REVIEW

Women and Gender in Iraq by Zahra Ali, 2018. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, $29.99, xviii + 322 pp., illus., maps. ISBN: 978-1-3166-4162-0 (pbk).

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In this valuable addition to scholarly literature on Iraq, Zahra Ali offers her readers an excellent ethnographic account of contemporary Iraqi feminist movements and organizations. Specifically, her focus is on Iraqi women activists operating in the wake of the 2003 US-led invasion of the country and the subsequent Sunni-Shiʿi sectarian violence and massive state failure, with the latter continuing to plague the country today. Ali's aim is to explore and analyze the many social and political forms taken by feminist activism in Iraq through combining rigorous ethnography with a solid understanding of the complex history of the Iraqi state and nation since the last century. To undertake this task, Ali conducted intense fieldwork between 2010 and 2012 in the cities of Baghdad, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah, with the former two belonging to the autonomous region of Kurdistan in the north of the country. She further took shorter trips to, again, Baghdad, and the southern cities of Najaf, Kufa, Karbala, and Nasiriyah in 2013, 2016 and 2017 [31]. As part of her fieldwork, Ali interviewed 80 Iraqi women activists of all ideological bents (Islamist, nationalist, communist, etc.) and ethnoreligious backgrounds (Kurds, Arabs, Sunnis, Shiʿis, Christians, etc.) to be as comprehensive as possible. She enhances her book with insightful quotes from these women, which help readers understand the kind of life led and the challenges faced by them in a context of pervasive insecurity, militant violence, lack of resources, and a conservative political culture dominated by patriarchal, religious groups. Furthermore, Ali relies on an impressive array of feminist and postcolonial literature dealing with the precarious situation of women in the nation-states of the developing world. In doing so, she builds the theoretical parts of her arguments primarily on two types of literature: works approaching Islam in the Middle East from a gender studies perspective, and studies on Iraqi history, politics, and society, especially ones focusing on identity and authoritarianism.

Ali's main argument is that contemporary Iraqi feminism is diverse and internally heterogenous, and one could not duly appreciate the efforts of Iraqi feminists by reducing their aims to issues related to "culture" or "Islam" writ large. According to Ali, like elsewhere in the Middle East, Iraqi women in their quest to wrestle more rights from their societies have to "bargain with patriarchy", meaning that they conduct their activism and tailor their demands according to social limits imposed by class, education, and ethnic, religious, and sectarian identities [19]. In addition, Ali approaches "Iraqi women's lives and activism… through a complex intersectional/international lens" [15]. Her analysis takes into account the embeddedness of Iraqi women in their social, economic and political realities, without being reductive. She forecloses potential criticism of being additive by emphasizing that the

relationship between gender, class and religious identities on the one hand, and the state and nationhood on the other, is always bound by one's time and place.

Ali recognizes that the unique circumstance of being under the rule of one of the Middle East's most totalitarian regimes insulated Iraqi women from many regional and international trends. However, few years after the fall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, she makes it clear that neoliberalism and "NGO-iziation" with its discourse of international human rights and development increasingly become the main avenue for women right's activism in the country, a process all too common in developing countries [23–24]. Of course, she also recognizes the importance of internal factors unique to Iraq in shaping women's activism and their way of conceptualizing their goals and phrasing them to the Iraqi public. Just as it radically reshaped politics in the country, *al-muhasasah*, the shorthand name for power-sharing between the countries main ethnic and sectarian parties, had a major effect on Iraqi women activists. Most notably, it constricts their movements because state's corruption and society's militarization eroded Baghdad's security infrastructure, rendering the city inhospitable to women's freedoms of movement, expression, and even dress. It also forces some of them to choose political stances perceived to affirm their ethnic and sectarian identities, even if such stances erode women's rights [171, 232]. This is seen most clearly in the controversy surrounding attempts to incorporate conservative interpretations of Shiʿi Jaʿfari *fiqh* into the Iraqi Personal Status Code (PSC), which organizes laws and regulations governing marriage, inheritance, and custodianship, among other legal spheres that have historically disadvantaged women. The code, established during Iraq's "leftist" era in the early 1960s, was one of the region's most liberal, and guaranteed women a more equitable status in marriage, for example. However, in 2014 certain Shiʿi Islamist parties attempted to "reform" the code so that it conforms more closely to traditional Shiʿi *fiqh*. If passed, the law would reduce the age of marriage for girls to nine years old and boys to fifteen, as well as facilitate "temporary marriages", a Shiʿi form of marriage hazardous to women and girls. Ali argues that many Shiʿi Islamist women activists supported the law, even though they were cognizant of its potential harm to women and were against it in principle, because they saw it as supporting Shiʿi communal rights and identity, an inevitability in Iraq's current "communal-based political system" [231].

While most of the book focuses on women activism in the post-invasion era, the first two chapters give the reader a history of women activism and the major changes that underwent the sociolegal status of women in Iraq from its foundation in 1920 to the end of the Baathist era. In addition to secondary sources comprised of critical literature on Iraq and feminist theory, Ali's semi-structured interviews add a personal touch to the book that makes it a far cry from the usual, dry academic treatment of such a topic. Indeed, Ali herself makes it clear from the onset that she has personally invested in feminist activism and Iraq, both as a feminist activist herself and as a Franco-Iraqi who grew up in the diaspora [35]. Refreshingly, unlike most works dealing with Iraq, Ali does not ignore Iraqi Kurds and their unique experience within the country. One chapter is devoted to women activism in Kurdistan, where it diverged from the rest of the country after Kurds achieved de facto independence in 1991. Ali's treatment of Kurdish activists is nuanced, and she highlights the similarities and differences between how Kurdish women conceive of their rights and campaign for them in Kurdistan and how their Arab counterparts do the same in Baghdad. Markedly,

Ali is the first scholar to date who treats in good detail the pro-women activism of Islamist Kurdish women in Iraq [212].

This is where the book's strengths become apparent. Ali is acutely aware of the internal diversity of Iraqi feminism(s). She is sympathetic to her interviewees and is careful to allow them to describe their situation in their own words. That being said, she doesn't shy away from critically analyzing their stances, ideologies and modes of activism. The women activists she chose as her interview subjects run the gamut from religious Islamists to gender abolitionist leftists. Their interviews serve as a launching point for Ali to explicate her analyses and connect them to the wider literature on women and gender in the Middle East and the theorical debates of the field. Nonetheless, Ali's theoretical expositions can feel overwhelming at times. The book could have been made more digestible to readers if they were compressed or integrated into individual chapters or subsections to make them clearer and more succinct for those unconversant with feminist theory. Lastly, it would have enriched the book even more if Ali provided more contexts for her interviews. She primarily divides women activism in Iraq into pre-2003 and post-2003 periods, with her main focus being the latter. However, much political turmoil and change took place during the period in which Ali conducted her interviews, and even up until the book publication in 2016, that must have had transformative effect on women activism in Iraq. It would have been interesting if she attempted to investigate if any changes took place in her interviewees' positions on women rights between the beginning and end of her fieldwork.

Zahra Ali's very illuminating work is an invaluable addition to the fields of Iraqi and Middle Eastern Studies. It is a great resource for scholars and researchers of Iraq or feminism in the Middle East. Academic courses on feminism in the developing world, social history of Middle Eastern countries, and Iraqi history would all benefit immensely from incorporating it or some of its chapters and sections into their syllabi.