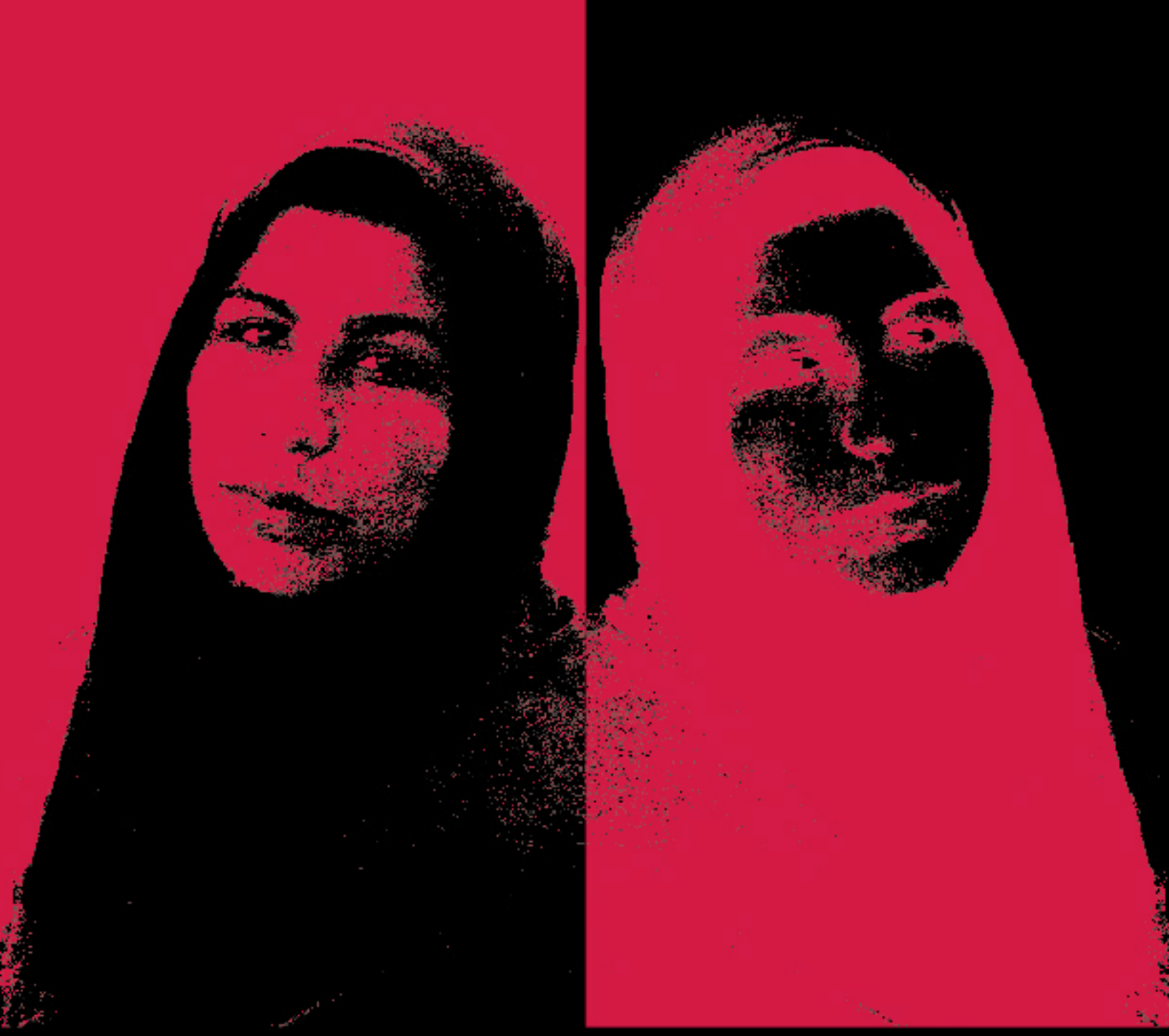

Promising Democracy, Imposing Theocracy

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND THE US WAR ON IRAQ

MADRE

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Promising Democracy, Imposing Theocracy:
Gender-Based Violence and the US War on Iraq
by Yifat Susskind, MADRE Communications Director

This report is dedicated to the courageous women of the
Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq
and to all Iraqis working to build a democratic, secular
Iraq free of military occupation and religious coercion.

Special thanks to **Yanar Mohammed**, director of the
Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq.

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INTRODUCTION

In spring 2003, as the smoke began to clear from the US invasion of Iraq, a wave of kidnappings, abductions, public beatings, death threats, sexual assaults, and killings gripped the country. The targets were women. US authorities took no action and soon the violence spread. Killings of Iraqi men and foreigners became commonplace as Islamist militias launched a campaign of terror that mushroomed into the civil war now raging across Iraq. While the militias were taking to the streets, their political leaders were taking their seats in a new Iraqi government. With money, weapons, training, and political backing from the United States, Iraqi Islamists have put an end to 85 years of secular rule in Iraq and established an Islamist theocracy. As Yanar Mohammed, director of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI, a partner organization of MADRE) said, "We used to have a government that was almost secular. It had one dictator. Now we have almost 60 dictators—Islamists who think of women as forces of evil. This is what is called the democratization of Iraq."[1]

Since 2003, the media has documented Iraq's mounting civilian death toll. A few accounts have also described the ongoing rise in violence against women. But few analyses have examined the relationship between these phenomena. Most casualty reports by governments, the United Nations, and human rights organizations have not disaggregated data by sex. They fail, therefore, to reflect the growing number of attacks on Iraqi women and the rising incidence in *gender-based* attacks. For women have not only been targeted because they are members of the civilian population; Iraqi women—in particular those who are perceived to pose a challenge to the political project of their attackers—have increasingly been targeted because they are women.

This report explores the scourge of gender-based violence in US-occupied Iraq. It documents the use of gender-based violence by Islamists seeking to establish a theocracy, including assaults on women in the public sphere, "honor killings," violence against women in the context of Iraq's civil war, gender-based violence against men, and torture of women in detention.

Contrary to its rhetoric and its international legal obligations, the Bush Administration has refused to protect women's rights in Iraq. In fact, it has decisively traded women's rights for cooperation from the Islamists it has empowered. This tactic has relied on and reproduced ideas about violence against women and ideas about Muslims that serve to justify US intervention in the Middle East. For example, although most assaults on women occur in public, violence against Iraqi women continues to be perceived mainly as a "private" or family matter, somehow outside the realm of "politics." Meanwhile, characterizations of violence against Iraqi women as "cultural" in nature de-emphasize the ways that such violence is used as a means toward *political* ends and obscures the role of the United States in fomenting gender-based violence. Critiquing these assumptions is key to supporting Iraqi women who are combating gender-based violence, military occupation, and religious coercion.

The term "Islamist" in this report refers to those who pursue a reactionary social and political agenda in the name of Islam, as distinct from "Islamic" relating to the religion of Islam.[2]

Part I. TOWARDS GENDER APARTHEID IN IRAQ

One widely predicted outcome of the US overthrow of Iraq's Ba'ath government was the empowerment of Islamist forces. The Bush Administration denied this probability, choosing to repeat the hollow assurances of CIA informants such as Ahmed Chalabi, who promised that Saddam Hussein's successors would be secular and democratic. But MADRE and other women's organizations around the world warned that right-wing, religious extremists would be the greatest beneficiaries of a US invasion.

Indeed, the two most powerful Iraqi political parties to emerge under US occupation are the Dawa Party—which has called for an Islamist state in Iraq since the 1970s[3]—and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—a name that hardly disguises the party's intent. These forces stepped into the political vacuum created by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and immediately began using their new-found power to roll back women's rights. In fact, under US occupation, violence against women—including public beatings, abductions, rapes, and assassinations—has occurred within the context of a rapid erosion of women's legal rights and political participation. That trend was set in motion by the US-sponsored Iraqi government.

The Iraqi Governing Council Attacks Women's Rights

In summer 2003, L. Paul Bremer, the top administrator of the US occupation, assembled the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), described by *The Washington Post* as, "a body that will cooperate with [the occupation] and support policies that are generally in line with US interests."[4] The members of the IGC were hand-picked by Bremer, who retained final veto over the Council's decisions. Among those who Bremer appointed were Islamists who openly declared their intent to restrict women's rights.[5] These same men are the architects of Iraq's civil war. One of the first acts of the US-installed IGC was a harbinger of things to come: the Council replaced Iraq's observance of International Women's Day on March 8 with a celebration of the birthday of the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed.

Then, on December 29, 2003, the IGC held a quasi-secret vote to replace Iraq's 1959 family law—among the most progressive in the region. The family law (also referred to as the personal status law) was enacted in 1959 by the left-leaning government of Abd Al Karim Qasim, who was later overthrown by the Ba'athists (with support from the United States). According to Huibin Amee Chew, "Aspects of the progressive family law persisted until the eve of the US invasion, when Iraq still remained exceptional in the region. Divorce cases were to be heard only in civil courts, polygamy was outlawed unless the first wife consented, and women divorcees had an equal right to custody over their children. Women's income was recognized as independent from their husbands'."[6] The law also restricted child marriage and granted women and men equal shares of inheritance.[7]

Through Resolution 137, IGC planned to replace the 1959 law with arbitrary interpretations of *Sharia*, or religious law. In January 2004, MADRE warned that, "If upheld, Resolution 137 could give self-appointed religious clerics the authority to deny women the rights to education, employment, freedom of movement and travel, inheritance, and custody of their children. Forced early marriage, polygamy, compulsory religious dress, and wife beating could all be sanctioned under the Resolution."[8] Iraqi women took to the streets in protest of Resolution 137. Facing mounting pressure from US Congress members and women's organizations, including MADRE, Bremer chose not to ratify the resolution.

Yet, despite the Bush Administration's rhetoric about liberating Iraq, occupation authorities consistently undermined Iraqi women's efforts to secure their human and legal rights. During the first year of US occupation, Iraqi women's organizations appealed directly to Bremer, demanding that the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) that he headed train and dispatch security guards to help prevent violence against women and that the CPA prosecute crimes against women. These demands were ignored.[9] Under Bremer, the US refused to honor a series of demands by women's organizations, including calls to create a women's ministry; appoint women to the drafting committee of Iraq's interim constitution; guarantee that 40 percent of US appointees to Iraq's new government were women; pass laws codifying women's rights and criminalizing domestic violence; and uphold UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which mandates that women be included at all levels of decision-making in situations of peacemaking and post-war reconstruction.

"MADRE and other women's organizations around the world warned that right-wing, religious extremists would be the greatest beneficiaries of a US invasion."

Indeed, rather than support progressive and democratically minded Iraqis, including members of the women's movement, the US threw its weight behind Iraq's Shiite Islamists, calculating that these forces, long suppressed by Saddam Hussein, would cooperate with the occupation and deliver the stability needed for the US to implement its policies in Iraq.

The Battle over Iraq's Family Law

For Iraq's Islamists, as for religious fundamentalists in the United States and elsewhere, the subordination of women is a priority of the first magnitude—because it is both a microcosm and a precondition of the social order they wish to establish. For this reason, the very first civil law drafted by the IGC was Resolution 137, addressing women's rights within the family. Similarly, the first battle in the drafting of Iraq's constitution was over these same family or personal status laws. As Nathan J. Brown, Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University, has pointed out, "There is no area of law that more broadly affects the lives of ordinary Iraqis."[10]

Those seeking to overturn Iraq's 1959 family law have tried to discredit the law by associating it with the government of Saddam Hussein. But Iraq's family law predates the Ba'ath regime: it came into being thanks to mass mobilizations by the Iraqi women's movement, which took to the streets at the end of the British colonial era demanding equal rights. The religious right in Iraq has reviled the 1959 law for being "secular" and spawning "deviant decisions that tore families apart"[11] (a reference, perhaps, to women's rights to divorce and child custody enshrined in the law). In fact, the 1959 law is not secular. Much of it is rooted in *Sharia*, but the code represents a liberal, as opposed to reactionary, interpretation of Koranic law. The law also helped mediate against sectarianism by synthesizing Shiite and Sunni interpretations of Koranic law into one code that was applied to all citizens regardless of sect. Thus, though the 1959 law utilized *Sharia* to adjudicate personal and family matters, it did so in a secular manner.

Another less publicized, though perhaps more germane, Islamist grievance is that the 1959 law transferred power from Islamic clerics to the state. Prior to 1959, family law was interpreted by individual religious judges, giving clerics great influence over people's lives. The 1959 law removed that authority. It limited the role of judges to applying the law and ended clerics' control of personal status courts by absorbing these courts into a national judicial system under the authority of the state.[12] The current move to overturn the 1959 law is as much a strategy to reassert the political power of right-wing clerics as it is a battle over the "values" enshrined in the law.

Iraq's Constitution: Islamists Appeased

Having failed in 2004 to revoke Iraq's family law through Resolution 137, the Islamists focused on drafting the country's new constitution in 2005. There, the United States handed the clerics their most important victory to date. Throughout summer 2005, the Bush Administration exerted tremendous pressure on Iraqi politicians to complete a draft of the constitution within three months (though the same process took more than 10 years in the United States). At the time, the Bush Administration was in desperate need of a public relations victory in Iraq: it needed a display for US audiences of the "democratic progress" that had replaced the "threat of weapons of mass destruction" as the *raison d'être* for attacking Iraq. The Administration was also afraid that failure to meet the timetable for drafting a constitution would trigger new elections in Iraq, which would have likely produced a less compliant government.

In summer 2005, with the clock ticking, US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad inserted himself heavily into negotiations over the drafting of the constitution. His intervention was worrying: this was the man who had helped negotiate Afghanistan's post-Taliban constitution, which—despite all of Bush's talk about "liberating" Afghan women—proclaims the country to be an Islamic republic in which no law can contradict Islam. As in Afghanistan, Khalilzad supported the Islamist factions on the Iraqi constitutional drafting committee. The result was a new constitution that declared Islam to be the official religion of the state and a fundamental source of legislation.

Muslim feminist scholars point out that the problem is not intrinsic to Islam itself. Islamic jurisprudence, or *Sharia*, is not a predetermined list of rules, but an *intellectual tradition* of interpreting religious texts. Islamic holy books can be interpreted to support relatively progressive legislation affecting women's rights, as in Morocco, where forced marriages for women are banned on the basis of a Koranic verse.[13] But *Sharia* can also be used to justify violence against women, as in northern Nigeria, where women may be publicly stoned to death for having sex outside of marriage.[14] The paramount question, as in every legal system, is how and by whom the law is interpreted and applied.

In the case of Iraq, "…Mr. Khalilzad had backed language that would have given clerics sole authority in settling marriage and family disputes…and allowed clerics to have a hand in interpreting the constitution."[15] This news was reported by *The New York Times* under the innocuous-sounding headline, "Iraqi Talks Move Ahead on Some Issues." In fact, Khalilzad's "cooperation through cooptation" approach to engaging with Islamists was widely lauded by mainstream media, although the tactic is essentially one of appeasement. In Iraq, as in Afghanistan, it resulted in a constitution that traded women's rights for cooperation from Islamist political parties.

Legalizing Violence against Women

That women's rights were deemed expendable by the US is obvious from a quick reading of Iraq's US-brokered constitution. Described by US Vice President Dick Cheney as "progressive and democratic,"[16] Iraq's new constitution effectively legalizes multiple forms of violence against women.

Article 2, Section A: "No law that contradicts the established provisions of Islam may be established."

Problem: This article can be used to negate guarantees of women's rights enshrined elsewhere in the constitution[17] and to sanction domestic violence and other human rights violations against women. The phrase "established provisions of Islam" does not necessarily refer to a codified canon of law, but to dominant interpretations of religious texts, which are *made dominant* through an assertion of political power. In Iraq today, those who have gained a monopoly on interpreting and applying "Islam" may define human rights abuses against women, such as forced marriage or marital rape, as "established provisions" of the religion.

Article 36: Freedom of expression, freedom of press, and freedoms of assembly and peaceful protest are conditioned on "public order and morality."

Problem: This article can be used to suppress political opposition to a government dominated by Islamists, outlaw social and political dissent, and quash the circulation of competing interpretations of Islam. "Morality" is always a problematic basis for law. When legislators and judges believe it is immoral for women to choose their spouses, control their fertility, or work outside the home, "morality" becomes an arbitrary justification for human rights violations.

Article 39: "Iraqis are free in their adherence to their personal status according to their own religion, sect, belief and choice."

Problem: The article calls for marriage, divorce, alimony, inheritance, and other personal status issues to be adjudicated by religious courts, which consistently discriminate against women. For example, in religious courts, a woman's legal testimony is worth half that of a man's. Moreover, women will not be "free in their adherence" to a particular set of laws: in most families, the decision of which court to use will be made by men. Women will be particularly disadvantaged in cases of conflict with male family members, such as divorce. Because most interpretations of *Sharia* pronounce one set of rights for men and another for women, Article 39 sets the stage for separate and unequal laws to be applied on the basis of sex.

Article 89: "The Supreme Judiciary Council will [nominate] the head and members of the Supreme Federal Court." And Article 90: "The Supreme Federal Court will be made up of a number of judges and experts in *Sharia* and law."

Problem: Nothing in the constitution mandates that the members of the Supreme Judiciary Council be elected. Indeed, they appear to be accountable to no one. Yet, Council members will effectively control the laws by nominating the "experts in *Sharia*" (presumably clerics) empowered to veto legislation, rescind existing laws (such as the 1959 family law), and determine the constitutionality of new laws governing marriage, divorce, women's inheritance and property rights, and more. These articles portend an Iranian-style theocratic oversight body, empowered to legalize human rights violations against women.

Part II. IRAQ'S OTHER WAR: IMPOSING THEOCRACY THROUGH GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

While the US State Department propelled Islamists and their appeasers to positions of state power in a "liberated Iraq," the US military allowed Islamist militias to perpetrate a wave of attacks on women throughout the country. As the occupying power, the US was legally obligated under the Hague and Geneva Conventions to provide security to Iraqi civilians, including protection from gender-based violence.[18] But the military, preoccupied with battling the Iraqi insurgency, simply ignored the reign of terror that Islamist militias were quickly imposing on women.

Islamists Unleashed

Since the US overthrow of Iraq's authoritarian and powerfully centralized government, the country has been overrun by networks of criminal gangs, militias, and paramilitary units, including the complex of shadowy groups that comprise the anti-US insurgency. One senior US military official estimated in October 2006 that there were more than 23 militias operating in Baghdad alone.[19]

In March 2004, on the first anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, MADRE issued a report on the status of Iraqi women's human rights. Already at that time, women identified a breakdown in security and public order as their number one problem. A sharp rise in abductions, rapes, and sexual slavery made women afraid to leave their homes. It is estimated that more than 400 Iraqi women were abducted and raped within the first four months of US occupation.[20] Girls were being kept out of school and many women were by then forbidden by their families to be in public without a male escort.

Initially, Iraqi women attributed much of the violence to social disintegration and criminal activity triggered by the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime and protracted armed conflict between US and Iraqi forces. But within a few months of the invasion, women began citing the rise of Islamists as a primary source of violence. By summer 2003, Islamist "misery gangs" were patrolling the streets in many areas, beating and harassing women who were not "properly" dressed or behaved.[21] According to a woman musician, "If the Islamists see me walking on the street with my flute, they could kill me."[22] In a move reminiscent of the Taliban, male doctors were warned not to treat women patients and women doctors were threatened against treating men. Across Iraq, cities were soon plastered with leaflets and graffiti warning women against going out unveiled, driving, wearing make-up, or shaking hands and socializing with men. Islamist "punishment committees" sprang up, manned by the Badr Brigade[23] of the US-backed SCIRI Party[24] and its rival, the Mahdi Army.[25] These "committees" roamed the streets attacking people accused of flouting Islamic law. In Basra, the Mahdi Army ensured that women were virtually confined to their homes. Wearing pants or appearing in public without a headscarf became punishable by death.

Violence against Women as a Strategy for the Creation of a Theocracy

This campaign of gender-based violence was intended to subjugate women as a first step in the creation of an Islamist state. As Mithal Alusi, one of 30 Iraqi legislators who called for the protection of women's human rights in a 2006 declaration said, "These attempts to intimidate women are attempts to terrorize society."[26] In fact, violence against women is a primary weapon in the arsenal of fundamentalists of various religions, who seek to impose their political agenda on society. Often,

the first salvo in a war for theocracy is a systematic attack on women and minorities who represent or demand an alternative or competing vision for society. These initial targets are usually the most marginalized and, therefore, most vulnerable members of society, and once they are dealt with, fundamentalist forces then proceed towards less vulnerable targets.

"This campaign of gender-based violence was intended to subjugate women as a first step in the creation of an Islamist state."

In Iraq, women, Christians, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, and intersex (LGBTTI) Iraqis have been among the Islamists' first targets of violence. For example, the Mujahadin Shura Group vows to kill any woman seen in public without a headscarf. Mujahadin Shura listed among its reasons for opposing the January 2005 Iraqi elections the need to prevent Iraq from "becoming homosexual." In the northern city of Mosul, the group has targeted Christian women with a campaign of murder, kidnapping, rape, and sexual enslavement. According to the Union of the Unemployed,[27] groups such as this use the most violent and inhumane methods to impose their will, targeting "anyone who disagrees with them and does not observe their way of living."[28]

The Bush Administration has highlighted violence carried out by groups that, like Mujahadin Shura, are Sunni-based and part of the anti-US insurgency. But comparable violence is perpetrated by Shiite Islamists affiliated with US-backed political parties. For example, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Sistani, the spiritual leader of SCIRI, has ordered all Iraqi women to wear headscarves. His edicts are enforced by beheadings and acid attacks.[29] In 2006, Sistanti also issued an order for the killing of gays and lesbians, which was publicized for several months on his website (www.sistani.org). Sistani, who advocates violence against Iraqi civilians rather than US occupation forces, is lauded in the US as "moderate"[30] and "mainstream."[31]

On both sides of the sectarian divide, attacks on women are committed in the name of religion. However, their purpose is fundamentally political: armed groups use gender-based violence to assert dominance over one another and over the population at large. As Yanar Mohammed said, "When an Islamist militia wants to take control of a neighborhood, imposing the veil on women is the first point on their agenda. It is their way of claiming power over the area. In Sadr City, you no longer see a single woman without the veil. Since the Americans came, the transformation is complete. It is not that these women have suddenly become more religious. It is because they will be killed if they do not wear the veil…When a political party gains control of an area, it puts its flag everywhere. The flag is a message to your opponents that this is your area and they should not dare to step into it. The veil on women is like a flag now."[32]

"On both sides of the sectarian divide, attacks on women are committed in the name of religion. However, their purpose is fundamentally political."

While Iraqi women in general have been subjected to this reign of terror, certain groups of women have been specifically targeted: political leaders, professionals, academics and students, and those who publicly defend women's human rights. The overall pattern that emerges is one in which women are attacked and killed because they represent an obstacle to the establishment of a theocracy. As Yanar Mohammed said, "When I think of the women who have been beheaded, kidnapped, and gunned down, they have a lot in common: they are successful, educated, public people who represent a cosmopolitan lifestyle." [33]

FIRST THEY CAME FOR THE WOMEN

Women were the first targets of theocratic violence in Iran, Algeria, and Afghanistan.

Iran: As in Iraq, Islamists quickly moved to consolidate their power in the legal arena by stripping women of their rights. Following the 1979 "Islamic revolution," "the new government immediately suspended Iran's relatively progressive family law, banned women judges, and strongly enforced the wearing of the headscarf. Within a few months, *Sharia* rulings lowered the marriage age to nine, permitted polygamy, gave fathers the right to decide who their daughters could marry, permitted unilateral divorce for men only, and gave divorced fathers sole custody of their children."[34]

Algeria: Starting in the 1970s, Algerian Islamists, like their Iraqi counterparts, "systematically attacked civilians as a method of war, in particular, women who deviated from their prescribed roles."[35] Islamist militias imposed their social and political agenda by murdering feminists, professionals, women university students, public intellectuals, and advocates of secular democracy.

Afghanistan: One of the Taliban's top priorities was the creation of a public sphere devoid of women. Their earliest orders—enforced by beating, imprisoning, and executing offenders—banned women from working outside the home, going to school, and traveling freely. Women were effectively put under house arrest and could only appear in public accompanied by a male guardian and with their faces and bodies concealed.

A Division of Labor

The US-backed Iraqi government has largely reinforced the Islamist call to restrict women's rights and bar women from the public sphere. For example, in 2005, Khdeir Abbas, the Secretary General of the Iraqi Ministers' Council, began requiring all women employees to wear headscarves or be fired.[36] The government also began providing a small benefits package to public sector employees whose husbands die in order to facilitate widows' departure from the workforce. Iraqi women's rights campaigner Hanna Edwar explained that the order reinforces "the interpretation of *Sharia* that commands a woman to stay at home after the death of her husband and not be in touch with the outside world."[37] Then, in 2006, the Iraqi Interior Ministry issued a series of notices warning women not to leave their homes alone and echoing the directives of religious leaders who urge men to prevent women family members from holding jobs. Thus, the violence carried out by militias in the streets is backed up by more respectable political leaders who support the call for a women-free public sphere. As one *imam* (Muslim religious leader) in a Baghdad mosque commented, "These incidents of abuse just prove what we have been saying for so long. That it is the Islamic duty of women to stay in their homes, looking after their children and husbands rather than searching for work."[38]

Iraq's US-allied political and religious leaders clearly benefit from the reign of terror imposed by their followers, for as long as women are preoccupied with merely surviving, they are unable to demand accountability from the government for the broad range of economic, social, and political rights that they are denied. As Yanar Mohammed commented, "We cannot insist on separation of mosque and state and the drafting of egalitarian legislation now that women are afraid to even leave their homes to discuss such matters."[39] In December 2003, when the IGC attempted to repeal Iraq's family law through Resolution 137, women's groups took to the streets in vocal, visible protests that were instrumental in galvanizing opposition to the resolution. Today, such demonstrations are far too dangerous to even consider.

US Support for Islamists: Blunder or Blueprint?

The transformation of Iraq into an Islamist state is often characterized as one of numerous "unintended consequences" of US decision-making since 2003. But the US has long viewed the religious right as a strategic ally in the Middle East. During the Cold War, US funding, behind-the-scenes diplomacy, and military interventions helped strengthen Islamists in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Arab Gulf, Iran, and other countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, the US undertook its largest covert operation ever by arming, training, and funding Islamists in Afghanistan and Pakistan to combat its main economic rival, the Soviet Union. That alliance spawned civil war in Afghanistan, gave rise to the Taliban, and positioned Osama bin Laden to build al-Qaeda.

Since the end of World War II, US policy in the Middle East has been guided by an effort to control the region's energy resources. This economic interest has trumped ideological concerns about "freedom" or "democracy" (though US actions are always presented in these lofty terms at home). On the ground, the US cultivated Islamists as an alternative to the rule of socialists or Arab nationalists (like Saddam Hussein), who were less amenable to US control over their countries' reserves of oil and natural gas. Despite the myth of a "clash of civilizations" between Islam and "the West," the US has been very comfortable with reactionary, theocratic leaders in the Middle East. As we can see in the cases of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, these men have made great business partners.

Part III. THE RISE OF US-BACKED DEATH SQUADS

From Cakewalk[40] to Quagmire

Perhaps the best-armed and most powerful perpetrators of gender-based violence in Iraq are those militias that have been trained, funded, and armed by the United States. The US began using Iraqi militias to enforce its occupation during the first weeks of the invasion.[41] On April 8, 2003, under the headline "US-backed Militia Terrorizes Town," *The Financial Times* reported that the Iraqi Coalition of National Unity, led by Shiite cleric Hassan Mussawi, was looting homes, beating residents, and stealing cars in the city of Najaf, where they were carrying out arrests on behalf of US forces.[42] Within months, Islamist militias had mushroomed across Iraq. Women's organizations publicized the growing number of gender-based attacks committed by these forces.

At home, Bush Administration officials reminded US audiences of the "mission" of liberating Iraqis, especially women. But on the ground in Iraq, the Islamist militias were wholly tolerated. According to US Major General Martin Dempsey, commander of the First Armored Division in Iraq, "[The militias] have recognized that they can operate freely so long as they do not challenge us."[43] In fact, the US military enabled the militias and their growing attacks on women. As the "cakewalk" envisioned by US war planners quickly devolved into the quagmire that has become the Iraq War, the US began to actively cultivate Shiite militias to help battle the Sunni-led insurgency and enforce the US occupation.

"The best-armed and most powerful perpetrators of gender-based violence in Iraq are those militias that have been trained, funded, and armed by the United States."

In January 2005, *Newsweek* reported on a Pentagon plan to dispatch US "Special Forces teams to advise, support and possibly train Iraqi squads, most likely hand-picked Kurdish Peshmerga fighters and Shiite militiamen, to target Sunni insurgents and their sympathizers."[44] The next month, then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld promised that these groups were "going to have the greatest leverage on suppressing and eliminating the insurgency."[45] In June 2005—at a moment when Shiite militias' systematic torture of women was an established fact of life in Iraq—former Marine officer and counterinsurgency expert Thomas X. Hammes described "a marriage of convenience" between the US and the militias, stating that, "Our policy is to equip those who are the most effective fighters."[46]

The two largest militias that the US has supported are the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army. Like SCIRI's Badr Brigade, the Mahdi Army belongs to a political formation that won 30 parliamentary seats and control over several government ministries after the December 2005 elections. It is the armed force of Moqtada al-Sadr, commonly described as an "anti-American cleric," whose men twice battled US troops in 2004. But in 2005, the US struck a deal with al-Sadr in order to mobilize the Mahdi Army against a common enemy—the Sunni-led insurgency.[47] By 2007, the US was once again confronting the Mahdi Army (through Bush's so-called troop "surge"), but the policy change does not negate the Pentagon's earlier support for the militia. As al-Sadr said, "Yesterday's friends are today's enemies."[48]

For the US, the devil's bargain of backing Shiite against Sunni militias was risky. In fact, within a year of the Pentagon plan to train the Badr Brigade, the militia—with its obvious ties to the US-backed government—caused a public relations crisis for the White House when the group was implicated in widespread sectarian killings. As for the Mahdi Army, Pentagon planners surely considered the possibility of a future confrontation with the militia. Those risks were assumed because the official Iraqi army—on which Bush had staked his exit strategy from Iraq—was unable and unwilling to fight the insurgency. Moreover, the militias offered an enticing advantage over government troops. For a time, their quasi-official status allowed the US to out-source the violence of its counter-insurgency operations without having to answer for the militias' gross human rights violations, including their campaign of terror against the women of Iraq.

THE SALVADOR OPTION: DEATH SQUADS AS US POLICY

Iraq is not the first war in which the Pentagon has relied on militias that commit gross human rights violations against civilians. Indeed, the plan to support what are now known as the Iraqi death squads is called the "Salvador Option," named for the policy used in Central America in the 1980s. Both the Badr and Mahdi forces were trained by the US military under the command of Colonel James Steele during John Negroponte's stint as US Ambassador to Iraq. Steele and Negroponte worked together in Central America in the 1980s. Steele was commander of the US military advisory group to the government of El Salvador, which used death squads to commit gross human rights violations against the civilian population.[49] Negroponte was ambassador to Honduras, where he oversaw the creation of death squads that tortured and killed thousands of suspected "leftists."[50]

Refusing to Connect the Dots

By early 2005, two facts were clearly established. First, the US was arming and training Islamist militias in Iraq. Second, these same militias were using gender-based violence to impose a theocracy. Yet, almost nowhere in the media were these facts examined in relation to each other. Indeed, after initially reporting on the "Salvador Option," most mainstream media sources failed to cover the consequences of US military support for the militias, even as *The New York Times* and other outlets cited Badr fighters armed with US-issued weapons, driving US-issued trucks, and operating freely during US-imposed curfews.[51] Meanwhile, articles such as "Iran Gaining Influence, Power in Iraq Through Militias"[52] emphasized the Badr Brigade's extensive ties to Iran, while ignoring the fact that Iraq's largest militia—the Mahdi Army—is vehemently anti-Iranian.

Mainstream media often report that the Badr and Mahdi militias have "infiltrated" Iraq's Ministry of Interior,[53] which controls the country's police, intelligence, and paramilitary units. More accurately, Iraq's Islamist government, boosted to power by the US, placed the ministry in the hands of its militias. In April 2005, Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaffari appointed Bayan Jabr, a high-ranking Badr Brigade officer as Interior Minister.[54] Since then, the Badr Brigade has been headquartered in the ministry. The Mahdi Army, meanwhile, controls the police forces of Baghdad and Basra, Iraq's two largest cities.[55] Press reports frequently cite killings by "men in police uniforms," resisting the foregone conclusion that gunmen are wearing uniforms because they are indeed police officers—trained, armed, and funded by the United States. As one senior Iraqi minister told the British newspaper, *The Independent*, "of course they wear police uniforms. They are real policemen."[56]

In November 2005, the Badr Brigade was widely labeled a death squad when its operatives were discovered imprisoning and torturing Sunni men in a secret prison. Although this same group had been torturing and killing Iraqi women for more than a year, these gender-based attacks were generally not identified as part of the pattern of politically-motivated violence that was then coming to light. To cite just one example, in October 2005, journalist Robert Dreyfuss, known for his authoritative and critical analysis of Iraqi politics, reported that in addition to targeting Sunnis, the Shiite Badr Brigade was "terrorizing Iraq's secular, urban Shiite population."[57] Although gender-based violence was a central tactic of this terror campaign, Dreyfuss does not mention it. Nor does he explore why a supposedly sectarian militia was terrorizing members of its own sect. Like most media accounts, Dreyfuss' report fails to consider the Badr militia from the perspective of Shiite women. From women's vantage point, the militia is typical of theocratic fundamentalists everywhere. For such groups, asserting control over members of their own religion—especially women, who are seen as the carriers of group identity—is a prerequisite to extending control over society at large, including, ultimately, the institutions of the state.

From Violence to Feminicide

Like the press, much of the anti-war movement has failed to assess the gendered dimension of the violence gripping Iraq. For example, Iraqi artists, musicians, academics, and teachers have all been targeted by Islamists in a manner reminiscent of Pol Pot's Cambodia and for the same reason: they represent a potential challenge to the killers' vision of society. In response to these attacks, a series of international campaigns have been launched to protect people in these sectors. With the exception of the advocacy work of gay men, who are also attacked on the basis of gender, these campaigns have not recognized that women are specifically targeted in attacks against artists and intellectuals. Yet, as Yanar Mohammed said, "We have been studying these killings since they began. It is not that the Islamists also kill women journalists, performers, or intellectuals—women are especially hunted. That's because they commit a double offense—by advocating a secular society and by being accomplished, working women."[58]

Here, the issue of disaggregated data is critical. For without comprehensive knowledge of who is being targeted, it is difficult to analyze the crisis or protect people. But rather than facilitate the collection of data, US authorities have repeatedly ordered the Iraqi Health Ministry to stop publishing statistics about whom or even how many Iraqis are being killed.[59] When figures have been released, Iraqi women's organizations have cautioned that the actual number of women who are harassed, assaulted, abducted, raped, and killed by Islamist militias is much higher than statistics show, since most crimes against women are not reported because of stigma, fear of retaliation, or lack of confidence in the police.

These concerns, together with the failure to collect data, place violence against Iraqi women squarely within the paradigm of "feminicide," a term usually reserved for the wide-spread killing of women in Guatemala and Mexico since the early 1990s. Feminicide is the sum total of various forms of gender-based violence against women, characterized by impunity for perpetrators and a lack of justice processes for victims. Feminicide occurs in conditions of social upheaval, armed conflict, violence between powerful rival criminal gangs and militias, rapid economic transformation, and the demise of traditional forms of state power.[60] All of these conditions apply to Iraq.

The framework of feminicide also emphasizes the complicity of local or state authorities in violence against women. Iraqi women's organizations report clear links between the Islamist militias who

control and work in the police force and criminal gangs involved in forced prostitution and trafficking of women. For example, Maha (who chose to withhold her last name) was abducted from her home in Najaf and trafficked from brothel to brothel in Baghdad for nearly two years. She managed to escape twice and flee to the police station in Baghdad's Amiriyah neighborhood. Both times the police forcibly returned her to the brothel.[61]

US authorities bear responsibility for the crimes of the Iraqi police force they have created and for failing to provide police recruits with even rudimentary training regarding women's human rights. In fact, the company that the Bush Administration contracted to train Iraq's new police force, DynCorp, has its own record of perpetrating violence against women. DynCorp was hired by the federal government in the 1990s to train police in the Balkans. Company employees were found to have systematically committed sex crimes against women, including "owning" young women as slaves. One DynCorp site supervisor videotaped himself raping two women. Despite evidence, the contractors never faced criminal charges.[62]

Part IV. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN WITHIN FAMILIES

"Honor Killing"

"It is not a democracy and an open society where a man can talk about politics without anyone threatening him. Democracy is when a woman can talk about her lover without being killed."

–Saud M. El Sabah[63]

One form of gender-based violence that has increased dramatically in Iraq since the US invasion is "honor killing."[64] These murders are usually perpetrated by male relatives acting to restore "family honor" tarnished by women's "immoral" behavior. "Honor killings" resemble so-called "crimes of passion" in US, European, and Latin American jurisprudence in that sentencing is not based on the crime, but on the feelings of the perpetrator. For example, in 1999, a Texas judge sentenced a man to four months in prison for murdering his wife and wounding her lover in front of their 10-year-old child.[65] As in an "honor killing," adultery was viewed as a mitigating factor in the case. But while individualistic societies, such as the US, tend to locate honor in the individual, communities that suffer "honor killings" vest honor in the family, tribe, or clan. "Honor killings" are therefore often reluctantly condoned as necessary for the greater good of the community—sometimes even by those who are grief-stricken by the woman's death. In the ethical and legal framework that condones "honor killings" there is an inversion of the relationship between perpetrator and victim as understood in most formal legal systems, including international human rights law. The woman who is killed (along with anyone who tries to defend her) is considered the guilty party because she has tarnished the honor of her family. In contrast, her killer, who is the dishonored party, is seen as the victim.

Islamists claim that "honor killing" is a religious obligation. However, these crimes are not condoned by either the Koran or the *Hadith* (the sayings and doings of Mohammed). Rather, they are rooted in customary law that pre-dates Islam and Christianity. The notion of family honor has been maintained and deployed by Islamists because it embodies their social vision. "Honor killings" punish women who make autonomous decisions about issues such as marriage, divorce, and whether and with whom to have sex, and force men to conform to gender norms of heterosexuality and marriage. For example, in 2005, the Badr militia began a program of surveillance of unmarried men over the age of 30, threatening the men with violence if they did not get married. Furthermore, because entire communities are called to enforce the ethic of family honor, the framework provides a powerful means of social control over potential victims and perpetrators alike—in other words, over everyone. For example, the Badr militia has ordered male relatives of gay Iraqis to murder their gay family member in the name of honor—or face murder themselves.[66]

Honor under Occupation

While "honor killing" may be committed within the "private sphere" of the family, its increase under US occupation demonstrates that—like other human rights violations—the prevalence of "honor killing" is influenced by broader social forces and institutions in the public sphere. In Iraq, the rise in "honor killing" under US occupation has multiple causes, including some which stem directly from US policy:

• The US has empowered Islamist political parties whose clerics promote "honor killing" as a religious duty.[67] As Yanar Mohammed explained, "Once the religious parties came to power, Iraqi men began hearing in the mosques that it was their duty to protect the honor of their families by any means. It is understood that this entails killing women who break the rules."[68]

• The US destroyed the Iraqi state, including much of the judicial system, leaving people more reliant on conservative tribal authorities to settle disputes and on unofficial "religious courts" to mete out sentencing, including "honor killings."

• Poverty-inducing economic policies, such as the 2003 US decision to fire all public-sector workers (40 percent of whom were women), have also contributed to the rise in "honor killings." Increased poverty has made people more dependent on tribal structures for jobs, housing, and other scarce resources and compelled more women into polygamous, forced, and abusive marriages, where they are at greater risk of "honor killing."

• While the US saw fit to violate international law by overturning most of Iraq's legal system, it maintained Article 130 of the penal code, which provides vastly reduced sentences for "honor killings" (as little as six months as opposed to life imprisonment, which is the minimum sentence for murder).[69]

• Although the US is obligated as the occupying power to protect Iraqis' human rights, including the prevention and prosecution of "honor killing," it has not done so. Official negligence promotes "honor killing" because perpetrators are confident that they will not be prosecuted.

•Women who are attacked by men outside of their family are considered to have shamed their families. For that reason, the overall rise in rape and kidnapping under US occupation has elicited a rash of "honor killings." In October 2004, Iraq's Ministry of Women's Affairs revealed that more than half of the 400 reported rapes since the US invasion resulted in the murder of rape survivors by their families.

• The detention of women by US and Iraqi forces exposes women to the threat of "honor killing" once they are released. Extensive documentation of the sexualized torture of detainees by US forces in Iraq confirms the widely-held assumption that any woman who is arrested is also raped, which may be considered grounds for "honor killing."

The Culture Card: Religion as an Excuse for Violence against Women

Despite the many ways that US policies have contributed to the increase in "honor killing" in Iraq, most people in the US continue to view these crimes as an invariable part of Iraqi, Arab, or Muslim "culture." For instance, US journalist Kaye Hymowitz defines "honor killing" as part of the "inventory of brutality" committed by men against women in the "Muslim world," railing against "the savage fundamentalist Muslim oppression of women."[70]

Hymowitz echoes a commonly held assumption, namely that gender-based violence in the Middle East derives from Islam. Identifying Islam or "Muslim culture" as the source of violence against women serves to dehumanize Muslims and justify US violence against them. It also deflects attention from factors (such as politics, economics, and militarism) that influence the prevalence of gender-based violence, and obscures the ways that US actions have exacerbated conditions that give rise to violence against women.

In fact, culture alone explains very little. Like all human behavior, "honor killing" does have a cultural dimension, but like culture itself, "honor killing" is shaped by social factors (such as poverty) and discourses (such as women's rights) that change—and can be changed—in ways that can either help combat or promote "honor killing." Culture is a context, but not a cause or a useful explanation for violence, whether in Iraq or anywhere else.

It makes much more sense to examine gender—a system of power relations whose number one enforcement mechanism is recourse to violence against women. There is nothing "Muslim" about that system, except that its Muslim proponents, like their Jewish, Christian, and Hindu counterparts, use religion to rationalize women's subjugation. In fact, shifting the focus from culture to gender reveals a system of power that is nearly universal. A 2005 Amnesty International Report on the mass killings of women in Guatemala could easily refer to Iraq when it describes a "notable sense of insecurity that women in Guatemala feel today as a result of the violence and the murders in particular. The resulting effect of intimidation carries with it a perverse message: women should abandon the public space they have won at much personal and social effort and shut themselves back up in the private world, abandoning their essential role in national development."[71] This passage captures the intent of Iraq's Islamists, who have little in common with the perpetrators of feminicide in Guatemala, other than a rigid adherence to a gendered system of power.

"Culture is a context, but not a cause or a useful explanation for violence, whether in Iraq or anywhere else."

Part V. GENDER WAR, CIVIL WAR

"The state of Iraq now resembles Bosnia at the height of the fighting in the 1990s when each community fled to places where its members were a majority and were able to defend themselves."

–Patrick Cockburn[72]

A Product of US Policy

Whether by design or incompetence, the US has instigated a civil war in Iraq. Remarkably, in a country with almost no history of communal violence, US actions helped transform a doctrinal difference between the Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam into a political divide. The US dismantled Iraq's largely secular government bureaucracy in favor of a system that allocated seats in parliament, jobs, and other resources according to ethnic and religious divisions. That system produced the so-called "Shiite list" that swept the first national elections held under US occupation in January 2005.

In effect, US policy forced Iraqis to compete for scarce resources on the basis of sectarian identity and reoriented Iraqi citizenship on the basis of religion instead of nationality. At the same time, the US armed and deployed openly sectarian Shiite and Kurdish militias to fight Sunnis and police Sunni neighborhoods. The US State Department has acknowledged that this policy has "greatly exacerbated tensions along purely ethnic lines."[73] After igniting the civil war, US policies have continued to fuel the violence by giving one side—the Sunni-based insurgency—its *raison d'être*, while giving the other side—the Shiite-controlled Iraqi security forces—money, weapons, and training. In addition, the US failure to provide security has led many Iraqis to support whatever armed group promises to protect their families and communities.

Looking at Gender in Iraq's Civil War

In September 2006, *The Los Angeles Times* described the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army as "Iraq's two most deadly Shiite militias" for their role in sectarian violence.[74] What the *Times* did not mention is that both Islamist groups are also notorious for their attacks on women. Indeed, the relationship between Iraq's civil war and its "gender war" has been largely overlooked. Yet, the two crises are deeply intertwined.

In the legal arena, the same provisions of the US-brokered constitution that most clearly codify gender discrimination (Articles 39 and 41)[75] also lay the groundwork for sectarian violence. Six months before the February 2006 bombing of the Samarra Mosque that marked a turning point in the civil war, MADRE warned that, "the new constitution could allow un-elected clerics and Islamist politicians to determine a person's legal recourse based on her sex *and religious affiliation* [emphasis added]. Due to varying interpretations of religious law, tensions between Islamic groups with differing rules about personal status issues would be exacerbated. The resulting civil strife will further endanger Iraqis, undermine prospects for democracy, and foment a dangerous sectarianism in an already destabilized society."[76] The decision to apply separate laws on the basis of sex and religion reinforced gender discrimination and sectarian conflict—the twin crises now plaguing Iraq—underscoring the link between women's human rights and democratic rights in general.

IRAQ'S CIVIL WAR, FUELED BY US OCCUPATION POLICIES, GENERATES NUMEROUS FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.

• Though women comprise a minority of those killed in sectarian violence, women are targeted for attack. For example, on October 12, 2006, six Shiite women and two four-year-old girls were gunned down while picking vegetables on a farm south of Baghdad. The attackers, who police said were Sunnis seeking to intimidate Shiites into leaving the ethnically mixed village of Saifiya, reportedly forced two teenage girls into their cars before escaping.[77]

• Sectarian violence has bolstered the Islamist militias that have been attacking women. Indeed, one of the militias' primary motivations for fomenting violence is that the resulting chaos causes people to become dependent on the militias for security. As *The New York Times* reports, "Iraqi Shiites see the Mahdi militia as their most effective protector against the hostile Sunni groups that have slaughtered Shiites and driven them from their homes. Shiites say that as long as the government cannot keep them safe, they cannot support the disarming of the militias."[78] Even Iraqis who would otherwise condemn the violence and ideology of the Islamists have come to support them because they are the only force providing security.

• Sectarian conflict has made domestic violence more deadly because of the proliferation of guns in Iraq. Because of the threat of attack, nearly every Iraqi household now possesses weapons. On October 30, 2006, *The New York Times* reported that the US military failed to keep track of hundreds of thousands of weapons it had shipped to Iraq, including thousands of nine-millimeter pistols and assault rifles.[79] Women's rights advocates in other armed conflicts have noted that, "domestic violence often increases as societal tensions grow and becomes more common and more lethal when men carry weapons."[80]

• Sectarian violence has entrenched the authority of conservative tribal leaders, many of whom condone violence against women (including forced marriage and "honor killing"). Iraqi women's rights advocates report a sharp rise in "honor killing" since the onset of civil war, which they attribute, in part, to the enhanced authority of tribal leaders. In early 2006, in the rural province of Maysan, police released an accused murderer after his tribe agreed to pay $3,000 and promise three women in marriage to the family of the victim.[81] In rural areas, where tribal affiliations are strongest, many people resent the rule of the Islamist militias[82] and have rallied, instead, behind traditional tribal leaders.

• Sectarian violence has triggered widespread displacement of Iraqi women and their families.[83] Nearly 1.8 million people have been forced to flee their homes, while two million have fled to other countries.[84] Forced displacement is itself a form of violence against women and exposes women to other types of violence, including domestic abuse, forced prostitution, and sex trafficking. According to the UN Refugee Agency, many Iraqis are in urgent need of "shelter and aid items, food, access to water and employment."[85] Within families and communities the world over, women's needs are often the first to be sacrificed when resources such as these become scarce.

• The gendered dimension of sectarian conflict endangers women. Because of women's role in cultural and biological reproduction, they are often perceived as symbols of group identity. As such, they are specifically targeted in times of communal violence. In 2003, OWFI began reporting cases of "Islamic groups taking revenge on each other by raping women."[86] In September 2006, OWFI reported that "Recently, a sectarian gang abducted a Shiite woman from the Alhussienya district of northern Baghdad, raped her and dumped her in a deserted area on the outskirts of the city. In retaliation, a Shiite gang kidnapped eight Sunni women from Rashidya district (adjacent to Alhussienya) and subjected these women to rape and torture."[87] Additionally, Christian women in Mosul and elsewhere have been targeted for rape[88] as part of a broader attack on that community.[89]

Part VI. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST MEN

A corollary to the systematic violence against women in Iraq is the campaign of torture and killing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, and intersex (LGBTTI) Iraqis under US occupation. Homophobic attacks intensified in early 2006, after Grand Ayatollah Sistani issued his *fatwa* (religious decree) saying that anyone accused of "sodomy or lesbianism" should be killed "in the worst, most severe way possible." The *fatwa* triggered a systematic witch-hunt by SCIRI's Badr Brigade, which was carried out while the group was receiving military training from the US. Badr militiamen began ordering Iraqis to kill gay and lesbian family members in "honor killings."[90] In so-called religious courts with no official authority, self-appointed clerics—including those affiliated with Sistani—preside over the "trials" and executions of those accused of homosexuality.[91]

Crimes committed as part of the Islamist campaign of "sexual cleansing" are a form of gender-based torture: they are gender-based because they seek to enforce prescribed social roles for men and women; and they constitute torture because state authorities have acquiesced to and participated in the violence. US authorities have responded to Iraqis seeking protection or justice in the wake of homophobic attacks with derision and outright mockery.[92] The US-backed Iraqi police stand accused of rape and extortion by gay men. According to one Baghdad resident, "Policemen raped me several times at gunpoint and threatened to hand me over to extremist groups if I refused."[93]

Gender-based attacks on Iraqi men are also used to foment sectarian violence. "Terrorists in the Hands of Justice" is Iraq's most popular television show.[94] It airs six nights a week on the Iraqiya television network, which was created by the US Pentagon. The show—financed with US tax dollars—consists of an interrogator eliciting live confessions from alleged insurgents. The detainees—who have not been tried or convicted of any crime—usually show signs of torture: bruised and swollen faces and the "robotic manners of those beaten and coached by police interrogators off-camera."[95] The program relies heavily on gender ideologies to fuel sectarian hatred. The "suspects" are invariably Sunni men rounded up by the US-backed Special Police Commandos—a Shiite group affiliated with the Badr Brigade. Confessions frequently include admissions of homosexuality, pedophilia, pornography, and rape.[96] In fact, the word *mujahid*, meaning holy warrior, has become slang for homosexual because so many of the detainees appearing on the show have confessed to using mosques to hold "gay orgies" for Sunni insurgents.[97] Like Rwanda's notorious Radio Mille Collines, "Terrorists in the Hands of Justice" is a dangerous use of popular media to promote gender-based and communal hatred.

The most widely circulated images of gender-based violence from US-occupied Iraq are the notorious Abu Ghraib photos. Released to the public in April 2004, the photos document the sexualized torture of Iraqi men by US soldiers. They include images of prisoners forced to stand naked, masturbate, simulate gay sex, and wear women's clothing. In essence, the torture consisted of an attack on the gender identity of the prisoners. The forcefulness of that attack derived from the misogyny of both the detainees and their torturers. As Dhia al-Shweiri, an Iraqi who was tortured in Abu Ghraib said, "They were trying to humiliate us, break our pride. We are men. It's OK if they beat me. Beatings don't hurt us, it's just a blow. But no one would want their manhood to be shattered. They wanted us to feel as though we were women, the way women feel, and this is the worst insult, to feel like a woman."[98]

The systematic killing of LGBTTI Iraqis is a grim reminder that all human rights are indivisible. In Iraq, as elsewhere, protecting LGBTTI rights and ending violence against women are inextricably linked.

Part VII. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN DETENTION

Some of the most hidden arenas of violence against women in Iraq are the hundreds of US- and Iraqi-run detention centers established since the 2003 invasion. Like their male counterparts, Iraqi women have been detained and tortured on the basis of their religious affiliation. But women are also tortured on the basis of their gender. According to Iraqi human rights advocate and writer Haifa Zangana, the first question asked of female detainees in Iraq is, "Are you Sunni or Shia?" The second is, "Are you a virgin?"[99]

The Abu Ghraib scandal focused almost exclusively on the torture of male prisoners. But the first evidence of abuse in Abu Ghraib came from a letter written by a woman detainee. The letter, smuggled out of the prison in December 2003 (five months before the scandal broke), was signed only with the first name, Noor. It said that women were being systematically raped by US soldiers in Abu Ghraib and that some detainees were pregnant as a result of these rapes.

"The first question asked of female detainees in Iraq is, 'Are you Sunni or Shia?' The second is, 'Are you a virgin?'"

The secret US military inquiry into Abu Ghraib headed by Major General Antonio Taguba verified many of the letter's claims. Taguba's report cites photographs of a US military policeman "having sex" with an Iraqi woman detainee as well as videotapes and photographs of naked female detainees taken by guards. Some of these images were shown to members of the US Congress during the course of the investigation. However, unlike the photographs of men being tortured, Congress has refused to release these images of Iraqi women to the public.

Based on Noor's letter, Iraqi lawyers gradually uncovered evidence of ongoing and widespread US torture of Iraqi women detainees. Rafida Shalal al-Jbouri, a social researcher at the Center of Rehabilitation for Youth (a division of the Iraqi Justice Ministry) confirmed that occupation soldiers were assaulting and raping women prisoners at Abu Ghraib and al-Tasfeerat prisons.[100] In 2004, attorney Amal Kadham Swadi asserted that prisoner abuse was occurring across the country, stating that, "sexualized violence and abuse committed by US troops goes far beyond a few isolated cases."[101] US-based organizations have also documented the torture of Iraqi women. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) publicized documents in March 2005 citing 13 cases of rape and other forms of torture of female detainees, which were released after a lawsuit brought by a team of human rights organizations, including the ACLU and the Center for Constitutional Rights. No action was taken against any soldier or civilian in any of these cases.[102]

Routine Horrors

In addition to sexual violence, evidence of torture of women by US forces includes routine maltreatment, degradation, physical and psychological abuse, and unhealthy and unhygienic conditions. Women detainees have been forced to remove their headscarves, dragged by their hair, made to eat from dirty toilets, and urinated on.[103] In 2005, UK Member of Parliament Ann Clwyd confirmed a report of US soldiers torturing an elderly Iraqi woman by attaching a harness to her and riding her like a donkey. Women have been kept in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day. Some

detainees, still nursing infants at the time of their arrest, were subjected to intense psychological trauma because of the separation from their babies.[104]

The vast majority of Iraqi women detainees were held by the US military without charges or any semblance of due process. Very few were arrested on suspicion of a crime. Rather, as *Newsweek* reported in 2004, most of these women were essentially hostages, held by the US "as bargaining chips to put pressure on their wanted relatives to surrender."[105] US officials have acknowledged this tactic, which violates the Geneva Convention and other international laws. In addition, US forces have routinely arrested the wives and daughters of male detainees and threatened the women with rape in front of their male relatives in order to coerce the men into confessions.[106]

One woman who was arrested by the US military because of allegations against her husband is the wife of Iraq's former Minister of Commerce. While under arrest, this woman (who has chosen to withhold her name) was forced to stir burning human waste in metal containers. A US sergeant warned her that, "If you don't do it, I will tell one of the soldiers to fuck you."[107] Recalling her time in prison, the woman said, "Once I saw the guards hit a woman, probably 30 years old…They pulled her by the hair and poured ice water on her. She was screaming and shouting and crying as they poured water into her mouth. They left her there all night. There was another girl; the soldiers said she wasn't honest with them. They said she gave them wrong information. When I saw her, she had electric burns all over her body."[108]

The number of women who have endured detention and torture by US occupation forces is unknown. According to Iman Khamas, head of the International Occupation Watch Center, "Since December 2003, there are around 625 women prisoners in Al-Rusafah Prison in Uma Qasr and 750 in Al-Kadhmiya alone. They range from girls of twelve to women in their sixties."[109] Even the number of detention centers is a matter of controversy, though it is clear that jails have mushroomed across Iraq since the US invasion. Hajj Ali, director of the Organization for the Defense of Detainees in Occupation Jails, states, "Under Saddam there were 13 prisons. Now there are 36 run by the government and 200 run by the militias. All these have the approval of the American government."[110] The US State Department Democracy and Human Rights Bureau put the number of detention centers even higher, at 450. There are also an undisclosed number of secret detention centers, established by the US in violation of international law.[111]

REDEFINING RAPE: THE US MILITARY COMMISSIONS ACT

No international legal or humanitarian provisions allow torture, even in conditions of war. Perhaps that is why the 2006 US Military Commissions Act (MCA) effectively expunges rape from the definition of torture. The law, championed by President Bush, requires proof of specific intent to commit torture. But motive is very hard to prove in cases of sexual assault because a defendant can always claim that his motivation was sexual gratification rather than torture. The law limits the definition of rape to sexual penetration (most US states and international law use a broader definition). The law also requires physical contact to prove sexual assault, excluding numerous forms of sexual abuse that US forces have committed in Iraq, including forced nakedness and sexual threats and humiliation. Under the law, only forcible or coerced penetration is considered rape. Thus, the Taguba investigation's photographs of a US military policeman "having sex" with an Iraqi woman would not be evidence of rape, since they do not necessarily document coercion. Yet, US federal and international law recognizes that rape occurs whenever the victim does not give free and voluntary consent. In a sexual relationship characterized by an extreme disparity of power (such as that between a prison guard and an inmate) consent becomes a hollow concept. The MCA thereby effectively sanctions violence against women by US forces.

New Jailers, Old Torments

Reports of torture continued after the US shifted responsibility for Iraq's prison system to the country's Interior Ministry. In September 2006, the United Nations special investigator on torture reported that torture was worse in US-occupied Iraq than under Saddam Hussein.[112] According to OWFI, which has conducted a Women's Prison Watch project since November 2005, "Torture and rape has become a common procedure of investigation in police stations run by the militias affiliated with the government, mostly the Mahdi and Badr militias."[113] Amnesty International has demonstrated that US-led multinational forces in Iraq are legally responsible for crimes against detainees, including crimes committed by Iraqi security forces.[114]

During visits to Kadhmiya Prison, run by Iraq's Interior Ministry, and other Iraqi-run jails, OWFI took testimonies from numerous women who said they were raped by prison authorities.[115]

- **Zina Akram Khdayir** *is a 24-year-old woman who went to the police in Baghdad in June 2005 to escape a situation of life-threatening domestic violence. While seeking refuge at the Aminyah Police Station, Zina was raped by a man known to her as Major Saad. She was then forced to confess to "being a terrorist" or face being returned to her family. Zina resolved to file a complaint against Major Saad, but was later offered release in exchange for withdrawing that complaint. She was released in July 2006 without a trial.*

- *Forty-year-old* **Khadija Mohammed Mhawish** *was tortured regularly for more than two years in several different jails. She reported being flogged with cables, having her fingernails pulled out, and being forced to stand naked before prisoners who were urged by guards to rape her. Khadija, who was sexually assaulted in front of her son (also a prisoner), identified the following men as her rapists: Fifth Branch officers Major Raid, Captain Nabeel, First Lieutenant Saad, and non-commissioned officers Abdilamir and Raad.*

- **Fatma Mohammed Ashur** *was raped by Ministry of Interior officers Lieutenant Colonel Amir, Captain Riyadh, Military Intelligence non-commissioned officers Hussein and Ziyad, and al-Bayya Police Station officers Lieutenant Colonel Jalal and First Lieutenant Hazza.*

- **Ilham Mohammed Ridha** *was tortured in May and August 2005. She was flogged, shocked with electrical cables, and gang-raped by officers in the al-Karrada Police Station for Major Crimes.*

Coerced Silence and Official Denial

Like women in many parts of the world, Iraqi women often face severe social stigma and even violence at the hands of their families upon release from prison. Amnesty International researchers suspect that Noor, the author of the letter that precipitated the Abu Ghraib scandal, was killed in the name of family honor after her release. Iman Khamas, head of the International Occupation Watch Center, Mohammed Daham al-Mohammed of the Union of Detainees and Prisoners, and Hoda Nuaimi, politics professor at Baghdad University, all separately reported that three young women from western Baghdad were killed by their families after returning from Abu Ghraib pregnant.[116] The threat of "honor killing" is compounded by the near-total lack of due process under US occupation. With no reliable justice system, some families turn to "tribal diplomacy" to secure the release of relatives from prison.[117] Tribal leaders are more likely than other authorities to prescribe "honor killing" as a remedy for the perceived disgrace that a woman's detention casts on her family.

Given the threat of renewed violence, it is not surprising that relatively few Iraqi women have been willing to speak publicly about their ordeals in detention. Yet, despite the intense pressure on women to keep silent, at least nine Iraqi organizations[118] as well as Amnesty International, the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq, and the Brussels Tribunal have documented the torture of Iraqi women by US and Iraqi forces. Despite this evidence, US and Iraqi authorities routinely hide behind women's reluctance to testify about abuse, using detainees' coerced silence to deny allegations of torture. For example, Hassan Jaffar, a senior Iraqi military official, has repeatedly told reporters that women were "imagining" the abuses they recounted.[119]

US Media Tow the Line

Official denial is reflected in mainstream US media, which has paid little attention to Iraqi women's experiences of detention. The lack of media coverage is remarkable given that thousands of Iraqi women have been arrested since the US occupation began; that torture by the US military has been infamously documented by the torturers themselves; and that US Vice President Dick Cheney has publicly acknowledged and defended torture in Iraq and elsewhere.[120] Even during the highly publicized 2006 kidnapping of US journalist Jill Carroll, there was little media curiosity about her captors' single demand, namely, the release of Iraqi women in US custody.

Those reports that have addressed the issue of women's torture have implicitly cast doubt on the veracity of the allegations. Some have suggested, for example, that images of women being raped by prison guards are staged pornography rather than evidence of torture.[121] In fact, there is no firewall between the for-profit production of war-related pornography and the circulation of images of women's torture. Indeed, several former detainees report that photographs of their rapes have been posted on pornographic Internet sites, propelling their experience of torture into virtual perpetuity.

Other US media stories have chosen to focus on "honor killings" of released detainees rather than on the unlawful detentions that triggered the murders.[122] These stories divert attention from US crimes of illegal detention and torture of women, implicitly shifting blame to Iraqi society for tolerating "honor killing." What these reports miss is the ways that crimes of occupation reinforce crimes of honor and how repressive codes of family honor have made all Iraqis more vulnerable to abusive authorities, whether they are US occupiers or their Iraqi successors.

CONCLUSION: STANDING WITH IRAQI WOMEN IN A TIME OF WAR

Since the US bombing of Afghanistan in 2001, the Bush Administration has resurrected the hackneyed colonial notion that its military intervention is intended to save Muslim women from their oppressive societies. As Laura Bush has said, "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."[123] Few Middle Eastern women believe this. (The line is really intended for people in the US.) In Iraq, women know that their work for equal rights has been undermined by British colonialism and, more recently, by US intervention. Throughout the Middle East—and indeed, around the world—the US has preferred to support authoritarian leaders who systematically violate women's rights.

Despite all of Bush's talk of bringing women's rights and democracy to Iraq, the US may ultimately prefer a theocratic dictatorship in Iraq over a true democracy in which the government respects human rights and popular will. After all, if it were up to the majority of Iraqis, how many would have endorsed the country's new, US-brokered oil law, which effectively puts Iraq's most valuable resource at the disposal of US-based corporations?[124] How many Iraqis would have opted for huge, permanent US military bases in their country (whose sole purpose is to enable more US military intervention in the region)? Ultimately, the US-supported attack on women's rights in Iraq is instrumental to US policy in the Middle East because women's rights are an integral part of democratic rights and democratic rights threaten US control of the region.

Today, many progressives in the US argue that Iraqis should be free to determine their own political destiny. They look at Iraq, see widespread support for Islamism, and conclude that these are the politics that Iraqis have chosen. What many in the US don't know is that they are looking at a political landscape shaped in part by US intervention. During the Cold War, while the US propped up Islamist movements throughout the Middle East, it also worked to crush the Left, helping to create an environment largely devoid of strong progressive forces. In Iraq, the US welcomed the Ba'ath Party to power in 1963 by supplying it with lists of Iraqi communists to assassinate.[125] Thus, the US helped ensure that the Islamists whom they covertly supported were the only viable alternative to the status quo. In 2004, when the status quo was US occupation, support for an Islamist state in Iraq rose from 20 to 70 percent.[126] The spike shows how quickly a political trend can take hold in a crisis. Interpreting that trend as inevitable and singularly authentic shows the hazards of trying to understand the world without knowledge of history.

"Women's rights are an integral part of democratic rights and democratic rights threaten US control of the region."

The fact that the US has used women's rights as a rallying point for its wars in the Middle East is sometimes used to fuel the claim that women's rights is "foreign" to the region and a tool of "Western domination." We hear that claim from conservatives in Muslim countries who oppose women's rights. We also hear it from some on the Left who seem to believe that condemning US intervention in Iraq requires defending any group that opposes the US, regardless of that group's own human rights record. These people glorify the Islamist forces within the Iraqi insurgency (though they themselves would hate to live in a theocracy). They refuse to condemn violations of Iraqi women's rights simply because those committing the violations are under attack by the US.

Indeed, within the United States, any discussion of gender-based violence in Iraq occurs in a climate of heightened hostility towards Islam and Muslim countries. Right-wing talk-radio is full of platitudes about the plight of Muslim women that are little more than racist diatribes used to justify US intervention. Prominent US military and religious leaders have explicitly cast Bush's invasion of Iraq as a Christian holy war against Islam—with no censure from the White House.[127] Clearly, strategies against gender-based violence in the Middle East need to also combat the violence of US foreign policy, confront "Islamaphobia" in the US, and recognize the ways that sexism and racism have been conscripted into Bush's "war on terror."

Understanding the links between opposing violence against Iraqi women and opposing violence by the US can help address the concern of people who worry that advocating Middle Eastern women's rights imposes "Western values" on Muslim countries. Here, a fear of condoning "cultural imperialism" leads people to be silent about violence against women. But silence is not a defensible response to grave human rights abuses. Nor is silence necessary to avoid charges of cultural imperialism, for there is nothing inherently "Western" about women's rights. Women in the Middle East have a century-long history of political struggle, popular organizing, jurisprudence, and scholarship aimed at securing rights within their societies. As Haifa Zangana says, "The main misconception is to perceive Iraqi women as silent, powerless victims in a male-controlled society in urgent need of 'liberation.' This image fits conveniently into the big picture of the Iraqi people being passive victims who would welcome the occupation of their country. The reality is different."[128]

"Strategies against gender-based violence in the Middle East need to also combat the violence of US foreign policy."

The assumption that women's rights are a "Western" concern is not only historically inaccurate, but also overblown. After all, the intellectual foundations of civilization—writing, mathematics, and science—are "Eastern." Are these pursuits therefore "foreign" and inappropriate in "the West?" Human rights, feminism, literature, and science are all aspects of our common human heritage. We should be suspicious whenever one is said to belong—or not belong—to a given people, especially when that designation is used to deny people their rights. The imagined community of "the West" has no monopoly on democracy, women's rights or any other "values" that the Bush Administration purports to be "bringing" to Iraq.

In the US, right-wing intellectuals like to talk about a "clash of civilizations" dividing the United States from the Middle East. But the real clash is not between "Western" democracies and "Eastern" theocracies; it is between those who uphold the full range of human rights—including women's right to a life free of violence—and those who pursue economic and political power for a privileged few at the expense of the world's majority. In this clash, no one is predestined to be on one side or the other by virtue of her culture, religion, or nationality. We choose our position based on our principles and our actions. Those of us who choose to stand in defense of human rights in Iraq must support the efforts of Iraqi women who are struggling for women's rights within their country and for their country's right to freedom from US domination and Islamist repression.

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MADRE is an international women's human rights organization that works in partnership with community-based women's organizations worldwide to address issues of health and reproductive rights, economic development, education, and other human rights. MADRE provides resources, training, and support to enable our sister organizations to meet concrete needs in their communities while working to shift the balance of power to promote long-term development and social justice.

Since we began in 1983, **MADRE** has delivered over 22 million dollars worth of support to community-based women's organizations in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, the Balkans, and the United States.

The **Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI)**, founded in 2003, is the only national women's organization in Iraq that works for a secular society based on democracy and respect for human rights, including the full range of women's human rights. **OWFI** programs promote women's political participation, freedom from gender-based violence, media activism, and a peaceful resolution of Iraq's civil war.

Graphic/Cover Design & Layout: Julio Blanco-Bogantes.
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Thanks to **Sylwia Wewiora**, **Marie Meslin,** and **Ashley Skiles**
for their research support.

SUPPORT IRAQI WOMEN

Despite the tremendous dangers they face, Iraqi women are organizing to defend their rights. **MADRE** works in partnership with the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) to meet immediate needs of women threatened with violence and to develop long-term solutions to the crises they face.

WOMEN'S SHELTERS AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FOR IRAQI WOMEN

MADRE and OWFI have launched the *Underground Railroad for Iraqi Women*. Just as enslaved African Americans relied on a network of courageous individuals like Harriet Tubman to help them make their way to freedom, OWFI has created a secret escape route for Iraqi women who are threatened with "honor killing." This woman-to-woman network provides women with emergency relocation and the support they need to rebuild their lives. **MADRE** also supports OWFI's six women's shelters, located in cities across Iraq.

MAKE ART, NOT WAR: ART ACTION, AN IRAQI YOUTH PEACE PROJECT

OWFI and **MADRE** are supporting a brave group of Sunni and Shiite youth who are coming together to demand peace. According to the logic of the civil war, these young people from warring communities should be enemies. But instead, they are joining together, using music and spoken-word poetry to call for an end to the civil war and promote human rights—including women's rights and freedom from occupation and religious coercion. In Baghdad, OWFI hosts *Freedom Space* gatherings—public performances where people come together to share their poetry and music. These gatherings have been banned by Islamists. Several members of Art Action have been attacked, but Iraqis who want peace are flocking to these gatherings despite the danger.

Contact **MADRE** to learn more
about how you can support Iraqi women
at this critical time
www.**MADRE**.org.

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