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Iraqi Women and UNSCR 1325: An Interview with Sundus Abbas, Director of the Iraqi Women's Leadership Institute, Baghdad, January 2011

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*Iraqi Women and UNSCR 1325: An
Interview with Sundus Abbas,
Director of the Iraqi Women's
Leadership Institute, Baghdad,
January 2011¹*

Nicola Pratt: What is the role of UNSCR 1325 in helping Iraqi women to participate in Iraqi politics since the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime?
Sundus Abbas: Under the regime of Saddam Hussein, women's political participation was limited. [...]

After 2003, the Iraqi women's movement wanted to increase women's participation in decision making. Thanks to extensive efforts by Iraqi women, the Transitional Administrative Law of 2004² specified that women should occupy no less than 25 per cent of all seats in parliament and other elected bodies. Thanks to the quota, in the first elections after the overthrow of the Ba'th regime, in January 2005, women won 31 per cent of parliamentary seats, while the percentage of women in local councils was 28 per cent. Women's NGOs were active in raising awareness among women about voting in the elections, as well as in training women candidates to run their campaigns. There was wide voter turnout amongst women. In the government formed after the election, however, there were only six women ministers (out of thirty-six ministers). In the drafting of the Iraqi constitution in the summer of 2005, the committee included only nine women out of fifty-five members. And there were only two women included in the committee for constitutional amendments!

In the parliament elected in December 2005, the number of elected women fell to 75 (less than 25 per cent of parliamentary seats), with only four women appointed as ministers. There was a similar situation with regards to the local council elections.

In this context, Resolution 1325 is one of the instruments used by women in Iraq (1) to maintain the quota, and (2) to push for women's involvement in decision making positions and national reconciliation. However, in reality, there is limited implementation of the resolution's contents due to a limited

awareness of the resolution. [...] The limited awareness amongst decision makers (men and women), and especially women, about 1325 has had a negative impact on peace building initiatives in Iraq, and women's contributions to these initiatives. [...]

NP: Why do you think that the United Nations has not played a greater role in promoting UNSCR 1325 in Iraq?

SA: I do not believe that there are any women that faced the challenges of lack of security and peace more than women in Iraq. For a very long time, women in Iraq have been living with wars, conflicts, and occupation.

Despite efforts by UN agencies to increase women's participation in decision making positions and women's protection, the role of the United Nations is still limited in this area, as Resolution 1325 has not been adopted as a framework for action by the UN Mission in Iraq. We were hoping that 1325 would represent a mandate for the United Nations Mission in Iraq to play a significant role in combating trafficking of women and children, and to address the increasing poverty amongst women and the killing and abduction of women. The percentage of destitute women is on the rise. Despite all of this, our voices as survivors are unheard or are disrespected because we are women. We are not yet seen [...] as part of the solution; as real added-value for peace building if not the very basis for it.

NP: There are reports that violence against women in Iraq has become a much more serious problem since the US-led invasion and occupation. What do you think are the reasons behind violence against women in Iraq?

SA: Like other women in the world, women in Iraq face different forms and kinds of gender based violence. Although this phenomenon is not new, its extent and characteristics have become different from how it was in the past.

Silence still marks all forms of domestic violence faced by women and girls in Iraq, because this form of violence is justified by the misinterpretations of some religious texts, which give men the right to beat their wives and daughters under the pretext of disciplining them. This, unfortunately, makes this violence accepted by some and justifies the silence of women. Women have to accept violence as a way of being 'righteous women' according to Iraqi culture, which imposes endurance, patience and silence on women. This culture, which justifies violence, always excuses abusive men and allows them to be abusive. Men are even brought up on this, as part of the male Arab culture, especially that they are taught that they have the right to impose their wrong understanding of power in the household, on the street, in the workplace and even in educational institutions. It is important to clarify that sexual harassment against women is increasing in all the places mentioned here. We can summarise the most important reasons behind violence against women and girls in Iraq, as follows:

- Prevalent social attitudes [...];
- Weak political will with regards to addressing the phenomenon of violence against women;
- Misinterpretation of religious scriptures, and linking culture and traditions to Islam, and using such misinterpretations to serve political purposes;
- Increasing rates of unemployment, and high poverty levels. According to the Central Agency for Statistics in the Ministry of Planning in Iraq, 27 per cent of Iraqis were below the poverty line in 2010. Meanwhile, 11 per cent of households are headed by women, and 73 per cent of those households are headed by widowed women, according to the Living Conditions Survey conducted by the central agency of statistics in 2008;
- The lack of shelters for women and girl survivors of violence in central and southern Iraq. There are less than five governmental and non-governmental shelters in the Kurdistan region;
- A weak legislative framework. [...] Iraqi legislation, for the most part, legitimizes violence against women and girls. [...]
- The lack of political stability and security in Iraq. We cannot ignore the general context in which women and girls live, and the impact of street violence on domestic violence, in addition to the spread of armed extremist organisations that directly and indirectly target women.

NP: What do you think is the impact of the US-led occupation on violence against women and girls in Iraq?

The presence of the occupying international troops in Iraq has contributed to the increase in violence against women and girls, because the occupation has caused the collapse of state institutions, the disintegration of social control mechanisms, and the spread of extremist groups that target and use women. Extremist groups deliver their messages by targeting women, either by killing them or kidnapping them, or even threatening them, leading to forced migration.

Sectarian strife and the high number of terrorist attacks have also caused an increase in refugee flows and forced migration. In addition, the fragility of state institutions and the limited rule of law have created opportunities for human trafficking gangs, especially for the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation and prostitution purposes. There are no mechanisms to combat forced migration or to protect refugee women and girls.

NP: How have Iraqi women responded to the growth in violence against women and girls?

SA: After the fall of the totalitarian regime [of Saddam Hussein], the period following 2003 witnessed an unprecedented growth of women's organisations and activities in the area of protecting women's rights and raising societal

awareness of the dangers of violence against women and the need to stop it at all levels, because it is an offense to human dignity.

[...]

Some organisations, including the Iraqi Women's Leadership Institute, have set up centres that provide social and psychological counselling services, and legal consultation services for women survivors of violence. [...] In coordination with academics, lawyers, a number of organisations and the Ministry of Human Rights, we have drafted legislation to combat human trafficking, which could provide protection for women and girls.

In collaboration with several UN agencies, some organisations, including ours, have developed a national strategy to combat violence against women and girls [...] and designed a database to document this phenomenon.

NP: What about governmental efforts to address violence against women?

SA: Generally, we can say that there is weak political will towards adopting a long-term government program to combat violence against women and girls in Iraq. The government denies that there is a problem and considers any discussion of this phenomenon as an attempt to harm the society.

Maybe as a result of international pressure, especially by the UN, two family protection departments have been established in Baghdad, run by the Ministry of the Interior. Although those departments are not active, they constitute a positive initiative that can be developed.

Meanwhile, we are pressuring the government to pass a law preventing domestic violence, and a law against human trafficking, as we mentioned previously.

The conditions of women prisoners and detainees are still bad, and many violations take place there, but it is very difficult for women's organisations to access women's prisons.

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Notes

- 1 Translation from Arabic into English by Nour Abu Assab, University of Warwick, UK, kindly funded by the Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick.
- 2 This refers to the transitional constitution that was passed in March 2004 and was in effect June 2004 until May 2006.