The federation had branches all over Iraq, and it is estimated that it had about two hundred thousand members in 1982 (Joseph 1991: 182). It was initially generously funded by the regime and organized in a strict hierarchical structure, similar to the Ba'th Party (Helms 1984: 99). Although the federation was a branch of the ruling party that lacked political independence, the government's initial policies of social inclusion and mobilization of labor did facilitate a climate in which the federation could play a positive role in promoting women's education, labor force participation, and health, as well as providing a presence in public life. The GFIW collaborated with state-run industries in training women, with trade unions in providing educational and service programs, and with peasant co-operatives in educating women (Joseph 1991: 182). It also participated in implementing the law that grew out of the literacy campaign in 1978, requiring all illiterate adults from the ages of fifteen to forty-five to participate for two years in one of the numerous literacy programs established by the regime (181).

Iraqi-born anthropologist Amal Rassam, who visited some rural GFIW centers in the 1980s, provides a nuanced analysis. During her visits some of the achievements were clearly evident: women were instructed in sewing and other domestic crafts (1992: 85), and, most importantly,

were taught how to read and write. Rassam describes how many women would walk a long way after a day's work in the fields to reach one of the GFIW centers, where dedicated young teachers would eagerly wait for them (86).

It is obvious, however, that the literacy campaign of the Ba'ath was not merely aimed at encouraging women's labor force participation; education was also perceived as a vehicle for their indoctrination. The creation of the "new Iraqi woman" and "new Iraqi man" required resocialization, which mainly happened at schools, in universities, in the media, and in the various workplaces. Adult education was one way to reach those men and women who were moving outside state institutions and channels of indoctrination (Al-Ali 2007: 137–38).

The more progressive women in the Ittihad (GFIW), many of whom had originally been members of the communist-led Iraqi Women's League, demanded more radical reform of the personal status code of 1959 and to reverse the amendments that had been made in the 1960s. Yet the regime was reluctant and consciously avoided being "revolutionary" with regard to patriarchal family structures and the role of religious authorities (see Farouk-Sluglett 1993; Joseph 1991; Rassam 1992). Many women of the federation advocated the secularization of the personal status laws (Joseph 1991: 184). More concretely, women activists, such as Nasrin Nuri, Budor Zaki, and Su'ad Khayri, asked the government for the following changes: banning polygyny, eliminating the ambiguity in the minimum age of marriage (stated as the age of "sanity and puberty" in Article 7 of the 1959 code), outlawing forced marriage and marriage by proxy, prohibiting divorce outside court, and guaranteeing women's right to divorce, prolonged custody rights for mothers, and women's equal right to inheritance (Efrati 2005).⁶

However, many women activists were disappointed when their demands for the secularization and more radical changes of the laws were not met. Instead, the regime combined more progressive aspects of Sunni and Shi'i interpretation of laws and modified them (Joseph 1991: 184). Being careful not to alienate a large part of the male population that was benefiting from the prevailing power structures within families as well as conservative religious establishments, the regime was far more ready to engage in land reform than in the reform of gender relations. In a speech at the Seventh Congress of the GFIW in 1976, Saddam Hussein was reacting to the criticism that the government's legal reforms with respect to women were lagging behind other more radical reforms: "But when the revolution tackles some legal matters related to women with-

out taking a balance of attitudes to the question of equality and its historical perspective, it will certainly lose a large segment of the people” (quoted in Hussein 1981: 36–38). Hussein went on to carefully articulate a position that expressed commitment to changes in gender relations and greater women’s rights but also a consideration of prevailing conservative norms and values. His strategy did not differ much from the modernist secular regimes in other Muslim countries, most notably the Egyptian regime under Nasser, which restricted its revolutionary policies and laws to the so-called public sphere and stopped short of revolution in the private sphere.

POLITICAL REPRESSION

One of the strategies of the Ba’th was to gain more broadly based support by trying to indoctrinate large segments of the population. Iraqis of all ethnic, religious, and social class background were first encouraged and later pressured to become party members. At some point, in the late 1970s, it became clear that certain career paths and professions were available only to people who had officially affirmed their loyalty to the party. Teachers and headmistresses were under particular pressure, since schools were seen as one of the main sites for indoctrination of the future generations.

Dalal M., who had also been an active member in the Iraqi Women’s League since the mid-1950s, found herself under growing pressure at work: “When I was in the teacher’s union, I was approached by a colleague who said that all teachers are required to attend a speech directly coming from the Ba’th Party every Thursday. All teachers should deliver the content of the speech to all their students even if they are not members of the Ba’th Party. I refused and went to the head of the teachers’ union. He said: ‘I might be able to accept your refusal now, but within one year all teachers should be Ba’thi’” (Al-Ali 2007: 119). Dalal and many of her comrades had to escape Iraq shortly after this incident in 1978, as the clampdown on communists and other political opponents to the Ba’th became increasingly brutal and dangerous. By 1979, most of the communist activists who had not been arrested or killed had fled the country.

Many women we talked to were not as lucky as Dalal, however, and experienced severe political repression, including arrest, torture, and rape. Several women gave sad accounts of their fathers, brothers, and husbands being killed by the regime. One of the most gruesome stories Nadjé heard

was from Zeinab M., an activist with the Islamist Da'wa Party,⁷ mother of three children, now living in Dearborn, Michigan: "My husband was active with the Da'wa Party in the seventies. He was killed at Baghdad University in front of my eyes. They dissolved him in a chemical solution. I was one month pregnant with our second child. I was taken to prison as well and was tortured. When I was released I could not work anymore as a teacher." During the 1970s, the regime was also embroiled in a conflict with the Kurdish nationalist leadership. It began to move Arab families to the predominantly Kurdish city of Kirkuk in order to prevent the oil-rich city from coming under Kurdish control. Suspicion between the Kurdish leadership and Baghdad resulted in all-out war by 1974 (Tripp 2000: 199–214). The Kurdish fighters (*peshmerga*) received help from the Iranian government and the United States, although this was withdrawn following the Algiers Agreement of 1975.

It became obvious from our interviews that women had experienced the first decade of the Ba'th regime (1968–1979) rather differently depending on whether they or their families had been politically active or not. The state did not just rely on its coercive and repressive control mechanisms to rule the country. It also managed to silence dissent and even obtain people's approval by providing a prospering socioeconomic context in which many Iraqi families flourished. Many small businesses, companies, and small-scale industries benefited from the economic policies of the state and experienced instant capital accumulation and wealth (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 2003: 232). Shi'i and Kurdish areas benefited from new infrastructure developments as the regime attempted to co-opt potential opponents through patronage (Tripp 2000: 204, 214). Many secular and apolitical middle-class Shi'i, Kurdish, and Christian women concurred in their perceptions of the achievements of the Ba'th with many of the middle-class Sunni women we interviewed. Even some women who had been imprisoned or had had to flee as political refugees during the 1970s or early 1980s acknowledged the positive impact of developmental modernist policies on women during that period. Iraq is not the only country in which a repressive dictatorship initially opened up certain social, economic, and professional spaces for women. Without doubt, those women who either suffered directly themselves or had relatives who suffered from the brutal state oppression did not share a sense of appreciation for the former regime's developmental policies. For most women we talked to, the atrocities of the Ba'th regime became more obvious with the start of the presidency of Saddam Hussein in 1979, which was associated with a series of wars.

THE IRAQ-IRAN WAR (1980–88)

In 1980, Saddam, with the support of the United States, launched a war against the newly created Islamic government in Iran. The war, according to various sources, killed between 150,000 and 340,000 Iraqi soldiers and between 450,000 and 730,000 Iranian soldiers. During the war with Iran, there was a shift in state rhetoric and government policies regarding women and gender relations. Maybe more than before, women were needed in the public sphere as thousands and thousands of Iraqi men were fighting and dying in a war that was meant to be quick and to present an easy victory. Instead, years of intense warfare negatively affected not only the Iraqi economy but the social fabric itself. Most families lost male relatives, friends, or neighbors to one of Saddam Hussein's many senseless wars. Women were carrying the burden of doing most of the work in the state bureaucracy and the public sector and being the main breadwinners and heads of households as well as caregivers and mothers. Amal G., an accountant and mother of three, remembers: "The Iran-Iraq War had a big effect on society. It showed the efficiency of women in a very clear way. Most of the men were fighting at the front. There was a great dependence on women. And women proved their strength and their resourcefulness. You could even see women at gas stations or women truck drivers. They not only took responsibility for work but also for the home and the children. Our women all became superwomen." The women who were living closer to the front in the south had generally much worse and difficult times during the war. Leila G, a young Shi'i who grew up in Basra and was a student during some years of the war, had to see her family home nearly destroyed and neighbors dying across the street during the numerous bombing raids on the city:

Because we were so close to the battlefields, we were bombed many times during that war. We had to rebuild some walls and the roof of our house three times. But at least we were not hurt. One day, I saw our neighbors all torn to pieces and all lying dead after a bomb hit their house. Both of my brothers were fighting in the army, so we could never relax and always worried about them. My father was too old so he was working. We had a really difficult time. I volunteered in a local hospital to help with the injured and I still cannot forget the images of all these terrible injured men, some of them with missing limbs, some of them too shocked to say anything. (Al-Ali 2007: 152–53)

Leila, like many of her contemporaries, was helping with the war efforts by volunteering in a hospital. Other women with whom Nadjé talked

concluded with Leila's description of Iraqi women stretching themselves to respond to the changes wrought by war.

During this period the state moved away from images of men and women working side by side to develop a modern progressive nation to images of men protecting the land assaulted by the enemy—the land being represented as a woman whose honor had to be protected. These changes became particularly obvious in late stages of the war (1986–88), when morale was falling and the country faced economic difficulties. Even though women were needed to replace the male labor force in all sorts of areas, the Iraqi leadership clearly distanced itself from previous calls for women's rights, reforms, and equality. Society was becoming increasingly militarized, and certain types of masculinity—that of the fighter, the defender of his nation, and the martyr—were becoming glorified. Women were simultaneously encouraged to “produce” more Iraqi citizens and future soldiers. The glorification of a militarized masculinity coincided with the glorification of the Iraqi mother. During the last years of the war, the regime launched a fertility campaign asking every woman to bear at least five children. Initially the state attempted to address the demographic imbalance with Iran and to create a large generation of future soldiers. Later it had to appease an increasingly frustrated male population and prepare for the return of the troops to an economy and labor market in crisis. Within this context, Achim Rohde argues that the Iraqi regime traded its earlier commitment to gender equality for internal security: “For eight long years the regime was in constant need to mobilize the male population into the war effort at the front and to rally the unconditional support of the civilian population for the troops, including the acceptance of a superior social prestige awarded to soldiers as compared to women and other civilians” (2006a: 231). The regime's rhetoric shifted away from education and work toward procreation and motherhood (214).

Among the women Nadje interviewed, experiences of the Iran-Iraq War varied greatly. Overall, women stressed that despite the hardship and loss of life, life was still more bearable during this war than any of the subsequent wars (in 1991 and 2003). Especially middle-class families in cities far from the actual front in the south experienced minor disruptions in their everyday lives in comparison to the traumas related to later wars. However, for the tens of thousands of women who lost husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers during the Iran-Iraq War, life was never the same again.

TARGETING IRAQI SHI'Ī

Despite some discontent with the regime and also some sectarianism as a result of discrimination before and during the Ba'ṯh regime, there was no call for a merger with Iran or self-rule of Shi'ī in the south during the war with Iran. Instead, most Iraqi Shi'ī continued to stress their Arab identity and allegiance to the Iraqi nation, though not necessarily to the Iraqi regime. Saddam Hussein, on the other hand, continued to fear the disloyalty of the Shi'ī population and collectively punished hundreds of thousands by forcibly deporting them to Iran. During the late 1970s, about 250,000 Iraqis of "Persian descent" had already been deported and their property confiscated. The deportations were stepped up with the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War. During the first year alone about forty thousand Iraqi Shi'ī were forced to leave their homes, and over the eight years of the war, an estimated four hundred thousand Iraqis ended up in Iran (Abdullah 2003; Tripp 2000).

Many of the Iraqi Shi'ī refugee women Nadjé talked to in Dearborn had vivid memories of *zamn al-tasfīrat* (the time of deportations). Suad K., a lively and vivacious mother of three, followed her father and husband to Iran in the mid-1980s, fleeing the increasingly threatening security forces of the regime one night with two toddlers and an eight-month-old baby. She explained to Nadjé how a tactic of draft evasion during the Ottoman Empire was used by Saddam Hussein against many people:

In Ottoman times, they [the Ottoman administration] established a system of who is Ottoman and who is not. Those who did not want to fight in the army asked for an identity certificate (*tabaiya*) that would say "of Persian origin." Many Shi'ī managed to get out of the draft at the time by not getting a *tabaiya* with "Persian origin" on it. But Saddam said that all Iraqis of Persian origins were traitors and could not be trusted. They were pulling people from their beds and putting them at the border to Iran. These poor people could not even take spare clothes, or money or anything. My father was deported to Iran in '79. My parents did not send me to school because they were afraid, because of the *tabaiya*. (Al-Ali 2007: 156)

Iraqi Shi'ī with Persian *tabaiyas* were especially vulnerable to Saddam's allegations of disloyalty and deception toward the Iraqi nation-state in the context of Saddam's Qadisiya campaign—a reappropriation of a historical battle in which Arab Muslims were victorious over Persians. History books, magazines, newspapers, articles, poems, and other cultural productions all stressed Iraqi and Arab cultural superiority, the evil intent of everyone Persian, and the corrupting influence of Persian culture

on Arab Muslim civilization (Davis 2005: 183–90). In 1982, a law was passed offering financial rewards to men who would divorce their Iranian wives (Abdullah 2003: 189).

The harshest treatment, however, was saved for members or sympathizers of Islamist underground organizations, such as the Da'wa Party, which are now part of the political alliance in government. In 1977, the Da'wa Party and other Shi'i Islamist organizations used the occasion of the demonstrations linked with the religious festival of Ashura to express their resentment against the secular government. Over thirty thousand people took the security forces by surprise as their prolonged demonstrations against the repression of religious authorities and the governments' networks of patronage ceased to be religious in nature (Tripp 2000: 216). Troops were dispatched to Najaf and Kerbala, and about two thousand people were arrested (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 2003: 198). In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the Da'wa Party organized numerous antigovernment rallies and carried out a series of assassinations and assassination attempts of top Ba'th officials. A severe crackdown followed, with hundreds of arrests and a new law making membership in the Da'wa Party punishable by death, since the Iraqi regime feared the spread of the Islamic Revolution to Iraq. According to Hamdiya H., a Dearborn resident who fled Iraq in the mid-1980s, membership in the underground organization became increasingly difficult: "I was a member of the Da'wa Party and I was wearing a *hijab*. The culture was secular at the time. Wearing the *hijab* was a sign of resistance, a challenge to the regime. I was afraid of the regime, of neighbors, family, friends. If you were not a member of the Ba'th Party, you were in trouble. Back in the '60s and '70s, they were accusing you of being communist. Later on in the '80s, they were accusing people of being Islamists" (Al-Ali 2007: 160).

The Iraqi regime under the leadership of Saddam Hussein clearly targeted the Shi'i population as part of his attempt to totally control and terrify the Iraqi population. However, experiences of the regime differed among Shi'i. Indeed, many individuals who in post-Ba'th Iraq are identified or identify themselves as Shi'i then thought of themselves as Iraqi and secular in orientation. They were part of the growing urban middle class that had benefited from the developmental policies of the 1970s. They had more in common with their Sunni, Christian, and Kurdish middle-class neighbors in mixed neighborhoods than with lower-class Shi'i or members of Islamist political parties. Outright sectarianism hardly existed among non-Islamist Shi'i prior to 2003 but was widespread among

the Shi'i Islamist refugees residing in Dearborn and London whom Nadjé talked interviewed. Fatima G. told Nadjé in a meeting of several Shi'i women activists in Dearborn: "The Sunnis were all working with the regime. When I was imprisoned no Sunni was in the prison. It was only us. Now it is our time to have a say in Iraq." The members of Shi'i Islamist parties whom we interviewed hardly acknowledged the suffering of non-Shi'i Iraqis, such as political opponents of all backgrounds, including Sunni Iraqis, as well as Kurds. However, non-party-affiliated Shi'i women were less condemning of Iraqis of other religious and ethnic backgrounds and spoke about friendships and good neighborly relations with them; some even mentioned Sunnis who had resisted the regime.

WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE KURDISH STRUGGLE

Although Kurdish society continued to be very conservative and tribal, many Kurdish women were involved in the struggle for independence: they not only supported their male relatives who were fighting by taking over responsibilities traditionally associated with men, providing logistical support, cooking for *peshmergas*, passing on secret messages, working as couriers, and transporting and distributing leaflets but also provided political leadership. Taavga A. recalls the anxiety and fear that her older sister's involvement in politics created for the family:

My sister had become one of the leaders of the Kurdish freedom movement. And even my mother had been very active for the Kurdish cause. We were living in the city of Kirkuk, in one of the poorest neighborhoods. Al-Amn [the security apparatus of the Ba'th regime] started to find out about people involved in the Kurdish struggle. They went around with their big moustaches and sunglasses and arrested people. In 1974, Leila Qasim, a Kurdish student who was studying at Baghdad University, tried to assassinate Saddam Hussein. Her show trial was public and we watched it on TV every day. They had tortured her and finally executed her by hanging. We were all scared that this would happen to my sister as well. And then, one day, they came to our alley and caught a woman who was about my mother's age. They drugged her and shaved her hair. They took her from house to house and asked her to identify people involved in the Kurdish struggle. She identified my sister-in-law. We knew we had to leave immediately as we would be next in line. (Al-Ali 2007: 125)

Twelve-year-old Taavga fled her hometown of Kirkuk with her mother, a teenage sister, her politically active sister Nisreen, and a nine-month-old nephew in the middle of the night. They spent two weeks walking, riding donkeys, and wading through rivers.

More than one hundred thousand Kurds fled to Iran during the period when Taagva and her family fled their home. As it had become increasingly clear that the Ba'ath regime was not ready to implement an agreement signed with the Kurdish leadership in 1970, Barzani and even some of his rival factions confronted the Iraqi government, and open war broke out by summer of 1974. The Kurdish *peshmerga* inflicted a heavy toll on the Iraqi army, increasingly relying on Iranian military support (Tripp 2000: 212). Despite the Iranian government's repression of its own Kurdish population, the shah was initially eager to help the Iraqi Kurds in order to destabilize what he perceived to be a hostile regime. Yet in what proved to be devastating to Barzani and the Kurdish resistance, secret negotiations between Baghdad and Tehran led to the Algiers Agreement in 1975. Without Iranian support, the Kurdish resistance collapsed and thousands of Kurds fled while many *peshmerga* and civilians were killed in reprisals by the Iraqi army, which destroyed about 1,500 villages (Yildiz 2004: 23). About six hundred thousand men, women, and children were deported to collective resettlement camps as the regime tried to create a security belt along the Iranian and Turkish borders (McDowall 2000: 339). Deported Kurds were threatened with death if they tried to return to their home villages, many of which had been razed to the ground and were uninhabitable (Tripp 2000: 214).

During the 1980s, the Iraqi government pursued its Arabization policies of the Kurdish region, forcefully moving thousands of Kurdish families and encouraging Egyptian and Iraqi Arab families to take their place.⁸ Another strategy by the regime to attack and infiltrate Kurdish society was to offer Iraqi Arab men an equivalent of one thousand British pounds at the time to marry Kurdish women (Cobbet 1986: 132). The regime's heavy investment in Kurdish infrastructure and economy was part of its overall strategy to develop and modernize the country and buy people's loyalty. But it was also a means of dividing and conquering, as the state's system of patronage benefited some Kurds more than others. By the end of the 1970s, the KDP had managed to regroup, with Barzani's son Mas-soud taking over the leadership. Yet tensions with Talabani's rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which was more popular among urban Kurds, led to internal feuds and even armed conflict. For years, this internal struggle continued, not only weakening Kurdish resistance against the regime but causing death and destruction among the Kurdish civilian population.

After initially focusing his attention on the war with Iran, Saddam Hussein became more concerned about the north after the KDP and PUK

managed to end their feud and enter into an alliance in 1985, enabling more effective military operations against the Iraqi army. As Kurdish *peshmerga* had been receiving military and financial support from Iran, the Iraqi government retaliated brutally. The most known element of this systematic killing of Kurds was the 1987–88 Anfal campaign, nominally a counterinsurgency operation but in reality a carefully planned and executed program of ethnic cleansing in which fifty thousand to two hundred thousand people are estimated to have been killed, most of them men and adolescent boys.⁹ Thousands of Kurdish villages were systematically destroyed, and over a million and a half of their inhabitants were deported to camps with no water, electricity, or sewage. Others were executed as they were leaving their villages.

Adalat Salih, who fled Iraq over the border to Iran during the 1975 war in Kurdistan and has spent her adult life researching the events and repercussions of the Anfal campaign, spoke to Nicola about the tragedy of the “Anfal widows”—that is, the women who lost their husbands during the Anfal campaign. In an interview in April 2007, in which she was soft-spoken but clearly passionate about her work, she discussed some of the findings of research she had conducted among a sample of 147 “Anfal widows”: “Ninety-six percent of women didn’t remarry, and of these, 72 percent of their children didn’t marry. Eighty-three percent of these have housing problems. Until 2003, 92 percent expected that their relatives would come back, but after the mass graves were opened, they became hopeless. Ninety percent of these women are illiterate. Ninety-four percent have psychological problems. Thirty-three point four percent are responsible for supporting their families. This study is of 147 families. The problems are more widespread than this.” The Anfal campaign has been particularly associated with the use of chemical weapons, such as mustard and nerve gas. One of the most notorious attacks took place in the city of Halabja on March 16, 1988. Approximately five thousand civilians died on that day alone, and thousands suffered horrendous injuries. Many people were covered with horrible skin eruptions; others went blind and suffered severe neurological damage. Long-term effects have included various forms of cancer, infertility, and congenital diseases. According to one of the women Nadje talked to, Kurdish men have been reluctant to marry women who originally came from Halabja, fearing infertility and genetic mutations.

Although Kurdish men were the primary target of the Anfal campaign, many Kurdish women and children also died as a result of the widespread and indiscriminate use of chemical weapons. In some regions, especially

those in which Iraqi troops met armed resistance, large numbers of women and children were among those killed in mass executions. Tens of thousands of women, children, and elderly people were deported to camps and forced to live in conditions of extreme deprivation. Children suffered from malnutrition and diarrhea, and many died as a result of the harsh conditions in the camps.

According to various human rights reports, rape was one of the weapons used against Kurdish women during the Anfal campaign. Sexually abused women not only suffered through the actual crimes committed by Iraqi soldiers and security forces but also had to endure becoming the “shame” of the family and Kurdish community. Some women who might have survived the atrocities committed by the regime even became victims of honor killings by family members and fellow Kurds (Mojab 2000: 93). In addition, according to official records discovered after the fall of the Ba’th regime, 705 girls were sold to Gulf countries and 18 girls were sold to Egypt during the Anfal campaign. One was as young as twelve years old (Nader 2004).

In the accounts of the hardship and struggles endured by Kurdish women, we were struck by the apparent contradiction between the extreme conditions endured by families, forcing women and men to challenge traditional gender roles and relations and the survival of strong tribal and patriarchal norms and structures. Nadjé discussed this issue with a group of Kurdish women in El Cajun. Runak M., who has been working for a Kurdish human rights center, shared the following experience:

For us Kurds, a girl’s or a woman’s freedom very much depended on social class and particular family background. I was 11 when we fled to Turkey. My family never told me to cover up and wear the headscarf. If I had wanted to go to school, my family would have been ok with that. But because my brother was a *peshmerga*, we had to move to the mountains, so I did not get much formal education. But I knew many women who were very much restricted. Society was very conservative. Some women had to eat after their husbands ate. Some parents did not allow their daughters to go to school. Some parents forced their daughters to marry someone they did not even know. I heard of several stories of young women committing suicide by burning themselves. And we also had problems with honour killings.
(Al-Ali 2007: 167)

Although the two major political parties, KDP and PUK, recruited women into their military and political ranks and established their own women’s organizations, the feminist academic and activist Shahrzad Mojab argues that these organizations were mainly cosmetic and did not ac-

tually help the case of Kurdish women (1996: 72–73; 2000: 90). In contrast, the Women’s Union of Kurdistan, established after the Anfal campaign (not to be confused with the KDP-related Kurdistan Women’s Union established in 1957), did help vulnerable women deal with their trauma and also promoted women’s rights (Mojab 2003: 24). Yet it has been obvious that in Kurdistan, just as in many other nationalist and separatist struggles, women’s rights and women’s equality have been sidelined in favor of the fight for independence. Hedi F., a member of the Women’s Union of Kurdistan who fled Kurdistan in 1990 and returned in 2005 to help rebuild her country, told Nicola in the spring of 2007: “At the end of the eighties, Kurdish people fled to the mountains and to Iran. A group of us women thought, ‘We can’t just sit here, we have to be included in the Kurdish revolution.’ So the Women’s Union of Kurdistan was founded with two aims: to support the national struggle and to support women. We were under attack by the government. Men were fighting and women were sitting and crying. We thought, we could provide nursing and support, to show that we can do something. Women needed education, health, and political awareness. So we provided this.”

The link between nationalism and patriarchy has been widely documented in different historical and cultural contexts around the world. With respect to Kurdish women, Shahrzad Mojab (1996, 2003, 2004) has provided compelling evidence that despite the nationalist struggle the patriarchal system has been extremely strong in Kurdistan. As she argues, “Although the nationalist movement depends on rallying the support of men and women, it discourages any manifestation of womanhood or political demands for gender equality” (Mojab 1996: 73). Patriarchy has manifested itself in diverse tribal, rural, and urban social formations (Mojab 2004: 111). While Kurdish women have been members of parliament since the 1990s, women are increasingly victims of so-called honor killings and are even punished for associating with or talking to men (111).

It comes as no surprise that the atrocities committed against the Kurdish population have fostered an anger and hatred that has also taken the shape of sectarianism against Arabs. When Nadje met with Runak S. at the Kurdish Human Rights Center in San Diego, Runak openly stated: “It made me hate everyone who is not Kurdish. I did not even hate the government only, but all people [non-Kurdish Iraqis]. I was never aware of the suffering of other Iraqis until I came here when I was sixteen years old. I never thought anyone else had been persecuted by the regime.” Other Kurdish women we talked to continued to stress the particular suffering

of Iraqi Kurds in relation to other non-Kurdish Iraqis, thereby paralleling some of the Shi'i Islamist women Nadje had talked to in Dearborn. Whether among Iraqi Shi'a or Kurds, the stress on the uniqueness of suffering was not merely an attempt to get the truth acknowledged but also part of a process of claiming political and economic rights. While many Kurdish women politicians and activists we talked to denied any sectarian hatred, numerous interviews revealed Kurdish nationalist and sectarian sentiments that were sometimes expressed in terms of a suspicion or mistrust of Arab politicians but occasionally extended to include Arab populations more generally. Yet some Kurdish women politicians and activists we talked to clearly came out against sectarian trends and stressed their affiliation to Iraq as well as the cause for women's rights.

IMPACT OF THE 1991 GULF WAR AND ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

Only two years after the end of the war with Iran, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait (August 2, 1990) and the Second Gulf War began (January–March 1991). Nobody knows exactly how many civilians died in the war in 1991, but estimates for civilian deaths as a direct result of the war range from one hundred thousand to two hundred thousand (BBC News Online 2003). The air campaign destroyed almost the entire infrastructure of the country, including water supplies, electricity grids, factories, and storage facilities. After one month of relentless bombings with about 116,000 sorties (Abdullah 2003: 195), the ground war started.

Although the Gulf War in 1991 led to the deaths of thousands of civilians and the destruction of the country's infrastructure, the thirteen years of economic sanctions—the most comprehensive and devastating ever to be imposed on a country—had a particularly detrimental impact on women and gender relations.¹⁰ Aside from the most obvious and devastating effects, related to dramatically increased child mortality rates, widespread malnutrition, deteriorating health care and general infrastructure, unprecedented poverty, and an economic crisis, women were particularly hit by a changing social climate. The breakdown of the welfare state had a disproportionate effect on women, who had been its main beneficiaries. State discourse and policies as well as social attitudes and gender ideologies shifted dramatically during the sanctions period.

Women were pushed back into their homes and into the traditional roles of being mothers and housewives. Women's employment rate went from being the highest in the region, estimated at above 23 percent prior

to 1991, to only 10 percent in 1997 (UN Development Programme [UNDP] 2000). Monthly salaries in the public sector, which, since the Iran-Iraq War, had increasingly been staffed by women, dropped dramatically and did not keep pace with high inflation rates and the cost of living. Many women reported that they simply could not afford to work anymore, since the state had to withdraw its free services, including child care and transportation (Al-Ali 2005: 747).

There was also a sharp decrease in access to all sectors of education for girls and young women because many families were not able to afford sending all children to school. Illiteracy, drastically reduced in the 1970s and 1980s, rose steadily after the Iran-Iraq War and grew between 1985 and 1995 from 8 percent to 45 percent. The dropout rate for girls in primary education reached 35 percent (UN Development Fund for Women [UNIFEM] 2004). In the late 1990s, 55 percent of women aged fifteen to forty-nine years were illiterate (UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs [UN-OCHA] 2006).

The nuclear family became more significant in an environment where people had to struggle for their everyday survival, since they were largely dependent on the monthly food rations of the government. In the context of an economic crisis, high rates of unemployment, and a demographic imbalance between men and women, marriage patterns were also affected in various ways. For many Iraqi women marriage became an unattainable dream. For others, arranged marriages to much older men, sometimes expatriates, or even polygamous marriages became a “way out” (Al-Ali 2007: 195–98). At the same time that marrying became more difficult, young women in particular felt pressured by a new cultural environment marked simultaneously by a decline in moral values like honesty, generosity, and sociability and an increased public religiosity and conservatism (Al-Ali and Hussein 2003).

The demographic cost of wars, political repression, and the forced economic migration of men triggered by the imposition of international sanctions accounted for the high number of widows and female-headed households. In 2003, the Human Relief Foundation estimated that there were approximately 250,000 widows in Iraq, although other estimates were higher (UNIFEM 2004). Not only widows found themselves without husbands but also women whose husbands went abroad to escape the bleak conditions and find ways to support their families. Other men just abandoned their wives and children, being unable to cope with their inability to live up to the social expectations of being the provider. During the 1990s, female-headed households, rural households, and poor house-

holds had the highest rates of infant and child mortality. While those whose husbands were killed in battle received a small government pension, those whose husbands were killed by the former regime for political reasons received no benefits and were left to fend for themselves (Al-Ali 2007: 200).

Economic hardships pushed more women into prostitution—a trend that created much anguish in a society where a woman’s honor is perceived to reflect the family’s honor. Prostitution was initially supported by the regime, which, alongside an emerging class of nouveau riche war and sanctions profiteers, presented itself as the main clientele. However, responding to a changing domestic social climate of a population increasingly drawn toward religion and social conservatism as well as the attempt to increase regional and international support among the Islamic *ummah*, Saddam Hussein opportunistically engaged in a religious campaign (*al-hamla imaniya*). The government condemned prostitution and engaged in violent campaigns to stop it. In a widely reported incident in Iraq in 2000, a group of young men linked to Saddam Hussein’s son Uday singled out about three hundred alleged female “prostitutes” and “pimps” and beheaded them (Amnesty International 2000).

The imposition by the government of the *mahram* escort for women leaving Iraq failed to stop Iraqi women from engaging in prostitution across the border. This law did not allow Iraqi women to leave the country without being accompanied by a male first of kin unless they were over forty-five years old. It was enforced after the Jordanian government complained to the Iraqi government about widespread prostitution by Iraqi women in Amman.

On the level of government discourse as well as within society, Iraqi women became the bearers of the honor of the whole country: they had to be protected because they were vulnerable to temptation, gossip, a tarnished reputation, and potentially prostitution. Teenage girls especially complained about increasing social restrictions and difficulties of movement.¹¹ Yasmin Hussein Al Jawaheri interviewed a number of Iraqi teenagers only a few years prior to the invasion in 2003. The interviews reveal that while the parents of the predominantly middle-class young women Al Jawaheri talked to had mingled relatively freely when they were the age of their children, young Iraqis in the nineties found it increasingly difficult to meet each other. Schools became segregated between sexes, but even in coeducational schools interaction between boys and girls became more limited. Girls became extremely worried about their reputation and often avoided situations in which they could find themselves alone with a boy (Al-Ali and Hussein 2003).

These fears may have been aggravated by the not uncommon occurrence of so-called honor killings (Al-Ali 2005: 752). Fathers and brothers of women who are known or often only suspected of having violated the accepted codes of behavior, especially with respect to keeping their virginity before marriage, may kill the women in order to restore the honor of the family. Before 2003 this phenomenon was mainly restricted to rural areas, but knowledge of its existence worked as a deterrent for many female teenagers. Others may have been less worried about the most dramatic consequences of “losing one’s reputation.” What educated middle-class women from urban areas feared was not so much death as diminished marriage prospects (Al-Ali and Hussein 2003: 54).

The young women Al Jawaheri interviewed frequently spoke about changes related to socializing, family ties, and relations between neighbors and friends. Often they quoted a parent or older relative as stating how things had been different in the past, when socializing had been a much bigger part of people’s lives. Zeinab, a fifteen-year-old young woman from Baghdad, spoke of the lack of trust between people and suggested the following as explanations for the change in dress code for women and the social restrictions she and her peers were experiencing:

People have changed now because of the increasing economic and various other difficulties of life in Iraq. They have become very afraid of each other. I think because so many people have lost their jobs and businesses, they are having loads of time to speak about other people’s lives, and they often interfere in each other’s affairs. I also think that because so many families are so poor now that they cannot afford buying more than the daily basic food, it becomes so difficult for them to buy nice clothes and nice things and therefore, it is better to wear *hijab*. Most people are somewhat pressured to change their lives in order to protect themselves from the gossip of other people—especially talk about family honor. (Al-Ali and Hussein 2003: 46)

Thus our research showed that many economic, social, and political factors at the levels of state and society converged during the most comprehensive sanctions system ever imposed on a country. In addition to widespread poverty and the collapse of crucial infrastructures, including the previously excellent health and education systems, a shift toward greater social conservatism and more restrictive gender ideologies and relations became evident. Religious ideology started to gain greater significance as many Iraqis tried to find solace in faith and Saddam Hussein opportunistically tapped into religious sentiments. Yet the drastic economic crisis, which included widespread unemployment, underemployment, and nonpayment of employees’ salaries, cannot be overstressed in terms of

its impact on the call for women to return home and take up traditional roles of mothers and housewives.

WOMEN IN THE “SAFE HAVEN”

Semiautonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan allowed women to establish civil society associations and become involved in party politics. Women also increasingly became involved in the expanding labor market and in the attempt to rebuild a destroyed society. In the first years of the sanctions regime, poverty, malnutrition, and hunger were widespread among the population. However, a combination of factors led to an improvement in living conditions, even though the Kurdish region suffered from a “double embargo”: that of the United Nations imposed on Iraq and that of the Iraqi government imposed over the Kurdish region. Significantly, in northern Iraq the oil-for-food money included a cash component, while the center and south, under the control of the Iraqi regime, did not receive any cash. A report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (UNFAO) in September 2000 linked the different impact of sanctions on the north and the south/center to “greater resources in the North, the North has 9% of the land area of Iraq but nearly 50% of the productive arable land, and receives higher levels of assistance per person.” In addition, the Kurdish region’s geographic position bordering Turkey, Iran, and Syria allowed for lucrative smuggling on small and large scales.

Another important factor was the major presence of humanitarian agencies undertaking relief and development work: in 1999, there were thirty-four NGOs in the north, while in the rest of the country there were only eleven. According to Sarah Graham-Brown (1999: 303), “The collaboration between international agencies, local NGOs and villagers themselves in restoring rural life produced some remarkable results.” Women became increasingly involved in the emerging civil society and the expanding economy. New organizations were created, networks were formed, and campaigns were launched. As Zana L., the founder of a women’s center in Sulaymaniya, told Nicola: “In 1991, society was completely destroyed. Women didn’t have any rights, which is why I joined the women’s movement. In addition to the wars, the law was against women’s rights. For example, honor crimes were allowed. Women in Kurdistan started to demonstrate to get this law repealed, and we succeeded. It still exists in the rest of Iraq. There have also been campaigns against female circumcision and raising awareness of female suicide, setting up women’s shelters and centers for women’s rights.”

Independent women's initiatives and political participation were not always welcomed. Some conservative Kurdish male politicians were hostile to the idea of women's rights. Roxanne S., a legal expert and women's rights activist, told Nicola that she had been criticized when, in 1994, she opened a center for women in Erbil providing training, legal aid, sports facilities, and social services: "This was taboo at the time." Meanwhile, the two major Kurdish political parties were suspicious of activities not linked to their organizations. Some Kurdish women activists campaigning against widespread honor killings in the north have been subject to harassment, and a newly established women's shelter for victims of domestic violence had to close down because of political opposition. Zouzan H., a Kurdish woman's rights activist based in London, told Nadje in an interview in the spring of 2005:

I was one of the founding members of a new women's organization in 1991. We were campaigning against honor killings, which became very widespread in 1992 with PUK coming into power. We were a mass organization and were very active. We had branches all over Kurdistan. In 1993, we founded the Independent Women's Organization, which was supported by the Workers' Communist Party. But both political parties, the PUK and the KDP, gave us a hard time. They really harassed us. There was even a small bomb attack in our office. Some of us decided to leave Kurdistan and to set up branches abroad. (Al-Ali 2007: 207)

Paradoxically, domestic violence against women appeared to increase dramatically after the establishment of the "safe haven" in 1991 and the creation of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government in 1992.¹² According to Shahrzad Mojab, who has done extensive research on what she calls "gendercide" of Kurdish women (2003: 25), a parliament "dominated by males and especially the conservative KDP, refused to initiate new legislation" that would protect women against so-called honor killings (Mojab 2007). While the more progressive PUK issued two resolutions that treated honor killings as punishable crimes, they were in no position to implement these (Mojab 2007). However, women activists galvanized to campaign against this violence and expose the conservative gender policies of the parties. In some cases, Kurdish politicians claimed that women's oppression, including honor killings, were part of Kurdish tribal and Islamic culture (Mojab 2004: 122). We also came across the "culture" argument during interviews with female Kurdish politicians and activists in 2007.

In the 1992 elections women and men were forced to line up separately to cast their votes, although Kurdish men and women had formerly

socialized freely in rural areas. Only 5 of the 105 elected members of parliament were women (Mojab 2004: 119). Hasan M., a former *peshmerga* turned local politician, told Nicola candidly, “The problem is, men don’t want to give up their power to women.” The political leadership of both factions tried to incorporate patriarchal tribal leaders, using women as a bargaining chip much as Saddam Hussein had tried to co-opt tribal leaders in central and southern Iraq during the 1990s (129).

Peace between the two rival Kurdish parties faltered in May 1994, followed by a period of tensions and internal war. NGO activist Chimana A. recalls, “This was bad for people and for women’s rights. Islamic groups increased. People became hopeless because of the war. They turned to religion, which fueled the growth of the Islamic parties. This had a negative effect on women’s rights. After the KDP and PUK stopped fighting, things became better. But during the fighting, the Islamic parties had a chance to occupy Hawraman [an area of Iraqi Kurdistan], and they turned it into Afghanistan. They set up checkpoints. Women were made to cover up. Music was forbidden. Even pictures of women on the wrappings of products were removed.” Women activists marched from Sulaymaniya to Erbil to protest this “fratricidal” or “suicidal” war (Mojab 2007). However, it took many years of a “destructive cycle of sporadic fighting interspersed with tenuous cease-fires” (Tripp 2000: 273), which led to the deaths of thousands of Kurds, before a cease-fire was finally signed in September 1998. The United States provided intensive mediation, since, in the context of the crisis over weapons inspections, they viewed a unified government for Iraqi Kurdistan as increasingly necessary (273).

WOMEN’S CHANGING LIVES

Throughout Iraq’s modern history, women have played an active role in all aspects of society: the education system, the evolving labor market, intellectual and artistic productions, and politics and civil society. Changing economic and political conditions, rather than Islam, have affected women’s lives and rights over the past decades. Certainly patriarchal and tribal culture has been responsible for many of the values, norms, and practices that have been oppressive and harmful to women. However, the influence of traditional culture over women has waxed and waned according to changing state policies and economic conditions. Facing a deteriorating economy and a weakening hold over the populace, the Iraqi state under Saddam Hussein opted to revitalize tribal leaders and conservative practices as a means of stabilizing state power;

those conservative practices were not an inherent feature of a predominantly Muslim country.

Despite a fierce and often brutal dictatorship, a series of bloody wars, and the deterioration of daily living conditions under economic sanctions, Iraqi women have not been passive victims but have been active in resisting these negative events within the social, political, and cultural spaces available. Iraqi women participated in the struggle for national independence in the 1940s and 1950s and were part of political parties and organizations that demanded greater social equality. The campaign for women's rights in education, the workforce, and politics has also been waged vigorously by Iraqi women's rights activists since the 1940s. However, it is also important to mention that some Iraqi women were themselves part of oppressive political and social structures, whether as Ba'ath functionaries or as leading members of the GFIW.

The regime itself drastically changed its rhetoric and policies on women and gender between 1969 and 2003. An adherence to developmental modernist ideas about national progress, in conjunction with an economic boom in the early 1970s, initially led to a form of state feminism that enabled many Iraqi women to benefit from a growing education system at all levels including the university level, an expanding labor market that required skilled labor, and the attempted replacement of local religious and tribal authorities with centralized state power. Many women of the middle classes acknowledge having been co-opted by a state that ruled not merely through force but also through generous welfare programs and considerable socioeconomic rights.

But although many women of the urban middle classes benefited from rapid modernization under the Ba'ath, simultaneously thousands of women and their families suffered the brutality of the regime. Wars and the devastating embargo contributed not only to the deterioration in infrastructures and everyday living conditions but also to the shift toward greater social conservatism, religiosity, and more restricted social spaces and mobility for women. In the later phase of the previous regime, the state lacked the financial means to support women in their double roles as mothers and workers and provide services related to education and health care. The state also withdrew its political support for women's equality and participation in public life, adopting a more conservative and restrictive gender ideology. The impact of thirteen years of economic sanctions was especially detrimental, as it worked on both the level of state policies and services and the level of social attitudes, values, and relations.

Contrary to popular views, sectarianism and religious extremism are

relatively new phenomena in Iraq. The sense of being “Iraqi” grew with the development of the Iraqi state and the expansion of education and has historically prevailed over sectarian sentiments despite tensions at various historical moments. Most significantly, variables such as social class, urban versus rural identities, and even political orientation have historically cut across religious and ethnic groups. The eldest generation of Iraqi women to whom we talked describe a relatively harmonious multicultural and multifaith society in the years prior to the second Ba’th coup in 1968. However, Iraqi society at the time was divided along class lines, with the majority of the population living in extremely harsh conditions.

Ethnic and religious affiliations and communal identities started to gain ground as a result of Saddam Hussein’s nepotism and brutal divide-and-conquer policies. Hundreds of thousands of Kurdish and Shi’i civilians were killed, imprisoned, and tortured as part of the Ba’th regime’s uncompromising repression of the Kurdish nationalist and Shi’i Islamist movements, respectively. Yet other ethnic and religious groups, including Sunni Arabs, also suffered from wars, sanctions, and oppressive policies, particularly if they were involved in opposition politics. As the state began to disintegrate as a result of international sanctions, Saddam Hussein promoted the role of tribal leaders and manipulated growing religiosity to protect his regime’s authority. Meanwhile, state-sponsored Islam and tribalism thrived as avenues for individual and family survival in the context of deteriorating social and economic circumstances.

The rise in religious extremism, sectarianism, and communal identities in the post-Ba’th period has to be understood partly as a continuation of the social trends rooted in the 1990s. In addition, many returning Iraqi political exiles in the diaspora imported outright sectarianism that was able to flourish in contexts where identity politics were promoted. This is not to argue that the violent sectarianism and communalism we witness today were inevitable. The occupation systematically eroded the structures and institutions that could have helped to contribute to national unity and instead fostered sectarian and communal sentiments. As we will show in the following chapters, Iraqi women have borne the brunt of the attempt by various social and political forces to symbolize a break with Ba’th rule and to replace centralized state power with tribal, religious, and communal leadership.