Introduction

Many sociological questions about this research on women, gender, and feminisms in Iraq were answered by my experience of the everyday life in postinvasion Iraq. For a day of fieldwork in the capital city center, we have to pass at least a dozen checkpoints as our car, driven by 'Amu[1] Abu Manal[2], leaves my family house in al-Kazimiyya on our way to central Baghdad. Such checkpoints are situated between the different areas of the capital we are crossing, and some are more imposing than others. Framed by concrete walls, a checkpoint can consist of pulling into a hall where the car is parked and the motor turned off; a soldier then passes a mirror under the car's wheels, and another walks with an explosive detector around the car. Sometimes we would have to get out of the car, and its trunk would be searched. In such cases, 'Amu Abu Manal would be searched from head to toe by soldiers while standing in front of the car, and I would be taken behind a window where my bag would be searched and my body patted down by women security guards. Such checkpoints are rare and mostly found in areas such as al-Kazimiyya, which is often visited for the al-Kazimayn shrines, or between some Sunni and Shi'a neighborhoods. For most other checkpoints, 'Amu Abu Manal would not have to turn off the motor or park the car; he would simply lower his window and salute the soldiers, who would always salute back, while one of the soldiers would run an explosive detector alongside the car as it passed the concrete walls. Passing checkpoints is more or less difficult and time-consuming depending on the security climate in the country. If there was a car bomb, an assassination of a political leader, or any kind of security-related events during the week, the circulation in Baghdad would be slowed down due to

[1] 'Amu is a familiar and affectionate word that means "uncle," and it can be used to designate a paternal uncle or an elder man, as in this case.
[2] *Abu Manal* means literally the "father of Manal." In Iraq, most adults are commonly addressed as "father of" or "mother of" their eldest son, and less frequently eldest daughter, as in the case of Abu Manal, who has three daughters and whose eldest is named Manal.

increased checkpoint inspections. In such environments, we would have to leave home earlier; if an explosion happened while we were on the road in a nearby area of Baghdad, we would have to wait hours for the soldiers to allow us through the checkpoints, especially if we were trying to cross neighborhoods of different sects.

Every day in Baghdad carries its uncertainties, surprises, and often frustrations and tensions. Baghdad is segmented by checkpoints and concrete walls that divide its neighborhoods according to ethnic, religious and sectarian belonging; such barriers also exist around governmental buildings and surrounding the Green Zone where some of the country's most important institutions (Parliament, Council of Ministries, etc.), the US Embassy, the United Nations, and other international agencies are situated. Although these walls are often covered in paintings of the Iraqi flag, scenes highlighting national unity, and various symbols of ancient and modern Iraq,[3] these art works hardly affect the atmosphere of conflict, chaos, and degradation and impoverishment. On our way to central Baghdad, between buildings marked by bullets or traces of explosions, hanging electricity wires, and dirt, I witness heart-wrenching scenes of women beggars. Often holding a swaddled baby in their arms, they would sit in the dust wearing a ripped black *'abaya*[4] or stand selling small packets of tissues to car drivers. Next to them, children whose faces have been burned by the sun sell all kinds of biscuits, sweets, and small bottles of water. In the evenings, the women beggars approach families sitting on restaurant terraces, at ice cream parlors, or in cocktail shops to sell small packets of chewing gum. Always presenting themselves as widows, these women would ask for help to feed their children. They are the only women hanging around the streets, because most women are merely passing by, entering or leaving a shop, or sitting in family-dedicated spaces. The rest of the capital's public outdoor spaces are occupied by men, and armed male soldiers and police officers stand at every corner (see Figures I.1 and I.2).

While we approach central Baghdad, 'Amu Abu Manal said to me: "'Amu Zahra, al-Rashid is not a good place to walk around, especially for a young woman like you. It is full of *muhasheshin* ['junkies'] and loose men. Let me

[3] In 2008, the occupying Multi-National Forces (MNFs) decided to erect checkpoints and mural divisions in the form of the T-walls all over the capital in their attempt to "secure" the different areas of Baghdad, which were divided according to sectarian belonging after the 2006–7 explosion of violence. In 2008, the US army, the Iraqi government, and several foreign associations commissioned a $100,000 budget for what was called a "beautification campaign" for the T-walls, which was led by local municipalities. This resulted in the creation of a series of paintings, mostly inspired by ancient Mesopotamia symbolism, all over Baghdad (Damluji 2010; Pieri 2014).

[4] A traditional piece of women's clothing in Iraq consisting in a long section of black tissue.

Figure I.1 Central Baghdad (April 2012)

drive you directly to al-Mutannabi Street." I replied: "I would like to walk around there, in Bab al-Mu'azem, al-Midan, the 'old Baghdad' and also al-Rashid and al-Nahar Street before going to al-Mutannabi." 'Amu Abu Manal was right, it is not pleasant to walk around this area nowadays, but I still enjoyed going there because of its association with my family: my mother used to work on al-Rashid Street as an accountant at the Orosdi Company, which is where she met my father, and, in the 1970s, al-Nahar Street is where my mother would go shopping for fashionable clothes and spend time with her friends. Today, these streets have been converted into depositories and wholesale shops for all kinds of products. This area of Baghdad used to be the cultural and social heart of the city; when my parents first met in their mid-twenties, this area was full of theaters, cinemas, shops, cafés, restaurants, and places for young Baghdadis to relax, socialize, and walk around. Now the beautifully white and flowery balconies and colonnades are covered in dirt, and the theaters, cinemas, and cafés have disappeared. The area has become a stomping ground for poor, lurking men and has the reputation for hosting all kinds of underground business. Despite harassing looks and remarks from the men with tattered clothing who hung

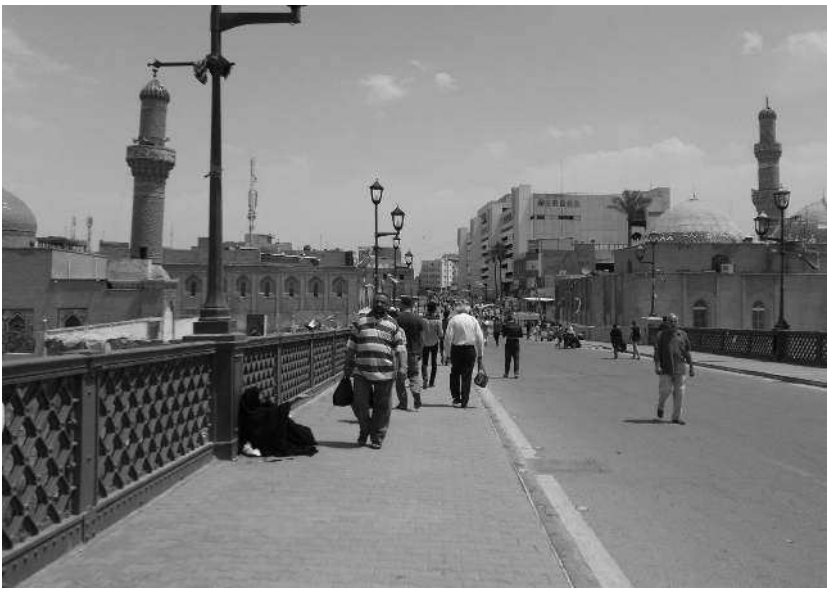

Figure I.2 Al-Shuhada' Bridge (May 2017)

around aimlessly, I often walk around there – either alone or accompanied – before heading to al-Mutannabi (see Figures I.3 and I.4).

In Baghdad, I visit al-Mutannabi area on an almost weekly basis. Friday is the day this street, which is dedicated to books and stationary, unveils its treasures and wonders: booksellers display their books along the street as scholars and students of all fields, poets, musicians, writers, painters, political activists, and idealists of all ages walk along. Usually a cultural event is organized in Dar al-Mada bookshop or in the cultural center recently restored at the end of the street, after which people sit at the al-Shabendar Teahouse and discuss things over black or lemon tea. Al-Mutannabi is the only street in central Baghdad that has been refurbished; it was nearly destroyed in 2007 after a dramatic car bomb killed thirty people and wounded a hundred. Every Friday afternoon I feel that I am on an island far away from the realities of Baghdad. In the little garden at the end of the street, around al-Qishla clock tower[5] on the edge of the Tigris River, a group of young musicians often sits at a wooden kiosk singing old Iraqi songs and playing Maqam with their ouds while others improvise verses of poetry.

[5] Built during the Ottoman period in 1855.

Figure I.3 Al-Rashid Street (March 2010)

There one can meet famous Iraqi scholars and artists, as well as meet with activists and liberal and leftist politicians (see Figures I.5 and I.6).

There are not so many women, young or old, walking around in this area nowadays; middle-aged or older academic and other highly educated men are in the majority. Most of the women I meet, apart from activists and scholars with whom I have a specific appointment, are mothers who come to buy schoolbooks for their children (see Figures I.7 and I.8).

Sadly, apart from small little islands like al-Mutannabi and university campuses, most outside public spaces in Baghdad are male dominated, particularly by young and middle-aged army soldiers or police officers. Poor widows begging in tattered black *'abaya* are the primary female figures in the streets. Even the gorgeous Abu Nuwas promenade, which is bordered by gardens and flowering trees at the edge of the Tigris River, is no longer the place for lovers. Its restaurants, where my maternal grandparents brought their children to eat their famous *samach mesguf* ("smoked fish") on the banks of the Tigris, are today empty and in disrepair. The French Cultural Center where I sometimes study is situated on Abu Nuwas, and I am often the only woman walking alone

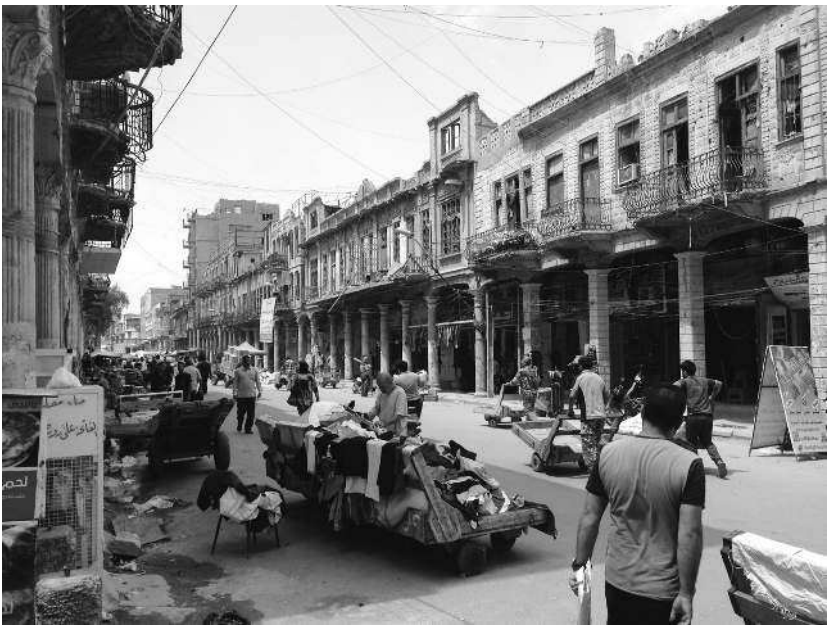

Figure I.4 Al-Rashid Street (May 2017)

there, several times being harassed by soldiers at checkpoints or lurking men. I later heard from relatives that this area had become a landmark for prostitution, understanding then why I was constantly told to avoid this area without anyone verbalizing the reason. When I asked my female cousins of a similar age about their experiences walking in central Baghdad, they said emphatically that it is no place to walk at all, especially for women. A few weeks after I settled in Baghdad, I realized that "going out" with my cousins and relatives meant going to "family-dedicated places" – restaurants, shopping areas, or homes. Often my male cousins would leave the family gathering after a while and continue the evening together in a coffee or a *shisha* place. Many cafés in the capital are exclusively open to men after 7 P.M., and most restaurants are divided into two spaces: the *shabab* ("young men") area for men and the *'awa'il* ("family") area for women.

The militarization of Baghdad's public space makes it a real challenge to photograph the streets of the capital, and I received many warnings from soldiers when I attempt to do so. I told that taking photographs was forbidden, especially in areas related to the Green Zone (some

Figure I.5 Al-Mutannabi (May 2017)

of the Green Zone is visible from Abu Nuwas and central Baghdad), official buildings, political party offices, and checkpoints. In order to evade such warnings, I bought a little pink camera that looked like a girlish telephone in the hopes that it would confuse the army soldiers and police officers standing at every corner. I initially thought the soldiers would not forbid a young woman to take random pictures in the streets, and most of the time my performance of innocence and naiveté convinced them that I was taking pictures without intention or agenda. Being a young woman and mastering the urban middle class gender codes in dress and behavior really help me to access many places without being systematically stopped and searched. A man standing, observing, or taking pictures alone in the city would be regarded with suspicion because most of the kidnappings, assassinations, and explosions are perpetrated by males. Dressed casually, I am perceived as harmless while observing and taking pictures, eliciting smiles from male officers rather than suspicion. Nevertheless, most of the time I am so exhausted by trying to move around Baghdad that I have no energy to play the role of simple-minded, girlish photographer. As a result, I take most pictures from inside

Figure I.6 Al-Mutannabi (May 2017)

offices or while sitting with other people at a café or restaurant so as not to garner the attention of security services.

From this brief ethnographic account, the first question that arises is, How did one of the most advanced countries in the Middle East and North Africa, in terms of women and men's education, work, and personal status, turn into this militarized, armed-men-dominated, and fragmented place that is so difficult to live in for its inhabitants, especially for women?

This book explores women, gender, and feminisms in Iraq. My sociological approach merges in-depth ethnography and social, political, and oral histories to provide an understanding of Iraqi women's social, economic, and political experiences that allows me to analyze the content, realities, and political significance of the different forms of their social and political activism and feminisms. My initial argument here is that women and gender issues as well as feminist struggles in Iraq must be analyzed through a complex, relational, historical, and multilayered lens of analysis that moves away from the use of "culture" or an undifferentiated "Islam" to explain women's social, economic, and political realities. Looking at Iraq's social histories from – at least – the very formation

Figure I.7 Crowd at the end of al-Mutannabi, in front of the Shahbender Teahouse (May 2017)

of the postcolonial state appeared essential to me, as much as avoiding an approach marked by the "post-2003 rupture" (Harling 2012)[6] or through the reductive lens of an undifferentiated and millinery violence (Al-Rachid and Méténier 2008). Clearly, this book is as much about women, gender, and feminisms in Iraq as it is a feminist book about Iraq. As such, it seeks to contribute to critical feminist debates as well as to propose a feminist analysis of Iraq's contemporary social and political history.

With and Beyond the Postcolonial: Looking at the Materiality and Heterogeneity of "Culture"

Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1977), significant steps have been made in academic approaches to the Middle East and Muslim majority contexts. Mostly influenced by Fanon's groundbreaking

[6] As rightly pointed out by Peter Harling (2012), the lack of historiographical continuity of many research on Iraq starting the study of its current realities in 2003 poses a serious problem to the understanding of its social, economic and political histories.

Figure I.8 Al-Qishla Park, poetry in a kiosk (May 2017)

works (1952, 1961), Said provides a strong critique of Western scholarship's tendency to essentialize the so-called Orient, depicting it as in opposition to a supposed West. In this dichotomous equation, the "Orient" is depicted as fundamentally archaic, barbaric, and inclined to despotism; the "West," by contrast, is defined as modern, progressive, and liberal. Said also shows that by depicting the "East" in essentialist and negative terms, Western writers and researchers constructed a positive representation of the West, justifying its colonial enterprise and so-called mission of civilization. Throughout his work, Said always insists on the importance of deconstructing essentialism, seeing neither the East nor the West as homogeneous realities but instead as representational constructs built on and according to the interests of European colonialism. While denouncing Western imperialism by revealing the functioning of its discursive mechanisms, in line with Fanon (1961), Said remained cautious about the risk of falling into reverse essentialism. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), he provides a critique of several forms of identity politics–based cultural resistance and a homogenized representation of the West. According to Said, "Occidentalism" means accepting the racial, religious, and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself. Moreover, Zubaida (1989) also