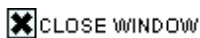


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The Talibanization of Iraq

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Yanar Mohammed returned to Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime because she thought the veil of tyranny had finally been lifted from her native country. She and two other women started the Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), with the goal of fighting for women's rights.

But since those days, her OWFI cofounders have fled the country, and Mohammed herself has received numerous death threats for her work. OWFI, one of the few remaining nongovernmental organizations left in Iraq, has been forced to operate in complete secrecy.

"Because of the chaos on the streets and in the government, women have been forced to leave work and hide at home," says Mohammed, 47. "We live in a state of continuous fear--if our hair shows on the street, if we're not veiled enough at work," says Mohammed. "It's a new experience for women in Iraq. After four years, it's turned into Afghanistan under the Taliban."

Throughout much of recent history, Iraq was one of the most progressive countries in the Middle East for women. Saddam Hussein and his Baath party encouraged women to go to school and enter the workforce. The constitution drafted in 1970 guaranteed women the right to vote, attend school, own property and run for political office.

The 1959 Law of Personal Status--which came into being thanks to a mobilization by Iraqi women after the end of British colonial rule--gave women equal rights to divorce, restricted polygamy, prohibited marriages under age 18 and ensured that men and women had the same inheritance rights.

These rights diminished somewhat after the 1991 Gulf War, partly because of Saddam Hussein's new embrace of Islamic tribal law as a way of consolidating power, and partly due to the United Nations' sanctions against the regime. After the sanctions were imposed, Human Rights Watch reports, the gender gap in school enrollment in-creased dramatically, as did female illiteracy (because, when faced with limited financial resources, many families chose to keep their girls home). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in 1987 approximately 75 percent of Iraqi women were literate; by the end of 2000 that percentage had dropped to less than 25 percent.

Still, as bad as it was during Saddam's time, women's well-being and security have sharply deteriorated since the fall of his regime. Violence against women, both at home and on the streets, has spiked, as women are less protected legally and institutionally and standards of living have gone down. From 2003 to 2005, says Mohammed, she could meet with groups of 200 or 300 women at factories or the railway station. "But this year is completely different. A woman can't even walk two to three blocks safely, much less [come to] a meeting."

Furthermore, extremists in both Sunni and Shiite areas have taken over pockets of the country and imposed their own Taliban-like laws on the population, requiring women to wear full-length veils, segregating the sexes in public and forbidding such activities as singing and dancing. Hair salons are bombed, and many have gone under-ground. Women college students are stopped and harassed on campuses, so going to school is a risk. "I don't have one woman friend who has not been harassed, or worse, on the street," says Mohammed. Women who work for OWFI are routinely threatened with beatings or rape if they aren't completely veiled. Islamist "misery gangs" regularly patrol the streets in many areas, beating and harassing women who are not "properly" dressed or behaved.

Zainab Salbi also grew up in Iraq, experiencing first-hand the oppression of Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime as the daughter of Saddam's pilot. When Hussein was toppled, she too began traveling back to Iraq to work for

women's rights. But when she compares the situation there today to how it was in her childhood, she says that now it is definitively worse.

"The violence during Saddam's time was ... committed by the government, Saddam's family, people in power. Now the violence is ... being committed by everyone around you," says Salbi, who founded the group Women for Women International in 1993. That organization now operates in nine countries to help women survivors of war and civil strife rebuild their lives; Iraq, says Salbi, is in the worst shape of them all.

Today, most of her friends have left Iraq. There are only a handful of organizations left in the country. Women for Women International has to keep its locations secret and take all sorts of security precautions. Unlike other countries in which the group operates, in Iraq it's responsible not only for helping needy women but also keeping its own staff alive.

Salbi herself stopped traveling back to her homeland two years ago because of the spike in targeted assassinations of professional women. "At first I was able to say I knew 10, 20 women who had been assassinated," she says. "Now, I've lost count. ... They are pharmacists, professors, reporters, activists..."

The Human Rights Office of the U.N. Mission in Iraq has received reports of young women being abducted by armed sectarian militias and found days later sexually abused, tortured and murdered. It has also charted an increase in kidnapping and killing of women: "In late December, three female students from Mustansiriya University were reportedly kidnapped by Shiite militias," the report reads. "Despite the payment of a ransom, their bodies were found at the morgue on December 22 bearing signs of rape and torture. Official sources denied the incident but students from the University confirmed it did take place."

Many of the bodies of women and girls who are raped and killed are not getting claimed, because families are too fearful or ashamed to identify them. One day at the Baghdad morgue last November, OWFI activists were told that more than 150 unclaimed women's bodies had moved through over the previous 10 days, many of which were beheaded, disfigured or showed signs of torture.

"Often, the first salvo in a war for theocracy is a systematic attack on women and minorities who represent or demand an alternative or competing vision for society," wrote Yifat Susskind, communications coordinator of the international human and women's-rights organization MADRE, in a report she authored on "gender apartheid" in Iraq. "These initial targets are usually the most marginalized and, therefore, most vulnerable members of society, and once they are dealt with, fundamentalist forces then proceed towards less vulnerable targets."

Beyond negotiating their personal safety, women in the new Iraq are worried about whether fundamentalist forces will succeed in curtailing their legal freedoms. The new Iraqi constitution makes citizens "equal before the law without discrimination based on gender," yet the document also states that no law "that contradicts the established provisions of Islam may be established." But which version of Islam will prevail in the country's new legal system?

During Saddam's rule, the national personal status law governed such things as age of marriage, inheritance, divorce and custody of children. Women were able to settle suits in civil courts. Now, such law is the domain of religious courts, and judges and imams are free to make their own individual interpretations. In some parts of Baghdad, like the Shiite slum of Sadr City, religious courts following strict interpretations of sharia law have become the de facto authority in place of government courts. "We used to have a government that was almost secular. It had one dictator," says Yanar Mohammed. "Now we have almost 60 dictators--Islamists who think of women as forces of evil. This is what is called the democratization of Iraq."

During the January 2005 elections for the National Assembly, political parties were required to field electoral slates on which every third candidate was a woman, and as a result women captured 31 percent of the seats. But nearly half of the elected women parliamentarians ran on the list of the Shiite alliance, and they have had to toe

the conservative line of their party. Some of the women parliamentarians could be forces for moderation and progress-- such as Mayson al-Damluji, a former undersecretary of culture who has urged the prime minister to honor his pledge to improve women's rights--but the dangerous political environment of targeted assassinations has prevented them from being very outspoken.

Increased violence against women in the streets has had a parallel effect on the increase in domestic violence, including "honor" killings. With the destruction of the former Iraqi state, and the rise in the power of Islamists and conservative tribal authorities, lethal responses against women who are raped--and thus considered to have shamed their families--have become more common.

Also, in a situation that may be akin to honor killings, it was reported in December 2006 by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq that in the Kurdish-governed north, 239 women burned themselves in the first eight months of 2006. A hospital source in the northeast city of Sulaimaniya suspected that such cases are underreported because of fear of the social stigma, shame and culpable involvement of family members associated with honor crimes. Most cases have been investigated as "accidents" or "suicide attempts."

In response to the rise in honor killings and other domestic violence, OWFI has set up women's shelters in four cities around the country. If the shelters cannot protect a woman, an "underground railroad" network helps her escape the country, along with providing money and support to help her set up a new life.

For those remaining in Iraq, a recent survey by the United Nations Development Programme shows one-third live in poverty and 5 percent in extreme poverty--a sharp deterioration from before the 2003 invasion. Half the population is lacking in the supply of clean water, and more than 40 percent have inadequate sanitation. The price of certain essentials, like kerosene used for cooking, has shot up, in some cases from \$1 per unit four years ago to \$40 per unit today.

Such poverty has a harsh impact on women, as does the fact that very few jobs are available. Women generally have a harder time finding work in Iraq, and after years of war there are an estimated half million widows in the country, according to OWFI. The U.N. reports that the international community has not done enough to help: "Projects created to provide jobs for women were abandoned after the exodus of international NGOs from [Iraq in] October 2005. There is an urgent need for the international community to ensure projects aimed at job creation, especially for women, who now face a long struggle surviving and bringing up families on their own."

The few women activists who are still in Iraq feel that time is running out for them and their work. "Women are a bellwether for the direction of a society. Both violence and progress often start with women," says Salbi. "A classic example was with the Taliban--they started with violence against women, and everyone looked the other way... but eventually everyone suffered. We need to take this moment to raise the world's attention. Iraqi women are holding up, but they can't hold it on their own--they need us to help."

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