MIDDLE EAST INITIATIVE

The Protest to Parliament Pipeline:

Investigating the Link Between Activism and Women's Political Participation in Iraq

Marsin Alshamary

HARVARD Kennedy School
BELFER CENTER

50 YEARS
OF RESEARCH, POLICY, AND LEADERSHIP

PAPER
JULY 2024

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About the Author

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About the Middle East Initiative

Established in 1998, the Middle East Initiative (MEI) is Harvard University's principal forum for policy-relevant research and teaching on the contemporary Middle East and North Africa. MEI convenes policymakers, scholars, and intellectuals from the region and beyond to expand our understanding of this complex part of the world and to contribute to the search for solutions to its most pressing policy challenges. Through the integration of scholarly research, policy analysis, executive and graduate education, and community engagement, MEI aims to advance public policy and build capacity in the Middle East to enhance the lives of all the region's peoples.

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Campaign posters for upcoming early parliamentary elections are displayed in Baghdad, Iraq, Sunday, Oct. 3, 2021. (AP Photo/Hadi Mizban)

1. Introduction

Iraq is expected to hold its seventh parliamentary election in October 2025, defying many expectations about the longevity and durability of the post-2003 democratizing state.[1] The previous election, held in October 2021 as an early election, succeeded in shaking the stagnant political system by introducing a new electoral law that paved the way for independents, new political parties, and female candidates to succeed. The 2021 election also benefited from international expertise, including the efforts of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), whose mandate will expire by the end of 2025, giving it one final opportunity to support Iraqi democracy. Like many other international organizations, UNAMI dedicated some of its efforts to bolstering the usually neglected foundations of democracy: civil society and women's political participation. In many ways, the 2021 election was a success story for both civil society and women's political participation, but it remains to be seen whether this success will be replicated in the upcoming October 2025 elections. This paper examines the linkages between civil society, women's political participation, and democratization in post-2003 Iraq and highlights the ways in which Iraq's stability and democratization can be sustained.

In the lead up to the October 2021 federal elections, the streets of Baghdad were lined with posters of female candidates. Some were familiar faces with clear political baggage and history, like Sara Iyad Allawi, the daughter of Iraq's former prime minister. Others were former members of parliament from entrenched political parties. What drew the most excitement from observers, however, were the campaigns of civil activists who had participated in the October protest movement. Locally known as the "Tishreen Movement", the October protest movement was the largest sustained protest movement in post-2003 Iraq's history, which took place between October 2019 and February 2020 and involved the participation of hundreds of thousands across multiple cities[2] The protest movement succeeded in pushing for a new electoral law and in holding early elections, though the elections were only six months ahead of the traditional schedule by the time they were organized. These women represented a new type of female candidate, one without ties to the entrenched elite and who represented

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Iraq's youthful society. Their participation, like the protest movement itself, heralded to many a new era of Iraqi politics, one where younger women were confident enough to run for office and who relied on grassroots campaigning and social media.[3]

Ultimately, Iraqi women were able to win 95 seats in the 329-seat legislature. Although Iraq has a constitutionally imposed 25% quota of female representation in parliament, 57 of those women were able to win their seat without the quota.[4] From the outside looking in, it appeared as though Iraq was making gains in women's political participation. One of the goals of this article is to investigate the longevity and quality of these gains.

Scholars and practitioners alike draw an implicit link between democratization and female participation in politics.[5] In December 2011, the United Nations' General Assembly adopted resolution 66/130 which is dedicated to reaffirming the importance of women's political participation and which "calls upon States in situations of political transition to take effective steps to ensure the participation of women on equal terms with men in all phases of political reform, from decisions on whether to call for reforms in existing institutions to decisions regarding transitional governments, to the formulation of government policy, to the means of electing new democratic governments."[6]

In the early days of post-invasion Iraq, this resulted in the female quota as well as support for civil society organizations (CSOs) working on advocacy, human rights, and women's rights.[7] Nearly two decades later, however, the link between female political participation and democratization is, in practice, tenuous. More and more, the Iraqi public views the quota system as empowering candidates who are associated with entrenched political parties and to do little for the populations they are intended to support.[8] The tendency for traditional political parties to use quotas to their advantage is not unique to Iraq and exists in both democracies and autocracies.[9]

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Much of the cautious optimism surrounding the 2021 elections was due to the presence of female candidates who had emerged from the protest movement, and

by extension, from civil society. The belief was that perhaps these women would be able to avoid the traps of being instrumentalized by powerful politicians and would not trade women's issues for their own political survival. The narrative surrounding the protest movement's gender-empowering and equalizing spaces fueled this hope.[10] After all, it made sense that women who emerged from civil society and protest were not the same as those who were recruited by entrenched political parties.

In this article, I examine the origins of this new class of female political leadership and the role Iraqi civil society played in its emergence. In the process, I detangle various manifestations of civil society, from the traditional women's organizations to new youth-driven political groups.[11] I examine the challenges that women face in political participation in Iraq and discuss what the nature of their participation means for the future of democratization in the country.

I do so by relying on semi-structured in-person interviews with women from across the political spectrum in Iraq, including first-time candidates from the protest movement as well as hardened politicians from established political parties. In addition, I spoke to scholars from Iraqi academia and members of civil society. I also analyze the media output of political campaigns and politicians across various social media platforms. Additionally, I rely on a rich body of secondary scholarship that has paved the way for understanding the roots and rewards of women's political participation globally. I discuss this groundwork in the subsequent section of this report, where I define key terms and situate the Iraqi context.

Following this, I turn to the substantive findings of my research. First, I raise the question: has Iraqi civil society produced female political leadership? I detangle the various manifestations of civil society in Iraq and discuss how they can – in theory – promote women's political participation. Following this discussion, I examine the relationship between the protest movement, civil society, and women's political participation. Finally, I examine the challenges that women face when seeking public office and how these challenges differ for women across the political spectrum. I conclude with a series of policy recommendations derived from the findings and directed at Iraqi government institutions as well as international organizations who seek to enhance women's political participation and democratization in Iraq, with an eye towards the next federal elections.

2. Setting the Scene

2.1 Defining the terms

Many scholars espouse a very broad definition of women's political participation. For example, Koens and Gunawardana define it as "the multitude of ways in which women challenge and redistribute unequal power dynamics that limit agency in their daily lives. It is viewed as both a formal agentic act (for example, contesting elections) and an informal agentic act (for example, participating in a rally to advocate for more women contesting elections)."[12] Although the common definitions include a variety of behaviors, this paper focuses specifically on the experiences of women who are seeking a seat in the Iraqi parliament, regardless of whether or not they were able to win the elections. Thus, this is not a study of quotas or of descriptive representation, both of which are discussed and assessed, but a study of the political activism and interest demonstrated by Iraqi women when they choose to run for parliament. When the term "political participation" is used in this paper, it refers specifically to the process of running for parliament. In other contexts, and in the literature, political participation includes several activities, including for example, voting, monitoring elections, volunteering, advocating, and protesting.

2.2 Lessons learned about Women's Political Participation

The extensive literature on women's political participation has investigated many relationships, including the impact and motivation behind parliamentary quotas, the relationship between regime type and women's political participation, the relationship between regime transition, specifically democratization, and women's political participation, as well as a host of other interesting variables including international aid, economic development, and well-being outcomes. The literature has utilized a variety of methods – from the ethnographic to the statistical – and has examined global and regional patterns, as well as delved deeply into country cases.

For example, concerning democratization and women's political participation, research from Chile has shown that there is an opportunity window for women to advocate for their political rights and representation during regime

Iraqi National Assembly members Sameria Aziz, left, and Sameria Fatheil chat before the parliament's morning session in Baghdad Saturday, Jan. 9, 1999. Iraq's parliament members urged the government to continue its defiance of Western "no-fly" zones. (AP Photo/Murad Sezer)

transition.[13] Other scholarship, focusing on sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrates that transitions to democratization after civil war creates more space for women's political representation.[14] This is corroborated by quantitative analysis of political transitions globally, which finds that specifically for a transition from civil war to democracy, higher shares of women are elected to parliament in the medium term (defined as after three elections cycles).[15] However, this research also maintains that political transitions globally, from autocracy to democracy and vice-versa, do not improve the representation of women, and especially not in the short term.[16] The lack of consensus on the relationship between democratization and women's representation represent a paradox to scholars.[17]

In some ways, Iraq is a unique case because its regime transition was orchestrated by an occupying force with its own preferences and preconceived notions about women's inclusion and political participation and their impact on democratization.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of the 25% quota was the achievement of the Iraqi women's movement and not a Western import.[18] Moreover, the quota has been in place for multiple election cycles allowing for the comparison of its short-term and long-term impacts on outcomes for women.

The literature is clear-eyed about the shortcomings of quotas and the ways in which they can be abused, including by enterprising political elites. Globally, the use of quotas is widespread, with over 130 countries employing some type of quota.[19] Many developing countries adopt quotas for reputational reasons and in response to international pressures.[20] However, scholars have cautioned against assuming that a quota guarantees greater political representation for women, as there are different quotas (parliamentary and party) and they can differ in their efficacy depending on the country they are operating in, how long they have been operating, and other factors.[21] In Iraq's case, researchers have pointed out that the parliamentary quotas have limitations as female MPs are significantly less likely to occupy powerful ministerial positions than their male colleagues.[22] Nevertheless, there are many benefits for women's legislative representation including increased representation in other domains, women-friendly policies, and improvements in women's rights.[23] In the Iraqi context, one advancement that scholars have highlighted has been the adoption of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda through a national action plan.[24] With regards to CSOs, women's organizations have proliferated in Iraq after 2003, but many of them have fallen victim to what scholars describe as the "NGO-ization" of civil society.[25]

Protests can be an alternate form of civil society organizing. Iraq's post-2003 protest movements – especially the October 2019 protest movement – were not unique. The mobilization mechanisms, the demands, and the ways in which the protests were magnified and then quelled were like many other instances of protest globally and in the region. One of the emerging themes of the protest movement was the participation of women, which some believed would translate into political participation. Emerging research from the October protest movement suggests that the prolonged participation of women in demonstration squares was reflective of a desire among Iraqi youth for greater social freedom.[26]

There is some research on the impact of protests and women's participation in protest on women's rights and political participation. For example, a study from the Egyptian Arab Spring has shown that in areas with high protest visibility, women experienced a significant improvement in their ability to make decisions

about health, socialization, household expenditure as well as a decrease in acceptance of domestic violence and FGD.27 Research from the Red Shirt and Yellow Shirt Movements in Thailand shows that women increase their political knowledge when participating in protest movements, and as a result, have greater political participation.28 The research demonstrates three types of participation: first, more sophisticated engagement within the protest movement itself; second, becoming informal representatives of their communities; and finally by formally joining politics. All three mechanisms are relevant to the experience of Iraqi women in the October protest movement.

2.3 The History of Women's Political Participation in Iraq

Women's political activism in Iraq began to develop in the 1930s and 1940s, with the development of political parties. An important figure at this time was Amina Al-Rahhal, a trailblazer who spurned social mores by becoming the first woman to drive in Baghdad. She attended law school and became the first female member of the Communist Party's central committee from 1941 to 1943.[29] Al-Rahhal paved the path for women's political participation in Iraq, a path which was deeply intertwined with civil society activism. For example, it was during this time that the Women's Committee for the Prevention of Nazism and Fascism was established, and later transformed into the Iraqi Women's Network after World War II.[30] The Women's Committee included Al-Rahhal and other pioneers as members, including Naziha Al-Dulaimi, the first female minister in Iraq and in the Arab World.[31] Many of the women's movement's earliest pioneers were also members of the Iraqi Communist Party, a trend that has only began to change since 2003.

Under Ba'athism, the women's movement (and civil society more broadly), was subsumed under the state. Thus, the General Federation of Iraqi Women was established and although it was always an arm of the Ba'ath party, it faced increasing restrictions after Saddam Hussein assumed leadership of the country.[32] The GFIW is associated with certain gains, including the literacy campaign and Iraqi women's right to vote in 1980. Although they were not remotely democratic, the parliamentary elections held under the Ba'athist regime produced female parliamentarians at a rate of 7.2% in the 2000 elections, three years before the war.[33] During the age of Ba'athist authoritarianism, many Iraqi feminists and

organizations operated either out of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq or underground.

In 2003, many of these groups resurfaced to advocate for women's inclusion in the new Iraq, including through a gender quota in parliament and through the preservation of the personal status law from 1959, which was a civil personal status law that eliminated the need for religious courts.

Since then, the Iraqi women's movement has been facing new challenges including constant threats to transform the personal status law into a sect-based or religious-based family law,[34] a co-optation of the quota they had worked so hard for, and an uphill struggle to pass a law against domestic violence. At the same time – women's participation in politics has sky-rocketed as has the number of women's NGOs. Despite these quantitative advancements, there is little qualitative gains for Iraqi women, particularly for non-urbanite educated women.

Iraq is a puzzling country when it comes to women's rights because it sometimes appears to be performing better than other countries in the region, particularly when using indicators, but the challenges that face Iraqi women are deeply apparent through ethnographic work and through qualitative research. For example, although Iraqi women find employment opportunities in the public sector and advance to key positions in ministries, they are not protected against sexual harassment and extortion. In addition, although Iraq's personal status law sets the legal age of marriage at 18, there are no real mechanisms preventing marriages for minors, particularly religious marriages. Perhaps the best example of how Iraq's legal institutions are insufficient is the issue of sex trafficking in the country. In a recent investigation on the issue, Simona Foltyn has uncovered the degree to which powerful political figures, tribal customs, and religious leaders have fueled a system that leaves women with no exit options. Government officials protect colleagues and friends who profit off sex trafficking, conservative tribal customs prevent women from being accepted back into their communities, and religious leaders tend to focus on certain subsets of vulnerable women rather than those they view as being "dishonorable". Iraqi society makes it difficult for CSOs to create women's shelters and have blocked legal and activist measures to support vulnerable women.[35]

Iraq has institutions and laws, but they are not implemented, or they are easily abused when implemented – like the quota. For example, there used to be a Ministry for Women's Affairs, but it was dissolved and replaced by the Women's Empowerment Directorate at the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers. Now, in each ministry, there is a women's empowerment office, though interviewees described it as a "joke to appease the international community."[36] In addition, although there is a parliamentary committee on women's affairs, it is seen as an undesirable position by ambitious political women. Doubtlessly, Iraq can do much better and it can rely on a foundation that was created through a history of women's activism.

An anti-government protester holds a placard with Arabic that reads, "We are a stubborn people," during ongoing anti-government protests, in Baghdad, Iraq, Sunday, Feb. 23, 2020. (AP Photo/Khalid Mohammed)

3. Findings

3.1 Traditional Civil Society and Women's Political Participation

Throughout Iraq's tumultuous history, civil society has played a vital role in connecting society to politics. At the height of their repression under the Ba'ath regime, CSOs operated underground or in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq. After 2003, CSOs mushroomed across all Iraq, bolstered by the steady flow of international aid, but only a fraction was durable and impactful.[37] The ones devoted to the promotion of an explicitly women's rights agenda were led by veteran activists, many of whom were leftists with ties to the Iraqi Communist Party. However, there were female activists and women's organizations from other walks, including religious organizations and ones rooted in ethnic identities.[38]

In theory, there are two mechanisms through which these organizations can bolster women's political participation. First, they can increase the communication and coordination capacity as well as the political knowledge of their members and volunteers. In turn, this would allow their members to have the logistical and intellectual tools to run a compelling campaign. Second, they can intentionally devote themselves to training and empowering female candidates and existing parliamentarians through workshops and trainings. Both mechanisms have been at play in Iraq, though to various degrees of success.

With regards to the latter, many organizations devoted themselves to trainings and workshops for female activists and candidates following the October protest movement and in anticipation of the early elections of October 2021. This was

Members of "Women for women International" march during International Women's Day celebration in Baghdad, Iraq, Tuesday, March 8, 2011. (AP Photo/ Ceerwan Aziz)

done in coordination and support from the international community, particularly from the United Nations agencies and democracy-promoting organizations. A candidate who ran with Emtidad in Baghdad, Jihan Al-Khafaji says:

> There were a lot of workshops. There were some European organizations providing them as well as NDI, a Canadian organization, Popular Relief, and the Amal Movement and they were all helpful for me. They gave me a lot of information. The information that they gave had statistics…It was not just for people running for office, it was for women's political empowerment. You go there and there's activists and media women and other people. There were leadership skills. I went to a lot of workshops.[39]

International organizations also supported programs initiated by the Iraqi government. For example, the National Security Advisory held training programs for female candidates in July 2021, in coordination with the Department of Women's Empowerment in the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), and UN Women.[40] I spoke with two candidates – one running with a traditional party and one running with a protest-based party– who attended these sessions, and both described them as being practical, in the sense of presenting technical information about the course of the elections, political programs and the campaign, as well as guidance for cybersecurity. In addition, the Iraqi Media Network also provided a three-day workshop for female candidates and gave them an opportunity to conduct a TV test to learn how to introduce themselves.[41]

Many first-time candidates expressed an appreciation for the skills that these events taught, though some expressed a preference for more workshops that focused on substantive topics (e.g. the constitution, electoral laws, fiscal policy, etc.) and less ones that focused on campaigning and leadership. Nour Nafea, a candidate that ran with Emtidad in Diwaniya and who, after the Sadrist resignation from parliament, became the youngest MP, told me that "what we really need is workshops with substance and not about leadership." By substance, Nafea, meant more political and economic know-how that would allow MPs to devise legislation that served the interests of the country and that could hold its ground against the experience of the entrenched parties. This sentiment was also reflected by female activists in the protest movement, who recognized that the weakness of the movement was in the lack of political know-how.[42] Some of the trainers from CSOs expressed their frustration with the lack of essential policy knowledge that many first-time candidates had.

To their credit, women's organizations in Iraq do not focus their efforts exclusively on first-time candidates or liberal candidates but reach out and welcome women from a broad range of political orientations. Many of the older women's organizations in Iraq are associated, in one way or another, with the Iraqi Communist Party, but their training and empowerment policies are not exclusively directed at communist, socialist, or liberal segments of Iraqi society.

That being said, many of the women who ran for politics for the first time did not emerge from leadership positions in these CSOs, but rather from newer organizations or from the protest movement. The ones with ties to the traditional parties credit them for "opening their eyes to Iraqi society". Nour Nafea who worked with both UNICEF and with the Amal Organization said, "through my work with civil society – including Amal Organization- I understood the ills of society. Our society has so many issues." Similarly, Fatima Al-Issawi, who ran with Emtidad in Najaf, told me "I am a daughter of the Amal Foundation, I was one of their trainees, they really supported me."[43] Other candidates sought out CSOs to bolster their own social networks, due to a lack of political connections. Some of the candidates who did not win in the elections expressed a desire to form CSOs devoted to their electoral district as a means of campaigning ahead of the next election. They believe that a CSO, particularly one that provides goods and services, would allow them to develop a good reputation in their community and would bolster their chances at winning during the next election.

There have also been instances of veteran CSO activists who have run for office. In an interview with Amal Habashi, from the Iraqi Women's Network, she complained that "unfortunately, the women who rose [to power] by saying that they were close to civil society or that they have knowledge of women's issues, they were not able to represent women's point of view or the view of civil society in parliament. They became very distant from work with civil society."[44] As an example, she shows that many of these female parliamentarians were uninterested in the women's committee in parliament and hesitant about adopting issues that were important to women's movements in Iraq, like the anti-domestic violence bill. Awatef Rasheed, a veteran activist from Basra who ran in the elections, agreed that female MPs were either disincentivized by financial reasons from focusing on women's issues (as not enough money was allocated to them) or they were beholden, despite the quota, to their political party's agenda. Dr. Ilham Mekki,

although there are examples of women who have reached parliament after work in civil society, they have consistently distanced themselves from civil society and from the goals of the women's movement after reaching office.

Anti-government protesters hold a huge Iraqi flag as they gather in Tahrir Square during ongoing protests in Baghdad, Iraq, Thursday, Dec. 12, 2019. (AP Photo/Khalid Mohammed)

a well-known Iraqi women's rights advocate and writer, explained that even feminist MPs, like Alaa Talabani and Maysoon Damalouji, got sidelined. Thus, although there are examples of women who have reached parliament after work in civil society, they have consistently distanced themselves from civil society and from the goals of the women's movement after reaching office.

3.2 Protest and Women's Political Participation

Many of the female candidates who emerged from the protest movement, particularly the younger ones, were trained at some point by the traditional women's civil society groups in Iraq (such as the organizations that comprise the Iraqi Women Network). Iraqi civil society did not organize the protest movement and were even surprised by its rapid growth and momentum.[45] Moreover, women's participation and behavior in the protest movement operated outside of the influence of traditional CSOs.[46] At the same time, activists from the protest movement credit Iraqi civil society for providing the political awareness that led to the protest movement. The female candidates who ran in Iraq for the first time in 2021 describe themselves as being inspired by the October protest movement or being born from it, but at the same time, they also credit traditional civil society for providing a basis for their training and empowerment.

The female candidates who ran in Iraq for the first time in 2021 describe themselves as being inspired by the October protest movement or being born from it, but at the same time, they also credit traditional civil society for providing a basis for their training and empowerment.

946 female candidates ran for office in the 2021 elections.[47] There were 791 female candidates affiliated with political parties and 155 independent female candidates.[48] Of these, 97 women won seats in parliament, 57 of which did not need the quota to win.[49] Although this appears to be a decisive victory for Iraqi women, the reality is that 31 of the 97 seats were for women from the Sadrist Movement and only 2 went to Emtidad (the new protest-based party), 4 to New Generation Movement (a Kurdish reformist party), and 5 to independent candidates (not all of whom were non-partisan independents). However, in June 2021, the 73 Sadrist parliamentarians resigned, and other women – including more independents and new party members – ascended to parliament. This includes the candidate mentioned earlier in the paper, Noor Nafea, who had not won a seat until her Sadrist rival resigned in June.

The protest movement expanded the political opportunities that women envisioned for themselves, including as parliamentary candidates, organizers, and observers of elections.[50] Having worked so hard on ensuring there were early elections under a new electoral law, female activists also wanted to play a role in observing the conduct of the elections. An activist with the Shams Network for Monitoring Elections, a local CSO, said that although electoral monitoring campaigns did not have a focus on women, there were nevertheless many women serving as monitors on the team and many women CSOs engaged with Shams. Women who served as monitors and women who went out to vote faced harassment in voting stations in popular neighborhoods. The activist from Shams Network told me, "My experience at the voting station was very bad. I waited two hours in line in the sun and no other women came, except a few old women. I was harassed for wearing a long skirt with a slit by people in the line and by a poll worker who asked me 'why are you dressed for a party'?"[51] Female candidates, speaking anonymously, complained of the particularly thuggish behavior of some of the Sadrists in certain areas of Baghdad. They criticized international monitors for focusing only on manageable middle class and upper middle-class neighborhoods and ignoring intimidation and manipulation in other areas. Other candidates also complained that wealthier parties were able to hire their own monitoring teams (like an exit poll team), but that independents and new political parties did not have the same resources. Thus, although the protest movement created a new set of aspiring politicians with the support of the Iraqi street, they were severely under-resourced.

To many women, running for parliament was the continuation of the protest, an extension of their cause to reform the Iraqi political system from within. In this, they differed from many other protestors, who sought revolutionary change in Iraq, and who demonstrated

that desire by boycotting the election. They were dismayed by the protest movement, and some even felt betrayed by it. A candidate who ran in Baghdad told me: "Unfortunately, we were surprised at the boycott. After Tishreen ended, we had to move to political work, I was surprised they [the protestors] did not continue this work. On the contrary, they boycotted us."[52] But it was not only voters who boycotted the election in 2021, there were entire political parties who emerged from the protest movement who chose not to participate or run.

3.3 Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Political Participation

There are shared challenges that Iraqi female candidates face, whether they are from a traditional entrenched party or whether they are first time candidates from a protest movement. In the words of Maysun al-Damaluji, a former deputy minister of culture and a former MP with a feminist agenda:

> Iraq, like other countries in the region, has a largely patriarchal society, and women suffer in their candidacy and work. A woman has to work ten times as much as a man to get a tenth of the appreciation. It is enough for a man to be the chief of a tribe to earn respect. As for a woman, she has to accomplish a lot, and she may get some respect. The challenge to her work is linked to her personal reputation or her external appearance, and she is the subject of constant criticism, even from the women themselves and the media, and this is unfortunate.[53]

There are several themes that al-Damaluji highlights in her interview that were reiterated to me by other candidates, especially younger ones. First, the notion that Iraqi women had to work much harder than men for recognition was something shared by Iraqi female candidates, activists, and scholars. A first-time candidate who had worked at the Ministry of Electricity, Ola al-Tamimi, described the challenges faced by professional young women: "people at the ministries treat you as a cover if you're a young woman, like you're empty inside."[54] A professor at the University of Baghdad added that Iraqi men have much easier career advancement, given that they are not expected to take on additional burdens of being caregivers and home managers. A woman's family must be fully on board for her to be able to make a career, especially one in politics.

It is not surprising, then, that many women who choose political careers are from political families. This is especially the case with Iraq's established parties, who recruited

and supported female candidates from their own ranks. This includes, for example, Ala Talabani who is the niece of Iraq's late president, Jalal Talabani, and four times elected MP. Having familial ties to politics also allowed women to join political parties broadly, not just those affiliated with their family. Ola Al-Tamimi who ran as a first-time candidate with the Awareness Movement said that despite her family having ties to many different Iraqi political parties, she chose to run with a new party and her family supported her in that endeavor.[55] In the provincial council elections that took place in December 2023, Al-Tamimi started her own party, Arak, and then ran as part of the Power of National State coalition that was organized by Ammar Al-Hakim and former prime minister Haider Al-Abadi.

Having familial ties to political work does not only make running for office logistically easier, but it also lessens the reputational costs associated with political work. A former MP with the Hikma Movement, representing Baghdad, explained that despite coming from a political family, her children were worried about the reputational costs of her being in parliament, but were willing to accept her decision.[56]

The reputational costs associated with political work for women are two-fold. First, there is a less pernicious cost of being associated with corruption and ineptitude that effects all parliamentarians in Iraq. Second, there is a cost that is paid especially by women who face smear campaigns that accuse them of a variety of activities and that deploy fake news on social media.

The 2018 Iraqi election was a particularly ugly time for female candidates who were subjected to smear campaigns. At least two candidates had to deal with alleged sex tapes and many candidates have become hyper vigilant as a result. One of the ways in which the government has become responsive to this, in the 2021 election, using the National Security Advisory to create a hotline with an officer devoted to receiving and addressing complaints about reputational smearing and other electoral manipulation, including tearing down posters. Some candidates praised the decision and agreed that it was a step in the right direction, but many informed me that the hotline was either not functioning or that the officer in charge took in the complaints but did nothing in response. However, electoral violence against women was reduced in the 2021 elections.[57]

This is in addition to the issues of sexual harassment that professional women face and that women who decide to run for office or to become activists must face to an even greater degree. Another young woman who was an activist and the head of a political NGO in Baghdad expressed to me her disappointment in the lack of attention both Iraqi

feminist CSOs and the international community paid to workplace sexual harassment laws, stressing that private sector development should not come at women's expense.[58]

Another shared challenge that impacts all women running for office, and which is driven by societal norms, is women's inability to access informal political spaces. Perhaps due to the high temperatures for half of the year, a lot of political discussions and decision making takes place privately in late hours at the homes of party leaders. These are gatherings that extend into the early morning, and which are deemed socially inappropriate for women to attend. There are also formal daytime occasions that are closed off to women, like men's funerals and tribal gatherings. In some highly conservative communities in southern Iraq, even the markets are closed off to women. Nour Nafea, the Emtidad candidate, spoke to me about the uproar and confusion caused in Diwaniya by her decision to campaign in the market as a young woman. She had no choice but to seek these public spaces because, as she says, "there are no spaces for women to congregate and to breathe... there are no cafes or parks [for women]."[59] These are the spaces in which male candidates' campaign, secure support, make promises, and advance their careers. These are spaces that are closed off to women. And although there are women who have managed to enter these spaces, it comes at a very high cost. As one former parliamentarian said to me in in an interview, "when we are careful about reputation, space is limited to us, we live in a tribal society. A male MP can go to tribes, funerals, he can stay up all night. You can't do this; you can't bring damage to your reputation."[60]

Women punish female candidates for these infringements on social norms more so than their male counterparts. Nearly every single candidate I spoke to told me how she faced attacks from women in her own community and how her voters and supporters were predominantly men. Most female candidates avoided a campaign strategy that was directed at securing votes from women, apart from one MP from Sulaymaniyah, who believes that the future of women's political participation lay in a women's political party.[61] A civil society observer of the election expressed her frustration with the how the Iraqi street voted, saying that they exhibited sexist standards, and opted to vote for female candidates with attractive posters.[62]

4. Conclusion

4.1 Policy Recommendations

Given the experience of Iraqi women in political participation, how can the international community – whether through diplomatic or development efforts – advance their cause? How can the Iraqi government promote women's participation? In this section, I outline a few policies recommendations that emerged from this research project.

First, the international development community should continue to hold capacity building workshops for women but coordinate substantive topics through engagement with Iraqi women's CSOs and experts.

As described in the paragraphs above, the workshops that were organized by both local CSOs and international organizations were helpful to female civil society activists and aspiring parliamentarians. Women especially appreciated the sessions that focused on substantive skills, including explaining the electoral law and policy design. Women also stand to benefit from workshops focusing on economic issues and fiscal policy. Women who emerged from the protest movement are less interested in leadership and campaign workshops, as they understand the Iraqi street well and need help navigating the political system.

Second, the international community should expand future electoral monitoring missions to popular urban neighborhoods where the most manipulation takes place and where local female monitors are most vulnerable.

Despite the UN's positive report on the Iraqi elections, female candidates complained that electoral manipulation and intimidation took place away from the eyes of monitors, in popular urban areas where members of established parties intimidated and harassed candidates and their voters. Future electoral monitoring missions, especially international ones, should expand efforts to monitor more remote areas to support local monitoring missions, particularly those that involve women.

Third, the international community should continue to support the Iraqi government's efforts to protect female candidates from cyberattacks and from smear campaigns.

Female candidates expressed a satisfaction with the protective regulations put in place in the 2021 election through coordinated efforts from the UN and the National Security Advisory. These efforts should be maintained and expanded in the future.

Relatedly and **fourth**, both the Iraqi government and the international community should work to safeguard women against harassment in the workplace and in political spaces.

Although female candidates expressed feeling protected against smear campaigns in the run-up to the election, Iraqi women still face harassment in the workplace and in political spaces. Local CSOs and the international community have fixated on the domestic violence bill, which has been stalled for years in parliament, and have not shifted their gaze to other important measures, including creating positive discrimination for women in the public sector and promoting laws that protect against sexual harassment.

Fifth, the international diplomatic community can help compensate for Iraqi women's political exclusion from informal spaces for increasing their inclusion in international decision-making spaces and setting a tone for the Iraqi government.

Iraqi women from across the political spectrum are excluded in informal political spaces where many decision-making takes place. To address this requires shift in societal norms, which will require coordinated long-term efforts. In the meantime, the international diplomatic community can help set this tone by increasing the space for Iraqi women's inclusion in international decision-making spaces.

Sixth, the Iraqi government should consider strategies to even the advertising playing field for first time candidates.

This includes, for example, financial caps on campaigns or the prohibition of certain campaign goods. The Iraqi communications commission can create a more even playing field granting candidates time on television, to allow under-resourced candidates an opportunity to present.

Seventh, the Iraqi government should forbid the presence of party representatives in polling stations.

Iraq's established parties can send teams to polling stations to monitor the situation and to assess the party's progress and ensure against manipulation. However, the presence of these teams is unfair to under resourced parties and candidates and in some circumstances can create an uncomfortable atmosphere for voters and for candidates.

4.2 **Can Women push Iraq towards Democratization?**

Despite the quantitative success of women in the 2021 Iraqi election, there is much work to be left. First, many of the women who won a seat represent the interests of established parties who have a history of sidelining the women's rights agenda. Many of those who emerged from traditional civil society have been also unable to advance the agenda in parliament due to the constraints of their political party or of parliamentary culture.[63] Civil society, however, has been able to train a new cadre of young women who emerged in the October protest movement and who made the decision to run for politics subsequently. These women were neither the predominant participants nor the predominant winners of the election, but they represent hope for change. They face similar challenges to other female parliamentarians including a lack of access to informal political space, sexism in the workspace, and reputational costs. They face additional challenges due to their positionality in the protest movement, including uneven resources and lack of policy experience. These challenges are not insurmountable, and in some cases, they are being addressed to some capacity. The struggle for women's substantive participation in Iraqi politics will continue to evolve and develop and observing how these women rise to meet the challenges of a new era of politics will be telling for Iraq's experiment in democratization.

Campaign posters for upcoming early parliamentary elections are displayed in Baghdad, Iraq, Sunday, Oct. 3, 2021. (AP Photo/Hadi Mizban)

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