Gender and conflict in the Middle East

By Leila Stockmarr

Interview with Professor of Gender Studies Nadje Al-Ali, SOAS, University of London

Leila Stockmarr (LS): *I would like to open by using a quote from one of your lectures on women in the Middle East: "the louder a President will shout women's rights in the Middle East, the more conservative backlash you will have against women's rights in the region or anywhere in the world". What do you mean by that?*

Nadje Al-Ali (NAA): I mean that the recent dynamics, especially since 9/11, between western countries and particularly Middle Eastern countries more so than in the rest of the world, is very much defined in terms of us-versus-them. Here women's sexuality, women's bodies, and statistics relating to women's education and so on, are being used as a benchmark to demarcate the west against the "uncivilized" Middle East and the Muslim world. Unfortunately, I think that was very evident during President Bush' presidency; if you have a president shouting for women's rights while invading in the Middle East militarily, the resistance to western imperialism and the resistance to imperialistic

encroachment will also be articulated in terms of gender relations, women's bodies and so on. People who under different circumstances would not be opposed to issues like women's education, labor force participation and dress codes take up more conservative ways of thinking, because these markers of difference have become so central in this struggle of east versus west, the Muslim and the western world. This creates a stronger backlash for women. We have seen it very clearly in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also other places in the region.

LS: *You have described this link between international interventions and conflicts, and then women's situations, as having a negative impact on women's rights. Could you be more specific and explain that link as you've done in your work on Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine?*

In the Palestinian context, it is very clear that the more the west is perceived to be supportive of Israel, Israeli foreign policy and occupation, the more there will be resistance to western cultural encroachment. Women are sort of symbolically marking these boundaries between cultures and communities. So the turn towards greater social conservatisms and more conservative gender norms in Palestine are very much linked to the occupation and anti-imperial policies and sentiments. The same in the Iraqi context, where both the Iraqi government but also the resistance to the occupation very much used gender relations and women's issues politically. In the Iraqi context it is complicated, because there were both the challenges of the old marker of difference of the previous regime that was seen to be more progressive and secular as far as women were concerned, and at the same time the resistance was very much trying to act against western imperialism, invasion.

LS: *Why do you argue that gender relations are used by external powers to legitimize intervention?*

NAA: It was most obvious in the Afghani context, where a major reason for the justification for the war was to liberate Afghani women. It was very clear that women were used to justify military invasion. In the Iraqi context there were a lot of women's rights activists who let themselves be co-opted by the Bush administration. It started already in 2001, when there were all these projects funded by the US State Department addressing the issue of women's rights under Saddam Hussein, and how the regime was violating women's rights. This was used to justify the invasion. In that perspective, I think one should question why in all those years before, the US State Department was not interested in women's rights and human rights in Iraq, but all of a sudden they were?

When I interviewed some of the Iraqi women who had been based in the United States for longer periods of time, and the way they had spoken about the Ba'ath regime, and of course the regime was horrible in terms of human rights abuses, but there was quite a bit of propaganda in this portraying of a country in which women are all oppressed. It was just so much more nuanced than that.

LS: *Is this, the use of women's rights to justify different kinds of interventions, a new phenomenon? Is it particular in the context of the Middle East?*

NAA: No, I think it has a long history. If you look at colonial history you have similar things happening. Spivak's notion of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' has a long history, but I think that it has been intensified in the post 9/11 era, and we are seeing trends similar to

colonial times with the rhetoric of bringing civilization to 'uncivilized countries' with oppressed women.

LS: *What are donor communities, progressive NGOs, to do in this context if they are to work abroad in Iraq and Afghanistan?*

NAA: They have to work in an intersectional manner. They have to do their homework and get into alliances with local women's organizations, but most importantly look at women's issues intersectionally by also looking at the impact of occupation and the impact of neo-liberal policies. I could never have done my work in Iraq without having done it this way.

LS: *How do you, in your research, maneuver between different categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity – is gender a specific category or marker of difference equal to other "categories"?*

NAA: One marker of difference is constituted by the other. Maybe in some contexts some markers of inequality are more significant than others. I think there is no one answer: people need to do their homework and understand the context. For example, in Iraq maybe religion at the height of the sectarian tensions and violent conflict was a more significant marker than gender, but even then religion clearly intersected with gender: the things you experience as a Sunni/Shia woman were different from the ones experienced by a Sunni/Shia man. In some contexts, then, religion or class or 'being exposed to an occupation' might be secondary. The specifics of a context are crucial, and these might change over time: they are not static. Right now it is very much the occupation in Iraq and authoritarianism, especially in the Middle East, that seem to be important. In my research I look at the underlying structures and I look at patriarchy. But I cannot look at patriarchy and gender relations in the Middle East right now without looking at wider structures of political authoritarianism and how they intersect with patriarchy, combined with a look at how that intersects with political economies.

LS: *In your book* What Kind of Liberation, *you reject cultural explanations for gender relations giving special credence to Islam and other cultural particularities? How do you then deal with cultural aspects?*

NAA: Of course there is culture, and it matters. What I argue is that cultures are not static, they are changing. Culture is always subject to change depending on political economy. And it's always quite diverse: in a country like Iraq there are huge differences in terms of attitudes, customs, traditions, depending on class, depending on where you live. As I try to write in my book *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*, there were specific historical moments when specific political economies opened up spaces and opportunities for women. For example, in the 1970s in Iraq, women were pushed into the education sector and the labor force. This was very different from the 1990s, when sanctions marginalized women, as there was very little employment and little money. A phenomenon like polygamy increased in Iraq because of demographic changes, not because of some inherent cultural element.

However, I am not an economic determinist. I am an anthropologist, and interested in culture, but I argue that people's perception of culture is not static and does not exist in a vacuum.

LS: *Most of your research is on women? Don't you see a need to incorporate perspectives on masculinities into the analytical equation in order to understand the gendered processes as a connected relational system? In your research, how do you deal with these two categories?*

NAA: Definitely, this is very important. And I did actually come to a point a few years ago where I felt that I can't possible understand what is happening to women if I don't study men and masculinity as well. Especially in a context like Iraq: how have men and masculinities been affected by dictatorship, sanctions and invasion, fleeing the country, violence and sectarianism. I did start a pilot study, and I just found myself unable to continue. After writing *What Kind of Liberation*, I was very personally affected by what had happened in Iraq, and didn't have the stamina to do an in-depth study on Iraqi men. I think that this should be done. I started at a place where women were non-existent in any kind of official history, so that was my starting point – trying to insert women back into the picture. As a feminist I am really committed to women's rights, but I do think that for too long masculinities have not been problematized in a proper manner. In terms of future research, I have decided that I would like to do research on 'love' focusing on Palestine and Iraq. I think that it will be a good way to combine masculinity with femininity from an analytically original perspective. Also, I wanted to move away from looking at Iraq and Palestine merely through the lens of war and violence. Love is a very interesting analytical lens, as it opens up [a space] to study gender norms, marriage, sense of belonging and community and nationalism.

LS: *What role should women play in national mobilization strategies as we have seen them unfold during the last two years of the Arab Spring?*

NAA: It's very tricky, and a long debate in feminist circles after the Egyptian revolution. Looking at the literature, my starting point was that national liberation and women's liberation don't really work hand in hand. Yes, there are certain historical moments where national liberation opens up political spaces, but then gives priority to a range of wider issues of national liberation, and women's rights are pushed aside. I think historically, having worked on Iraqi Kurdistan and talked to people in Palestine, where you have people who are without a state struggling for national liberation. I think it is really not possible for us, especially us in the West, to be judgmental about women's nationalist mobilization. It doesn't make sense for Palestinian women's rights activists not to be involved in broader national struggles as well. The question is one of emphasis: historically and cross-culturally, the idea that 'let's get the bigger struggle sorted and then look at women's rights' is just unrealistic. We've just been hit over the head so many times. We always have to put demands for women's rights at the front. What Nicola Pratt and myself argue in the book *Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives* is that, when you look at the relationship between nationalism and feminism – national liberation and women's liberation – we really have to ask the question, and be empirically and historically specific: What kind of nationalism? And what kind of feminism are we talking about? Because they intersect in very different ways. Are we speaking about a right-wing exclusive nationalism? Or are we talking about an anti-colonial inclusive nationalism? Are we talking about an imperial feminism, or are we talking about a liberal feminism that is just talking about rights, but not political and economic issues? Are we speaking about post-colonial feminism? We need to be very careful as to how we use these concepts, and in addition to the fact that temporalities are also very important. At which stage of a national struggle, and at which stage of women's struggle, do these two intersect? If, for example, we take Palestine and Iraqi Kurdistan, there were historical moments when the national liberation struggles opened up space for women. But the

moment these struggles were institutionalized, as happened in Palestine and Iraqi Kurdistan, we've seen shifts towards more conservative gender norms and relations.

LS: *In Egypt, what should women have done not to sideline their demands on behalf of national revolution?*

NAA: This is, of course, not for me to judge. But certainly what I found disturbing myself was that in the very beginning many women said 'We are not here as women but as Egyptians and citizens'. I understand this, and perhaps there was momentarily this space that had markers of difference; gender and class was not as significant anymore, and it wasn't very important to stress this. But now there are so many obstacles. More than me saying, 'they should have put it on the table earlier on', when looking at the current situation, I think that coalitions and broader based international alliances would have been useful, as the Egyptian women's movement, like other places in the world today, is caught up in rivalry and competitions.

LS: *Many of the contributions of this journal deal with the challenges of implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. What are the ambiguities and inherited problems of that resolution?*

NAA: It's very problematic, but we can't really let go because we don't have much else. The problem in the context of Iraq and Palestine is that, in the Palestinian case, none of the UN resolutions have really been implemented. So there is a kind of double standard and hypocrisy in Israel not following UN resolutions, and that the UN has not really been helpful in terms of solving the political problems. In the Iraqi context, it was the UN that was actually managing the sanctions regime for thirteen years, which caused the death of many thousands of Iraqi children and widespread poverty. So there is quite a lot of discrediting of the UN in these contexts. So that is, of course, very problematic to use resolutions as a tool. Having said that, I do know that there are women's rights activists that are trying to use Resolution 1325 to put pressure on Iraqi politicians, because it is one of the few tools that they have. We need to be critical and recognize the limitation, but at the same time, we can't just totally dismiss them.

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Al-Ali is also President of the Association of Middle East Women's Studies (AMEWS), and a member of the Feminist Review Collective.

As a political activist Al-Ali has also been engaged and founded the British organization Act Together: Women's Action for Iraq, and active in the London Branch of Women on Black, a worldwide network of women against war and violence.