

Review - Against All Odds: Voice of Popular Struggle in Iraq

Written by Zahra Ali

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Against All Odds: Voices of Popular Struggle in Iraq

By Ali Issa

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This short book presents recent popular political mobilizations in Iraq through series of reports and interviews. It is divided into two parts: Section I is dedicated to reports of the diverse protests in post-invasion Iraq, mainly occurring after 2011; and Section II consists of interviews with Iraqi activists, mainly involved on the ground, gathered between 2011 and 2014.

Section I opens with an account of the "Iraqi Day of Rage" (25 February 2011), which was followed by weekly protests simultaneous to the popular uprisings across the Arab region. These protests, which also took place in Baghdad's Tahrir square, expressed the Iraqi population's exasperation with the corruption and mismanagement of their new political elite. This description is followed by a report of the important mobilizations of Iraqi political groups: from the anti-occupation movement that called for the unconditional departure of the occupying forces, to the protests against al-Maliki's corrupt government and sectarian politics, to the solidarity movement with both Occupy Wall Street and the Syrian popular uprising. By describing these mobilizations, Section I introduces Iraqi civil society and political groups to a wider audience; groups that rarely gain media attention, such as the Popular Movement to Save Iraq, the Movement of Iraqi Youth, and the Federation of Workers' Councils and Unions in Iraq.

Section II is dedicated to interviews with Iraqi political activists, most of which were conducted in Arabic over Skype. This section opens with an interview from Uday al-Zaidi, who is not only the brother of the infamous Muntazar, who threw his shoes at George W. Bush in September 2009, but is also the leader of the Popular Movement to Save Iraq. Uday explains how and why he and his two brothers, the sons of a working-class Iraqi family, have been involved in mobilizations against the occupation and the al-Maliki government. Uday speaks of the mass protests after al-Maliki's government failed to undertake reforms promised during the "100 Days" demanded by the Iraqi street. Next, the interview with the Basra-based Hashmeya Muhsin al-Saadawi, president of the Federation of Iraqi Workers in Basra, not only sheds light on female activists and leading figures of workers mobilizations in Iraq, but also the success of protests such as the Oil Law demonstrations. Through the interviews with Hashmeya and Greg Muttitt, an investigative journalist, we learn that this law was pushed by the occupying administration, aimed to limit parliamentary control over governmental decisions on energy contracts with multinational corporations, and did not pass thanks to the massive mobilizations of civil society. Environmental mobilizations are also referenced throughout this section, such as the Save the Tigris and Marshes Campaign, which was in response to Turkey's plan to build the Ilisu Dam. Women's rights mobilizations are also tackled through the words of Jannat Alghezzi of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, highlighting the government's systematic repression of radical feminist activism.

In publishing the words of these Iraqi individuals and groups inside Iraq and linking their mobilizations with diasporic movements, such as shakomako.net and the Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative, Ali Issa illustrates the existence of a non-sectarian and revolutionary Iraqi popular movement. By showing the faces of those who resist the country's dramatic and dreadful situation with dignity and determination, Issa manages to bring some hope and positive insight

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of the Iraqi context. Through the involvement of individuals and political groups at the margins of the new political elite, this book illustrates that, as Vijay Prashad writes in the foreword, “Other stories had been possible for Iraq”; stories other than war, occupation, poverty, sectarianism and the rise of ISIS. Ali Issa privileges the voices of those he calls “the progressives”, mostly leftists, unionists, and women’s rights or civil society activists not affiliated to the new political elite. It was while working as an interpreter for an Iraqi labor union delegation’s visit to New York in 2009 that the Iraqi-American author was first introduced to this kind of activism in Iraq. Issa lives in Brooklyn, where he works as a translator, the National Field Organizer for the War Resisters League, and is a member of the Community Funding Committee of the North Star Fund.

Perhaps his desire to show another story – a story different from that constantly propagated by the mainstream media, which highlights sectarianism and Islamic fundamentalism – might have pushed Issa to privilege a specific voice: those whom he describes as “progressive”, are mainly secular and leftist activists. Other research and accounts of popular movements in Iraq could complement *Against All Odds* by showing the non-secular, non-leftist-oriented groups also involved in mass protests and popular struggles. In my own research on post-invasion Iraqi women’s activism, I have also shown and documented the diversity of women’s rights activism in Iraq: religious and non-religious, who both use vocabulary and references that are not necessarily part of the “progressive cosmology”. We, Iraqi activists and scholars, producers of knowledge about Iraq, have to be aware, open and sensitive to forms of activism that do not employ the secular or classically politically articulated (leftist) terms to which we are accustomed.

Nevertheless, as popular demonstrations have swept across Iraq since June-July 2015, the recent publication of Ali Issa’s book could not have been more timely. This popular movement was sparked by ordinary Iraqi citizens taking to the streets of Baghdad to complain about the summer heat, which was made unbearable by the lack of public electricity supplies in the country. However, this spontaneous movement quickly turned into mass protests denouncing the corruption and mismanagement of the political elite brought to power in 2003, as well as questioning the post-invasion Iraqi political system itself. Demonstrators are asking for an end to the communal-based system institutionalized by the Coalition Provisional Authority – led by the US-administration – during the occupation of Iraq. Under the slogan “*Bism al-Din Baguna al-harmyah!*” (“In the name of religion we have been robbed by looters!”), demonstrators are criticizing conservative Islamist political groups’ use of religion to justify their power and cover their incompetence, as well as the government’s sectarian politics. Ali Issa’s book allows us to grasp essential dimensions of the hidden political dynamics behind these demonstrations.

About the author:

Zahra Ali is a sociologist specialized in women and gender studies in relation to Islam and the Middle East and currently a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Chester and a research associate at IFPO. Her doctoral research untitled “Women and Gender in Iraq: between Nation-building and Fragmentation” explores contemporary Iraqi women activism through an in-depth ethnography of post-2003 Iraqi women political groups conducted in Baghdad, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah and a socio-historical study of women’s social, economic and political experiences since the formation of the Iraqi state. She edited *Féminismes Islamiques*, the first collection on Muslim feminist scholarship published in France (La Fabrique editions, 2012), which was later translated and published in German (Passagen Verlag, 2014).