

Women and War

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"Fearful for their safety and unnerved by last weekend's attack on a high-ranking female official, Iraqi women activists are retreating from the public sphere and choosing to keep their work low-profile ... They do not want to be featured because they have seen what has happened to Aqila Hashemi." This was how Noeleen Heyzer, executive director of the UN Development Fund for Women, described how Iraqi women felt after the murder of Aqila Hashemi, a member of the interim governing council. Unidentified armed men had shot at Hashemi in September, while she was standing in front of her house in Baghdad, and she had died a few days later from her wounds. Hashemi's murder came as a shock to Iraqi women, and heightened their feeling that they were direct targets in this war.

This murder sent a twofold message, warning Iraqi women against seeking to assume a role in Iraq. There have been a succession of messages directed at Iraqi women, even before the demise of Saddam Hussein; but today, their situation is far more complicated and difficult, considering the lack of security and chaos nurtured by the extremists' calls for banning women from going out or working, and their discrimination against women who are not veiled.

Aqila Hashemi's murder was no coincidence. She was an educated and successful woman, and one of three female members of Iraq's interim governing council. There is no doubt that whoever planned the murder of this active woman meant to target primarily women as a group, over and above targeting a member of the governing council. Hashemi appeared as the weak loser, or at least this is what lingered in the minds of people, who were made to believe that through this woman, not only the governing council was being targeted but also an entire spectrum of women who had ambitions to play a role in Iraq's public life. The culture of fear made a powerful comeback. Indeed, it is a part of the lives of many women in our region, and especially those living in a state of insecurity.

Women have always been targeted in times of war or cri-

sis. They represent society's core honor and shame and when they are targeted, the entire society is targeted through them. This is merely the continuation of an old culture that has existed in many regions and many political and social contexts, which have contributed to putting women in two contradictory situations - either one of total protection to the point of suffocation or one of full targeting to the point of killing.

During the course of my visits to several countries that experienced wars and conflicts, women were represented as the traditional victims. In Algeria, the women were the first group targeted by the fighters in the early 1990s, as they were either Taghout (security force members) or their daughters or sisters. They were taken by fighters to the mountains as prisoners of war to serve for their pleasure and service. They are the reporters who had to be killed so that they wouldn't write about these "guardians of morality" who impose chains around their homes.

In Sudan, the matter is no less one of suffering and gloom. Kidnappings and rapes of women during the armed conflict that pitted the north against the south in the 1980s and 1990s were widespread, yet hardly covered by the media. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the Iraqi army committed systematic rape against dozens of Kuwaiti women. This shook the Kuwaitis even more than the invasion itself, and their confusion manifested itself in the way the Kuwaiti society dealt with it, namely in a secretive manner, fearful of admitting it officially. As a result, there was no effective treatment to this problem, to the extent that there was fear of admitting it officially.

This phenomenon is not limited to Arab societies, as numerous similar cases have been reported in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Chechnya and many other regions that experienced armed conflicts. In Afghanistan, when the Taliban regime fell and was being replaced by the North Alliance factions, the Afghani tribes rushed to contact the Americans and ask them that the new authority respect the Afghani traditions related to women. This was

the first issue raised by the heads of tribes to the Americans. Societies fear for their women in the first place, as they represent their Achilles heel.

Addressing the subject of Arab women in times of war carries the risk of falling into a feminist discourse that could lead to extreme bias, which would represent an obstacle to offering an accurate assessment of women's share of responsibility. In the end, women represent half the society and, in that sense, they are part of the situation that produced their suffering. In Iraq, we saw women who were part of the Baathist regime, such as the biological weapons expert dubbed 'Dr. Germ' by the Western press and the women of the ruling Iraqi family who were simultaneously executioners and victims. There are also women fighters with the Iranian Mujahideen Khalq group, who leave observers at a loss as to whether they are victims or executioners.

So women resemble us, we children of this sad East. In Palestine, the phenomenon of suicide bombers turned young Palestinian women into human bombs that exploded in the face of our degraded situation. Even if women are more exposed to certain dangers than men, this does not mean that we have to always portray them as victims. The truth is that wars sometimes offer women an opportunity to display their strength.

Traditionally, women at war are depicted as victims or silent defenders of their homes. But during the American military operations in Iraq, women turned out to be fighters as well as victims, politicians, and protestors against the war or in support of it. And yet, the strongest image of women that lingered in viewers' minds was that of women mourning their sons or husbands. One of the images that moved me most was that of the Iraqi woman rocking the bed of her wounded son in one of Baghdad's hospitals. This image embodied the everlasting situation of the grieving mother. But we probably have to rethink the issue and resist the beauty and force of this image because, in the end, this image represents one woman in a poignant situation. When I read the caption accompanying the image, it appeared that this woman was the aunt of the child, and it wasn't clear from the text what had happened to the child's mother and if she had been injured by the war or not.

Despite the fact that this war was covered directly by reporters and photographers stationed at the fronts, the real war took place far from our eyes and we can add that we seldom saw the female victims.

There were news reports about seven women and children killed at an American checkpoint, because a soldier had not fired a warning shot. There was the story of the Iraqi

boy, Ali Ismail Abbas, who lost his family and had his arms amputated. Ali's mother was killed in the shelling. In such cases, we never saw the images; maybe they would have been too harsh. But in the end, for every image of a woman, there were always many other images that were even harsher and could not be published.

The role of women in war varies significantly. In a war, women can find themselves suddenly alone and for the first time in their lives responsible for their families, especially in our region, where men still enjoy authority as heads of their families. Many women in Iraq, Algeria or Sudan had to leave their houses to earn money for the first time in their lives. And despite the harsh conditions, such experiences proved to be an added source of strength and determination among certain women.

Al-Raida has decided to dedicate this issue to Arab women and war in an attempt to reflect the various dimensions of women's roles in wars and conflicts that have raged and still rage in the region. Women actively participate in many armed conflicts all around the world and have played a role in wars throughout history. World War II was the turning point that shed light on the role of women, whether in the reserve units or in supporting German and British forces, not to mention their direct participation in the fighting, as in the case of the Soviet Union, as members of all services and units, representing eight per cent of the total armed forces. Since that time, women have assumed a greater role. Despite women's participation, willingly or not, in armed conflicts as fighters or in supportive roles, certain countries and societies, including Arab ones, refuse to allow women to assume fighting roles in wars. It is possible to argue that women endure the experience of war mainly as individuals who are party of the civilian populations.

Are women more prone than men to being exposed in armed conflicts? There is no clear-cut answer to this. Women are not necessarily more exposed, but one has to admit that they are more exposed to marginalization, poverty and suffering resulting from armed conflicts, especially since they are undoubtedly victims of discrimination in times of peace. Women are particularly exposed considering the campaigns depicting them as symbols of cultural and ethnic identities, as bearers of future generations.

The century's conflicts make it clear that women have become more and more a target in fighting. And yet, men are no doubt also clearly exposed; indeed, there are certain conflicts in which the average of men detained reaches 96 per cent and that of disappeared men stands at 90 per cent. Armed conflict affects the lives of all civilians especially women; and its ill-effects have a bearing on society as a whole and frequently last long after the use of arms subsides.