



## Colonial Feminists from Washington to Baghdad:

# Women for a Free Iraq as a case study<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

In the few months preceding and following the occupation of Iraq, several US-funded Iraqi women's NGOs were established in Washington. Their hastily staged birth was deemed necessary to engage "important voices which were missing from the debate – those of Iraqi women with personal experience of Saddam Hussein's oppression."<sup>2</sup> It was a last minute rush to provide the much-needed moral legitimacy to the immoral invasion.

I will argue that these US-Iraqi women's NGOs are an important part of the US combat team and an arm of the US government in Iraq representing its colonial policy rather than Iraqi people's interests, women in particular. They were instrumental in rallying support for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. They continue to do so. Furthermore, they have played a damaging role affecting the much-needed work by genuine independent women's organizations. Like the occupiers, they underestimated the Iraqi people's feelings against occupation. They confused the need to get rid of a tyrannical regime with imposing a new colonial order. Their "women's rights" claims are often seen by Iraqi women as the second supply-line of US colonial policy

in Iraq. At its best it is seen "cosmetic," as it fails to address the priorities of Iraqi women under occupation.

### Background to Iraqi Women's NGOs

US policy towards NGOs was reformulated in the aftermath of September 11. President Bush's words, "You are either with us or against us" became the Holy Grail that governs all aspects of the American state's policy, including that toward NGOs. They have not been spared the transformation of many aspects of world politics that ensued from the "war on terror." Former Secretary of State Colin Powell outlined the new vision when, addressing NGOs in 2001, he argued: "Just as surely as our diplomats and military, American NGOs are out there serving and sacrificing on the frontlines of freedom, NGOs are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team."<sup>3</sup>

Andrew Natsios, the Administrator for the US Agency for International Development (USAID), bluntly spelled out the same vision. He told international humanitarian leaders that "NGOs and contractors are an arm of the US government."<sup>4</sup> Women's organizations are obviously included. That explains why the April 2003 State Department magazine featured a signed message from

the Secretary whose title tells it all: "Women's Issues Are Integral to Our Foreign Policy."<sup>5</sup>

How does this redefinition of policy reflect on US-Iraqi women's organization working in Iraq, a country the US government deems vital to its national interests?

### Establishment of an Iraqi Women's NGO

Several US-funded Iraqi women's organizations were established either immediately before or after the invasion of Iraq. They all described themselves as NGOs and began working in Iraq immediately after "mission accomplished" having accompanied the US troops. They claimed to represent Iraqi people, women in particular. A typical example, and the most prominent of these women's NGOs, is Women For a Free Iraq (WFFI).

WFFI was established in Washington, DC in February 2003, a month before the invasion of Iraq. Two US institutions fathered WFFI: the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD) and the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq (CLI). But the call to establish WFFI came from FDD which is "A non-partisan, non-profit policy institute based in Washington, DC dedicated to winning the war of ideas."<sup>6</sup> Its board of directors are Steve Forbes, Jack Kemp and Jeane Kirkpatrick. Its distinguished advisors are Newt Gingrich and James Woolsey. Its advisors include Bill Kristol, Richard Perle and "members of Congress from both parties, as well as leading political figures from opposite sides of the political spectrum." They are all united in "recognizing the dangers facing the United States."<sup>7</sup>

Among the FDD's celebrated achievements was sending its representatives to the International Court of Justice at The Hague in February 2004 "to defend Israel's right to build a security fence to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks. FDD was the only non-partisan, non-religious, non-governmental organization at The Hague standing up for Israel's right to self-defense."<sup>8</sup>

FDD also twice provided the inspiration and support for the resurrection of the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), in 1950 and 1976, for the robust prosecution of the Cold War. CPD was resurrected recently to "oppose the new present danger: the danger posed by Jihadists – radical Islamists and Islamo-fascists – assisted by rogue regimes."<sup>9</sup>

It is worth emphasizing that FDD did not show any interest in Iraqi women's suffering before the build up the invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration. In fact, their suffering was totally ignored by the US administration and FDD alike over decades. Their timely interest in Iraqi women's suffering was conveniently ballooned for reasons best explained by themselves:

"When President George W. Bush was considering intervention in Iraq, FDD recognized that important voices were missing from the debate – those of Iraqis with personal experience of Saddam Hussein's oppression, brutality and genocide. FDD brought together a group of Iraqi women who could help Americans understand what had been taking place in Iraq – and what was at stake there."<sup>10</sup>

FDD brought together 50 Iraqi women (most of them US citizens) to establish WFFI. Its birth was embraced by Bush's administration in an unprecedented way. It was launched at the Foreign Press Center in Washington, DC on March 6, 2003, by Paula J. Dobriansky, Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs and attended by prominent members of WFFI: Tanya Gilly, Zainab Al-Suwaij, Maha Alattar and Esra Naama, who were received earlier in the day by White House officials.

Gilly, FDD Director of Democracy Programs, read the WFFI statement which made no mention of the administration's systematic silence towards the Iraqi people's plight for many decades, its support for Saddam Hussein's regime especially during the Iran-Iraq war, and imposing economic sanctions on the Iraqi people. "We are women who fled from Iraq to escape persecution by Saddam Hussein's regime. We have come together to speak up about the suffering of the Iraqi people under his regime and their yearning to be liberated,"<sup>11</sup> she read.

She went on: "We were honored to have the opportunity today to share with Vice President Cheney, Congresswoman Price, Dr. Condoleezza Rice, Dr. Wolfowitz, and Dr. Khalilzad the message that we expressed to President Bush in a letter last week."

In their statement, the WFFI sang homilies to the US administration, offered their support "To President Bush for his principled leadership," and applauded "the determination of the American Government to disarm Saddam, and its commitment to help liberate the people of Iraq."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, "Being grateful to the Americans for liberating us" has become the *bismAllah* (Islam's "in God's name" dedication used before the start of anything) of their speeches, media interviews, press conferences and photo opportunities with US officials.

Financially, WFFI was also supported by the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq (CLI) which was set up in late 2002 by Bruce Jackson, a director of the Project for the New American Century and dominated by neo-Conservatives and foreign policy hawks like Jeane Kirkpatrick, Robert Kagan, Newt Gingrich, Richard Perle, William Kristol and James Woolsey.<sup>13</sup>



In an interview with *The American Prospect's* John Judis, Jackson said that acquaintances in the Bush administration asked him if he could replicate the success he had had pushing for NATO expansion through his US Committee for NATO by establishing an outfit aimed at supporting the administration's campaign to convince Congress and the public to go along with a war. He said, "People in the White House said, 'We need you to do for Iraq what you did for NATO'." <sup>14</sup>

### Speaking for the Iraqi People

In its statement, WFFI claims that it speaks for the Iraqi people aiming to put an end to their suffering. What have members of WFFI done to justify this claim before and after the invasion of Iraq?

Since its establishment, WFFI worked relentlessly to echo the US call for war on Iraq. They claimed that the war on Iraq was the only means to liberate the Iraqi people and put an end to their suffering. This was in no way a reflection of the Iraqi people's needs and aspirations. In fact it was exactly the opposite of what the majority of Iraqis, Arabs, Muslims, and the international community were demanding and struggling to achieve. Furthermore, the WFFI chose not to see that it is women and children who bear the brunt of the absence of law and order, the lack of security, and the availability of weapons in the aftermath of war.

To understand how misleading the claims of WFFI are, it is worth listening to a few other Iraqi and non-Iraqi voices who campaigned against the war.

Act Together: Women's Action for Iraq (previously Women Against Sanctions and War on Iraq) warned in February 2003 that "If a new military assault takes place it is highly likely that much of Iraq's infrastructure will again be destroyed, with devastating effects for ordinary Iraqis." <sup>15</sup> Calling for no more bombs on Iraq, it reminded war pundits that "In the Gulf War, Western bombs transformed Iraq from a modern, urban society to a "pre-industrial age."

Iraqis in Exile Against War, a group of professionals, writers, teachers and other responsible and concerned citizens, many of whom have personally experienced the persecution of the dictatorship in Iraq, argued in an open letter <sup>16</sup>: "We are told a war on Iraq is needed to pre-empt a threat to the region and to free the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein's tyranny. We as Iraqis already free from that tyranny, living outside Iraq and in the Western democracies, say that both these claims are false. We say: no to war; not in our name, not in the name of the suffering Iraqi people."

Like women members of Act Together they believe "that Saddam Hussain's regime is responsible for leading Iraq from a situation of great promise into one of unmitigated catastrophe, and this regime must be held to account for its abject failure and for the crimes it committed against the Iraqi people." But unlike WFFI and other organizations funded by the US administration, they warned that "the remedy must not cause greater damage to the innocent and to society at large."

To build a new, democratic Iraq, Iraqis in exile are convinced "that real change can only be brought about by the Iraqi people themselves within an environment of peace and justice for all the peoples of the Middle East. A change of this kind, combining truth and reconciliation with legal processes of punishing offenders is being espoused all over the world. Why shouldn't that be the case for Iraq?" and as an alternative to the war they called on the UN "to put together a timetable for the lifting of the economic sanctions and do all it can to halt the drive for war that will only plunge the region into the abyss. We also call on everyone to challenge the dangerous and irresponsible war plans of the US administration." <sup>17</sup>

In the wider Arab and Muslim world similar calls were made. Nine women's organizations signed a statement against the war, stating: "We, Arab women say 'NO to the war against Iraq' because we are certain that when armies invade, only destruction will prevail." <sup>18</sup>

At the international level, a joint statement by British aid agencies working either in Iraq or in the wider region, was issued to convey their belief that "Military action could cause a humanitarian catastrophe." The agencies included Action Aid, Cafod, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB, and Save the Children. <sup>19</sup>

Oxfam expressed a general sentiment on February 18, 2003: "The people of Iraq are still suffering the effects of bombing during the 1991 Gulf War. Twelve years of economic sanctions, and their own government's policies, have made things worse," and went on to emphasize that "those who propose war have not yet shown that any threat from Iraq is so imminent that it justifies the risk of so much human suffering." <sup>20</sup>

Human Rights Watch warned on February 13, 2003 that Iraqi civilians could face tremendous hardship if war disrupts their access to food and water.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches stated that "The war urged by Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair will undoubtedly increase the suffering of the people of Iraq and violence in the world rather than achieve a desirable

democratic outcome for the people of Iraq or increase world peace and security. Any war on Iraq will affect the lives of common people gravely. The children, young people, women and men of Iraq have suffered enough, without being subjected to yet another devastation."<sup>21</sup>

Peace movements, US historians,<sup>22</sup> legal experts and internationally recognized archeologists concurred. Millions of people in scores of countries took to the streets to protest against the pre-emptive war on Iraq, none of them defending Saddam Hussein's regime or dismissing his crimes but concerned about the safety of the Iraqi people, women and children in particular, the long term devastating effect on human life, and on the country's cultural heritage. All were proved to be right.

On March 20, 2003, at around 0230 GMT, America launched its first series of air strikes on Baghdad. Iraqis had to live the diary of war and death again. March 23, bombs and missiles began to strike Baghdad, in a massive scaling-up of air strikes that are designed, say the US military, to "shock and awe" the Iraqi people into submission.<sup>23</sup> March 31 – American B-52 bombers continue their heavy raids on Baghdad. Iraq says the last night's raids killed 106 civilians, the Red Cross warns of a humanitarian emergency as water supplies begin to run out in Basra.<sup>24</sup> US troops kill seven women and children at a checkpoint in Najaf, southern Iraq. April 5 – American tanks blasting their way towards the city. "I saw houses totally destroyed, with pieces of children flying in the air," an eyewitness said. Jamal Abd Hassan, the Director of Al-Yarmouk, the city's biggest casualty center, said: "Last night it was carnage," he said, "too many dead, and too many wounded."<sup>25</sup> US-led troops used thousands of tons of depleted uranium, MK77 (Napalm) and cluster bombs in their assault. They also managed to destroy much of what was rebuilt of the Iraqi infrastructure after the 1991 war.

At that very time, members of WFFI made more than 200 media appearances, including an interview with Barbara Walters to "offer their support to President Bush for his principled leadership."<sup>26</sup> With FDD's help, they twice visited the White House for meetings and photo opportunities with the President, the Vice President and the National Security Advisor. While Iraqi women were mourning the death of their loved ones and the destruction of their country, WFFI women were "instrumental in rallying support for the "liberation" of Iraq," as one of them, Esra Naama, put it to the press. "We want to thank President Bush and the troops that are there in the desert. Thank you for helping my people and for going to liberate my country."<sup>27</sup>

### Brands Multiplying

On April 21, a few days after Bush declared "mission accomplished" in Iraq, 19 members of WFFI attended a meeting to form The Women's Alliance for a Democratic Iraq (WAFDI) in order to be eligible for international aid. WAFDI is described as "an international non-partisan and not-for-profit women's rights organization, dedicated to a free and democratic Iraq with full and equal individual rights for women."<sup>28</sup> Basma Fakri was chosen as President, Susan Dakak, Vice President, Zakia Hakki, Administration Director, Tanya Gilly, Steering Committee. Some WAFDI members moved with the troops inside Iraq to develop "projects in advancing women's participation in rebuilding Iraqi Civil Society," examples of which I will highlight later.

WAFDI claims to be "The voice of our sisters by providing other venues of activities such as lobbying elected government officials, media appearances, and fostering awareness through letter writing campaigns. WAFDI will participate in fundraising, project proposals, and lobbying public agencies, funds, and symposiums."<sup>29</sup>

Most of their letters were addressed to US officials with a mantra like "we must all continue to fight evil," and headed with the phrase "the mission of the mothers and the daughters of the new Iraq."<sup>30</sup>

In August 2004, WAFDI helped to select women leaders from inside Iraq for a visit to the US, the highlight of which was a photo call with George Bush. "The Iraqi women were joined in the Oval Office by American soldiers who had just returned from Iraq. They were eager to thank the soldiers for their freedom and for their personal sacrifice on behalf of the Iraqi people. Raz Rasool, the Executive Director of WAFDI, characterized her meeting with the President saying, "We have met the brave soldiers, American soldiers... WAFDI worked closely with Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, to create a bi-partisan agenda that would showcase the political process from the local level up to the White House."<sup>31</sup>

Another organization closely linked to WFFI is The American Islamic Congress (AIC). AIC was created after September 11, 2001 by an Iraqi-American woman called Zainab Al-Suwaij, herself later a founding member of WFFI. It describes itself as "An organization dedicated to building

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interfaith and interethnic understanding, in the belief that American Muslims should take the lead in fostering tolerance, respect for human rights, and social justice.”<sup>32</sup> Zainab Al-Suwaij moved to Iraq with the US forces to be “actively engaged in reconstruction projects in Iraq.”

The parent organization of the WFFI, the FDD, moved in again to establish an umbrella body for all women’s and non-women’s US-funded Iraqi NGOs, called the Iraq-America Freedom Alliance (IAFA).<sup>33</sup> This includes all members of WFFI in addition to WAFDI, the American Islamic Congress, and Iraq Foundation which was established in 1991 by Kanaan Makiya and Rand Rahim Francke.

According to FDD, this development was crucial for two reasons:

1. “When the major US news outlets did not adequately cover the progress in Iraq following liberation, FDD established a grassroots organization, the Iraq-America Freedom Alliance (IAFA), to tell the untold story of Iraq’s fight to build a peaceful democracy. The alliance established a website to highlight the good news coming from Iraq. It also invited Iraqis to tour America and tell their stories of oppression under Saddam Hussein’s regime, of gratitude for their liberation and of hope for a future as part of the Free World. These courageous Iraqis spoke to audiences and local media in cities across the country, and appeared in print and broadcast media more than 400 times.”

2. “To win the war of ideas, FDD has launched a number of allied organizations. They operate under different “brands,” but they all adhere to a consistent set of principles. In particular, all believe in defeating terrorism and defending freedom. It is critical that these many voices speak out to a multitude of audiences.”<sup>34</sup>

IAFA was exceptionally active in August 2004, before the US general election, organizing speaking tours for Iraqi women and visiting military camps in the US. They thanked the US soldiers for their sacrifices in Iraq and painted a rosy picture of Bush’s mission in Iraq.

Although these organizations, and some others based in the UK, are registered under a variety of names, and claim varying objectives and programs, they have, in fact, been established and run by the same handful of Iraqi women. Ala Talabani, a member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) Party, for example, is a co-founder of WFFI, then the Iraqi Women’s High Council, in October 2003, then the Iraqi Women’s Network in 2004. Rand Rahim Francke, the Executive Director of the Iraq Foundation, moved on to co-found WFFI. Tanya Gilly, Manager of the Democracy Program at the FFD is a founding member of WFFI then WAFDI. Zainab Al-Suwaij, Safia Al-Suhail etc. are in more than three NGOs at the same time.

### Projects in Iraq

US-funded NGOs moved to work inside Iraq immediately after “mission accomplished.” Most prominent are WFFI, WAFDI, the Iraq Foundation and AIC. Their funding came primarily from the US State Department, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute, (NDI’s President is Madeline Albright), the Independent Women’s Forum (IWF).

The budget allocated for women’s NGOs was several millions of US dollars. The funds go mainly for organizing conferences, training selected women to be “leaders on democracy, women’s rights.”

Here is an example of a conference attended by 150 women in the country. “The Heartland of Iraq Women’s Conference” on democracy and women’s rights in Hilla, was organized by WFFI in October 2003, with support from the FDD, the American Islamic Congress and the Iraq Foundation, and sponsored by the US Agency for International Development’s Office of Transition Initiatives and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in South-Central Iraq.<sup>35</sup>

The conference chair was Ala Talabani who acted as a liaison between women’s groups around the country and the CPA and Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) which are perceived by the majority of Iraqis as the occupation authority and its puppet council. Zainab Al-Suwaij, Safia Al-Suhail and Rand Rahim Francke, were the organizers. US Ambassador Paul Bremer delivered the closing remarks, and brought with him a taped address by Condoleezza Rice. The ending was described as “a momentous ending to four very intense days” during which “the participants meticulously read everything we gave them. We distributed the only democratic constitution we could find in Arabic, the Swiss Constitution.”<sup>36</sup>

The closing moment was described in an emotional way: “The women stood up and clapped, tears streaming down their faces. We knew something very special, maybe even historical, had taken place – speakers and participants alike were transformed by the experience.”<sup>37</sup>

WFFI described the conference as instrumental in orchestrating the cooperation between women “positioned to take leadership roles in the new Iraq. In so doing, we went to the heart of conflict between extremism and freedom, where it is taking place today: in the minds of the Iraqi people.”<sup>38</sup>

FDD continue to support and finance WFFI, WAFDI and others, organizing their efforts when needed, in the ser-

vice of US policy. "FDD arranged for Iraqi women to speak at the White House and to members of congress, organized letter-writing campaigns to Ambassador Bremer and the Iraqi Governing Council and built coalitions on behalf of Iraqi women that included liberal and conservative American women's groups."<sup>39</sup>

Here are excerpts from one of their letters dated July 24, 2003:

Dear President Bush,  
We are privileged that two of our representatives have the opportunity to meet with you once again, and convey our deepest gratitude for your leadership in launching Operation Iraqi Freedom and removing Saddam Hussein, a tyrant who endangered the whole world. The last time we had the honor of meeting with you at the White House on April 4, you moved us with your heartfelt commitment to helping the Iraqi people build a new, democratic Iraq.

The ongoing attacks against coalition soldiers remind us that the war to free Iraq is not over. Ba'athists and other anti-democratic forces in the region want to maintain Iraq in a state of chaos, and then use propaganda to turn Iraqis against the United States. They hope their attacks will pressure us to retreat. We must not allow that to happen: If our enemies succeed in Iraq, it will be a victory for tyrants and terrorists worldwide. (...)

The letter goes on to denounce a woman member of the IGC, and a plea to censure the media:

One critical issue is that the CPA continues to retain Ba'athists in positions of power: (...) One of the members of the new Iraqi Governing Council, Aquila Al-Hashemi. (...)

At the same time the CPA is not doing enough to counter anti-American propaganda. The coalition's spotty radio and TV broadcast service and local army newsletters are no match for the disinformation on the two television stations, four radio stations, and dozens of newspapers that Iran operates in Iraq, the Saudi intelligence's radio service and major Gulf TV stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya – all of which purposely present the United States in a bad light.<sup>40</sup>

Alongside these efforts and the US election campaign WAFDI hoped "To be able to bring at least three more groups of women through November to visit the United States and take courses before the election. These women are the best exposure to the American public to say thank you and to speak about what is really going on in Iraq."<sup>41</sup>

The US Department of State awarded FDD a grant to run a comprehensive democracy training program for Iraqi women beginning in the fall of 2004. The Iraqi Women's Educational Institute (IWEI) in partnership with the AIC and the IWF also benefited. Paula Dobriansky, US Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs, who announced the \$10 million grant, said, "we will give Iraqi women the tools. We will provide the information and experience they need to run for office, lobby for fair treatment in Iraq's emerging institutions."<sup>42</sup> The fact that the money will go mainly to organizations embedded with the US Administration – such as the Independent Women's Forum (IWF) founded by Dick Cheney's wife, Lynn Cheney, who has worked tirelessly over the years to oppose progress on women's issues in the United States – was not mentioned nor was it mentioned that Paula Dobriansky, who announced the grant, has also served on IWF's board of advisers. Recipients of the grants also include the Bangalore-based Art of Living Foundation, a volunteer organization that promotes yoga and other breathing exercises to "eliminate stress, create a sense of belonging and restore human values" and has been running classes in Tikrit.<sup>43</sup>

These training conferences continue in tandem with the US-designed "political process" in Iraq, i.e. the handing over of sovereignty, the elections, the drafting of the constitution etc. In April 2005, IWEI hosted the "Iraqi women leaders conference," where "150 Pro-democracy Iraqi women leaders from every corner of Iraq traveled to Jordan to participate in a historic five-day conference on the principles and practice of democracy and women's rights sponsored by the IWF and its partners in this endeavor, the AIC and FDD, and funded by IRI and NDI (who are said to have received \$80 million for the Iraqi elections) and IWF."<sup>44</sup> Iraq's official newspaper, *Al-Sabah* reported the conference as organized by the Iraqi Ministry for Women's Affairs.

Other projects inside Iraq are bizarre. WAFDI implemented a multi-phase "Love of Iraq" essay contest. The first phase took place during the 2003/04 school year. They claimed that the prize of \$100 per student per grade level was high for an average Iraqi family, but it was essential to attract the adults to help their children with this contest, so that "The love of the country will then be

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spread to the larger population much faster if it was approached through their children."<sup>45</sup>

Another WAFDI project was for Cultural Arts Paintings, designed to paint all the old picture murals of Saddam Hussein in Iraq with cultural and historical paintings. They claimed that "will give the Iraqis a constant reminder of how wonderful, beautiful, and historical country they live in."<sup>46</sup> A project with practical help to women in three locations in Baghdad and one in Nasiriyah was to provide women with sewing machines. The budget was exactly \$700.<sup>47</sup> However, no matter how small the project is, the USAID rules for NGOs had to be followed,<sup>48</sup> therefore, the local project managers in Iraq who received the amount on November 3, 2004 collected the names and information on the families that are in need of financial support and hence need sewing machines. To these families they had to explain that "the project is organized by a women's organization called WFDI which is interested in improving the status of women in Iraq."<sup>49</sup>

*Iraqi women have been actively involved in public life going as far back as the Ottoman Empire.*

A more public role for the women's NGOs has been in the political process, including more recently campaigning "to preserve women's rights in Iraq's new constitution". Representatives of two women's groups were in Washington, DC on August 4, to rally support for their cause. Zainab Al-Suwaij, Executive Director of the AIC, and Basma Fakri, WAFDI, appeared at a "Newsmaker" event at the National Press

Club, this time to represent other newly established Iraq-based organizations, the More Than One Source campaign and the Iraqi Women's Network (Amal), respectively. Leaders of the campaign in Iraq include Rand Rahim Francke, the former Iraqi Representative to the US, and Safia Al-Suhail, Iraq's Ambassador to Egypt and known to American audiences for her appearance at the last State of the Union address, where she was personally welcomed by President Bush. The IWEI, a joint project of the AIC, the FDD, and the Independent IWF, supported the efforts by Iraqi women leaders in the Press Club event to establish equal rights for women in the new constitution.<sup>50</sup>

### Reality of Iraqi Women

What about Iraqi women, their reality and aspirations? And how do they perceive the work of colonial feminists in Iraq?

From the start, the US Administration chose to perceive

Iraqi women as silent, powerless victims in a male dominated society in urgent need of social and political "liberation." That was borrowed from the image they created for Afghan women. The most striking example of this stereotyping comes from the CPA's representative, Joanne Dickow, who began working with Iraqi women in April 2003. Recalling the timid response she received in a meeting from Iraqi women, she says: "There was this incredible sense by the Iraqi women of 'Oh my goodness, what do you mean we are going to get involved in politics?' ...And there was this sense of 'oh, these are doctors, lawyers and engineers'." Dickow explained that women had been largely excluded from the political process, and said: "Getting them to understand that this was their time was probably the hardest job of all at the beginning."<sup>51</sup>

This image fits conveniently into the overall picture of the Iraqi people as passive victims who would "welcome the occupation of their country with flowers and sweets."<sup>52</sup>

The reality is, of course, entirely different. Iraqi women have been actively involved in public life going as far back as the Ottoman Empire. This can be seen in Iraq's public schooling, in the media and in women's participation in political life.

Women were involved in political activity, including combat, going back at least to the 1920 revolution against the British occupation. Feda'aha Al-Ezairjiya of Amara, the "poetess of the twenties revolution," joined the fighters to replace her brother who was killed in battle. Nazik Al-Malaika (b. 1924), the most important poetess and critic in the Arab world, blended Iraqi nationalism and solidarity with the Palestinian and Algerian struggles against occupation as well as broader struggles for freedom and social justice. Women were active in various political parties during the entire period, and, by 1952, there were 150 women political prisoners.<sup>53</sup>

All of this reflected the same principle: Fighting alongside men, women were also liberating themselves. This was proven in the aftermath of the 1958 revolution ending the British-imposed monarchy when, within two years, women's organizations achieved what over 30 years of British occupation failed to: legal equality.

These struggles and achievements, the result of slow organic processes, led UNICEF to report in 1993:

Rarely do women in the Arab world enjoy as much power and support as they do in Iraq. The 1970 Constitution affirmed the equality of all citizens before the law, and guaranteed equal opportunities without discrimination by sex. According to labor law number 71 enacted in 1987, men and women must receive equal pay for equal work.

Women working in the government sector are entitled to a one-year maternity leave, receiving their full salary for the first six months and half salary for the next six months. A wife's income is recognized as independent from her husband's. She has the right to vote, hold office, acquire and dispose of agricultural land. In 1974, education was made free at all levels, and in 1979/80 it was made compulsory for girls and boys through the age of twelve. These legal bases provide a solid framework for the promotion of women and the enhancement of their role in society. They have had a direct bearing on women's education, health, labor and social welfare.<sup>54</sup>

Other developments were also reported by UNICEF in 1998: Women's industrial employment increased from 13 percent in 1987 to 21 percent in 1993; in the same year, female employees constituted 79 percent of the services sector, 43.9 percent of the professional and technical sectors and 12.7 percent of administrative and organizational posts.<sup>55</sup> Iraq also had one of the highest literacy rates in the Arab world, 22 universities, 45 vocational colleges and approximately 14,000 schools. There were more professional women in positions of power than in almost any other Middle Eastern country.<sup>56</sup>

Despite all of this progress, the tragedy was, of course, that women were living under Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime. Members of the National Assembly were not elected but appointed. There was no legal protection for victims of crimes of the regime. It is true that women occupied high political positions, including 27 out of 250 seats in the National Assembly, but they did nothing to protest the injustices inflicted on their sisters who opposed the regime. The same is now happening in "the new democratic Iraq."<sup>57</sup>

After "liberation," Bush had a vision for Iraq that trumpeted women's advancement as a centerpiece of his policy of "democratization." And, indeed, in the White House, Women For a Free Iraq recited what Bush desperately needed to hear, justifying the invasion of Iraq. Those women have been rewarded generously in Allawi's CIA-backed government and the subsequently "elected" interim government. The US political rewards to WFFI included three cabinet ministers, a deputy minister, Iraq's ambassador to Egypt, and Iraq's ex-representative to the United States.

The gap between those women members of the interim government and the majority of Iraqi women widened by the day. While cabinet ministers and the US-UK embassies are cocooned inside the fortified Green Zone, Iraqis are denied the basic right of walking safely in their own streets. Iraqi women's daily lives are marked by this violent turmoil. Lack of security and a fear of kidnapping

effectively preventing them from participating in public life. Occupation troops are immune to prosecution under Iraqi or international law.

The killing of academics, journalists and scientists has not spared women: On October 27, 2004, Liqa Abdul Razaq, a newsreader at Al-Sharqiya TV, was shot with her two-month-old baby in the Aldoura district of Baghdad. Layla Al-Saad, Dean of Law at Mosul University, was slaughtered in her house. Maha Ibrahim, Editor-in-Chief of Baghdad TV, was killed on July 3, 2005. She is thought to have been shot by US military gunfire.<sup>58</sup>

The Iraqi journalist Raeda Mohammed Wageh Wazzan of the regional public TV station Iraqiya was found dead on February 25, five days after she and her son were kidnapped by masked gunmen in the center of the northern city of Mosul. She was shot in the head.

Wazzan was the 21st journalist to be kidnapped in Iraq since the start of the war in March 2003.

It is important to emphasize that the reality of Iraqi women under occupation is that of all Iraqis, the reality of women as citizens. Gender issues are situated in an overall frame, whereby the family, health, education, and survival dominate every minute of the day.

Iraqi women are outraged to see their country's resources robbed while they live in slums, drink water mixed with sewage and have no say in the political process. They witness the looting of their country by Halliburton, Bechtel, mercenaries, contractors, and local subcontractors. According to a study conducted by Iraq's Health Ministry in cooperation with Norway's Institute for Applied International Studies and the UN Development Program, acute malnutrition has doubled among children. This figure translates to roughly 400,000 Iraqi children suffering from "wasting," a condition characterized by chronic diarrhea and dangerous deficiencies of protein.<sup>59</sup> Unemployment at 70 percent is, of course, exacerbating poverty, prostitution, back street abortions and honor killing.

Ediba Nouman, a distinguished Iraqi academic who was dismissed by Saddam Hussein's regime in the eighties, re-applied for her old job as a lecturer at Basra University. In

*... the reality of Iraqi women under occupation is that of all Iraqis, the reality of women as citizens.*





order to start the process she was asked to provide a letter from Al-Hawze (Shia religious scholar authority) to prove her affiliation with one of the sectarian parties controlling the IIG.

House raids and random arrest are features of the new Iraq. Women and children, though they themselves might not be arrested, are obvious victims of these. The raids seem to exhibit a general pattern which was summarized in a February 2004 report by the International Committee of the Red Cross, based on its own investigation of reported incidents:

Arresting authorities entered houses usually after dark, breaking down doors, waking up residents roughly, yelling orders, forcing family members into one room under military guard while searching the rest of the house and further breaking doors, cabinets, and other property. They arrested suspects, tying their hands in the back with flexicuffs, hooding them, and taking them away. Sometimes they arrested all adult males in the house, including elderly, handicapped, or sick people. Treatment often included pushing people around, insulting, taking aim with rifles, punching and kicking, and striking with rifles. Individuals were often led away in whatever they happened to be wearing at the time of arrest – sometimes pajamas or underwear... In many cases personal belongings were seized during the arrest with no receipt given... In almost all incidents documented by the ICRC, arresting authorities provided no information about who they were, where their base was located, nor did they explain the cause of arrest. Similarly, they rarely informed the arrestee or his family where he was being taken or for how long, resulting in the de facto disappearance of the arrestee for weeks or even months until contact was finally made.<sup>60</sup>

Since the nominal handover of sovereignty on June 30, 2004, Iraqis have witnessed an escalation of Israeli-style collective punishment of Iraqi cities. Civilian carnage, coupled with enormous damage to homes and infrastructure, has become a daily reality. Mass punishments have become the language of occupation. Twelve cities were attacked in 2004. Most devastated of all was Fallujah. Camps around Fallujah had been erected to receive displaced women and children. Men aged 15-50 were not allowed to leave the city, so 150,000 waited in anguish for news of fathers, husbands and sons. The execution-style killing of the wounded Iraqi inside a Fallujah mosque by a US marine, captured by NBC television, was one of many, according to an eyewitness interviewed by Al-Jazeera television at the time.

The plight of the people of Fallujah is not unique. In Tall Afar, a city of about 300,000 inhabitants in the north, US

troops cut off water for three days in September 2004 and blocked food supplies to 150,000 refugees. Then in Samarra, residents cowered in their homes as tanks and warplanes pounded the city. Bodies were strewn in the streets but could not be collected for fear of American snipers. Of the 130 Iraqis killed, most were civilians. Hospital access was denied to the injured. Tal Afar was besieged and its people displaced again in September 2005.

The response of US-Iraqi “feminist” women’s organizations to the daily violations of human and women’s rights in occupied Iraq has been highly selective. The suffering of their sisters in cities showered by US jet fighters with napalm, phosphorus and cluster bombs, the destruction of archaeological sites, the daily killing of civilians by occupation forces, all of this is met with rhetoric about “training for democracy.”

### **Iraqi Women and the National Liberation Movement**

The architects of the occupation claim that it is Iraqis themselves who are beyond the reach of democracy, hence the need identified by the occupation apologists for running the “training for democracy workshops for Iraqi women” so that in the future they get involved in the peaceful democratic political process.

But Iraqis did and continue to do so, including women, albeit in a different frame than that designed by the colonial feminists. Over the last two years grassroots women’s groups have organically grown within new movements or independently, unlike the colonial feminist NGOs. They have identified their own priorities and timing. They have joined protests, appeals, initiatives to set up a reasonable program for elections, the opening of human rights centers, lecturing at universities, even poetry writing. This torrent of activism is still being practiced by a broad variety of political parties, women’s groups and individuals who oppose the foreign occupation. And they have been ignored. Newspapers were closed. Editors were arrested. Demonstrators were shot at, arrested, abused and tortured.

The Iraqi National Foundation Congress (INFC), an anti-occupation umbrella of about 20 political, cross-sectarian religious associations, veteran political leaders, and civil society organizations, includes two women’s organizations, Iraqi Women’s Will (Director Hana Ibrahim), and the Association of Iraqi Women (Director Dr. Maha Al-Hadithi). Individually women also participate in the Jurist Association and other unions affiliated to the Congress. The Popular Campaign to boycott Israeli and American Goods is headed by Dr. Haseeba Shia’, a veteran GP at the Sadr City Hospital who is also a Member of the Congress.

## To Summarize

Colonial feminists were instrumental in lobbying for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. They are also a political card repeatedly used in imposing the timetable of the occupation. They apply US policy by proxy, which has nothing to do with Iraqi people.

George W. Bush repeatedly utilized the colonial feminists at the times he needed justification for his policies or as a cover-up for his failures in Iraq. For his State of the Union address on February 2, 2005, Safia Taleb Al-Suhail was invited. Guests are usually selected by the White House as living embodiments of crucial administration policies. To no one's surprise, Al-Suhail, who had recently voted in the Iraqi election, sat next to Laura Bush, and waved her index finger stained purple to the packed chamber of the House of Representatives below, staged to promote a president whose Iraq policy is increasingly unpopular at home. Bush spoke first of one of the objectives of the war: "Our men and women in uniform are fighting terrorists in Iraq, so we do not have to face them here at home." Then he praised by name Safia Al-Suhail, a founding member of WFFI: "One of Iraq's leading democracy and human rights advocates (...). She says of

her country, 'We were occupied for 35 years by Saddam Hussein. That was the real occupation. Thank you to the American people who paid the cost, but most of all, to the soldiers.' And we are honored that she is with us tonight."<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile an Iraqi poet and mother, Nedhal Abbas writes:

### *Sura-Mn-Ra'a*<sup>62</sup>

*On Friday morning  
In Sura-Mn-Ra'a  
A young man lies in pieces  
Torn apart by sniper's fire  
A woman  
In black a'baya  
Passes by  
Holding her toddler by the hand.  
The child  
Stares at the remains,  
At a hand opened to the sky.  
He reaches for a touch,  
Wondering  
Could it be his father's?*

## Endnotes

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their standard of living in the next year or two. And I have to have it clearly associated with the US government, for diplomatic reasons which are, in my view, eminently defensible, ethically defensible, and good policy. So, proving results counts, but showing a connection between those results and US policy counts as well," remarks by Andrew Nastios, USAID Administrator at Interaction Forum, May 21, 2003.

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