

Interview - Nadjé Al-Ali

Written by E-International Relations

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Nadjé Al-Ali is Professor of Gender Studies at the Centre for Gender Studies, SOAS, University of London. Her main research interests revolve around gender theory; feminist activism; women and gender in the Middle East; transnational migration and diaspora mobilization; war, conflict and reconstruction; art and cultural studies; and food. Her publications include *What kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (co-authored with Nicola Pratt); *Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives* (co-edited with Nicola Pratt); *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (2007); *New Approaches to Migration* (co-edited with Khalid Koser); as well as numerous book chapters and journal articles. Her most recent book (co-edited with Deborah al-Najjar), entitled *We are Iraqis: Aesthetics & Politics in a Time of War* (Syracuse University Press), won the 2014 Arab-American book prize for non-fiction.

Professor Al-Ali was President of the Association of Middle East Women's Studies (AMEWS) from 2009-2011. Recently, she was elected to the Board of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA). She is also a member of the *Feminist Review* Collective and a founding member of Act Together: Women's Action for Iraq. She is currently involved in several projects with Iraqi academics and women's rights activists, with the aim to facilitate the introduction of women and gender studies and increase evidence-based research capacity in Iraq.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

My 'field' is quite broad: though I am an anthropologist by training, my research incorporates gender studies, Middle East studies and other aspects of politics. Recently, I think there has been some really exciting comparative work within Middle East studies. For too long we have been stuck with a kind of Middle East exceptionalism. Now, there are a number of colleagues who have started to do more comparative work looking at South Asia and Latin America.

After studying women in the Iraqi context for many years, I have come to a point where I feel that I can't really gain a greater understand of what is happening to women, unless I study men. In the last decade or so, there has been some interesting work on men, not just in the context of conflict, but also looking at men and masculinities, particularly in Palestine, but also in Iraq.

I have worked on war, conflict and violence for a long time, so I would like to work on love instead, particularly in Iraq and Palestine. In these contexts, people are mostly fascinated by war and violence, and although it is interesting to see how people are motivated by hate and violence, I would like to see how they are motivated by love. I want to start looking at romantic love, but you could of course extend it to love in terms of friendship, motherly or fatherly love, or love at the community level. I would like to consider questions of affection, sexuality and intimacy, and to ask how Iraqis and Palestinians think of love, how they practice love, and what channels are available to actually fall in love. Clearly one would also have to look at institutionalized love, such as marriage, but equally important is love outside of marriage and heteronormative contexts as well. I am very excited to be going to a workshop in Morocco in December on love in the Middle East.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

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I think I used to be much surer about things and with time I have started to embrace ambivalence much more confidently. I think there is a thin line – I am not into embracing postmodern nihilistic relativism of everything goes. I mean the kind of position that states that everything is relative, based on someone's positionality and that there is no truth. I do think it is important to get to the bottom of things and speak power to truth in the context of human and women's rights abuses. But at the same time, I have always been sensitive to positionalities and different approaches to things. This may be partly because of my background as a German-Iraqi with exposure to a different culture, beliefs and different ways of thinking. That does not mean that I don't have strong views on things. For instance, I was very strong in terms of my position against military intervention with respect to Iraq. I still don't think military intervention is a means of liberating people or bringing democracy, but I think I am less categorical now. I think there may be certain contexts where there is no other choice for a specific moment. For example, in the summer of 2014, ISIS was just outside of Erbil and Kurds were asking for US military intervention. There wasn't a demonstration here in London, but if there had been, I would not have been able to go out and demonstrate. I found the alternative of ISIS taking over Erbil even worse, even though I know that, in the long-term, US military intervention might create more ISIS members. So I think you would assume that, with time, one becomes surer of things, but I think I am less so than I used to be.

I used to be impressed by people who said or wrote great things, but now I appreciate it more when they translate what they say and write into daily practice. While I still think and write about big questions on national and transnational women's rights, I think where I can really make a difference is in my daily life, where I can interact with people. I try to do that as much as I can and sometimes I manage and sometimes I don't.

How are women's movements and gender issues affected during revolutionary or counter-revolutionary processes?

In many revolutionary contexts, such as the MENA region in 2011, space, whether it is on the street or in the square, is opened up initially. However, we know historically and cross-culturally that those spaces that open up often very quickly shrink again. This happens as revolutionary movements become more institutionalized, but also due to counter-revolutionary process. These processes can often zoom in on women and gender relations. I don't think it is a coincidence that we have seen an increase in gender-based violence on behalf of various authoritarian regimes, states and stakeholders, such as the military or Islamists.

What we have seen in the Middle East region over the last few years is really the centrality of body politics. For example, in Egypt during the protests, we saw that both male and female protestors would be beaten up. However, female protestors were also sexually harassed or forced to undergo virginity testing. These are very gendered ways of punishment and humiliation, which demonstrate attempts to deter female activists. I was very concerned when my Egyptian friends who were protesting said, 'We are here as Egyptians, we are not here as women'. This made me want to shout and say, 'Yes, but you have to be there as women as well'. Again, this can be noted historically and cross-culturally. We have already seen that if you don't make a claim as a woman at the same time you make other claims, you can be sure that this will be the first thing that is being swept under the carpet and seen as insignificant.

What and where did you find the most surprising or interesting developments for women during the Arab Spring? To what extent did the Arab Spring affect the perception of the role of women in politics and activism in the MENA region?

What is happening in the region is very depressing, how the moment of hope has metamorphosed into despair and various levels of violence, and new forms of dictatorship and authoritarianism. This is, again, a type of authoritarianism that cuts across secular, more militarized and religious constituencies like they did before. I think there is going to be a mixed picture, but right now there are so many bad ingredients in terms of sectarianism, ISIS, the economic situation and the level of violence.

There are a few things that gives me a bit of hope. That is the shift of many men, mainly young men but also some older men, who have started to recognize that their vision of a new society – a different, inclusive, democratic, transparent society – has to have women's rights, gender-based justice and a decrease in gender-violence as central

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issues and not just pushed to the margins. I think that is really new. Now you have men standing side-by-side with women protesting against sexual harassment. For example, men in Turkey were protesting against the rape of a young woman, which is recognition that this is a part of a struggle against authoritarianism. This gives me some hope and I think it is also a reflection of a debate over what it means to be a man. There has always been a contestation of what it means to be a man and masculinity; that is not new, but I think it is more pronounced now.

There are a number of things which have caused this. In the post-2011 context, patriarchy as usual didn't really work. Women didn't just jump out in Tahrir Square; women have been out there, getting an education and working, they have been part of trade unions, political parties, women's rights organisations, challenging the structures of the patriarchal system. Deniz Kandiyoti has been arguing that where we see regimes feeling challenged by political movements, there is often a really violent pushback. We are seeing a masculinist restoration, which is about restoring patriarchy, but also about restoring a particular authoritarian way of governing. This is demonstrated in the way states have been so violent towards female protestors. In the Egyptian context, for example, the orchestrated sexual harassment of women, the virginity tests, the way some women were raped in prison and so on, has mobilized lots of women, but also men. I think that the increase in violence, and particularly gender-based violence, has made men realise that gender-based violence is their problem, too. There is an increasing recognition that at the heart of political authoritarianism there is a patriarchy and a kind of militarized masculinity.

I remember Egypt in the 1990s when I was living there, feminists couldn't even speak about gender-based violence because it was such a taboo. When feminists raised the issue at the time, they were accused of selling out to the West and the Western agenda, and were told that 'it doesn't happen here'. Of course, that had changed a lot by 2011, more feminists were speaking out about gender-based violence, but no men were, or at least very very few men. Now men are talking about gender-based violence and they are protesting against as they see it as their issue. Of course, there are many men who are perpetrators, too. What is important is that when gender-based violence is spoken about now, there is a realisation that it does affect men as well. In fact, it is even more of a taboo if a man gets harassed or raped in prison. It is even more difficult for them to speak about it. The crackdown on men who do not fit the bill as those considered to be 'real men' – so gay men – is also linked to this taboo. This leads to another surprising and interesting development. I have always been frustrated that feminists in the Egyptian context were not at all addressing issues around gay-bashing or homophobia. Now, there is a shift amongst the younger generation and they are making that their issue as well. In Turkey, the Gezi movement and the Turkish feminist movement also address LGBTQ issues, which is something that is also happening in Jordan and Palestine. There is a lot of space opening up, which I find interesting.

There are some things which do make me more optimistic. At the moment, I think the Kurdish political movement is the most progressive thing in the region and maybe even globally. They are a political movement made up of people who do not have a state, who are saying, 'We don't want to pursue a nationalist agenda anymore, we don't want a state, we want to be included in an existing state, and we want to promote a radical democracy'. We can also see that gender-based equality is central to that. They have a political party which has male and female co-chairs and, at the same time, it is also inclusive of ethnic and religious minorities. I was in a small town called Mardin, about 25km from the Syrian border in southeastern Turkey, and I met the co-mayor who was a 27-year-old Assyrian woman. Where in the world do you have that? So there are these amazing pockets of progressiveness and hope, but they are hammered by so many aspects of the Turkish state which are cracking down violently on it, then there is ISIS on the other side of the border.

Another thing which gives some cause for optimism is the amazing creativity in the region. Of course, some parts of the population have said, 'Okay, I just want to go back to having a normal life', which is understandable to some extent. But there are signs of energy and talent. Lots of people are organizing, if not overtly politically, then culturally. There is so much theatre, cinema, poetry, graffiti and writing, but these things tend not to gain as much attention.

In your book *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the occupation of Iraq* (edited with Nicola Pratt), you highlighted the gap between the rhetoric of women's rights as a central policy of international policy makers and the reality in Iraq. What effect did this discourse have on women's rights and movements in Iraq? Do you see the same occurring elsewhere?

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Although women's rights and women's liberation were not as central to the discourse justifying the invasion of Iraq, as it was with Afghanistan, it did play a role in terms of the wider discussion about bringing human rights and democracy to Iraq. As Nicola and myself showed in our book, when we looked at speeches and reports prior to the invasion, we identified a focus on women and women's rights and liberation. This was particularly noticeable from US politicians, though less obvious in the UK.

It was very obvious by the rhetoric in the aftermath of the invasion that we had dual depictions of Iraqi women, either as victims – victims of the previous regime and victims of violence – or as the heroines and midwives of the new Iraq. That in itself was not so damaging for women, but it simplified things. Under the previous regime, the issue of women's rights was much more complex. The problem was that the moment there were challenges to the US and the political transition, the moment there was a shift away from human security to national security, women's rights and gender-based equality dropped off the agenda. It was the first thing to go from everyone's list of priorities. I don't think that is unique to the Iraqi context and can be seen as a more widespread phenomenon.

Initially the discourse of women's liberation and women's rights did open up spaces for women's organisations in Iraq. Particularly in 2003 and 2004, there was a kind of opening up, you had a mushrooming of women's organisations. Initially there was money attached as well, although this funding was often linked to conservative, neo-liberal gender agendas, which focused on creating women leaders and entrepreneurs, privatization, and democracy. This turned into what we call five-star democracy tourism, where the same group of women would be sent to five-star hotels for training. Initially many women's rights activists gained from this experience and it wasn't necessarily a bad thing. I should say, Iraqi women themselves were very divided over the invasion. Even in my own family in Iraq, there were some supporting the invasion and some who were not. Saying that, most people were happy to get rid of Saddam Hussein.

The previous regime was largely secular and engaged in some form of state feminism, though one should probably not call it feminism, but there was some form of pushing women's rights in specific areas, namely education and labour force participation. These are the typical areas of interest for secular modernizing development states, as we saw a lot in the post-colonial world in the 1950s and 1960s. These authoritarian secular regimes often instrumentalised women's rights. Because of the historical context and the horrible dictatorship which ran Iraq, there was a kind of backlash against women's rights on behalf of opposition parties. At the same time, because of the Western rhetoric on women's rights and women's liberation, the anti-imperialist opposition to the occupation and Western cultural encroachment also took place over the bodies of women. It formed part of a kind of resistance to the previous regime and a resistance to US imperialism with women at the centre. Overall, I think women's rights really experienced a backlash in the post-invasion period.

As time has passed since the invasion, we cannot just talk about the occupation anymore. It is really the Iraqi politicians and political parties which have had a huge impact on women's rights and movements recently. At best, they have paid lip service to the issue. There were some gains, such as a quota for political representation, but unfortunately the quota has been largely cosmetic. So we now find that the sisters, daughters and wives of conservative politicians end up in parliament and are not necessarily promoting women's rights.

How have women's movements in Iraq adapted to politics in post-invasion Iraq?

Firstly, I should say that women's movements in Iraq are not homogenous. There is a network, call the Iraqi Women's Network (*Al-Shabaka Al-Iraqiya*), which is quite amazing because it consists of over 80 women's organisations of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. These organisations are based across Iraq, some in the Kurdish region, but most are based in Southern Iraq, working on many issues, from humanitarian assistance to advocacy. Given the very fragmented and divisive politics of the post-invasion era, the sectarianism and tensions between Arabs and Kurds, I think it is quite amazing that you have this network. There are still tensions there, but it exists.

Different groups have adapted in different ways. Some have aligned themselves very closely to political parties and there is a system of patronage. You see quite a bit of this in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)-controlled areas where you have very few independent organisations, as many are linked to political parties. This is also the case

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in central and southern Iraq, where some groups are linked to political parties or militia. There are independent groups, some of which are coping by allying themselves with international feminist groups or funding bodies.

Initially there was not much distinction between the different kinds of funding available. I was a bit shocked in 2004-2005 when some women's rights activists were telling me that they were receiving money from the International Republican Institute. I think they were genuine when they told me they didn't know that it was linked to the Republican Party and people just didn't really realize. After a few years, I think many Iraqi women's rights activists have started to appreciate that with certain funders there are strings attached. More recently, I think funding from countries such as Canada, the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries were preferred, but there are still lots of groups who take money from USAID and organisations that are more clearly linked to more conservative, neoliberal agendas.

At some point when the situation was very violent, women's movements had to adapt by temporarily leaving the country or going underground. A lot of the difficulties for women's movements stem from security issues, so lots of meetings take place outside of Iraq. When Iraqi women's rights activists want to come together, it is very difficult to go to Baghdad, so they might go to Erbil, in the Kurdish region, or often they meet in Amman or in Beirut. It is quite sad that it is so difficult to actually come together as activists inside the country.

Has the role of women and women's activism in Kurdistan changed since the fall of the Baath regime in 2003? How do ideas of nationalism and feminism interact in Kurdistan?

The KRG has been trying to distance or distinguish itself from the central Iraqi government in many ways. For example, it has been trying to show that it is much more progressive and liberal when it comes to women and gender issues. I think that Kurdish women's rights activists sensed that out and have been trying to use it to put pressure on politicians. I think the leverage that the Kurdish women's movement has is stronger when trying to put through certain bits of legislation. For instance, they have been successful in pushing through legislation on certain honor-based crimes. Having said that, there is a big gap between legislation and implementation. So while the government would, with some resistance, go along with trying to change laws, it is not going to go out of its way to really see what is happening in society and thereby alienate many Kurdish men.

I think there has been an increasing sense of 'us' versus 'them' between Kurdish women's rights activists and those from Southern and Central Iraq. Kurdish women's rights activists don't often see themselves aligned with other women's rights activists in Southern Central Iraq. I know some who do, but most see themselves as primarily Kurdish and then feminist. The way they talk about what is happening in Central and Southern Iraq is a little bit similar to someone in the UK talking about what is happening in Iraq, so it is very far away. Part of this comes from Kurdish women stressing how much better and safer the region is for women relative to the rest of Iraq, which is true.

I published an article with my colleague Nicola Pratt about the relationship between nationalism and feminism in the context of the Kurdish women's movement in Iraq (the Southern Kurdish women's movement) from a Kurdish perspective. Firstly, you have to deal with the terminology. I think feminists, especially in Western contexts, are very critical of nationalism. I am critical of nationalism, but I think that we cannot really generalize about the relationship between nationalism and feminism. I think we need to consider historical and empirical factors, and ask the specific question: what kind of nationalism and what kind of feminism?

In the Iraqi Kurdish context, the Kurdish political movement was in opposition to the regime and female Peshmerga were fighting in the mountains. This was a political movement trying to fight for recognition and autonomy. I think it was a movement which opened up spaces for women, and although women's rights issues were secondary, it was a kind of moment of possibility. With the establishment of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region from 1991, you had a flourish of women's rights organisations, though initially it wasn't really tolerated and there was a kind of a backlash against it.

I just started research on the Northern Kurdish context, particularly the Kurdish women's movement in Turkey, which is extremely progressive. I would say Southern Kurdistan (Iraqi Kurdistan) is totally different from Northern Kurdistan.

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The context is quite authoritarian and conservative. In some ways, many feminists are complicit in reproducing this political culture that is quite corrupt and authoritarian, and they are not really challenging that. There are some individuals trying to challenge these issues, but most people are linked up with the system.

In Turkey (Northern Kurdistan), it was mindboggling to see the Kurdish political movement saying that they don't want an autonomous state, that nationalism is bad, whether it is Kurdish or Turkish, and it is particularly bad for women. This is the approach being taken by the HDP, a political party that is Kurdish-led, but not just Kurdish. That is a totally different approach to the one you find in Southern Kurdistan, where I would say most feminists are first and foremost nationalist, and secondly feminist.

I started the research on Northern Kurdistan this summer and I was hooked. I was fascinated, and very very humbled and impressed, by Kurdish feminists. I was in Diyarbakir in September and there was a violent crackdown on Kurdish cities in Southeastern Turkey. While I was in that area, a curfew had been issued, there was an explosion, police shooting live ammunition and it was quite scary. So I assumed that no one would want to talk to me while this is going on, but actually women did, especially because, unlike many other areas in the Middle East, it is not really covered, you don't have many researchers or journalists visiting. I managed to speak to quite a number of women's rights activists, female MPs of the HDP party and female co-mayors. I felt that this was a different world to the one I was introduced to in Iraqi Kurdistan.

You have conducted research on female academics in Iraq. What are some of the difficulties they are currently facing?

Female academics in Iraq are facing lots of difficulties, partly as academics generally, but also as female academics. Academia in Iraq has suffered and was really badly affected by the sanctions period. From 6 August 1990 for 13 years until the invasion, the sanctions had a really devastating effect on Iraqi society and the education system, including higher education. Books and journals were not allowed in, people were not really able to travel, and there was no internet. Many academics who had been trained and got PhDs abroad left during that time. There was a kind of brain drain which got worse after the invasion when there were several waves of targeted assassinations of academics. We don't know the exact reasons for many of the assassinations; it was a mixture, some were politically motivated, some were academics who were accused of being too close to the previous regime, and some were the wrong sect or political party. There are also accounts of academics who have been targeted because they didn't give students the right grades – that was the level of chaos. Prior to the situation in 2003, universities were controlled; you had to be high up in the Baath party to be high up in the administrative structure of the university. Now you have each militia, each political party and sect, controlling different universities. So if you are not of the right sect or political persuasion, then you're in trouble.

That is the general context. For women specifically, you have a situation where there are many female academics teaching, but many of them are teaching with only MAs and not PhDs. Female academics are kind of exploited as a teaching force, but they are not being encouraged to continue with their education, nor do they have the time to do so. When it comes to scholarships for PhDs, training abroad, or conference attendance, men are given preference. When it comes to decision making, women are sidelined regularly. The Baath regime, especially initially – in the 70s, and to some extent in the 80s – was quite good for women. To some extent, the regime tried to provide the infrastructure that would enable women to have access to education, participate in the labour force, and have a family – this is not the case now. Women are struggling because they are still very much under pressure to have children, and men are expecting them to do all the childcare and the housework, so it like a double burden on female academics.

The situation for female academics in the 70s was better than it is now. Then, in the 80s, you had the problem of the Iran-Iraq war, in which women were pushed into the public sphere, but money was spent differently, so the money went into the defence budget and the military, where, in the 70s, lots of this money had gone into the education sector. In the 90s, things unraveled because of the sanctions, but things are much worse now because insecurity, violence and gender-based violence are much higher now. Just getting to work is a big challenge.

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In some ways, I have to say, that when I did the research on Iraq and the challenges that female academics are facing, it reminded me of many of the challenges that female academics are facing in the UK – minus the violence. Obviously there is a difference, but I also see many of those issues here in the UK. Some things cut across and others are specific to Iraq, particularly the history, sanctions, violence, and the lack of exposure to the outside world. However, in terms of the gender aspect, there are actually lots of parallels.

You were part of *Tackling Trident Academics in Action through 'Academic Conference Blockades' and Act Together: Women's Action for Iraq*. Do you consider yourself an activist as well as an academic? If so, do you see it as an important/easy combination?

I consider myself an activist as well as an academic. I never thought that I could be anything else. As to which came first, it is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation. Certainly, if we take academia as a starting point for the kind of work that I am interested in, then I think it would have been very bizarre to work on Iraqi women and gender relations and to just try and speak to the ten experts. I always felt compelled to try to (a) reach a wider public outside of academic, but also (b) engage with women's rights activists in Iraq and the UK. For me, it is a dialectic. Now I have started to do some work on Turkey and the Kurdish women's movement, and immediately after coming back from Diyarbakir, I felt like I had to organize some events with the Kurdish women's organization here. It makes sense to me and I feel that it is normal and necessary.

However, sometimes there are some tensions. Fortunately, at SOAS, I feel I have the space I need to do both. In the US, often when I give talks, people ask me, 'How do you combine activism and academia?' Being an activist can be a bit of an issue in terms of the academic world, as there are certain rules of the game in terms of the publications you need to produce. You have the Research Exercise Framework (REF), and you have to publish for certain publishers and certain journals, and I feel that I have to tick that box before I have the freedom to do my other work. So far, I have managed this, but it is difficult. I just stepped down from being the Chair of the union, UCU, which I did for three years; after that I was Equality and Diversity Rep and I had to stop because I felt I couldn't really be an academic anymore, it had become a full time job.

One does help the other. I think my activist engagements and connections and work with women's rights activists, either in the UK or in the region, shape my questions as an academic and influence the kinds of issues that I am pursuing. It probably also gives me a different kind of access because people know the kinds of work that I am doing. Meanwhile, because of my academic background, in activist settings, I often play the role of challenging very simplistic black-and-white depictions of the world. I try to insert nuance and complexity, which is not always present in activist contexts, though sometimes it is difficult. I think sometime in 2005, there was a difficult moment for me. I was invited to the world tribunal on Iraq in Istanbul; it was series of world tribunals over three days, chaired by Arundhati Roy and organized by Turkish leftists and Turkish intellectuals. They invited academics, intellectuals and experts from around the world, including Iraq, to bear witness to what is happening in post-invasion Iraq. I was supposed to speak about the impact on women and gender-relations. I was speaking on the last day and, during the previous sessions, I was listening to many people starting and ending their talk with 'we have to support the armed resistance against US imperialism'. This was in 2005, when innocent civilians, Iraqi police and interpreters were being killed in marketplaces. I was in a place where I didn't feel like I could, or wanted, to do that, and it was very uncomfortable. I wrote an article at the time, '*The enemy of my enemy is not my friend!*', as I felt that sometimes it is a bit too polarized in activist circles. Here, I feel sometimes that the Socialist Worker's Party monopoly of political leftist discourses is very limiting. While challenging western imperialism, some leftists in the West tend to ignore the atrocities committed by dictators in the Middle East, like Saddam Hussein in Iraq earlier, or now Assad in Syria.

Researching *What Kind of Liberation?* demonstrated how the researcher's identity can affect the research they are carrying out. Having an Iraqi father opened up certain doors, but sometimes, in the Iraqi context, there is still a question of: what kind of Iraqi are you? When I was doing research in Detroit, there is a large Iraqi community there, in which there was initially a Chaldaen and a Shia community. The initial reaction to my presence, amongst a group of Shia Islamist women, was that they suspected me of being a Baathi spy. This was two years after the invasion, so Saddam was gone, but there was still a lot of suspicion. It takes quite a bit of time and work to get past that, so it can work for you and against you.

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What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Politics?

My advice would be not to lose sight of what really matters: that is, people. Too much of IR and politics scholarship seems to get lost in either positivist data or jargon theorizing. While there is a time and place for everything, we need to put people, humanity, back at the centre of our scholarship, both in terms of our own approach, but also in what we are aiming for.

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This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is Associate Features Editor at E-IR.