February 2020

# Middle Eastern Women between Oppression and Resistance: Case Studies of Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish Women of Turkey

Yasmin Khodary
*The British University in Egypt*

Noha Salah
*The British University in Egypt*

Nada Mohsen
*The British University in Egypt*

# Middle Eastern Women between Oppression and Resistance:
## Case Studies of Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish Women of Turkey

By Yasmin Khodary[1], Noha Salah, Nada Mohsen

**Abstract**

Wars and conflicts have had a profound impact on women and gender in the Middle East. In this article, we aim to highlight the various ways in which the ongoing oppression and conflict in the Middle East shape the responses of the Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish women of Turkey and the object of their struggles. We go beyond the 'Orientalist' discourse, which depicts Middle Eastern women in armed conflicts as solely vulnerable and helpless victims, to discuss the resisting roles played by the Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish women of Turkey. Middle Eastern women have played and continue to play major roles in responding to society, gender and state oppression. While the Iraqi women in this study voice their resistance through conventional actions and wide civil-society activism that transcends the local level, the Palestinian women engage in unconventional unarmed or peaceful resistance through Sumud and cultural resistance as well as armed/non-peaceful acts of resistance. Finally, in the face of Turkish state oppression, the Kurdish women of Turkey also deploy non-peaceful resistance through becoming active fighters and engaging leadership positions in the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

*Keywords:* Iraqi Women, Palestinian Women, Kurdish Women, Resilience, Resistance, Oppression.

## Introduction

Wars and conflicts have had a profound impact on women and gender in the Middle East. In Yemen, Libya and Syria, the civil wars and the displacement that followed there have, on the whole, affected women negatively. The emergence of the Islamic State (IS) has also led to massive waves of enslavement and the rape of women and young girls, particularly in Iraq and Syria. According to Tharoor (2016), after the so-called 'Arab Spring', the life expectancy for women decreased from 85 years to 66 years in Yemen and from 85 years to 75 years in Syria. In addition, "traditional" gender relations have been emphasized and women (mis)used as symbols to secure sectarian and national collective identities (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009). The intersectionality and interplay between gender and other identities also intensified the impact wars and conflict had on particular women groups, such as the female Arab population in Israel and the Kurdish women of Turkey, compared to the rest of the population (Na'amnih et al. 2010).

In this article, we aim, first, to highlight the ongoing oppression and conflict in the Middle East and, second, to explore the various ways in which such oppression shape the responses of

---

[1] Yasmin Khodary is an Associate Professor of Political Science - The British University in Egypt; Noha Salah- The British University in Egypt; Nada Mohsen - The British University in Egypt

Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish women of Turkey and the object of their struggles.[2] We go beyond the 'Orientalist' discourse, which depicts Middle Eastern women in armed conflicts primarily as vulnerable and helpless victims, to discuss the resisting roles played by the Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish women (in Turkey)[3]. On the contrary to this one-sided and static 'victimization' discourse, we present oppression and conflict as factors that stimulate women, in various and more dynamic ways, to react to the causes of oppression. Katerina Dalacoura (2019) encapsulates this thinking when she observes that, "wars and conflicts in the MENA region have clearly affected women and gender relations, but the reverse is also true."

Middle Eastern women have played and continue to play major roles in responding to oppression by society or formal state organizations and systems. Following Dudouet's classification of responses to oppression, we find that, while the Iraqi women voice their resistance through conventional actions and wide civil-society activism that transcends the national level, the Palestinian women engage in unconventional unarmed or peaceful resistance through Sumud and cultural resistance as well as acts of armed/non-peaceful resistance. In the face of Turkish state oppression, the Kurdish women of Turkey also deploy non-peaceful resistance strategies either through becoming active fighters in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) or engaging in leadership positions.

In exploring the various types of oppression which these Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish women endure and the major forms of resistance they employ, we utilize a qualitative methodology to collect and analyze our data. We rely on in-depth interviews carried out over the course of 18 months with experts and women involved in resistance, such as Amal Kabashi, the member of the Municipal Council of Sadr City, Hala Al-Sarraf, the director of the Iraq Health Access Organization, Aseel Al-Rubaei, a member in the Association of Iraqi Women, Amnaa Muhammed, the head of the Legal Department in the Iraqi Ministry of Justice and Social Affairs, Abla Al-Dajani the head of the General Union of Palestinian Women and Mohamed Gomaa', an expert in Kurdish affairs[4].

The article is divided into four sections. It begins by briefly situating the subject of this study within the wider debate on Middle Eastern women in the zones of conflict and violence. Then, in the following three sections, we illustrate the various ways in which oppression generates

---

[2] This study comes within the framework of a broader project supported by the Young Investigator Research Grant at the British University in Egypt. The project aims to study women's major forms of resistance to oppression and inequalities in the Middle East. Having endured not only internal but also external forms of oppression, which lasted for long periods of time, Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish women were selected as the focus of this study. For decades, Iraqi women were exposed to regional and international wars in addition to state oppression, whereas Palestinian women continues to endure daily and systemic oppression from the Israeli occupation and Kurdish women are exposed to external repression from the Turkish government. Having endured long periods of oppression, we expect the forms of resistance they deploy to be much more concrete and visible.

[3] We realize that Iraqi, Palestinian or Kurdish women are different in terms of ethnic background, social class, place of residence (urban or rural), religious and political orientation, specific experiences of oppression and that any tendency to present either them as homogeneous entities will be ignoring such differences. However, for research purposes, we will continue to use the terms 'Iraqi women', 'Palestinian women' and 'Kurdish women.'

[4] The interviewees were identified and approached after an extensive research about Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish female activists and experts. This has been followed by 'snowballing' to identify and reach further relevant female activists. The overall interviewing process took 18 months with an aim of getting a sense of women's experiences with oppression and their responses or resistance. Both interviewees Abla Al-Dajani, the head of the General Union of Palestinian Women, and Mohamed Gomaa', the expert in Kurdish affairs, were interviewed through face-to-face semi-structured interviews in Cairo, Egypt. Except for Al-Dajani and Gomaa', the rest of the interviewees were approached through web-based interviews which included open-ended flexible questions giving the interviewees sufficient space to express their experiences with oppression and resistance.

and shapes the nature of the Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish women's resistance and the object of their struggles. In each section, we explain the oppression they endure because of the society or state organizations and systems. Then, in light of the peculiarities of their contexts, we explain their agency and the different forms of resistance they deploy.

**Middle-Eastern Women in Conflict**

There is a general tendency to portray Middle Eastern women as inferior and imprisoned by their traditions and cultures in comparison to Western women who are often depicted as possessing a superior and liberated status. This lack of accurate analytical perspective, particularly about the Middle Eastern women during the nineteenth century, is largely due to the limited visibility of literature that presents any different experiences of Middle Eastern women (Afshar, 2016; Meriwether, 2018). Meriwether and Tucker (1999) explain the false depiction of Middle Eastern women as veiled and oppressed victims of a misogynistic religion, regardless of any change over time or space, with reference to Orientalism and the Western construction of 'the Orient' for purposes not only of self-definition but also for control and exploitation. This inaccurate perspective on Middle Eastern women and gender serves to guide and justify policies and actions of the 'West', including, for instance, the U.S led invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Khalili, 2010).

As a result of this trend, scholars such as Sedghi (1994), Babiker (1999), Sharoni (2001), Cockburn (2002) and Mazurana, (2013) challenge the dominant narrative by exploring the role Middle Easter women have played in resisting oppression. Within the domains of feminism, conflict theories, resistance theories, or social movements, these scholars have explored the multifaceted and often reinforcing relationship between oppression and conflicts, on the one hand, and women's agency, activism and resistance, on the other hand. Sedghi (1994), for example, employs "Third World Feminist" theory to highlight the range of responses by Middle Eastern women to domination and oppression. These responses are specific to both time and place. For example, many Middle Eastern women movements have merged with or emerged from nationalist local resistance movements to colonial and imperial domination in countries like Egypt, Algeria and Palestine (Sedghi, 1994). In the wars fought for liberation, women have played active roles by resorting either to peaceful means (e.g. by joining civil society movements) or to non-peaceful and militant means (e.g. by becoming combatants in conflict) (Mazurana, 2013). Some of these movements, especially in Egypt and Iran during the twentieth century, evolved to include progressive demands related to women's rights, either under claims of secularization or Islamization (Hoodfar, 1999; Sika and Khodary, 2012). Other movements, for example in South Yemen, have remained anti-imperialist and are less gender oriented. In Sudan, as well, women have played violent and revenge-related roles (Sedghi, 1994).

Clearly, in armed conflicts and post-conflict contexts, one needs to go beyond the orientalist lens that perceives women as mere victims or confines them within their traditional roles (Sharoni, 2001). Middle Eastern women are fighting a different fight to Western feminists. Their resistance is divided against various forms of domination and oppression. Hence, as reiterated by George-Williams (2005) and Hudson (2006), a more context-specific depiction of women and men's roles must be embraced to take into consideration the relevant socio-cultural, economic and political surroundings. Holt and Jawad (2013) employ, for instance, Scott's concept of 'everyday resistance' to explain the narratives of the women in the Middle East, particularly in Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq. James Scott introduced his concept of 'Everyday Resistance' in 1985; by doing

so, he opened the way for conceptualizing different strategies of resistance, including the use of culture as a tool of resistance (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013). Holt and Jawad also argue that the narratives of many Middle Eastern women carry a different meaning to resistance that go beyond the "politics of piety" normally assigned to them. Their forms of resistance occasionally interact with existing religious identities in a positive, negative or more complex manner. Tripp (2013) similarly discusses the many paths of resistance which Middle Eastern communities, in general, and women, in particular, employ. This includes violent, nonviolent, imaginative, economic and symbolic resistance, on the one hand, and the politics of violence and oppression that generate them, on the other hand. For instance, the violent shifts in power brought by the US-led invasion on Iraq in 2003 and the Israeli military occupation of 'all of historical Palestine in 1967' provoked violent resistance by both Iraqi and Palestinian women (Tripp, 2013). Hence, it is crucial to explore the variety among the contrasting forms of resistance which Middle Eastern women deploy within the context of oppression.

To gain a more comprehensive and analytical image of Middle Eastern women's realities, the contexts of oppression, victimization, violence or exclusion have to be depicted together with women's (in)existing responses to their contexts. According to Foucault and Gordon (1980), resistance occurs when power is exercised for the sake of oppressing and repressing others. Resistance, hence, is inseparable from oppression by the powerful or dominant group which possesses more power and access to resources. Different forms and degrees of oppression are capable of triggering a wide of array and degrees of resistance (Siljak, 2014). Resistance in this sense can be exercised by individuals and groups against a wide array of tangible and non-tangible forms of oppression, including material, status and ideological forms of domination (Scott, 1985). Resistance can also be exercised against oppression by social institutions, organizations and state systems (e.g., government, media, education, religion and criminal justice system), which is called 'institutional oppression' (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2012). In the later, the policies, laws, norms, rules and values governing the social institutions and state systems systematically benefit some groups over others, creating and perpetuating systems of disadvantage based on social identity and group membership.

Véronique Dudouet (2015) refers to a continuum of responses to oppression. This includes dynamic responses that can be employed, combined or changed depending on the time, space and type of oppression. The continuum includes two main analytical categories. The first category involves conventional actions, such as party politics, advocacy, dialogue, diplomacy, negotiations and litigation. This category builds on McCarthy's first three classifications of possible responses to oppression: non-conflictual responses or avoidance; conflict resolution through for example dialogue and negotiation; and institutional responses through legislation, legal action and lobbying. Dudouet's second category is contentious/non-conventional actions. Unlike Dudouet's first category of conventional actions, the second category, operates outside the bounds of conventional political channels. It includes two sub-categories: a) nonviolent and peaceful resistance through protest and persuasion, non-cooperation, disruptive intervention and creative resistance; and b) violent resistance, which inflicts physical damage to persons or property, through warfare, insurgency, terrorist attacks, guerrilla wars, violent protest and sabotage (Dudouet, 2013). As we shall see, while the Iraqi women voice their resistance through conventional actions and wide civil-society activism that transcend the local level, the Palestinian women, on the other hand, engage in unconventional unarmed or peaceful resistance through Sumud and cultural resistance as well as armed/non-peaceful resistance. In the face of Turkish state oppression, Kurdish women also deploy non-peaceful resistance through becoming active fighters in the Kurdistan Workers' Party

(PKK). However, portraying Middle Eastern women as always resistant also provides an incomplete image of these women's realities. Hence, it is important not to impose our assumptions about women's behaviors or specific roles as these factors change from one context to another depending on the socio-cultural, political, security conditions. Bearing this in mind, the following sections of the article analyze the interplay between women's surrounding contexts and their experiences of oppression and marginalization, on the one hand, and their (in)existing responses to these situations, on the other hand.

## Iraqi Women in the Face of State and Society Oppression

Traditionally stereotyped depictions of Iraqi women inside the family or as 'peace-makers' are still prevalent even among Iraqi women themselves and even among female Iraqi scholars. In an interview with Amnaa Muhammed, the head of the Legal Department in the Iraqi Ministry of Justice and Social Affairs, she asserts that,

> Maintaining and making peace is associated with the nature of women. The fact that women give life makes them realize the value of life. Hence, the supposed role of women in making peace in the world. Peace starts from home through the way of dealing with family members based on the adoption of dialogue and the prevention of any form of violence. Women, with their moral and deterrent nature, have special abilities to contribute to peacekeeping. They are also one of the main victims of war.

However, delimiting the presence of Iraqi women in the political scene to the stereotyped roles of women depicts an incomplete and inaccurate picture of the roles Iraqi women play in reality and de-contextualizes their experience. Early signs of Iraqi women's resistance to state oppression manifested in 1923, when Neamat Hamoudah, Asmaa Elzahawy, Paulina Hassoun, Hasiba Gaafar, Okailat Elhaidary and others called for a greater role for women in the public space. This call resulted in the emergence of women journalism (e.g Layla Journal) and a number of females led nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including the associations for the Protection of Children, the Houses of the Nation, and the Arab House (The Arab Women Pioneers Network, 2012). In the 1940s, Iraqi women expressed their resistance to Fascism and Nazism through establishing the Anti-Fascism Feminist committee and the Anti- Fascism and Nazism Iraqi Woman Association, which was founded by Afifa Raouf assisted by Naziha Eldelimy, Rose Khadoury, Viktoria Noaman, Afifa Elbostany, Amina Elrahal, Saadeya Elrahal and Nazima Wahby. The Iraqi women also played a significant role in resisting British colonization and in weakening the 1948 Portsmouth treaty between Iraq and United Kingdom by engaging in a series of demonstrations - led once by Adaweya Elfalaky- enduring wide arrests and violence (Ibid).

In more recent times, Iraqi women have responded to different forms of oppression inflicted upon them through peaceful activism, as well as non-peaceful acts of resistance. To better understand Iraqi women's activism and resistance, it is important to highlight the forms of oppression inflicted upon them by the society and state institutions. Oppression under the Baath regime accompanied by three decades of wars and more than a decade of economic sanctions led major deteriorations in the economic and social conditions in Iraq, which severely impacted women. According to Lasky (2006), women who related to male opposition activists or who were deemed to be of Iranian descent were exposed to rape and sex trafficking or expelled out of the

country. Ismael (2014) asserts that the Iran–Iraq war (1980-1988) pushed women towards more segregated work opportunities in the lower strata, unlike the situation in the West during World War II, where women came to fill many of the previously male-segregated jobs. In addition, between 1991 and 2003, the international economic sanctions were placed on Iraq after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, including forbidding the exporting of oil (for the first five years), freezing the government and personal accounts abroad, forbidding foreign direct investment, and blocking the overhaul of industry leading to serious humanitarian consequences (Von Sponeck, 2005). With 13 years of economic sanctions imposed on Iraq ad, additional burdens were placed on women due to the deteriorating health care, lack of food and basic needs (Lasky, 2013). Some families in centered and southern Iraq had to force their daughters into early marriage to avoid their additional expenses, which made the average age of marriage in these regions drop to only ten years old (NGO's Coalition of CEDAW Shadow Report, 2014).

At the same time, Iraqi women were subjected to religious extremism and societal oppression. According to Lasky (2006), "Iraqi women's legal rights and social and economic position teetered in an uneasy relationship with tradition: the overarching importance of the traditional patriarchal family, extremist religious ideologies and norms of family "honor" and reputation." Women's situation was worsened with Saddam Hussein's search for loyalty from conservative Sunni religious groups and tribal leaders on the expense of women's rights and freedoms. The intersectionality between gender and socio-demographic characteristics also played a role in marginalizing particular Iraqi women groups more than others. For example, the impact of religious and patriarchal values was greater on rural and poor Iraqi women compared to secular, rich and urban ones (Lasky, 2006).

The fall of the Baath regime, however, by U.S forces, which the interviewee Al Saraaf and 107 Iraqi women's organizations in the 2014 CEDAW Shadow Report continued to label as the 'Occupation Forces', did not necessarily signify the end of oppression (NGO's Coalition of CEDAW Shadow Report, 2014). To the contrary, in an interview with Amal Al Kabashi, the Vice President of Women for Progress Center and the member of Sadr City Municipal Council, the latter highlighted that the participation of Iraqi women in the political process post 2003 had encountered various political and socio-cultural barriers. In 2006, women were excluded from the membership of the National Reconciliation Committee which was mandated to ensure the rule of law, to combat violence and to spread 'social peace' and values of tolerance and coexistence. Women were granted a small bureau in the committee with no concrete duties, responsibilities or powers. On the contrary, the bureau's roles were merely ceremonial and consolidated the traditional stereotyped role of women. Rather than challenging these stereotypes, the committee only perpetuated and reproduced the patriarchal culture and institutions. As a result, the 2014 Civil Society Monitoring Report on the UNSCR 1325 revealed a deterioration in the percentage of Iraqi women involved in peace negotiating teams and the breakdown of gender issues addressed in the peace agreements (Cabrera-Balleza, M. 2014). The Iraqi women's exposure to such marginalization by the state organizations and systems denoted a clear lack of political will to mainstream gender in the reconciliation efforts and post-conflict reconstruction of Iraq.

Remarkably, the Iraqi activists we interviewed identified the adoption and later application of a woman's quota in the Iraq as another manifestation of the oppression and marginalization which they endured since the 2003 invasion. Since 2005, with an aim of ensuring equal rights for women and men in representation and participation in political life, a quota of 25 percent of the parliament's seats was allocated to women (Khodary, 2016). However, in an interview with Hala Al-Sarraf, the director of the Iraq Health Access Organization, she highlighted that many Iraqi

activists who supported the quota and pushed for it were unable themselves to engage in the political process by running for candidacy or even by voting because of security conditions. According to Amnaa Muhammed, "in the context of Iraq, the representation and participation of women remains challenging because of the security situation and the increase in sectarian strife and religious extremism." As emphasized also by Kabashi during the interview, the deterioration in the levels of safety and security in Iraq led to lower representation for women in the cabinet and public institutions and their presence have been limited to the Iraqi parliament and local governments, which had to set a quota for women by law. As a result, in their 2014 Civil Society Monitoring Report, the Iraqi women's organizations highlighted the impact of continuously deteriorating security situations on the aggravation of the already pre-existing challenges related to women and peace and security (Cabrera-Balleza, M. 2014).

Many Iraqi activists who supported and advocated for the quota were restrained also due to party mobilization and male domination in society and politics. In an interview with Aseel Al Rubaei, a member in the Association of Iraqi Women, the Iraqi International Law Bureau and the Association for the Defense of Human Right, she explained that Iraqi women suffer from a restricted role within Iraqi society. This restriction occurs at the hands of both women and men of the society. Al Rubaei further explained that "because the Iraqi society remains a tribal and male dominated society, we find that the roles of women and the way to accomplish them are portrayed and subsequently limited, by such socio-cultural parameters." According to Amnaa Muhammed, "women who wish to participate actively in formal peace negotiations should be named by their male political counterparts." Most of the women who were able to secure parliamentary positions represent traditional conservative parties that do not advocate women's rights or uphold women's roles in policy and decision-making. They were also chosen because of their family and social ties to certain politicians within the parties (Cabrera-Balleza, M. 2014). Eventually, the political scene was dominated by coalitions associated with 'the occupiers' and male-dominated political parties. Accordingly, the woman's quota in Iraq was used to serve strategic interests and to secure seats for male-dominated political parties. As highlighted during the interview with Al-Sarraf,

> The quota is, indeed, a proper affirmative action but for informed societies that are capable of securing a seat for the most competitive women. However, in a society where education has been on hold for more than two decades, the quota can lead to the fall of power into the wrong hands.

Eventually, only 22 Iraqi female candidates obtained the votes necessary to win seats in the 2014 election parliament, while 61 women were allocated seats to fill the quota (The Economist, 2018). In addition, whereas women occupied 25 percent of the Parliament and Provincial Councils in 2014, as per the quota, they occupied only 3 percent of the Iraqi cabinet, 5.6 percent of the judiciary, 0.7 percent of the military, 1.4 percent of the police and 0 percent as governors and deputy governors (Cabrera-Balleza, M. 2014). Women's roles in Iraqi political life was restricted due to societal barriers and lack of political will. This perhaps resulted in the reversal of the impact of the woman's quota. It also denoted the continuation of the Iraqi women's oppression within the political sphere.

A comparable example occurred when the Iraqi Government's refrained from applying the 2013 National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women and the 2014 National Action Plan (NAP) on the UNSCR 1325, among other national gender policies. The Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325 stresses the importance of women's equal participation and inclusion in

national, regional and international levels of decision-making and in peace and security efforts (including conflict prevention and resolution, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction) (UN Security Council, 2000). Despite budget of $36 million being allocated to implement the NAP on the UNSCR 1325, the relevant ministries of Justice, Interior, Education, Social Affairs and the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs did not receive any of the allocated funds (Cabrera-Balleza, M. 2014). Furthermore, under the newly approved Family Statutes Law, women were deprived from equal treatment in marriage, divorce, inheritance or custody. According to new Family Statutes Law, religious and tribal leaders were given the power to regulate family affairs in their provinces according to their own interpretations of Sharia (Salbi, 2013). According to Zainab Salbi, "this does not only make women more vulnerable, but it also gives women from various sects (Sunni or Shi'a) or religions (Muslim or Christian) different legal treatments on the same issues."

With the rise in sectarian violence and the seizing of many Iraqi cities by the so-called 'Islamic State' (IS), Iraqi women's situation witnessed further deterioration. This involved the abduction of Iraqi women and their rape or forced marriage through the dubious logic of 'Jihad al-Nikah.' Yazidi women, in particular, faced unprecedented levels of killing, rape and sexual slavery Dalacoura (2019). Female Iraqi survivors were frequently blamed for crimes committed against them, which exposed them to more domestic violence, forced marriage and attempted "honor" killings. They were also exposed to similar treatments by state institutions, such as the police and law enforcement and judiciary systems (Cabrera-Balleza, M. 2014). As a result, reported incidents of child marriage, honor crimes, beatings, torture, rape, trafficking and sexual harassment increased to 3426 incidents in 2014 compared to 2485 in 2010. As noted by Davis (2016), "while all Iraqis face insecurity caused by terrorism and civil strife, women and girls experience additional, targeted abuse because of their gender […] pre-existing impunity and social stigma surrounding gender-based violence worsens armed conflict's impacts." The armed conflict and violence accompanied by the culture of stigma, silence and tendency to solve such issues through customary laws and within family have all contributed to the deterioration of women's security and safety as well as the impunity of perpetrators (Cabrera-Balleza, M. 2014). In this sense, deeply-rooted cultural notions of honor and shame continue to dominate the responses of both public and state institutions.

In 2018, the Iraqi elections were held in an atmosphere that was optimistic to change, especially with regards to the situation of Iraqi women. The 2018 elections, however, revealed that pre-existing threats to Iraqi women remains ongoing at the levels of both state and wider society. During the elections, photos of female candidates were frequently cut or mutilated. According to the Iraqi news' platforms "Lift up your voice", the female candidates themselves were repeatedly harassed and attacked with honor-related accusations. Such accusations did not only reduce their chances of winning or even occupying decedent positions in the future, but they were also destructive to the reputation of the female candidates. They even provoked honor crimes to protect the so-called 'Sharaf al a'sheera' or the 'kin's honor' (Yousif, 2018).

The oppression which Iraqi women have experienced over the years -by society, imperial power and state organizations and systems- has resulted in various responses on the side of women. Despite suffering displacement, rape, violence and death, the International Committee of the Red Cross notes that "Iraqi women continue to show remarkable resilience and courage in the face of adversity" (ICRC, 2018). In 2005, 80 women's organizations representing different regional and ideological perspectives formed the 'Iraqi Women Network' with the aim of "achieving social justice, influencing public policies and social practices to eliminate all forms of gender

discrimination and ensuring woman's participation in political life" (Iraqi Women Network, 2006). Al Sarraf explained that many women's organizations took the path of law to defend rights of the vulnerable, while others worked at the humanitarian level to address widowhood, displacement and lack of economic opportunities. The Iraqi women's organizations aimed to ease the suffering by assisting the groups most affected by the conflict situations, especially women and children. Al Sarraf referred, for example, to the Health Access Organization, which was established by three women and has been working in conflict zones for the last 10 years to ease the suffering of vulnerable Iraqi groups in conflict areas of their country.

In the interview with Kabashi, she pointed to another initiative by seven Iraqi women NGOs[5] to develop a National Action Plan (NAP) in 2012 to implement UNSCR 1325[6]. The plan, later adopted officially by the Iraqi government in February 2014, was based on a number of aims. One very important aim was to boost women's participation in negotiations and decision-making. Another important aim was to protect and assist Iraqi women post-conflict by improving their living conditions and ensuring a legal environment within which equality is promoted in compliance with international law. This way, Al Sarraf reiterates, "Women did shape our stand as those were mainly female activists who represented Iraq." As described by 107 Iraqi women's organizations in the 2014 NGO's Coalition of CEDAW Shadow Report, the presence of clear and strong local NGOs in Iraq after 2003 is a 'reality.'

Iraqi women did not, however, voice their resistance through civil-society activism on the national level only, but also through international advocacy and lobbying on the international level. In 2014 and 2015, Iraqi women began to resist governmental oppression and lack of political will in more explicit ways by taking their battle to the national and international levels. The Iraqi women NGOs prepared two reports on the situation of Iraqi women amid conflict. One was a shadow report that was submitted in the 57th CEDAW session in February 2014 in Geneva. The other was the Civil Society Monitoring Report for the implementation of UNSCR 1325. The latter was presented at the commemoration of the 14th anniversary of the resolution in New York. The two reports assessed the status of women in Iraq, particularly at the level of political participation, violence against women, trafficking in women and prostitution and personal and marital status. In both reports, policies and legislations taken (and untaken) to promote the status of women were critically assessed to reveal the major weaknesses in governmental systems and societal practices.

In addition, the Iraqi women organized a series of national and international conferences that demonstrated their resilience to violence, militant acts, terrorism and the deteriorating security conditions. In May 2015, the Iraqi Women's organizations prepared the Regional Women's Security Forum on UNSCR 1325 for the Middle East and North Africa in Erbil under the title "Women's Resistance to Extremism, Terrorism and their Struggle for their Rights and for Peace and Security." The forum presented vivid testimonies of women who suffered sexual violence after an invasion that urged the city of Mosul, especially the Yazidi women. The forum did not only present testimonies of victim women, but also the testimonies of courageous women who resisted violence, terrorism and extremism. At the end of the forum, the "Erbil Declaration" was issued. It stressed the importance of solidarity among women in the face of militancy, terrorism and religious

---

[5] The organizations are: Women Empowerment Organization, the Women's Freedom Organization, the Iraqi Women's Association, the Assyrian Women's Union, Baghdad Women's Association, Iraqi Hope Association and ASODA.

[6] The UNSCR 1325, adopted in 2000, emphasizes "the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction" (OSAGI, 2005).

212

extremism. The declaration also emphasized the need to engage women in peace-building, resolving disputes, participating in negotiations, promoting a culture of nonviolence and in rejecting extremism and discrimination. In the interview with Kabashi, the latter pointed out that,

> We, 'women's organizations', stressed in the Erbil Declaration on the need to provide full protection for survivors of violence and their rehabilitation and integration into society through governmental and community action as per the general recommendation No. 30 mentioned in the concluding recommendation No. 14 of the CEDAW report on Iraq.

In the same year, the Iraqi women NGOs, in cooperation with the United Nations Mission in Iraq Gender Unit, organized a national conference on "Empowering women to counter the impact of terrorism." The national conference is considered a follow up to the Regional Women's Security Forum. It discussed the emergency plan which the Iraqi government adopted for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 while focusing on the protection of displaced and refugee women and promoting the need to engage women in conflict resolution, negotiations and peace-building.

**Palestinian Women in the Face of Israeli State Oppression**
Public activism among Palestinian women dates back to the mid-twentieth century and the establishment of the Israeli state. The nature of this activism has varied, including protests and demonstrations, communicating with the media, and seeking military training in West Bank and Gaza (Ebel, 2012). In the 1960s and 1970s, several women's organizations, such as the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) and the Union of Palestinian Women's Working Committee, were established for both nationalist and gender-equality purposes. They did not only provide direct services to fellow women, but they also emphasized the importance of women's role in liberating the homeland (Devroe, 2009; Ebel, 2012). The start of the first Intifada in 1987 stimulated waves of mass participation even among citizens who were, formerly, politically non-active and, hence, marked the start of a popular struggle against the occupying forces (Ryan, 2013). Palestinian women from different ages and classes took part in popular struggle through civil disobedience as well as by boycotting Israeli products (Jad, 1999). In an interview with Abla Al Dajani, the head of the GUPW, the latter highlighted that women managed to produce their daily needs inside their homes. They also created 'women cooperatives' to support the national production process. In addition, they participated in throwing stones, burning tires, building road blocks, delivering social relief funds to the Palestinian families under curfew and replacing men, killed or under detention, in some formerly male-dominated occupations.
After the end of the Intifada, the Palestinian women continued to resist the Israeli presence and practices. It is crucial, however, to 'contextualize' the experience of the Palestinian women within the general framework of oppression within which they live. Palestinian women are subjected to different forms of exclusion and oppression. Around 76 percent of the Palestinian adults and 83.4 percent of the Palestinian children in East Jerusalem live below the poverty line, compared to average poverty rates of 21.7 percent and 30 percent among the same groups in Israel (The Association for Civil Rights in Israel, 2017).
Particular women's groups, such as elderly women, those with disabilities or female-headed households, are exposed to greater marginalization than other women groups in Palestine. Elderly women, for example, are more vulnerable to poverty and disease due to their lower levels

of education and restricted access to services, income and all kinds of resources compared to elderly men and the rest of the Palestinian population (The Non-Governmental Women Coalition for the Implementation of CEDAW in the Occupied State of Palestine, 2017). Similarly, the 2019 Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Report on the Social and Economic Situation of Palestinian Women and Girls notes that "women and girls with disabilities encounter an additional range of challenges in reporting on violence and accessing justice, due to their heightened vulnerability resulting from their impaired ability to report crimes as well as the stigmatization of disability and/or their inaccessibility to protection services." According to the World Food Programme (WFP), the prevalence of food insecurity among female-headed households, which make up around 11 percent of Palestinian households, is 15 percentage points higher than male-headed households (WFP, 2017). As is clear from the recent murder of the 21 years old Israa Gharib by her family members, violence against women remains widespread among Palestinian families. In the period from 2016-2017, more than 22,200 cases of violence against Palestinian women were recorded (OCHA, 2017). Given Palestinian women's traditional reluctance to report violence, particularly when practiced by family members, the actual prevalence of violence against women is likely to even be higher than the number of cases reported (ESCWA, 2019).

The socio-economic situation of Palestinian women has been worsened and to some extent created by the Israeli occupation. Using state institutions, such as the government, media, education and criminal justice system, the Israeli occupation continues to expose the Palestinian women to systematic and organized sexual violence, ill treatment in prisons and restriction of movement. Since El-Nakba or "the Catastrophe" of 1948 and the ensuing genocide in Der Yassin, sexual violence against Palestinian women has been practiced by Israelis as a systematic warfare strategy (Ihmoud, 2015). According to the UNHCR, "women are regularly exposed to threats whenever they pass military checkpoints. They are forced to strip in front of their families and they occasionally fall prey to sexual violence by the Israeli soldiers." For example, Palestinian female students are forced to strip naked during inspections, particularly at Bethlehem checkpoint; and many students are forced to remove their veils and even their clothes for alleged reasons of security (Ghazalah, 2007). The raping of female relatives of Palestinian prisoners was even recommended by some Israeli academic scholars in Israeli public universities, such as Mordechai Kedar from Ban Ilan University, as a deterrence strategy to intimidate Palestinians from committing 'terrorist' attacks (Kashti, 2014). Some Israeli politicians, including members of the Israeli Knesset, such as Ayelet Shaked, support the killing of Palestinian women whom they believe compromise the security and very existence of the Israeli state (Abunimah, 2014). The endorsement of such violent practices by the state invokes various reactions among the Palestinian population, particularly women (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Ihmoud & Nashif, 2014).

Furthermore, the Israeli state apparatus continued to oppress Palestinian women through its legal and criminal justice system. Israeli forces have arrested more than 10,000 Palestinian women since 1967. In 2015, more than 106 Palestinian women were arrested, which is 60 percent higher than the number of Palestinian women arrested in 2014 and 70 percent higher than the number of the arrested in 2013 (Al-Dameer Association, 2016). During detention, Palestinian women are exposed to systematic physical violence during and after interrogations. Interrogators and guards in the Palestinian women's prisons are often males, a practice which increases the risk of women's exposure to sexual violence and violates article 76 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (Jaffer, 2011). They are also deprived of sleep, denied toilet facilities in prisons and yards, and forced to live in unhygienic conditions (bhais, Itani and Salahat, 2010; Jaffer, 2011).

In addition to sexual violence and ill treatment in the prisons and detentions, the Israeli forces deny Palestinian women their right to freedom of movement. As a result, these women do not enjoy access to medical care and health services. In some occasions, pregnant Palestinian women have to give birth on the ground by the checkpoints with no medical services provided. Ambulances are either prevented from reaching certain places or forbidden from passing checkpoints (Amnesty International, 2005). Furthermore, Israeli forces prohibited women, for instance in Al Khalayleh and Azzun Almeh, from obtaining their daily necessities. Public transportation is also denied, which increases the isolation of Palestinians and increases the burdens placed upon Palestinian women to obtain daily necessities (Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling, 2010). Eventually, the increased blockades, checkpoints and curfew negatively influence the rate of female enrollment in schools and universities, especially with the increasing risk of the Palestinian girls and women being exposed to sexual violence (Dana and Walker, 2015).

Whereas some women experience feelings of powerlessness to defend themselves in detention or at check points and some families force their daughters to quit education, some Palestinian women translate these acts of victimization into resistance, peaceful and non-peaceful. The practices of oppression do not disempower but, rather, empower Palestinian women by changing the traditional stereotypical roles of Middle Eastern women in mind. Coupled with nationalist motives, the insecurities faced by Palestinian women contribute to their resistance. Ultimately, it leads to a rebuttal of the dominant western discourse about women, in general, and Middle Eastern women, in particular, as victims.

'Sumud' is one form of Palestinian women's peaceful resistance to oppression. For Palestinian women, Sumud is a means to 'defy' and a source of power (Ryan, 2015). While the main aim of occupation is forcing people to leave their lands, Sumud, on the other hand, reflects Palestinian women's insistence on not abandoning their rights, including their right to land (Ryan, 2015). Al Dajani emphasized during the interview that, while she is the head of the GUPW in Egypt and someone who has the chance to sit with Palestinian leaders, for her, the role of Palestinian women living under occupation is 100 times her role in the resistance movement. Sumud is practiced by women through their protection of homes and maintaining a presence in them and the lands despite the occupation. In addition, Al Dajani observed that, "the Palestinian women inform their children about the Palestinian cause, culture and identity. Since men are detained or busy with work, women in Palestine are the ones who preserve the Palestinian identity by keeping the Palestinian memory alive and passing it on to the upcoming generations."

In that sense, Sumud involves the normalization of life making it 'livable' for Palestinian women and their families (Johanssona & Vinthagena, 2015). For instance, women organize weddings and different celebrations, visit their relatives and friends and make group trips, despite the blockades and the denial of collective gathering (Ibid). During in-depth interviews carried out by Devroe (2009), none of the Palestinian women interviewed explicitly used the word 'Sumud. However, the way in which they described the obstacles they face and their insistence at overcoming them and their refusal to be isolated are all signs of 'Sumud.' The interviewees emphasized that they have the right to enjoy life through, for example, travelling to the beach, visiting other Palestinian cities and meeting with relatives (Devroe, 2009). Their acts are symbols of peaceful resistance to domination and subjection. Through their Sumud, Palestinian women manifest their resistance to occupation.

To prevent the Israeli forces from eliminating their culture, Palestinian women employ also strategies of "cultural resistance" (Devroe, 2009). This includes singing folkloric songs, sewing

and dressing traditional customs, painting ceramics, writing stories, and producing documentaries, such as "This is not a Living" by Alia Arasoughly or movies, such as "Girls and the sea" by Taghreed El-Azza and "3000 Nights" directed by May El-Masri; all of which document and preserve the Palestinian heritage across the generations (Devroe, 2009; Johanssona & Vinthagena, 2015; Ryan, 2015). Such acts of cultural resistance challenge Israeli attempt to dominate the discourse. Rather, through them, Palestinian women commemorate their own history and produce their own narratives. According to Siljak (2014), by controlling the narrative of storytelling, the Israelis seek to reduce the Palestinian identity to themes of terrorism and victimization. On the other hand, through art, storytelling and narrating their hard realities, Palestinian women present an alternative local/indigenous discourse about 'Palestine' and the 'Palestinians' (Rijke and Teefelen, 2014).

Palestinian women are not only engaged in peaceful acts resistance. The history of militancy among Palestinian women started following the 1967 defeat. For instance, to demand the release of a number of Palestinian detainees and to draw international attention, Leila Khaled hijacked a passenger plane in August 1969 and attempted to hijack another one in 1970. Leila Khaled explains in an interview that, "the plane hijackings were tactical. Just for a short time, just to ring a bell for the world and make people ask the question: why?" (Schmitt, 2014). In March 1978, Dalal El Maghrebi, who was also a leader of a guerrilla group called 'Deir Yassin', hijacked an Israeli Military bus in an operation called "The Coast". Unlike the first Intifada, which was characterized primarily by women's peaceful resistance, some Palestinian women's resistance during and after the second Intifada took a different and more violent shape (Johnson, & Kuttab, 2001). In January 2002, Wafa Idris detonated a bomb outside a busy Israeli show store, thus becoming the first female Palestinian suicide bomber (Ebel, 2012). After Idris, the participation of women in suicide bombing operations gained momentum. For example, Dareen Abu Aisheh carried out a similar a suicidal operation in the same year of Idris action, using an explosive belt, despite the refusal of Hamas to women's engagement in suicide bombing operations. Abu Aisheh not only resisted occupation but resisted the traditional tendency to confine women to a solely reproductive and 'maternal' role (Ryan, 2013).

## Kurdish Women of Turkey in the face of State and Society Oppression

To better understand the roles of Kurdish women in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), it is important to situate these roles within their broad as well as local contexts. By broad context, we refer to the policies of practiced by the Turkish government. With the local context, we mean the specific ideological and strategic background and motives of the PKK and the Kurdish community.

According to Shahrzad Mojab (2000) "the Kurdish case can be distinguished from others by the brutality of national oppression. The Kurds have been subjected to genocide, ethnic cleansing, linguicide and ethnocide, i.e., the deliberate killing of their language and culture." Soon after the creation of the new Turkish Republic in 1923, Mustafa Kemal's government followed repressive physical and symbolic "assimilation policies" towards the "Kurdish minority" to assimilate Kurds into the dominant nation (Mojab, 2000; Donmez 2007; Al-Ali and Tas 2017). Ethnic diversity was seen as a threat to the integrity of the country and its "Turkishness." Thus, kurds were declared to be Turks; and their culture was to be Turkish. (Al-Ali and Tas 2017). Accordingly, the Turkish state banned the terms "Kurd" and "Kurdistan" and the term Kurd was removed from language and formal documents. Although the prohibition of the "Kurdish

language" was not applied until 1983 constitution, speaking Kurdish has been banned in the "southeastern provinces" since 1925 (Mojab, 2000; Donmez 2007; Al-Ali and Tas 2017). For instance, "mountain Turks," was used to replace "Turks" and the "Southeast" was used instead of the "Kurdish region". In the 1990s, the Kurdish activist and Member of Parliament, Leyla Zana, was sentenced to ten years in prison when she spoke Kurdish while taking the parliamentary oath (Al-Ali and Tas 2017). In addition, Kurdish farmers who sold their merchandise in urban marketplaces were also fined for every "Kurdish word" they spoke[7]. Also, constraints were placed on Kurdish costumes and celebrations of traditional holidays; the use of Kurdish language was also banned in media (Donmez, 2007).

In addition, the Turkish state used its educational system (and other institutions) to ensure Kurdish assimilation. This led to further repression of the Kurdish population, in general and the Kurdish women, in particular (Mojab, 2000). According to Westrheim (2008), through the Turkish nationalist educational system, the Kurdish society is being dispossessed of its "native language and, thus, is subordinated". Despite the state's attempts to teach Turkish in rural areas where ethnic Kurds dominate, the state minister for south eastern Turkey, Salih Yildirim, stated that half of the women living in the region still do not speak Turkish (Gökalp 2010). Being unable to speak the dominant language deprives the Kurdish women of Turkey from available opportunities, including education, employment in the formal sector and access to the public sphere (Westrheim 2008). Since language can be perceived as a form of social capital, or as Westrheim (2008) calls it "linguistic capital", many Kurdish women missed out on this vital social capital.

In response to being denied their identity, language and education, Kurdish nationalist feelings have intensified (Çaha, 2011; Al-Ali and Tas, 2017). The Kurdish protests against the government occurred in 1925, 1930 and 1937. Each time, they were violently quashed by the Turkish military, which burned houses and used artillery attacks on villages. Thus, from 1938 to the 1960s, the Kurdish activists were forced towards more underground activism. Against a background of state oppression, the rise of the PKK took place in late 1970s (Çaha 2011). At this time, the PKK called to establish a separate "Marxist-Leninist Kurdish" state in southeastern Turkey where the majority of Turkey's Kurdish people are concentrated (Tezcür 2010). According to Eyrice (2013), "from the beginning, the PKK described Kurdistan as an area under colonial rule, where tribal leaders and a comprador bourgeoisie colluded to help the state exploit the lower classes." Thus, the PKK employed an anti-capitalist, anti-feudal, Marxist-Leninist national liberation discourse to mobilize members of the poor rural Kurdish populations (its peasants, youths and intellectuals). To the Kurds, armed struggle was necessary for the preservation of Kurdish identity, which was based on a "traumatic collective identity" in relation to its enemy. The PKK started a violent insurgence against the Turkish government in 1984. This escalated further when the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was trapped in Nairobi in early 1999 (Dienel 2010)

To defend their identity against the Kemalist modernization project which marginalized the Kurds, young women engaged in "political and military operations" conducted by the PKK. On the one hand, the ethnic identity of Kurdish women in Turkey was dismantled; on the other hand, their female Turkish counterparts became the major beneficiaries of the Kemalist reforms aimed at improving women's civil and political status in Turkey. This resulted in huge economic and educational gap between Kurdish and non-Kurdish women in Turkey (Yüksel, 2006). According to Bloom (2012), "the common assumption that women are inherently nonviolent

---

[7] However, there was no official discrimination against those Kurds who agreed to be assimilated: they could reach the highest positions in the state apparatus. Those who refused, however, often met with severe repression (Donmez 2007).

remains fixed in people's minds. Even when women are implicated in violence, there is a tendency to assume that they are merely the pawns of men." However, in their interviews with female members of the PKK, Al-Ali and Tas (2017) and Wood and Thoma (2017) find a common agreement that the systematic and continuous repression of the Turkish state to the Kurds contributed to the growth of the PKK and its popularity among Kurdish young men and women. For example, Zeynep, a soldier in the PKK, explained her motivation to join the PKK in terms of nationalism: "I care very much about the interests of the Kurdish nation and for this I fight. I mean I fight not only for Kurdish women but also for Kurdish people. As a Kurdish woman, I perceive as my duty the fight against the ones who deny its existence" (Wood and Thomas, 2017).

Additional factors led to the radicalization and militarization of women's roles in the PKK. In some provinces, f instance Diyarbakir, the displacement process was reinforced over the last decades due to the struggle between PKK and Turkish forces. Morgenstern (2009) claimed that, from the 1980s to the 1990s, Turkish forces occupied large areas of the conventionally Kurdish-inhabited lands, utilizing extensive methods to defeat any insurgence movement, including killings, mass arrests, torture and the rape of many women. An estimated 35,000 Kurdish people were killed by Turkish forces at this time (Morgenstern, 2009). By 2016, the number grew to 50,000 deaths and 100,000 missing (Al-Ali and Tas 2017). Turkish forces destroyed and evacuated 2664 villages in southeastern Turkey which led to several internal social and economic problems (Morgenstern, 2009). In analyzing the impact of such practices on women, Al-Ali and Tas (2017) found that young Kurdish women -and men- became "fearless as a result of their experiences during the 1990s, a period of prolonged acute conflict, widespread violence and large-scale displacement." In addition, since many Kurdish women have lost their male breadwinners as a result of being detained, recruited in the PKK, or killed by the Turkish forces, the roles of Kurdish women in their families have been transformed. Kurdish women became the key source of income to their families and played a major role in terms of agricultural production for the 'household economy.' The loss of their lands due to displacement resulted in women's loss of their position as "providers for the household which increased the burdens placed upon them" (Bloom, 2005). This experience contributed to the radicalization of the Kurdish women. It also exacerbated their tendency to think that the only way to protect themselves and preserve their identity is through violence. It also led to the increasing acceptance of the PKK in Kurdish areas among women and local people. For example, in the video directed by Mukan (2014), Salan, a solider in the PKK, states that, "I went to the mountains to get the required education and for training to fight against our enemy." Zelal, another fighter in the PKK, states that "in the southeast region, the resistance has never stopped because of the massacres and displacement and the pain that was caused to our people, thus, we grow up for the resistance to protect our identity and to bring peace to our people" (Çaha, 2011). The video reflects the experience of Kurdish women living in conflict zones. It also shows how the discourse of "us versus them" has increased among the women leading them to want to join the PKK.

The increasing recruitment of Kurdish women in the PKK is grounded in three main factors: the PKK's pursuit for democracy and women's rights; the Kurdish women's search for gender equality; and the PKK's attempt to improve its strategic capabilities. On the one hand, Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan asserted that women's enslavement is the main factor that prevents social freedom. He supported women's emancipation and gender equality as the only way to achieve democratic change. According to Öcalan, "the freedom of a nation depends on the freedom of its woman" (Düzgün, 2016). Hence, since the establishment of the PKK, women have been recruited within the "Marxist-Leninist rhetoric" as well as the rhetoric of ethnic nationalism.

Öcalan suggested that "women's organizations create separate branches to promote rights and equality within the wider movement and society. Öcalan created these branches within society, political parties and guerrilla movements" (Gonzalez-Perez 2008).

On the other hand, Gonzalez-Perez (2008) argues that the "traditional feudal values" which are dominant in the Kurdish society reinforce the male-dominant values which made woman powerless. Thus, Kurdish males occupy more superior positions within the family and society while women are responsible of doing all of the domestic work and bringing up children, even when they succeed in gaining employment outside the household. Therefore, women's enrollment in the PKK can be seen as a way to avoid family subjugation and gain more 'gender equality' within the PKK, which seemed to embrace more democratic values. In their interviews with female members in the PKK, Al-Ali and Tas (2017) found that young women do not only perceive the PKK as a political movement, but also as a means for their emancipation and for achieving more egalitarian gender relations. According to Bouta, Frerks and Bannon (2004), traditional relations between women and men tend to change in conflict times and military towards more equal gender relations compared to outside the military or pre-conflict. As one of the female fighters of the PKK put it, "I am now a free woman, brave and able to defend myself and my people. I fight for the enslaved woman, help their liberation from oppression" (Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2010). According to Yüksel (2006), these women struggle for both their women's rights and their identity. It is, therefore, necessary to recognize the common ground between Kurdish women's fight for their feminine and national identities. For Kurdish women, the "oppressed nation" and the "oppressed gender" are both correlated and are viewed as equal to each other. The conjunction of these two types of oppression constitutes the Kurdish feminist identity (Yüksel, 2006).

Since the establishment of the PKK, it purposefully recruited Kurdish women in order to improve its strategic capabilities (Cragin and Daly, 2009). In an interview conducted with the expert, Mohamed Gomaa', he explained that "the PKK highly depends on women in suicide bombing missions due to that fact that women are less suspicious and they are less visible to inspection by security than men." According to Bloom (2005), "on 30 June 1996, the first women suicide bomber associated with the PKK in Turkey killed six soldiers and wounded an additional thirty through a suicide bombing belt strapped to her stomach and built in such a way to suggest that she was pregnant." As a result, eleven of the fifteen suicide bombings of the PKK between 1996 and 1999 were conducted by women (Sutten, 2009). In 2004, the PKK had around 5,000 fighters with 1,100 women functioning as suicide bombers. If this shows anything, it shows the high degree the PKK relied on women as "suicide bombers" (Bloom, 2005). Most importantly, the high prevalence of women within the PKK militaries contests the traditional image of militant acts as profoundly male dominated while women, when present, are merely victims.

In the PKK, Kurdish women did not only play important roles as logisticians, guerrilla fighters and suicide bombers, they also participated heavily in the leadership and decision-making. In the initial days of their struggle, Kurdish women in the PKK functioned mainly in cleaning the camps, cooking and transmitting communication. However, with the intensification of the Kurdish insurgence in the 1980s, the roles of Kurdish women in the PKK quickly moved into more strategic roles (Gonzalez-Perez, 2008). For instance, in the late 1990s, two of the PKK supporters in the Kurdish Diaspora, Hanan Ahmed Osman and Zehra Saygili, fundraised and facilitated the transfer of money to the PKK, as a part of the 'Kurdish Cultural Association in Montreal' (Ibid). In addition, with time, Kurdish women increasingly participated as leaders and decision-makers in the PKK. The PKK established a quota of 40 percent for women in the leadership council (Gökalp, 2010). The Kurdish women also played the role of "strategic visionaries". Strategic visionaries are

219

individuals or senior leaders within a terrorist group who prepare strategies and publish pamphlets and other documents that outline the PKK's worldview and direction (Cragin and Daly 2009).

According to Cragin and Daly (2009), Kesire Yildirim was a founding member of the PKK and wife of its leader. She became a believer in both the Kurdish nationalist movement and an adherent to the Marxist–Leninist ideology. Hence, as the primary and only female member of the PKK's dominant committee in 1978, Kesire Yildirim is recognized by most for inserting feminist ideals into the PKK's strategic direction. Under her leadership, the PKK became a group that struggled to offer better chances for Kurdish rural females in Turkey (Cragin and Daly 2009). In 1999, for the first time, three Kurdish women were chosen as local mayors. This number increased in 2004 by 14 women mayors (Yüksel, 2006). In the 2007 elections, 8 out of 21 Kurdish members of the national Parliament being females. The Kurdish women's representation was 38 percent compared to only 9 percent women's representation in the parliament of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The percentage of Kurdish women's representation increased by the 2015 elections reaching 40 percent compared to only 16 percent women's representation in the AKP (Erel and Acik, 2019). This reflects some signs of change in Turkey's patriarchal culture towards, arguably, more 'gender equality.' Such signs are the product of a long political struggle of the Kurdish women's movement, which has continuously challenged men's political leadership in the PKK (Al-Ali and Tas, 2017).


**Concluding Remarks**

The portrayal of Middle Eastern women as either victims or heroines confines our understanding of the real life for these women (Bibars, 2001; Al-Ali and Pratt, 2006). The reality is, of course, much more complex. Delimiting the experience of Middle Eastern women to the victimization discourse or the stereotyped roles of women depicts an incomplete and inaccurate picture of the roles women play in reality and de-contextualizes their experience. The oppression inflicted upon Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish women does not only victimize them, it also spurs their resistance. In this sense, victimization and resistance resemble two sides of the same coin. Allowing them to complete rather than compete enables us to piece together a more layered and nuanced portrait of women's realities. Considering both discourses simultaneously reveals the consequences of the oppression women endure and the true scope of their responses. According to Sedghi (1994), there is a multiplicity of Third World women responses. Such responses are specific to time and place and demonstrate an ongoing struggle against the domination and oppression exercised upon them not only by gender, but also by class, race and state.

These responses are shaped by external and internal factors –including gender relations- which restrain women and/or open windows of opportunities to them. Iraqi women suffer because of the staggering amount of violence around them and the failure the state to provide security, services and adequate humanitarian assistance and lack of political will to combat the violence and improve their overall conditions. However, while Iraqi women, for example, were able to take advantage of the window of opportunity opened in front of them after the fall of the Baʻth regime due national and international circumstances, others were not. As O'Connell (2011) states, "a new post-conflict political settlement, constitution and political regime, may provide opportunities to enshrine the principles and promote the practices of gender equality and women's rights and empowerment in social, economic and political arena." As a result, more than Palestinian and Kurdish women, Iraqi activists in 'post' invasion Iraq, managed to take advantage of writing a new constitution and the international support for women's rights to establish a quota for women

(Efrati, 2012). As emphasized by Cynthia Enloe (2010), in their struggle for quota, Iraqi activists drew on the pressure by many international women and human rights' organizations to introduce gender quotas and increase women's political representation during the 1990s and the early 2000s. In addition, they managed to take advantage of the newly acquired rights and freedoms, such as the freedom of association as well as the support and fund made available by the United States agencies, such as United States Institute for Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy and the Research Triangle Institute and 'Women's Democracy Initiative' (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2008). This is not to suggest that these Iraqi organizations are affiliated to the U.S (Ibid). Rather, it is to observe that the Iraqi women organizations and activists do not operate in a context characterized majorly by international opposition and lack of support, such as Palestinian and Kurdish women. As a result, the Iraqi women engaged in what Dudouet (2015) classifies as conventional actions (including party politics, advocacy, dialogue and negotiations and litigation) more than contentious armed or unarmed actions taking advantage of the national and international windows of opportunity.

Palestinian women, by contrast, lack international support. In her interviews with Palestinian women, Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2010) finds a constant use of phrases such as, "No one sees us or hear us," and "we are not considered human beings". In this sense, the Palestinian women's resistance operates within a context dominated by 'politics of invisibility', which deliberately attempts to make the Palestinian cause and the Palestinians' suffering invisible. Yet, in response to the Israeli use of 'invisibility' as a deliberate strategy to isolate the Palestinians, Palestinian women express their resilience through Sumud and strategies of cultural resistance. Their response is marked by uniqueness or being 'non-conventional' in Dudouet's terms in a way that matches the exceptionality of their experience and the oppression they endure.

In sum, the responses of Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish women (and of Middle Eastern women at large), can be best seen in the form of a continuum of responses characterized by multiplicity, dynamism and interaction. When met with severe oppression or colonial and imperial domination, Iraqi, Palestinian and Kurdish women at different points of times resorted also to non-peaceful resistance. Iraqi women have once resorted to non-peaceful means of resistance against the British colonization and the Yazidi women continue to lift up arms against ISIS to liberate their lands and defend their countries. Palestinian women, on the other hand, engage in militant actions to express their resistance to the oppressive institutions of occupation and their policies of violence against their 'body, home and homeland.' Indeed, the continuum of responses manifests itself most clearly in the Palestinian case where women use both Sumud and cultural resistance on and forth along with violent resistance. At last, the Kurdish women resisted the oppression and the repressive and violent policies of the Turkish state by becoming active fighters and holding leadership positions in the PKK.

## References

Abunimah, A. (2014). Israeli lawmaker's call for genocide of Palestinians gets thousands of Facebook likes.*Electronic Intifada*,7.

Afshar, H. (Ed.). (2016). *Women in the Middle East: perceptions, realities and struggles for liberation*. Springer.

Al-Dameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association. (2016). *Occupied lives: imprisonment of Palestinian women and girls.*

Al-Ali, N. & Pratt, N. (2006). Researching Women in Post-Invasion Iraq: Negotiating 'Truth' and Deconstructing Dominant Discourses.*Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies*,8(1-2), 193-214.

Al-Ali, N. & Pratt, N. (2008). Women's Organizing and the Conflict in Iraq since 2003.*Feminist Review*,88 (1), 74-85.

Al-Ali,N. & Pratt,N. (2009). *Women and war in the Middle East: Transnational perspectives.* London: Zed Books.

Al-Ali, N., & Tas, L. (2017). "War Is like a Blanket" Feminist Convergences in Kurdish and Turkish Women's Rights Activism for Peace.*Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*,13(3), 354-375.

Amnesty International (2005) 'Conflict, occupation and patriarchy: Women carry the burden', 31 March 2005. http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ engmde150162005.

Babiker, F. (1999), 'The Gender Impact of War, Environmental Disruption and Displacement in Sudan', in M. Suliman (ed), Ecology, Politics & Violent Conflict, London: Zed Books

Bibars, I. M. (2001). Victims and *Heroines: Women, Welfare and the Egyptian State,* London: Zed.

Bloom, M. (2005). *Dying to kill: the allure of suicide terror* (5-80). New York: Columbia University Press.

Bloom, M. (2012). *Bombshell: women and terrorism*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bouta, T., Frerks, G., & Bannon, I. (2004). *Gender, conflict, and development*. The World Bank.

Cabrera-Balleza, M. et al. (2014), Security Council Resolution 1325: Civil Society Monitoring Report 2014, Global Network of Women Peacebuilders.

Çaha, O. (2011). The Kurdish Women's Movement: A Third-Wave Feminism within the Turkish Context. *Turkish Studies, 12*(3), 435-449.

Cockburn, C. (2002). Women's organization in the rebuilding of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In Cockburn, C., & Zarkov, D. (Eds). *The postwar moment: Militaries, masculinities and international peacekeeping: Bosnia and the Netherlands*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Cragin, R. K., & Daly, S. A. (2009). *Women as terrorists' mothers, recruiters, and martyrs*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International.

Dalacoura, K. (2019). Women and gender in the Middle East and North Africa: mapping the field and addressing policy dilemmas at the post-2011 juncture. MENARA Final Reports

Dana, K., & Walker, H. (2015). Invisible disasters: the effects of Israeli occupation on Palestinian gender roles. *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 8(4), 488-504.

Davis, L. (2016). Iraqi Women Confronting ISIL: Protecting Women's Rights in the Context of Conflict. *Sw. J. Int'l L.*, *22*, 27.

Devroe, S. R. (2009). Here, it's not about conflict resolution- we can only resist': Palestinian Women's Activism in Conflict Resolution and Non-Violent Resistance. In N. Al-ali & N. Pratt (Eds.), *Women & War in the Middle East* (pp. 158-190). Zed Books.

DiAngelo, O., Sensoy, R. (2012). Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Dienel, H. (2010). *Terrorism and the Internet: threats, target groups, deradicalisation strategies*. Amsterdam: IOS Press.

Donmez, R. O. (2007). Nationalism in Turkey: Political Violence and Identity. *Ethnopolitics, 6*(1), 43-65.

Dudouet, V. (2013). Dynamics and factors of transition from armed struggle to nonviolent resistance. *Journal of Peace Research*, *50*(3), 401-413.

Dudouet, V. (Ed.). (2015). *Civil Resistance and Conflict Transformation: Transitions from armed to nonviolent struggle*. London: Routledge

Düzgün, M. (2016). Jineology: The Kurdish Women's Movement. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *12*(2), 284-287.

Ebel, M. E. (2012). *My Body is a Barrel of Gunpowder: Palestinian Women's Suicide Bombing in the Second Intifada* (Doctoral dissertation, Bachelor's Thesis], Pittsburg, Carnegie Mellon University).

Efrati, N. (2012) WOMEN, Representation and Democracy in Post-Saddam Iraq 2003–10, *Representation*, *48* (3), 253-265.

Enloe, C. 2010. *Nimo's War, Emma's War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Erel, U., & Acik, N. (2019). Enacting intersectional multilayered citizenship: Kurdish women's politics. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 1-23.

ESCWA (2019). The Social and Economic Situation of Palestinian Women and Girls. The United Nations, The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

Eyrice, I. U. (2013). *Roots and causes that created the PKK terrorist organization*. NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL MONTEREY CA.

Foucault, M., & Gordon, C. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.

George-Williams, D.O. 2005. Changing Gender Roles in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations in Africa. In: Rodríguez, D. & Natukunda-Togboa, E. (eds) Gender and Peace Building in Africa. New York: University of Peace (59-72).

Ghazalah, M. A. (2007). *Israeli army forces women to strip at Bethlehem checkpoint. If Americans Knew*.

Gonzalez-Perez, M. (2008). *Women and terrorism: female activity in domestic and international terror groups* (60-79). Routledge.

Gökalp, D. (2010). A gendered analysis of violence, justice and citizenship: Kurdish women facing war and displacement in Turkey. *Women's Studies International Forum, 33*(6), 561-569.

Hoodfar, H. (1999). *The women's movement in Iran: women at the crossroads of secularization and Islamization* (Vol. 1). Grebels, France: Women living under muslim laws.

Hudson, H. (2006). 'Human Security and Peacebuilding Through a Gender Lens', DIIS Working Paper no. 2006/ 37, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, p.12.

Ibhais, H., Itani, M., & Salahat, S. (2010). *The Suffering of the Palestinian Woman under the Israeli Occupation.* Beirut, Lebanon: Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations.

ICRC (2018), Iraqi Women, The International Committee of the Red Cross.

Ihmoud, S. (2015). Mohammed Abu-Khdeir and the Politics of Racial Terror in Occupied Jerusalem. *Borderlands*, *14*(1), 1-28.

Ismael, J. S. (2014). Iraqi women in conditions of war and occupation. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, *36*(3), 260-267.

Jad, I. (1990). From Saloon Ladies to Popular Committees, in Jamal Nassar and Roger Heacock (ed.) Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads, New York: Prager Publishers.

Jaffer, M. (2011, March). Interview: Palestinian women prisoners shackled during childbirth.

Johanssona, A., & Vinthagen, S. (2015). Dimensions of everyday resistance: the Palestinian Sumūd. *Journal of Political Power*, 1-31.

Johnson, P., & Kuttab, E. (2001). Where Have All the Women (and Men) Gone? Reflections on Gender and the Second Palestinian Intifada. *Feminist Review*, *69*, 21-43.

Kashti, O. (2014, July 22). Israeli Professor's 'Rape as Terror Deterrent' Statement Draws Ire. *Haaretz*.

Khalili, L. (2010). The new (and old) classics of counterinsurgency. *Middle East Report*, (255).

Khodary, Y. M. (2016). Women and Peace-Building in Iraq. *Peace Review*, *28*(4), 499-507.

Kudakwashe, N. A., & Richard, B. (2015). Causes of Armed Conflicts and Their Effects on Women. *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*, *2*(4),77-85.

Lasky (2006), Iraqi Women under Saddam. *Alternatives International*.

Mazurana, D. (2013). *Gender, Conflict and Peace*. World Peace Foundation.

Mojab, S. (2000). Vengeance and violence: Kurdish women recount the war. *Canadian Woman Studies*, *19* (4).

Morgenstern, H. (2009). *Suicide terror: understanding and confronting the threat* (225-253). Hoboken: Wiley.

Mukan, M. (2014, November 22). Inside PKK - Guerrilla Women Fighting ISIS.

Na'amnih, W. et al. (2010), "Trends in the Gap in Life Expectancy between Arabs and Jews in Israel between 1975 and 2004", in International Journal of Epidemiology, Vol. 39, No. 5 (October).

NGO's Coalition of CEDAW Shadow Report (2014), Iraqi Women in Armed Conflict and post conflict Situation Shadow Report. CEDAW committee. 57th Session.

OCHA (2017). 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview - Occupied Palestinian Territory. East Jerusalem United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

O'Connell, H. 2011. What are the Opportunities to Promote Gender Equity and Equality in Conflict-affected and Fragile States? Insights from a Review of Evidence, *Gender and Development*, *19* (3), pp. 455-466.

Rijke, A., & Van Teeffelen, T. (2014). To exist is to resist: Sumud, heroism, and the everyday. *Jerusalem Quarterly*, *59*, 86-99.

Ryan, C. (2013). *Bodies, power, resistance: Palestinian women's subjectivity and resistance in the occupied territories* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland).

Ryan, C. (2015). Everyday Resilience as Resistance: Palestinian Women Practicing Sumud. *International Political Sociology*, *9*, 299–315.

Salbi, Z. (2013). Why women are less free 10 years after the invasion of Iraq, CNN.

Schmitt, P. (2014). Interview with Leila Khaled: 'BDS is effective, but it doesn't liberate land'. *972 Magazine*. May 17, 2014. Available at: https://www.972mag.com/interview-with-leila-khaled-bds-is-effective-but-it-doesnt-liberate-land/.

Sedghi, Hamideh (1994) 'Third World Feminist Perspectives on World Politics', in Peter R. Beckman and Francine d'Amico (eds), Women,Gender and World Politics. Perspectives, Policies, and Prospects, Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Sharoni, S. (2001). Victims, perpetrators or actors? Gender, armed conflict and political violence. In C.O. Moser & F.C. Clark (Eds.), *Rethinking women's struggles in Israel-Palestine and the North of Ireland* (pp.85-99). London: Zed Books.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian,N. (2010). Palestinian women and the politics of invisibility: Towards a feminist methodology.*Peace Prints: South Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*,*3*(1), 1-21.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian,N. & Braithwaite, J. (2010). Victimology between the local and the global.*International Review of Victimology*,*17*(1), 1-8.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian,N., Ihmoud, S. & Nashif, S. (2014). Sexual Violence, Women's Bodies, and Israeli Settler Colonialism.*Jadaliyya.* 17 November 2014.

Sharoni,S. (2001). *Rethinking women's struggles in Israel-Palestine and the North of Ireland* Victims, perpetrators or actors? In C.O. Moser & F.C. Clark (Eds.), Gender, armed conflict and political violence. London: Zed Books. pp.85-99

Sika, N., & Khodary, Y. (2012). One step forward, two steps back? Egyptian women within the confines of authoritarianism.*Journal of International Women's Studies*,*13*(5), 91-100.

Siljak,S. (2014). *Combat Cinema: Women's Films in Palestine* (Doctoral dissertation, Roskilde University, Roskilde, Denmark).

Smits, J., & Gündüz-Hoşgör, A. (2010). Linguistic capital: Language as a socio-economic resource among Kurdish and Arabic women in Turkey. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 26*(5), 829-853.

Sutten, M. L. (2009). The Rising Importance of Women in Terrorism and the Need to Reform Counterterrorism Strategy.

Tezcür, G. M. (2010). When democratization radicalizes: The Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey. *Journal of Peace Research, 47*(6), 775-789.

Tharoor, I. (2016), "Middle East Chaos Leads to Drop in Life Expectancy in Some Arab Countries, Study Says", in The Washington Post, 26 August.

The Arab Women Pioneers Network (2012), Profiles of Pioneering Iraqi Women in our Contemporary History. AWPN.

The Non-Governmental Women Coalition for the Implementation of CEDAW in the Occupied State of Palestine (2017). Report on the status of women and girls in the State of Palestine.

Tripp, C. (2013). The power and the people: Paths of resistance in the Middle East. Cambridge University Press.

UN Security Council. (2000). "Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security" (31 October 2000), available from: http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/720/18/PDF/N0072018.pdf?OpenElement.

Vinthagen, S., & Johansson, A. (2013). 'Everyday resistance': Exploration of a concept and its theories. *Resistance Studies Magazine*,*1*(1), 1-46.

Von Sponeck, H. C. (2005). Iraq: Burden of UN Sanctions. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4902-4905.

Westrheim, K. (2008). Education in a Political Context A study of knowledge processes and learning sites in the PKK. *BORA*.

Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) (2010). *Life Behind the Wall. Voices of Women from the Seam Zone*.

Wood, R. M., & Thomas, J. L. (2017). Women on the frontline. *Journal of Peace Research, 54*(1), 31-46. doi:10.1177/0022343316675025

World Food Programme (WFP) (2017). State of Palestine Country Strategic Plan (2018–2022).

WFP/EB.2/2017/7-A/4.

Yousif, D. (2018). 2018. The year of undermining women in Iraq. *Lift up your voice*. Available at: https://www.irfaasawtak.com/a/469355.html.

Yüksel, M. (2006). The encounter of Kurdish women with nationalism in Turkey. *Middle Eastern Studies, 42*(5), 777-802