

Reviewed by Lauren Williamson, Research Associate, U K Defence forum

Although full of provocative insights that highlight the tribulations of women in Palestine and Iraq, the collection of essays in *Women and War in the Middle East* falls short in offering a comprehensive picture of gender issues in Middle Eastern conflict zones. Several key authors capture the essence of the gendering processes that occur during conflict and reconstruction, but the book's structure limits it to optimal use as an academic reference rather than a resource for policymaking.

*Women & War in the Middle East* by Nadje Al-Ali & Nicola Pratt is published by Zed Books (c) 2009

The impact of war on women has been substantially overlooked in the past, as researchers and academics have favoured assessing and writing on the more direct and easily measurable effects of conflict. The success of *Women in War in the Middle East* is in its alternative approach in conceptualising conflict, examining all the stakeholders and bringing to the fore the numerous and often very subtle ways that women are impacted by crises. But the title of the book mistakenly prepares the reader for a book about women in war in the Middle East; in reality, it focuses entirely on the plight of women in Iraq and Palestine.

The editors attribute the decision for this narrow focus to the relevance of the conflicts, as they are ongoing, and the fact that they have been the most enduring in the region. But the compilation of seven works from different feminist scholars fails to tie in other conflict examples, even as a reference or point of comparison to Palestine and Iraq. Weaving in examples of women in other nations embroiled in conflict, such as the women's peace movement in the recent Liberian civil war or the impact of the Yugoslavia conflict on Muslim women, would help the editors in justifying their emphasis on Iraqi and Palestinian women's experiences.

The back cover promises the reader completely "original empirical research." The three sections of the book are broken down into themes addressing the impact of neoliberalism on women's issues, the role of transnational activism in conflict and reconstruction, and a view of gender processes and citizenship during the post-conflict phase.

V. Spike Peterson's "Gendering Informal Economies in Iraq" provides an outstanding opening to the book's content. If traditional scholarship marginalizes gender in conflict, her contribution does precisely the opposite. It looks at how in times of conflict certain economies emerge including 1) combat economies where men engage in violence and often experience a loss of identity in losing their traditional role as provider and protector, 2) criminal economies that become the dominant profit creation network through illicit smuggling of drugs, goods, and people, and 3) coping economies wherein community members, particularly women, congregate and develop alternative methods for maintaining the social cohesion of the war-ravaged community. Peterson's detailed look at the various and subtle ways in which women can be affected by war is alarming.

Sophie Richter-Devroe's research includes a thoughtful history of Palestine's occupation and casts a light on the inefficiencies of using NGO's as a channel for creating pro feminist movements. Her critical analysis of UN Security Council resolution 1325 demonstrates that its top-down approach to gender mainstreaming has estranged certain feminist groups, like the resistance movement in Palestine, and has failed to result in a healthy collective action among women. The result of the mandate has been the imposition of superficial policy measures, such as gender quotas, which only mask the deep symptoms of gender inequality.

Martina Kamp's "Fragmented Citizenship" takes these ideas one step further. Her assessment of the west's historical involvement in Iraq and its involvement in the creation of Iraq's new constitution indicates that Iraq's colonial ties have substantially influenced identity formation in the country. Kamp considers processes of cooperation, subversion and resistance that have occurred and

are occurring among Iraqis as they modify their definitions of ethnicity, religion and ideology based on the massive changes and disruptions that have occurred in their society. As "war traumatized conscripts" have begun to take out their aggression on women at home and the crumbling of the public sector has ousted thousands of women from their jobs, Kamp details how shifts in power relations continue to evolve. The end verdict contradicts the typical narrative in which the west rescues Muslim women from domination by Islamic men. In fact, since western interventions (in all forms) began neither Palestinian nor Iraqi women are better off, and in many ways their situation has worsened, she argues.

An in depth discussion on faith and its ties to feminine identity is lacking, even though the book discusses the impact of Islam on the legislative process, particularly in Iraq. Also missing is consideration of how local women in Palestine and Iraq have viewed or interacted with westernized women who serve in combat or support operations during the conflicts.

Women in War in the Middle East is poignantly self aware at times, mentioning the perverse incentive of feminist scholars to keep their research separated and "ghettoized," while noting the need to incorporate research on masculinity and export feminist scholarship to "gender-blind" studies such as international relations. Yet it seems the editors do not realize the book contributes to this same problem it criticizes. It conclusively argues that gender mainstreaming must move "from paper to policy," but the book's academic jargon and superfluous explanations of minutia alienates the very audience that could help in reforming civil society in a way that allows such prized feminist ideals to flourish.

For example, several authors spend excessive time dissecting and clarifying the meanings of words like "transnationalism" and the various uses and contexts of certain language. Understanding semiotics is important, but excessive focus on details muddles the message of the book. While it does offer a fresh glance at women's side of two specific Middle Eastern conflicts, the bottom line is that the book promises more than it delivers.

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