

ROUNDTABLE: IRAQ TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE US INVASION

Post-Tishreen Online Feminism: Continuity, Rupture, Departure

Balsam Mustafa 

Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
Email: Balsam.Mustafa@warwick.ac.uk

Iraqi women's struggle for equal rights has been shaped by similar circumstances and factors in both past and present. Since the founding of the Iraqi nation-state, ruling elites have repeatedly traded women's rights for building alliances with tribal and religious conservative forces in the interest of sustaining power. There was some progress in the areas of personal status and family law as well as women's access to education and the labor market throughout the years from the revolution of 1958 to the 1980s. Women's status declined dramatically during the 1990s due to intermittent wars, economic sanctions, repressive policies of the Ba'athist regime, and eroding state structures. Similar developments are notable since the toppling of that regime in 2003 at the hands of a US-led invasion. The selling rhetoric of liberating Iraqi women was quickly debunked when women's rights were de-prioritized and sacrificed for the sake of maintaining order and security, giving way for tribal and Islamist powers to control and discipline women.¹ Iraqi women have been grappling with a new reality marked by a lack of security, an ethno-sectarian *muḥāṣaṣa* (quota-based) system, conflict, terrorist groups and militias, rampant corruption, the fragile rule of law, and the erosion of Iraqi institutions. All of these have allowed for the (re)emergence of different forms of patriarchies and masculinities, compounded by the empowerment of tribal and religious authorities, contributing to an increase in various forms of gender-based violence.²

Against this backdrop, renewed women's rights activism in Iraq was first manifested in the form of NGOs and women's rights organizations, initially focusing on women's political participation and legal rights, particularly working against attempts to replace the 1959 Personal Status Law with regressive laws based on the Ja'fari school of Shia *fiqh*

¹ Noga Efrati, *Women in Iraq: Past Meets Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 163–71. The backlash against women's rights was first manifested when the Iraqi Governing Council chaired by then 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Hakim, head of the Shi'a Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, attempted to abolish the often-contested 1959 Personal Status Law, replacing it with Resolution 137, which sought to regulate personal status matters, including marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, based on shari'a. Although the resolution was overturned, its main tenets were echoed in Article 41 of the Iraqi Constitution, stipulating that "Iraqis are free in their commitment to their personal status according to their religions, sects, beliefs or choices, and this shall be regulated by law." See Noga Efrati, "Negotiating Rights in Iraq: Women and the Personal Status Law," *Middle East Journal* 59, no. 4 (2005): 577–95.

² Nadjé al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, "Positionalities, Intersectionalities, and Transnational Feminism in Researching Women in Post-Invasion Iraq," in *Researching War: Feminist Methods, Ethics and Politics*, ed. Annick T. R. Wibben (London: Routledge, 2016), 76–91; Nadjé al-Ali, "Iraq: Gendering Violence, Sectarianisms and Authoritarianism," in *Gender, Governance & Islam*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti, Nadjé al-Ali, and Kathryn Spellman Poots (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 145–64.

(jurisprudence) and discriminatory articles in the Iraqi Penal Code.³ Iraqi women also have been mobilizing against domestic and gender-based violence and involved in charity work.⁴ Throughout the past decade, women's rights NGOs have proliferated across the country. They are criticized for being influenced by the agendas, discourse, and language of international donors.⁵ But various protest cycles since 2011 have allowed more grassroots-based and decentralized forms of women's activism to emerge, led by a new generation of women. In this essay, I examine this new dynamism by focusing on the 2019 Tishreen protest movement and its aftermath, particularly women's online mobilization and activism.⁶ I argue that women activists' online engagement marks both their participation in the Tishreen movement and a departure from what they saw as a "masculine" protest, in which women's positions, rights, and demands were sidelined. My analysis is informed by online ethnographic observations and interactions with Iraqi women activists on social media, particularly Twitter, between January 2022 and March 2023. My online ethnography grew out of my continuous online presence and activism since 2014. I secured ethical approval from my institution before recruiting eleven Iraqi feminists from Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Anbar, Diwaniya, and Denmark for online interviews. In the article, I incorporate insights from these interviews conducted between April and June 2022.

Contextual Background

Building on smaller protests in previous weeks, Iraqis in the central and southern provinces took to the streets on October 25, 2019. Although the demonstration was quashed with lethal force, it marked the beginning of what became known as Thawrat Tishrin (the October Revolution), the largest and most influential protest movement in the contemporary history of Iraq.⁷ It was decentralized and leaderless, akin to Basra's 2018 protests over contaminated water, power cuts, and corruption. The Tishreen movement was led primarily by young Iraqis in the central and southern provinces who rallied around the motto of "*Inrīd waṭan*" (We want a homeland). This slogan created a national, cross-sectarian narrative that resonated with a majority of Iraqis. Despite the security crackdown, the protestors camped in Baghdad's Tahrir Square and other public spaces in Iraq for months, demanding an end to government corruption, poor public services, and unemployment, and calling for profound change.

Although not unprecedented, the 2019 Tishreen movement was distinctly characterized by the surprisingly prominent participation of women. Not only did they raise the protests' main slogans of "*Inrīd waṭan*" and "*Nāzil akhud ḥaaqqī*" (I am taking to the street to claim my right), but, more significantly, they gradually started chanting feminist slogans. Key among them was "*Ṣawt al-mar'a thawra*" (A woman's voice is a revolution) in response to a masculinist and patriarchal saying associating woman's voice to *'awra* (defect or shame). In February 2020, an all-women march took place in Baghdad and the southern provinces under the slogan "*Banātak ya waṭan*" (Your daughters, oh homeland).⁸ The rally was partly

³ I do not discuss Kurdish women's activism here because the structural circumstances in Kurdistan have been different from the rest of the country, shaping a distinct trajectory of women's activism since the 1990s. For a full discussion, refer to Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, "Between Nationalism and Women's Rights: The Kurdish Women's Movement in Iraq," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4, no. 3 (2011): 339–55. Moreover, my sample of participants did not include Kurdish women activists. It was hard to connect with them exclusively online; the language barrier hindered such a possibility.

⁴ Al-Ali, "Iraq: Gendering Violence."

⁵ Zahra Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq: Between Nation-Building and Fragmentation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁶ Zahra Ali, "Iraqi Women's Activism—20 Years after the US Invasion," *Middle East Report* 306 (2023).

⁷ Balsam Mustafa, "All about Iraq: Re-Modifying Older Slogans and Chants in Tishreen Protests," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 3 (2023): 401–20.

⁸ Zahra Ali, "Iraqiyyat wa Tha'irat," in *Raihat al-Fulful: Tarikh wa Siyar li-Intifadat al-'Iraq*, ed. 'Umar al-Jaffal (Beirut: Dar al-Rafidayn, 2022).

a response to influential Shi'a cleric and political leader Muqtada al-Sadr's tweets, which sought to shame women by accusing the protestors of moral corruption and demanding gender segregation in public squares where protests took place. But the mobilization and organization of the women's march had in fact preceded Sadr's statements.⁹ Concurrently, another mobilization took place online in response to Sadr's antagonistic tweets. The two groups of female protestors joined forces and took to the streets in protest. Nevertheless, Arab media framed the march exclusively as a reaction to Sadr's tweets and overlooked the more proactive initiative at its root. The march highlighted women's presence in the protest movement and pressed their legitimate demands and rights as citizens. More importantly, it signaled the potential of a feminist movement emerging on social media platforms.

Post-Tishreen: A Digital Feminist Phenomenon

Despite the extraordinary participation of women in the Tishreen movement, it was not a feminist uprising, at least in its offline dimension.¹⁰ Yet women's activism has developed into a feminist digital phenomenon in its own right, not necessarily associated with the Tishreen movement. Feminist activists who participated in the Tishreen protests were keen to highlight feminist demands on the street, but women's rights were not a priority issue for male protestors. This caused disappointment and a rupture between women activists and male protestors, even while many women have continued to support the movement.

As the protest movement gradually lost momentum due to repression and the COVID-19 pandemic, women activists resorted to social media to voice their grievances, for instance, to condemn cases of domestic violence in Iraq, a country that experienced a spike in gender-based violence during the pandemic, like others in the region and worldwide.¹¹ In response, Iraqi cyberfeminism surged. Scholars studying online activism have shown that cyberfeminism is not disconnected from the material world and bodily experiences, as personal encounters in online spaces produce embodied emotions linked to material and physical experiences.¹²

Online Embodied Activism

A particularly shocking case of domestic abuse unfolded on social media in April 2020. Footage showed Malak al-Zubaydi from the southern province of Najaf being hospitalized with severe burns. She had set herself on fire after suffering domestic violence and died shortly afterward.¹³ Her death resparked a campaign against domestic violence, when a group of young Iraqi feminists launched the Arabic hashtag *#tashry' qanoon al-'unf al-usary* (passing the domestic violence law), calling upon authorities to approve a pending bill penalizing domestic violence despite its shortcomings.¹⁴

⁹ Author's interview with two Iraqi female activists.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Shalini Mittal and Tushar Singh, "Gender-Based Violence during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Mini-Review," *Frontiers in Global Women's Health* 1, art. 4 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fgwh.2020.00004>.

¹² Jessie Daniels, "Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1/2 (2009): 101–24; Marwan M. Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Jonathan C. Flowers, "The Affective Politics of Twitter," in *Computer Ethics-Philosophical Enquiry (CEPE) Proceedings*, 30 May 2019, doi: 10.25884/thbh-z535; Priscyll Antil Avoine, "Insurgent Peace Research: Affects, Friendship and Feminism as Methods," *Conflict, Security & Development* 22, no. 5 (2022): 435–55.

¹³ "Iraqi Woman Allegedly Tortured by Husband Dies: Family," Aljazeera News, 19 April 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/19/iraqi-woman-allegedly-tortured-by-husband-dies-family>.

¹⁴ Rahma Hija, "Kayfa Tahawal Harq Malak li-Qadiyat Ra'i 'Am fi-l-'Iraq," *Irfaasawtak*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.irfaasawtak.com/women/2020/04/13/%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%91%D9%84-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%82-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%83-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D8%A3%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%9F>. The bill had been criticized for prioritizing "reconciliation over protection"; see "Iraq: Urgent Need for Domestic Violence Law. Increasing Concern under Covid-19 Measures," Human Rights Watch, 22 April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/22/iraqi-urgent-need-domestic-violence-law>.

Simultaneously, an Iraqi female activist created the Arabic hashtag #kul yawm Malak (every day there is Malak) to highlight how Malak's tragic story fit into a pattern of gender-based violence in Iraqi society. Hashtags help "organize" similar emotions into "territories" in which bodies are aligned with each other.¹⁵ Under both hashtags, specifically the latter, Iraqi women shared experiences of domestic abuse.

Several women and girls contacted the activist behind the hashtag and reported having been subjected to different forms of domestic abuse. Through the hashtag and private conversations with the female activist, women established emotional connections, building trust, seeking support, and enacting politics of care.¹⁶ In an interview with me, the activist who created the hashtag stated that as a social worker she had never been able to reach comparable numbers of girls due to offline security concerns as well as social and political barriers: "But on Twitter, I could reach them in seconds. I never thought the hashtag would soon be trending, allowing me to connect to many women." The connection enabled the activist and other women to validate and share their experiences.

In addition to hashtagged and private conversations, Iraqi and other Arab women activists benefited from the voice feature of the newly opened social media platform Clubhouse. I attended and participated in several chat rooms organized by Iraqi women activists, whether living inside the country or in the diaspora. In these chat rooms, we experienced a collective rage at the tragic death of Malak and other cases of gender-based violence that often go under the radar. Our shared feelings emotionally brought us together around one cause. Clubhouse's voice feature has helped grant authenticity and credibility to women activists, many of whom write under pseudonyms to protect their safety. It also has incrementally enabled them to build a visible feminist identity online.

Online Feminism as Constructive Resistance

Online feminist activism can be seen as a form of "constructive resistance."¹⁷ Contrary to noncooperative forms of resistance, constructive resistance is less aggressive and is not necessarily loud. It can be quiet or implicit, occurring at individual or collective levels in offline or online spaces.¹⁸ A key feature of constructive resistance is its potential for producing new discourses, institutions, or personalities that can contribute to resisting hegemonic narratives. In Iraq, as elsewhere, domestic violence has long been viewed as a private or family matter. Iraqi law grants husbands and parents the right to discipline their wives and children. The family is seen as an almost sacred institution that cannot be questioned, and women's safety within the domestic realm is of little concern.

Therefore, when Iraqi women publicly spoke about domestic violence and called for social and legal change, they collectively challenged the sanctification of the family and defied existing societal pressures and patriarchal norms.¹⁹ According to the activist who launched the above-mentioned hashtag, the social media campaign managed to raise awareness among women and men, many of whom supported the campaign and called for legal change. In response to social media pressure, the controversial 2019 anti-domestic violence bill was approved by the Council of Ministers and transferred to parliament. However, no vote ever

¹⁵ Flowers, "Affective Politics."

¹⁶ Carrie A. Rentschler, "Bystander Intervention, Feminist Hashtag Activism, and the Anti-Carceral Politics of Care," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 4 (2017): 565–84.

¹⁷ Mona Lilja, "Theoretical Suggestions for Future Research on Constructive Resistance: Strategies of Representation of the Japanese Civil Society," *Journal of Political Power* 13, no. 2 (2020): 217–32; Mona Lilja, "Pushing Resistance Theory in IR Beyond 'Opposition': The Constructive Resistance of the #MeToo Movement in Japan," *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 1 (2022): 149–70.

¹⁸ Majken Jul Sørensen, "Constructive Resistance: Conceptualising and Mapping the Terrain," *Journal of Resistance Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 49–78.

¹⁹ "Commentary on the Draft Law on Anti-Domestic Violence in Iraq," Human Rights Watch, 9 March 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/19/commentary-draft-law-anti-domestic-violence-iraq>.

took place, as Islamist parties vehemently opposed the law and accused it of “disintegrating the unity of the family.”²⁰ Despite the failure to bring about legal change, women’s online activism produced new feminist collectives, a key feature of constructive resistance, like the group “Team of Basra’s Feminists,” which is the focus of the following section.

The Team of Basra’s Feminists: Collaboration, Fragmentation, and Challenges

A few months following the online campaign against domestic violence, Iraqis were shocked by the assassination on August 19, 2020 of Riham Ya‘qub by gunmen in the southern province of Basra. Except for her minor participation with other women in the 2018 Basra protests, Riham had refrained from political engagement or activism. The main reason for her assassination was an erroneous report by the Iranian news agency Mehr that accused a group of young people, including Riham, “who participated in the Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program [IYLEP, funded by the US Embassy in Baghdad] of being agents in a US plot to orchestrate violent protests in Basra.” The accusation was part of a broader conspiracy theory that continues to circulate in Iraq.²¹ Pictures allegedly showing Riham participating in demonstrations with other women activists were spread by the Iran-aligned media, and her name was subsequently posted “on a monitoring list held by security forces in Basra.”²² Riham’s name was removed from that list at the request of her family, possibly capitalizing on tribal networks, and Riham immediately disengaged from any political activities, offline and online. But such precautions did not save her life. My Basrawi interviewees argued that Riham was assassinated because she had a social impact as a feminist, even in less overtly political formats: Riham had opened the first all-women gym in Basra, and it became a gathering spot for socially conscious women. According to one of my Basrawi interviewees, “Riham was a feminist icon and a role model for women in Basra. She used to encourage women to walk in Basra’s streets and organized several outdoor activities for us. She turned her gym into a feminist hub and used to explain to us everything about the feminist movement. She was also active on social media, especially Instagram, and had many followers.” According to one interviewee, “militias feared that Riham would raise awareness and create a new generation [of feminist activists]. So, they killed her.”

But murdering Riham did not silence young women activists from Basra or elsewhere in the country. Illustrating the entanglement between online embodied resistance and offline activism, young Basrawi women started organizing regular small-scale demonstrations in protest of gender-based violence and patriarchal legal discrimination. Such events resulted in the formation of the Team of Basra’s Feminists (Fariq Nasawiyyat al-Basra), a group of young Basrawi female activists. A founding member of the group interviewed by the author stated that “our team was a seed grown out of our participation in Tishreen and inspired by Riham. We soon realized that we needed to put our efforts together and focus our attention on women’s struggle for their rights. So, we formed the team in April 2021.” The group split up after several months due to internal disputes. One branch continued to work under the name Basra Feminist Team (Fariq al-Basra al-Nasawy, BFT) online and offline, engaging with schools and universities. The second (less active) branch kept the group’s original name.²³

This split is emblematic of a fragmentation characterizing Iraqi feminist resistance due to several factors. Although polarization among political activists is a common phenomenon, it tends to intensify in online spaces. The discourse around sexual freedom is embraced by

²⁰ Mustafa Saadoun, “Islamist Parties Challenge Iraqi Domestic Violence Draft Law,” *al-Monitor*, 17 August 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/08/iraq-parliament-domestic-violence-islamic-parties.html>.

²¹ Benedict Robin-D’Cruz, “Why Did They Kill Riham Yacoub? The Murder of a Civil Society Activist in Basra,” *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 24 August 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/08/24/why-did-they-kill-riham-yacoub-the-murder-of-a-civil-society-activist-in-basra>.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Basra Feminist Team (@Basra_fem), فريق البصرة النسوي (@basra_fem), Twitter; Team of Basra’s Feminists (@fob_team), فريق نسويات البصرة (@fob_team), Twitter.

some diasporic feminists, but often criticized for putting local feminists in a vulnerable position and even endangering their lives, because it gives their opponents an excuse to demonize women's activism inside the country. Another contributing factor relates to online misogynistic attacks that push many feminists to change their mode of action to protect themselves. For instance, the activist who had created the hashtag “#Everyday there is Malak” deleted her account and temporarily withdrew from Twitter after facing online threats. At the time of writing this essay (May 2023) she tweets from a private account using only her first name. Deleting her activist account and limiting her audience is not an uncommon act, but reflects the intense pressure Iraqi feminists are facing both online and in the real world: several women activists interviewed by the author concealed their real names and used pseudonyms or anonymous identities to avoid censorship and harassment.

Islamists and conservative groups also attack feminism as an imported phenomenon that contradicts Islamic values and principles. This hostile antifeminist discourse negatively impacts online activism. Clubhouse feminist chat rooms were disrupted when misogynistic antifeminist rooms were opened by groups affiliated with militias. Moreover, many male Tishreen activists have failed to support their feminist compatriots and do not take feminism seriously, thereby contributing to the misogynist backlash that has pushed feminists to quit Clubhouse. Several Iraqi feminists have explicitly blamed some male activists of the Tishreen movement for mocking, shaming, and smearing them, thereby widening the rift between feminist activists and the Tishreen revolution.²⁴ One female activist who was active on Clubhouse told me that not all Tishreen male protesters were hostile to them, but lamented their neutrality: “They could not stop or stand up to those who attacked us.”

Although such threats and counter-mobilization campaigns have not deterred women activists, they have disrupted their activism and online campaigns. For instance, local campaigns against Article 398 of the Iraqi Penal Code (which allows for the reduction of rapists' sentences if they marry their victims) faced severe online backlashes.²⁵ In June 2022 a social media feminist mobilization calling on authorities to cancel a concert by Saad Lamjarred, a Moroccan singer accused of multiple cases of sexual abuse, developed into a campaign against Article 398 that lasted for weeks.²⁶ Young women and a few men supported it by tweeting under the Arabic hashtag #*Ilgha' al-mada 398* (Abolish Article 398). A crucial element of constructive resistance is its creativity, as illustrated by a popular young female vlogger who produced a short video featuring herself acting as a rape victim and highlighting the negative emotional and psychological impact that a forced marriage to her rapist has on the victim. In the video, disseminated through her Instagram and Twitter accounts, she describes Article 398 as “honoring” the rapist by allowing him to marry his victim.²⁷ The

²⁴ Hiba al-Na'ib (hiba_alnnaib_9), Twitter post, 15 December 2022, “ماشفت صديين يطعنون بالبنط الصدرية حتى لو اختلفت” وياه بالمبادىء ولاشفت ولاشي بسب ويشتم الولاية بس شفت #التشريحي الي يدعي الحرية وكتاب علماني وليبرالي وخر كاعد ركية ونص لبناتنا سواء صدرية او نسوية يحرض. عليها ويحاول يعهرها ويسرق نضالها ومجهودها #للبيض #العراق سيد نفسه

²⁵ Dima Yassine, “In Iraq, Violence against Women Comes in Many Shapes and Forms,” Assafirarabi, 4 August 2022, <https://assafirarabi.com/en/46761/2022/08/04/in-iraq-violence-against-women-comes-in-many-shapes-and-forms>.

²⁶ “Iraq wants Moroccan Singer Saad Lamjarred's Concert Cancelled Over Sexual Assault Claims,” The New Arab, 23 May 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/news/moroccan-singer-sex-assault-claims-faces-campaign-iraq>. The campaign against Lamjarred's concert was soon hijacked by powerful armed groups who protested outside the concert venue in Baghdad, canceling it by force. Militias most likely exploited the incident to settle scores with the organizing body while performing an Islamist identity. See Oumaima Latrech, “Iraqi Clerics Protest, Cancel Saad Lamjarred's Concert in Baghdad,” Morocco World News, 10 June 2022, <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2022/06/349610/iraqi-clerics-protest-cancel-saad-lamjarreds-concert-in-baghdad>. Even though the militias' moral outrage was sheer hypocrisy and known to most Iraqis, the movement soon backfired, with many on Iraqi social media accusing the female activists of legitimizing militias by allowing them to impose their power and control.

²⁷ Sarawi.abd (@Sarawi_abd), “*Ilgha' al-mada 398* alaty tukarim al-mughtasib bitawziji min al-dhahiya” (Abolishing article 398 which honors the rapist by making him marry the victim); sarawi.abd, “الغاء مادة 398 الي تكرم المعتصب بتزويجه من الضحية#” Twitter post, 13 June 2022, <https://t.co/wulFbpZYf9>.

video went viral and was widely applauded for its ability to communicate the message effectively and innovatively.

Yet, although the campaign attracted new supporters, it also met a lot of criticism. For instance, Safa al-Lami, director of the human rights unit of the Lawyers Bar Association, vehemently advocated in favor of the law and in a TV interview rhetorically asked: “How could the victim live without her rapist?”²⁸ When activists expressed their anger at this cynical remark, al-Lami dismissed them sarcastically, using sexist jokes.²⁹ Other activists, too, have faced bullying, slander, and other threats online. The personal Twitter account of a leading activist was suspended due to negative reports. Collective efforts against article 398 were thereby blunted, and the campaign soon ebbed.

The antifeminist atmosphere in Iraq reached an unprecedented level in December 2022, when a new media outlet launched a campaign against feminists and women’s rights groups, including BFT, accusing them of corrupting society. In one particularly inflammatory video, women activists were equated with terrorist groups such as ISIS and Shi’a militias.³⁰ Such campaigns promote antifeminism in Iraq by deliberately misrepresenting feminism and striving to alienate activists from society.

Conclusion

Constructive feminist resistance online offers many opportunities for women activists to call out domestic violence, harassment, and rape culture. By forming connections and networks, women establish solidarity and mutual support, raising feminist consciousness. Indeed, “mainstreaming” feminism in Iraq is viewed by all activists I have interviewed as an invaluable outcome of online feminist activism.³¹ It has enabled the construction of a distinctive feminist identity that galvanizes the voices of Iraqi women and their experiences after decades of marginalization.

However, disagreements among activists have led to organizational fragmentation, and growing online misogyny and antifeminist campaigns by a range of actors such as militias, media agencies, and even some male activists in the Tishreen movement have negatively impacted women’s mobilization. Accumulated fear, anxiety, and frustration can impede and restrict women activists’ efforts. Despite these challenges, Iraqi women activists have been creative in adapting their tactics. Tweeting under pseudonyms conceals their identity but keeps their voices audible, enabling them to reclaim their online spaces.

The activists I have interviewed deplore the lack of solidarity among their fellow feminists, whether locally or regionally. On the local level, individual activists criticize women’s rights organizations for failing to adequately reach out to Iraqi women from diverse backgrounds and accuse them of partly replicating hegemonic masculine discourses. Regionally, Iraqi feminists feel they are still marginalized after decades of social and political isolation, particularly under the Ba’thist regime and UN sanctions. Furthermore, it is hard for women to keep their activism, both online and offline, coherent or organized in a militarized environment like Iraq, where powerful militias and armed groups control public life and spaces and regularly target male and female activists, begging questions about the future of the women’s rights activism in Iraq.³²

²⁸ Yassine, “In Iraq.”

²⁹ Zahra, زهرة (@Zahrhly), “صور محادثات تثبت تهمة التحرش الجنسي للمحامي ومدير حقوق الإنسان في نقابة المحامين صفاء اللامي بالبناات,” Twitter post, 8 June 2022, <https://t.co/gEhLSjtqHr>.

³⁰ “Al-haraka alnaswiya fi al-iraq: tamkyn lil mar’a am tafkyk lil mujtama?” Feminist Movement in Iraq: Women’s Empowerment or Society’s Destruction? YouTube video, SMC, accessed 10 December 2022, : العراق : الحركة النسوية في المجتمع “أم تفكيك للمجتمع”.

³¹ Also, see Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller. “# MeToo and the Promise and Pitfalls of Challenging Rape Culture through Digital Feminist Activism.” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 25, no. 2 (2018): 236–46.

³² Lina Khatib, “Iraq’s New Government Puts Iran-Backed Militias in the Driver’s Seat,” *World Politics Review*, 1 November 2022, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/iraq-iran-relations-militias-politics-government>.

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