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# Middle East Bulletin

## Kids, Jihad and the Ballot box: Women in the Middle East

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# *Women* in Iraq and Palestine: Gendering the implications of war

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*According to one of the dominant myths concerning women in the Middle East, as the region's societies are being incorporated into the world system, women are gradually advancing their social position and personal rights. The cases of Iraq and Palestine, two societies that have been seriously affected by wars and occupation, demonstrate the superficiality and bias of such assumptions.*

**A**lthough the historical trajectories of Iraqi and Palestinian societies differ in many respects, there are some common threads that may allow us to detect the implications of war for women in the Middle East. Thus, under the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein women enjoyed civil protections which were relatively advanced for the Arab world. This had partly been a legacy of the pre-Baathist monarchy. In the early 1970s, the Baathist party established the "General Federation of Iraqi Women" (GFIW) to implement state policy, while the Iraqi Provisional Constitution guaranteed equal rights to women in various social arenas. A state-centered feminism came into place, which aimed to foster loyalty to the regime. The GFIW operated through female-based community centers to offer education, job-training, and other social programs, while after 1979 it also ran programs

aiming to eradicate illiteracy. Women were given the right to vote in 1980 and to be elected to the National Assembly and local governing bodies.

However, as the conflict with Iran wore on, Saddam (who became President in 1979) started to look for allies among conservative Sunni religious groups and tribal leaders, a development which progressively affected the stance of his regime on gender issues. Saddam began segregating schools and decriminalizing polygamy and honor killings, while he also changed many of the laws governing divorce, child custody, and inheritance rights. The GFIW stopped promoting women's rights to work and education and focused primarily on humanitarian aid and health care. Honor killings of women who were suspected of pre-marital sex or were victims of rape increased dramatically. At the same time, women, like men, were bru-

talized by Saddam's dictatorial regime, which used fear and terror to reign over Iraqi society.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 and the subsequent Gulf War made things even worse for Iraqi women. Widowed women, as well as women who had lost fathers, sons or prospective husbands in the wars became particularly impoverished. The wages of women who still worked dropped precipitously and many middle-class women fell into poverty. Impoverishment forced families to keep their female children out of school and illiteracy soared. Domestic abuse, prostitution, polygamy and divorce also increased. Moreover, due to the UN-imposed sanctions, women's access to food, education and healthcare was restricted.

Despite the rhetoric about the "liberation of Iraqi women" which had accompanied the US invasion of 2003, women in Iraq are currently facing additional problems and new hardships. They are now living within fear, as the abductions, rapes and murders have been soaring since the fall of Saddam's regime. Evidence collected from various local organizations suggests that rape is also being used as a weapon to humiliate families from rival religious sects. Women in Iraq might also die today for doing jobs that the militants have decreed that they cannot do, such as working in hospitals, ministries and universities. Moreover, women are afraid to defy the strict new prohibitions on dress and behaviour applied across Iraq by Islamist militants, both Sunni and Shia. Nevertheless, it is not



only the religious militias that are terrorizing Iraqi women. It is, to a certain extent, the government itself, which has allowed ministries run by religious parties to impose measures that are discriminatory against Iraqi women.

In more general terms, women's rights have been undermined by the country's postwar constitution, which has allowed the old Family Code (established in 1958 and guaranteeing women broad equality in key areas such as divorce and inheritance) to be superseded by the power of the clerics and the new religious courts. In fact, the clerics in charge are responsible for the rapid transformation of a once secular society, in which women held high office and worked as professors, doctors, engineers and economists, into one where women have been forced back to domesticity.

The dynamic presence of Palestinian women in the public sphere, on the other hand, has not been historically related to the establishment of laws favorable to them by an independent state, but to the challenges they have faced for long periods, namely wars and occupation. The 1st Intifada (1987-1993) came to epitomize the political consciousness of Palestinian women and their ability to organize and mobilize through civil society and popular committees. For instance, women had taken leading roles in boycott campaigns against Israeli products in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and had established underground community schools for their children. While the mass arrests of men placed a greater burden on them, they were also provided with a space for the assumption of greater leadership roles.

However, since the eruption of the 2nd Intifada (September 2000) their political participation has ebbed away. The escalation of the armed resistance has led to a noticeable absence of women from street demonstrations and confrontations with the Israeli army. In fact, women rather concentrated on family responsibilities and burdens as a result of the worsening economic conditions and the large numbers of Palestinian men who have been murdered, disabled or imprisoned by the Israeli occupation forces.

On the whole, the deterioration of Palestinian lives has affected women and girls more severely. For example, the traditionally high percentage of Palestinian women attending schools and universities is gradually dropping due to the hundreds of Israeli checkpoints that female students are forced

to cross in order to reach their schools. Women crossing checkpoints are often subject to sexual harassment and intimidation by Israeli soldiers, and as a result, many families are afraid to allow their daughters to leave the house.

Like men, women are unable to travel freely from one city or town to another, so they are often forced to quit their jobs because they cannot reach their workplaces. Furthermore, women, who represent a large segment of the labor force in farming communities, have lost their income as a result of their restricted access to agricultural land, following the expropriation of their properties, the erection of the Separation Wall (which Israel began building in June 2002) and the policy of checkpoints. Such restrictions on movement have isolated women from their own families and support networks, while they have also affected their access to provision of medical and health care.

Although it may seem paradoxical, the Oslo Accords and the subsequent massive mobilization of the international NGOs' interest in the OPT was followed by an ever-shrinking political participation of Palestinian women in the overt national liberation struggle. This was so because Oslo made the Israeli occupation the only issue on the agenda. In fact, international donors are currently forcing a disassociation of the feminist struggles from national struggles of Palestinian women, ignoring the link between Israeli occupation and Palestinian patriarchy. This has led to a depoliticization of the female movement in the OPT and to a type of 'schizophrenic existence', whereby



Palestinian women are denied the right to articulate the link between patriarchy and occupation and mobilize around it.

However, gender asymmetries and, especially, psychological and physical violence perpetrated by Palestinian men against women should not be seen as phenomena solely linked to the dominance of 'traditional' cultural codes. These are, to a great extent, directly related to the Israeli occupation, as the socio-economic and human degradation that Palestinian men are suffering due to the occupation has led to a reaffirmation of masculine and patriarchal identities in the OPT, something that is also expressed in turn through increased violence against Palestinian women. The combined and intertwined implications of the Israeli occupation and gendered violence have had a tremendous effect upon Palestinian women; it is not accidental that post-traumatic

stress disorders amongst women, but children as well, is higher than among adult men.

In contrast, however, to Iraq, where the re-emergence of sectarianism has impeded the previous social achievements of Iraqi women, the growing popularity of Islamist politics in the OPT does not seem to threaten women's progress on educational and social matters. On the contrary, Hamas does not prohibit women from working or receiving an education. Many of Hamas' female members and supporters are professional doctors, lawyers, teachers

and social workers. In fact, Hamas provides job training programs for women, as well as programs aiding women to gain both a religious and university education. Moreover, Hamas encourages women to participate in political and social positions within the framework of Islamist politics (for a more detailed analysis of the issue, see the article "Islamic Feminism" in this bulletin).

Despite the differences related to specific historical and political contexts, it is the case that in both Iraq and Palestine war and occupation by a foreign power has led to an evident deterioration of women's social position. Although this has been a process where external and internal factors are intertwined in complex ways, the consequences of international involvement on issues concerning local women have been at variance with its proclaimed objectives. ■

# A Hollow Equality: Women's Political Participation in the Middle East

**Jan-Hinrich Wagner**

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*Women's political participation in the Middle East (ME) is dependent on various domestic and region-wide factors. This article will attempt to explore the situation of women in the political systems of Syria, Egypt and the Gulf region.*

According to data from various sources, such as different UN institutions or organisations like Freedom House, as well as individual state statistics reveal a bleak image with regard to female participation in the political arena of the region. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for example, ranks the Middle East along with sub-Saharan Africa last in relation to female presence in parliament. The world



average is already as low as 13%, the entire ME has around 8% of women in the legislature. A closer look brings a great disparity within the region itself to light. The top performers are currently Iraq (31.5%) and Tunisia (22.8%), while Yemen (0.3%) together with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (both 0.0%) are the weakest. While Syria is close to the global average with 12.4 %, Egypt is far behind (4.3%). In late 2006, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) elected and appointed their first female members to the Federal National Council who took up 9 out of 40 positions.

The constitutional right to vote and to

stand for office was granted to women in Middle Eastern countries at different times. Furthermore, the interval between the time when those rights were granted and the date when the first woman actually became Member of Parliament (MP) is interesting. Syrian women received their full voting rights in 1953, when bans on the initial law of 1949 were lifted. Nevertheless it took 20 years until 1973, for the first female MP to be elected. Egypt granted the right to vote in 1956 and had its first women in parliament after the first elections the following year. Most citizens of the Gulf area do not have the chance to vote for any kind of institution. Qatar allowed women to vote in 1999, Bahrain in 2002 and Kuwait in 2005. Unfamiliarity with women in such positions seems to have resulted in a socially-based rejection of the candidates.

'Women in politics' as a subject of social discourse is exposed to a plethora of constraints. Rapid change in favour of women is not to be expected in Syria and Egypt, since the greatest opposition movements are de facto represented by conservative Islamic organisations and not by movements demanding a western type democracy or an expansion of civil and human rights. The ruling elites have to be careful in their approach towards women in order to avoid upsetting conservative traditionalists. Furthermore, data from the Freedom House institution indicate great public mistrust of the political system and of politics in general in Egypt. The same source explains that women are not barred by the constitution from political participation, but administrative procedures are prolonged and frequently prevent women from attaining the necessary documents such as an official ID or a voter registration card. As a result, many Egyptians, especially women, have channelled their activities towards the strong and fast developing non-governmental sector, which at times serves as the chief platform for democratic activists to pursue their demands.

In many Middle Eastern states, a significant reason for the misrepresentation of women in legislative institutions is the political systems itself. In Syria the Ba'ath Party together with the National Progressive Front hold a constitutionally guaranteed majority in the People's Assembly. What is more, all candidates have to be approved by the government. The only legitimate women's organisation is the General Women's Union (founded in 1967), which exists under the direct control of the Ba'ath Party. In the Egyptian case, the situation is not so straightforward. The National Democratic Party of President Mubarak has secured electoral majority ever since it was founded in 1978. This majority is not directly secured by the constitution but by the party's majority on the Committee on Political Parties that has to approve the formation of new political parties. Women issues are managed by the Egyptian National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (founded in 1988) and the National Council for Women (founded in 2000), both directly controlled by the government. Party systems are actually unknown to the Gulf States. In a number of occasions high-ranking positions across the region have been filled with women coming from the ruling elite. In most cases this has merely been a way of camouflaging the real situation. While Sheikha Fatima, wife of the head of state and president of the UAE's women's association, could be seen as one of these cases, the results achieved through her efforts in the last years seem to tell otherwise. Women hold 8 out of 40 posts in the UAE's Federal National Council, 20% of the whole labour force are women, while 40% of employees in the governmental sector are women (57% in banking, 27% in decision making).

Women are also in a comparatively negative position when it comes to gaining the wider public's confidence. Society does not have confidence in them in terms of being able to fulfil the role of a parliamentarian as seen in Kuwait, where women do not receive any credit as party members and are therefore not nominated by the parties, as in Egypt, while overall women are whole not assigned to ministerial portfolios beyond 'typically female' topics as family, education and social support. Women have held ministerial offices for example in Syria, though they have never been accredited with a portfolio without a social connotation.

Constitutionally granted equality between men and women as citizens in the countries dealt with in this essay, is undermined by interpretations of the Sharia law, which serves as a source, if not at times as the main or even the sole source, of legal codification. The belief that women are inferior to their male relatives at least in relation to the civil code, results in the widespread perception that this should also apply to the political sphere. In the Saudi case, this has led to the contradictory situation where actually only men have the right to vote, whereas the constitution grants this right to all citizens. Furthermore, Islamist circles throughout the Middle East have launched a discussion on how the application of the Sharia law should affect women, as members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood see women unfit for higher and highest political positions, while the al-Wasat party pursues a more moderate path and promises to grant women full citizen rights.

The position of women in the sphere of politics is compared to the worldwide standards and certainly with respect to the new millennium development goals. Some leaders have made efforts to proceed with the incorporation of women into the decision-making system and into the general administration. It remains to be seen whether the developments in the UAE will be promising in this respect. Other countries did make some efforts as well, while it is not clear whether these are only half-hearted attempts to please internal demands or to reduce external pressure. The issue of women's participation in politics is never does not stand on its own. It is connected to the demand for democracy, civil rights and national identity. It seems that those rulers in the region who are more self-assured and comfortable in their position find it easier to promote the role of women in the system. ■

# Women and militant Islamism: The misunderstanding behind *"the woman and the gun"*

Marina Eleftheriadou

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*What could Vera Zasulich, Ulrike Meinhoff and even Jamila Boukhreid and Sana Mehaydali have in common with the more contemporary Wafa Idris and Khava Barayeva on the one hand, and the "new trend" in Iraqi suicide bombings on the other?*

**P**rima facie evidence leads to the assumption that they share the experience of taking part in militant activities, albeit of a different kind. Moreover, it is possible to draw some intersecting (as well as dividing) lines between some of them representing particular ideological, national, cultural and social points of convergence (or divergence). The gender issue approach offers "one size fits all" explanations which disregard the way ideology interrelates with motivations to shape the "universe of action".

When the Egyptian newspaper Al-Sha'ab exclaimed: "It's a woman!!!" (in reference to Wafa Idris, the first female Palestinian suicide bomber and a Fatah member) it didn't exactly "discover Atlantis". Women have participated in armed struggles as far back as historical accounts can trace organized fighting, even more so in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the cyclone of ideas it unleashed. Islamic history itself had its first female warrior in the form of Aishah, wife of the prophet Mohammed, who led the Battle of the Camel. Aishah is a usual refer-

ence as part of the rationale used by Islamist supporters of female participation in armed struggle.

This "phenomenon", just as it's not new, it is neither unusual. According to the estimates of Mia Bloom, in the 1985-2005 period 34% of terrorist attacks were committed by women. During the same period, according to a database compiled by Yoram Schweitzer, the approximately 220 recorded female suicide bombers represented nearly 15% of all the suicide bombings around the world. These suicide bombings occurred in a variety of settings (Lebanon, Palestine, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Egypt, Uzbekistan, Iraq, India, Pakistan). Approximately two thirds of the Kurdish PKK's suicide bombings have been carried out by women. Women have participated in one third of the suicide operations attributed to the Tamil Tigers while the Chechen "Black Widows" head the list by participating in 80% of suicide operations and representing 40% of the total number of bombers. In Uzbekistan, the first ever suicide bombing (March 2004) was carried out by the 19-year-old

Dilnoza Holmuradova. The picture is completed by the recent surge of female suicide bombings in Iraq (although the first one dates as far back as April 2003) and the relevant reports and leakages, brought to light in recent months, such as a Canadian intelligence report (titled "The Female Jihadist", declassified and published in November 2007, though dating back to December 2006), which predicts that "women will play an increasing role in al-Qaeda terrorism".

What then is the "extraordinary" thing about female suicide bombers that justifies the special attention and treatment these cases attract and is it the same "extraordinary" feature ascribed to their secular, more-often-than-not leftist predecessors of more than thirty years ago? Besides the fascination of the media, this special treatment rests also in the theorizing about their motives held in academic and official circles. Via these "channels" the

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"gender particularity", with a few exceptions, is overstated. The usual logic follows a pattern whereby the initial hypothesis stems from "self-evident" presump-

tions about their position as women in a particular setting. The older belief that "men are attracted to organizations that practice violence for ideological reasons while women as a result of a relationship with a male member" has been adopted to its new Muslim setting to conclude that a woman turns to violence (and self-sacrifice, since they are mainly suicide bombers) as a result of the narrow margins of "acceptable behavior" set by a patriarchic society and restrictive religion and her manipulation or exploitation by her male environment. In this light, she becomes the direct or indirect victim, not of the prevailing political and social circumstances, but of her "personal failure" to fit into the pattern set for her as a woman in her society. Occasionally her looks are impressive (Leila Khaled as the "pin-up terrorist girl") but she never lacks a personal drama.

Accordingly, she is unmarried beyond the appropriate age (Hanadi Garedat, Haifa October 2003), unmarried and unattractive (the Palestinian -rather masculine- Faiza 'Amal Juma'a nicknamed as Ahmad, as well as Wafa Samir Ibrahim al-Bas who was badly burned in an accident), divorced (Darin Abu Issa, Maccabim checkpoint February 2002), unable to bear children (Wafa Idris, Jerusalem January 2002), accused of adultery (the case of the "peculiar honor killing" of Reem Rayashi, the first female suicide bomber sent by Hamas who allegedly had an affair with a senior Hamas official) or in the best case suffering from a child-age trauma (the Belgian turned Islamist Muriel Degauque who carried out a suicide bombing in Iraq, was said to had been deeply affected by

the death of her brother when she was a teenager).

Whenever the personal story is either unavailable or not interesting enough, the security services' sources fill the vacuum with stories of direct oppression and exploitation exercised by their male entourage. The cases of Reem Rayashi, Sajida al-Rishawi (she was arrested for participating in the November 2005 suicide bombing in Amman and was subsequently presented as an unwilling participant pressured by her husband who successfully set off his explosives belt) and the two Pakistani sisters who were "getting prepared" to become suicide bombers by their uncle Gul Hassan (of the extremist Sunni group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, who was sentenced to death in 2005 in connection with attacks on Shia mosques), are indicative. While these cases refer to their immediate environment, the exploitation can also take the - rather unsubstantiated - form of special rape units who seduce or rape young girls and then threaten them to spread the word if they refuse to become suicide bombers (there is so far no adequate evidence to prove the existence and action of such units). That kind of reasoning was occasionally used by the Israeli (as in the case of the Palestinians Aayat al-Ahras and Andleeb Takatka) and Russian authorities.

The Russians even provide a detailed description of how Chechen females are kidnapped, raped and drugged while participating in a mystic ritual where, "before a meal, she will declaim a verse from the Koran, burning the sheet she has read from which is laced with powerful narcotics", sold by their relatives (for \$1500) to the network of "suicide bomber trafficking" and driven to death by explosives belts detonated by remote control (Beslan school siege -a similar incident occurred on February 1, 2008 in Iraq, involving two mentally retarded women). These descrip-

tions go one step further beyond the already contradictory testimonies of Zarema Muzhakhoeva who was arrested in a failed suicide bombing in Moscow. The contradiction was apparent in the way the Russian officials were rolling from perspectives of total victimhood to the images of a mysterious woman called "Black Fatima" who trained and led the female suicide bombers-to-be under a special unified command. Similar training camps of "female death squads" have been reported in connection to Al Qaeda in Afghanistan (led by a woman under the alias Umm Osama bin Laden, arrested in Saudi Arabia in 2005), to the Kashmiri Jaish-e-Mohammed (allegedly operating a camp in Kotil, Pakistan), to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (led by a woman named Aziza in northern Pakistan) and to Shia "female assassination units" in Iraq, dubbed Al-Zahra groups. Special operational gender divisions are believed to exist also within the Tamil Tigers and Hamas (undertaking rescue missions, the most renowned of which in November 2006, when nearly 500 Palestinian women functioned as a human shield in order to rescue militants cornered by Israeli forces in a mosque). Despite this "image-building", the available evidence, especially as their numbers increase, suggests that they don't fit the stereotypical victimhood mould that could save them a place in the "women and children" category. Their age varies, they can be married, single, widows, mothers or not, educated or almost illiterate, western converts.

However, the women fighters are "mistreated" not only inside their gender realm but also in the wider context of militancy. The empirical "crash-tests" they go through are radically different from those of men. Questions about e.g. the distress felt by a Palestinian male, who can't afford the expenses of a marriage, are rarely asked. In these cases, what is often overlooked is that in order to participate in a militant

group and even more so die for what it stands, there should be something particularly out of the ordinary about this individual, at least because he or she escapes the average -normal- behavior. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs sustained that "in most of these cases, these women are from the extremes of the (Palestinian) society". Usually they come from the margins of society indeed. However, those margins are defined by their political and social status as well as their sex.

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The media and the state authorities are not the only one interested in these women. The militant Islamic (and other) groups themselves don't resist the temptation of an a posteriori exploitation. They have grasped the potential operational (authorities are less suspicious of women during security checks) and recruitment (as a source of shame for the men that remain inactive) benefits, and the power of a media image of the black-dressed Chechen women displaying their explosives during the Moscow theater hostage crisis. Subsequently although there was a certain social discomfort with the issue, they managed to fit this new exigency in their reasoning by "resurrecting" the woman warrior of the early Muslim age. According to this narrative, since Islam's survival is again at risk as it was in its early years, the pious Muslim woman, previously excluded from warfare, should evolve from a "mother of a shahid" into a "shahida" (martyr) by returning to the battlefield. That is the case of several "blessings" coming from Sheikh Ahmad Yassin (initially opposed to the use of women in suicide bombings) and Yusuf al-Qaradawi (of the Muslim Brotherhood) which, after establishing the legitimacy of the "woman of jihad," faded into arguments about how many hours a woman could be away from home without a chaperone.

Nevertheless, this biased approach is present in

every discourse concerning the "woman and the gun", Islamist or not. Still, though, Ulrike Meinhoff would look at her modern "s?urs d'armes" with compassion but also in perplexity. The women of militant Islam, indeed, seem abnormal compared to the past and extremely disadvantaged, although they are not "fatally restricted" by their position as women in a Muslim society. In fact the latter provides an operational politico-social setting not all that different from the one the previous generation of women militants had to face.

Their difference lies elsewhere. In other words, Fusako Shigenobu could lead the Japanese Red Army despite having being born in an equally patriarchic society, while a "Shahida" sometimes doesn't even get her video of posthumous fame (in the case of radical Islamist groups), and the best she can expect from her martyrdom is to become "the chief of the 72 virgins [promised to her male counterparts], the fairest of the fair". That doesn't mean the latter is less revolutionary. She even experiences a "feminist" outburst. But this feminism is different from that of Simone de Beauvoir and more similar to the type described in the aforementioned Al-Sha'ab editorial: "It is a woman who today teaches you ... the meaning of true liberation, with which the women's rights activists have tempted you... It is a woman who has now proven that the meaning of [women's] liberation is the liberation of the body from the trials and tribulations of this world...". In the final analysis what differentiates Ulrike Meinhoff from the latest female suicide bombers in Iraq is that the latter function and express their militancy through the confines of Islam. And then again a comparison between Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Andreas Baader looks strange...but after all they are both men. ■

# Islamic Feminism ?

## Women in radical Islamist organisations

Jan-Hinrich Wagner

Researchers: **Alexandra Karaiskou**  
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*During the last years we have witnessed the increasingly important role of women in Islamist networks and organizations. Has this segment of Arab societies established its own version of feminism? In the analysis that follows we will attempt to explain this phenomenon.*

**T**he general Western perspective on veiled women in Islamic countries is that of subjugated women under the yoke of Islamist organizations. The women's role is understood to be restricted to childbearing and preparing the next generation of mujahideen while passively sitting at home and having to follow their male relatives' orders. This situation is believed to be more accentuated the more conservative a family or society as a whole is perceived to be.

However, in the cases of the Lebanese Hizbullah and Hamas in Gaza we can see that the situation of women is not as homogeneous as expected. In both cases women do play an important role for the organizations and hold increasingly prominent positions within their ranks, even beyond those usually ascribed to female members of such networks. Three explanations are commonly identified. First of all these organisations need women in order to reach out to a wider segment of the society. Secondly, the increase of female members results in the latter's growing awareness of their importance for the networks and as a consequence they demand that this ought to be mirrored in a rise of women in the organizational hierarchy. Third, a number of women rights activists found refuge with the Islamists, where they are able to operate without being perceived as Western agents or feeling marginalized by their society.

Apart from the above, there are specific reasons which apply to each organization, given that they operate in different contexts and do not share the exact same religious background.

Hamas' profile concerning women has changed especially with regard to the general elections in 2006. A change for which the group had already prepared since the 2004/2005 municipal elections. The importance of women for



Hamas was obvious from an early stage and Sheikh Yassin, founder of the Hamas movement, was a renowned proponent of female participation in society. Therefore, women have long been active in a number of positions within the social networks of Hamas. Equally important seems to be the fact that women were the main direct beneficiaries of Hamas's charitable work - women receive the food aid, take children and the elderly to medic stations and hospitals and benefit from Hamas initiated pre-schools. The organization took great care to inform women that the 2006 ballot would be secret and that men would not be able to know their wives' choice - which seems to have resulted in women voting for Hamas even when their husbands were supporters of Fatah.

An interesting case is that of two female Hamas parliamentarians after the 2006 elections. On the one side is Mariam Farhat, who is well known for her loss of three sons in suicide attacks on Israel. She stands for endurance and sacrifice and was prominently positioned during the pre-election campaigns. On the other side stands Jamila Shanty, a former Professor of psychology and philosophy at Gaza Islamic University, who is an active legislator and understands her mission as directed towards the future rather than being attached to the past.

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While the charitable and social activities of Hizbullah have certainly had an influence on the rise of women's position within the establishment, there is an additional reason for the special role of women in the modernization process of the Lebanese Shia society. According to Lara Deep, Assistant Professor at the University of California, for Shia believers the battle of Karbala is the major decisive incident in their religious understanding. It is the battle in which Hussein and his followers lost to Yazid. For the Shi'a, history repeats itself and the battle between good and evil is continuously fought. Therefore the actual period of time and its context are of no importance. A different reading is applied to the role of Zaynap, Husayn's sister. Her characteristics, courage, strength and leadership, are not interpreted in the repetitive way those of Hussein are, but in a linear manner. This leads to Zaynap functioning as a role model, a view which reflects on the contemporary context: Shi'a women actually have the potential of becoming the agents of modernity in their societies in a more decisive manner than men.

The female members of both groups strictly reject the label of feminism. While Hizbullah women tend to speak more of justice than of equality, Hamas activists do use the term equality more frequently. Their exact understanding of these terms could be of interest for further research. Both movements coincide in their perception that the subjugation of women is not based on Islam but on tradition, whereas becoming more modern also means becoming more truly Islamic. Both Hamas and Hizbullah expect the Sharia law to grow somewhat organically as the principal source of guidance in their respective societies. To which extent can and should the Sharia law be applied is under discussion within both movements, where women widely agree that the application of the Sharia as one possible source will have a liberating effect. Hamas is trying to fulfil its pre-election promises and use its legislative majority in order to change and unify the Palestinian legal codification, though this attempt has been stalled by the current political situation.

There is no doubt that the adoption of Islamic dress has considerably increased in Gaza since Hamas gained control. Female members of secular Palestinian families feel indirect pressure to give in to the more conservative forces. Hamas has repeatedly assured that it will pressure nobody, though when it comes to their dealings with public authorities secular members of the society fear discrimination.

Both organizations have benefited from the fact that education of women up to the university level has increased, illiteracy has been significantly reduced and more women enter professional careers. Both, Hizbullah and Hamas, encourage women to seek opportunities for personal development. This mainly concerns the female members and supporters of the movements, therefore the real test for both organizations will be their treatment of secular women. ■

# Women and Business in the Middle East

Ilias Tasopoulos

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*Notwithstanding the norms and customs of Middle Eastern societies, the fact that women have only a minimum contribution to the business sector is of major significance for the overall position of women in the Middle East. The issue is connected to the physical and psychological violence to which women in the Middle East are frequently subjected.*

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**T**he Middle East has the lowest rates of economic activity for women compared to other regions of the world. In the 1980s, the rates did not exceed 15%, while during the same period they were almost 60% in East Asia. In the beginning of the 1990s, the female share of the total labour force in the Arab region was only 17%. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Progress of Arab Women (2004), women in the Arab world make up less than 28% of the labour force. More specifically, in Egypt and Lebanon women account for less than 22% of the entire labor force, while in Saudi Arabia the percentage is a meagre 5%. This is the lowest proportion in the world.

An explanation for this strikingly low regional record lies in the "neopatriarchal" and rentier character of these states. The impact of these characteristics is underpinned by the prevalent ethics and norms of Middle Eastern societies.

The income accumulated by non-productive sources, such as oil, has resulted in a specific pattern of development for the -directly or indirectly- rentier states of the Middle East. This pattern of development, favoring the maintenance of the social status quo, is reflected in the social welfare system vis-a-vis

women. The rentier status of these countries is interconnected with the neopatriarchal characteristics of the Middle Eastern state. "The family wage [financed by oil revenues] as well as family laws served to depress women's economic participation and reinforce the institution of the (patriarchal) family", as Valentine Moghadam argues in the International Review of Public Administration. The women in Saudi Arabia are "child bearers", in Egypt women are wives, homemakers, and mothers. Men are the breadwinners...

According to the Islamic interpretation, the society benefits from the work that only the woman can perform inside her house. In addition, for the clerical establishment, the employment of the woman compromises her honour. This issue is part of the greater debate on whether women's employment is permitted by the Shari'a. Contrary to the religious organizations, proponents of women's rights contend that the Shari'a permits women to work with men, while women have a lot to offer to the society by working outside the house. Another interesting aspect of this debate is whether the Shari'a differentiates between work appropriate for men and work appropriate for women



In any case, the family law is very conservative in most Middle Eastern countries. For example, in Jordan, women must obtain their husband's permission to stay in or to seek a job. Additionally, the father is ethically entitled to continue to exert control after the daughter's marriage; quite often, the father refuses to allow the married daughter to take a job, regardless of her husband's consent. The above example is illustrative of a deeper issue, that is, the different application of the principle of equality for men and women in Middle Eastern societies.

Overall, the oil boom of the 1970s did not result in the incorporation of women in the labour market.

A lot of factors could explain why the demand for female labour remained limited. Apart from the high fertility rates, there was very high intraregional migration of men between the Middle Eastern countries. Furthermore, after the end of the oil-boom, as unemployment grew in the 1990s, there was an implicit policy to discourage female employment.

However, due to shortages in the labour markets of the countries that sent migrants to the oil-rich countries, the agricultural sector became in some cases dependent on female workers. In some other cases, like Jordan, the participation in the labour force was only 3% for women in the 1970s, as the

importation of Arab male labour and Southeast Asian female labour prevented the Jordanian women's incorporation to labour. By the late 1990s, the Jordanian women's labour force participation rate was 12.5%, a very low percentage considering that informal economic activity was included in the survey.

The most common employment for women in the Middle East is in the civil service, due to the rising educational status of women and the preference of men towards the more profitable private sector. Women are underrepresented in private services, in the hotel, restaurant and trade sectors. Analysts explain this fact by invoking women's avoidance of such jobs because of the culture and the mores of the region; these occupations have the highest likelihood of indiscriminate contact with outsiders.

However, in Egypt women are also underrepresented at high levels of the public administration. Contrary to the above remarks, the number of women in decision-making positions in the private sector has increased from 7% in 1988 to 24% in 2003.

Self-employed women are also facing insurmountable problems in the Middle East. The estimated female participation rate in the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector in Egypt is 18%. Although Egypt has the largest share of microfinance and unemployment lending programs, the vast majority of recipients are men. Accordingly, in Syria, approximately 40,000 loans to microfinanciers have been made since last year, but only 17% of those had gone to women. Overall, the estimated female participation rate in the micro, small and medium enterprises sector in Egypt falls below 20%. In any case, their businesses are often restricted to the less productive informal sector, due to social gender-related barriers.

In the Gulf monarchies the situation is much worse. An example of the legislation about the financial activity of women is quite indicative. Until recent-

ly, a woman should have a male "legal agent" before obtaining a license to conduct business. The legal agent should act on her behalf to do all the paperwork required for any investment activity. Consequently, a woman was more likely to have a savings account in a bank than invest her money in a business venture. Therefore, the declarations from the Gulf monarchies that a considerable ratio (more than 30% in Saudi Arabia) of savings accounts in Saudi banks belong to women do not constitute evidence of gender equality in the Middle East.

What could really enhance the role of women in Middle Eastern economies is the full integration of Middle East economies into the global economic system. The share of total FDI in the Arab countries has been just 1% over the last thirty years. Nonetheless, Tunisia, which welcomed Foreign Direct Investment in sectors that draw on female employment, such as manufacturing, public services and tourism, has narrowed the gap between the two genders.

The future prospects for women could be much better in the Mediterranean Middle Eastern countries, which are obliged to liberalize their economies due to their need for cash flow. On the other hand, for the time being, the Gulf monarchies are able to escape the financial pressures of liberalization due to the oil income. ■

# WOMEN IN ISRAEL: CHALLENGING THE MYTH OF EQUALITY

**Madalena Papadopoulou**

**Researchers: Dania Paschopoulou  
Christina Prifti**

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*"To be successful, a woman has to be much better at her job than a man.", quoting Golda Meir, the first and only female Prime Minister of Israel. After her remarkable career, many women tried to pursue an active role in public life, especially in representative positions and peace movements in Israel. But, while some women have been involved in political life since the founding of the first Jewish political institutions at the turn of the century, to date women in Israel are underrepresented in all areas of public life.*

In the majority of western democracies, women's representation in politics is lower than their overall proportion in the population. The situation in Israel does not differ. Given Israel's excellent educational opportunities for women, strong legislation and history of women politicians, men and women would be expected to be equally represented within the ranks of public leadership. But despite entrenched myths of equality, there is a wide gap between the excellent legislation and the difficult realities facing those women who choose to pursue a political career. Today only five women hold a significant governmental position: among them Tzipi Livni, the woman who chairs the second most important position in the Israeli government; that is Vice Prime Minister, while she is also Minister of Foreign Affairs. The number of women in the Knesset has slightly increased since the State of Israel was established: from 8-12 until 1992, it has risen to 17 out of 120 today. Women play an important part in shaping government responses to various issues, particularly in the domestic front, but they have been less successful in participating in some of the high stake issues. This pattern is slowly changing since 1992 when women started to chair the Foreign Affairs and Security Committee and the Finance Committee. Women are also involved in political parties, but their numbers tend not to be reflected in party leadership or on party lists for election in office. Both major parties and some of the smaller ones have developed internal guidelines for increasing women's participation, such as the adoption of a clause requiring that women fill a certain percentage of all leadership positions. But the reality, both within the parties and in the Knesset, is quite different; the above guidelines have not yet been applied to party lists for Knesset elections. Last year a new legislation was been discussed which would give extra financing to the parties who include more women candidates on their national election lists.

Sex inequality and discrimination can be detected in the fields of economy and in the labor force. Despite legislation mandating equal pay for equal work, the average wage gap between men and women for full-time, year-round employment exceeds 30%. Over 70% of the minimum wage earners in Israel are women. The problem is that, for all of its sophistication and advances, Israel is still a society built largely on traditional values, while religious organizations hold increased social power. Pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood are among the main reasons for discrimination against them at work. Although they hold more than half of all academic degrees, women are under-represented in business, politics, and the media.

One path into national politics is through the army, which is also a discriminatory field for women. Israel is the only country worldwide that maintains obligatory military service for women. But, apart from the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, women have been barred from battle in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). They tried, especially during the last 15 years, to gain the same rights and have the same opportunities with men, but it was not until recently (2005) that they managed to be allowed to serve in 83% of all positions in the military. The Retired general Yehudit Ben-Natan's statement to the Israel Radio (17.09.2007) reflects the general feeling among women: "The heart and soul of the army is combat and if we are in the army we need to be at its heart". Even though the public doesn't seem to restrain their efforts, this change has been met with strong objections from religious institutions and politicians. This small step to equality is certainly not enough and the army still remains a predominantly male environment.

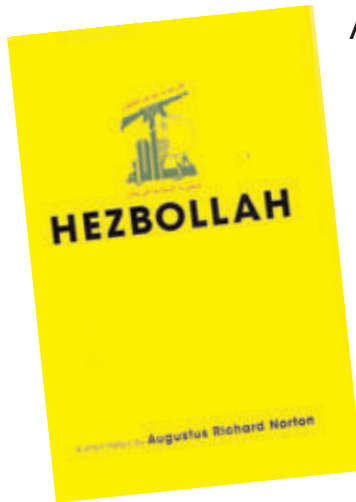
The same efforts are manifest in peace movements as well. Most peace organizations are left-wing and they currently have a minor influence on government and the society, in contrast to what it used to be two decades ago when the left was still of great importance. Israeli society has become much more conservative nowadays, while religion still plays a vital role in the society's attitude towards the position of women. Two of the leading voices are the Coalition of Women for Peace and Israeli Women in Black, which acts as a public reminder that oppression is unacceptable. Nadia Matar, co-chair of Women in Green (right-wing political group), says WiB "does not represent the views of the majority of the people in this country. (...)These are ideas of the extreme left-wing, of women who quite clearly work for the Arab cause". However, Prof. Lehman-Wilzig, former head of Bar-Ilan University's Political Studies Department, says that the group has been a peripheral success, mainly because over the past 20 years WiB had a "slight influence" on the significant shift in public opinion regarding Israel's place in the West Bank and Gaza, but "At the same time, their protests had little impact on



changing government policy. In order for a protest to be really effective and influential, its tactics must raise media attention. Doing the same thing every week for a long period of time means that after a while the media is no longer interested". Machsom Watch monitors the behavior of soldiers and police at checkpoints, seeks to ensure that human and civil rights of Palestinians are protected, while it also records and reports the results of its observations to the widest possible audience. The organization has been accused by the IDF of disrupting their operations. On the contrary, Haaretz (08.03.2006) argues that organizations like Machsom Watch should not be viewed negatively. Bat Shalom seeks peace and equality among the Israeli citizens. Almost every Israeli women peace movement has the same core principles: end of the occupation, establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders and the resignation of Jerusalem as the shared capital of the two states. Of course they also focus on women's issues; they particularly seek the full involvement of women in the negotiations for peace. B'Tselem, is an organization that acts primarily to change Israeli policy in the Occupied Territories and ensure that its government protects the human rights of residents there and complies with its obligations under international law. B'Tselem has attained a prominent place among Israeli human rights organizations.

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Although the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel preaches sex equality, so far none of the Basic Laws, which in the absence of a constitution form the country's normative rules, has incorporated this principle. One of the main reasons is the unresolved relationship between religion and the State. The limited number of women in public life can be also attributed to the political structure itself. Usually the absence of majority parties necessitates the establishment of coalitions with smaller parties to form a government, which tends to strengthen their role. These are generally conservative in political matters and are opposed to the participation of women in public life. A path into national politics is through local government, in which women also play a very minor role. Another course is via the army. A large number of high-ranking officers go for Knesset positions after retirement. But women rising to high ranks are very few. Cultural pressures to marry and start a family at an early age are strong in Israeli. Consequently, women who are interested in politics are frequently forced to sacrifice their aspirations. Nevertheless, women in Israel have managed to claim a greater role into politics and to play a prominent role in peace movements, given that the most active among peace organizations are those of women. ■



Augustus Richard Norton

## HEZBOLLAH **A Short History**

Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007

**Dania Paschopoulou** Page 21

*In this book, Norton, introduces "Hezbollah" and its course through time. It is a thorough and comprehensive analysis about the formation, the evolution and the current political role of the Lebanese Islamic movement.*

**A**ugustus Richard Norton is a Professor of International Relations and Anthropology at Boston University and a former U.N. military observer in southern Lebanon. Having conducted research in Lebanon for almost three decades, he is capable of conveying the "pulse" of the country to his readers. 'Hezbollah' is his last publication through which he offers to his readership an enhanced historical background and detailed information about the organization.

The writer attempts to delineate the real profile of the Shi'i group and its remarkable impact on the domestic Lebanese scene, moving beyond the "terrorist organization" stereotypes. The most interesting fact is that he achieves to highlight all the functions of Hezbollah as a militia, a social service agency, a public works provider and a political party. As the writer mentions "The purpose of this book is to offer a more balanced and nuanced account of this complex organization".

The book consists of six chapters. The first chapter describes the Lebanese political framework as it was shaped after the country achieved independence from France in 1943. The writer makes a brief analysis about the different communities and the rise of Shi'i politics up to the Lebanese civil war, focusing on the Amal movement as the most important rival of Hezbollah.

In the second chapter, the writer unfolds the founding of the organization. The establishment and evolution of Hezbollah is seen as a corollary of the Iranian Revolution and, of course, as a direct consequence of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Hezbollah was founded mainly by young revolutionaries that shared the dream of defending their country against the invader. The chief supporters of this effort were both Iran and Syria, although Iran played the leading role. Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, the current leader of Hezbollah, was only twenty-two years old in 1982 and he had been a rising star since

his teens as an 'Amal' representative in his village. Especially during the first years of its presence, Hezbollah attempted to achieve its goals through terrorist acts. More specifically, one of the methods introduced back then and still used by the group was the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers in order to exchange them with Lebanese prisoners. As far as its struggle against the intruders is concerned, it achieved the retreat of the Israeli military from Beirut to south Lebanon in 1985.

The following chapter provides a historical analysis of the narrative of Hussein's defeat and martyrdom at the battle of Karbala, in order to provide a comprehensive background of the Shi'a religion and tradition. Hussein was the son of Imam Ali, the first Shi'a Imam and Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. His defeat came at the tenth day of a fierce confrontation with Yazid I, the Umayyad caliph and leader of what was to become the Sunni branch of Islam. Hussein's martyrdom at that battle is commemorated by the Shi'a as the Day of Ashura. Nowadays, commemorations of Ashura take place in several parts of Lebanon and they are celebrated with parades and other cultural and social events. That day hundreds of thousands of exalted Shiites beat their heads and chests in unison and whip themselves with chains to induce bleeding in the memory of Hussein's martyrdom. The writer mentions the celebration of Ashura vividly because it is considered as the most important holiday for Shiite Muslims. This day can also be viewed as a political event. Hezbollah and Amal reinforce their image by participating in Ashura rituals. They hang out an array of scarves, vests, caps and other things, all emblazoned with the logos of the two rival political organizations, and they take part in the parades. In a way, the rituals offer the opportunity for the organizations to compete and to mobilize support. Last January, the appearance in public of Hezbollah's leader Nasrallah in southern Beirut on the day of Ashura, warning Israel against

attacking Lebanon and accusing the IDF of lying to the Israeli people, is a case in point.

Chapter four is dedicated to Hezbollah and terrorism. During the 1980s, Lebanon experienced what was termed the hostage crisis. This period refers to the systematic kidnapping of mostly Western journalists, diplomats and teachers. The perpetrators used this method in order to avoid retaliation by the U.S. for other terrorist attacks. Also it is widely believed that the kidnappings were rather blessed by high ranking Iranian religious-political leaders and were used by them to serve as checks and balances within the Iranian regime. However, in the aftermath of the civil war this phenomenon began to ebb and the abductions have decreased. The connection between terrorism and Hezbollah is not clear. There have been some clear-cut cases, for example the 1985 skyjacking of TWA flight 847, which are undeniable. As far as the relationship with Israel is concerned, Hezbollah appears to be the organization with the best-practiced attacks intended to end Israel's occupation, a goal that was ultimately achieved in 2000.

In the fifth chapter, the writer outlines the situation of Lebanese politics. In the beginning, he briefly mentions the electoral system and the changes it has undergone during the last decades and subsequently he deals with Hezbollah's decision to participate in the 1992 Lebanese elections. During the 1980s the Hezbollah leaders had repeatedly rejected the possibility of participation in Lebanese politics, although, according to the Shi'i cleric, Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, a gradual reformation was dictated by the society's needs and that was what led to the group's participation in the political system. After numerous negotiations among members of the organization, Hezbollah participated in the Lebanese elections for the first time in 1992, winning 12 out of 128 seats in parliament. Apart from the political benefits, Hezbollah decided to compete in the elections due to the

strategic benefits that could be earned, namely an official recognition of the hitherto clandestine group as a political party as well as access to a public podium. In addition, Hezbollah hoped to shape the political discourse to its benefit. Some of the issues it focused on in its political campaigns the economic exploitation, underdevelopment, limited personal freedom, insecurity and others. Hezbollah also appeared strong in the municipal elections. In the elections of 1998 it showed its strong base in Beirut, especially in the southern suburbs. Apart from the candidates of the Amal party, the group had to confront Subhi al-Tufayli, a former secretary-general of Hezbollah. Tufayli's populist platform was known as the "revolution of the hungry" and was partially critical of the organization he had previously belonged to. In the following elections of 2004, Hezbollah managed to outdo its main competitor, Amal, and to increase its popularity. As far as social services are concerned, Hezbollah has made a lot of effort to materialize in its own way what Fadlallah has preached, that is the creation of a "human state", providing hospitals, schools, clinics and other important facilities to the wider public.

In the sixth chapter, Norton discusses the years that followed after Israel's 2000 withdrawal. In the aftermath of Israel's pullout, Hezbollah experienced a period of increased popularity. However after a while, criticism toward Hezbollah began to reappear. Then, the writer focuses on the issue of sectarianism listing a series of factors which explain the phenomenon's increase. The first factor of rising sectarianism is that Lebanon's heterogeneous communities transformed as a result of the civil war, because of a significant displacement due to the outbreak of intercommunal violence. Secondly, economic difficulties, income inequality and the uncontrollable corruption of the 1990s have further accentuated sectarianism. The third factor is the revival of religious institutions and leaders who make divisions among the popu-

lation more marked. Finally, the role of regional developments that have affected relations between Sunnis and Shi'a is analyzed. A part of this is also dedicated to Rafiq Hariri, his service as a prime minister, his arguments with Syria and his eventual assassination by a car bomb explosion in 2005. Afterwards, Norton continues with the Israeli attack in 2006 which was triggered by Hezbollah's decision to kidnap two Israeli soldiers. The last part of book describes the aftermath of this last attack and its impact on the Lebanese people.

In this book, Norton manages to capture all the functions of Hezbollah and its evolution through time in a truly fascinating manner. Several points deserve mentioning: the demonstration of the different sides of Hezbollah, as a terrorist group, a political party and a social service provider and the decision to focus on each of them separately; the presentation of the different actors inside the country and of the complexities existing among them; the explanation of the turn that Hezbollah has made from ideology to pragmatism; the comprehensive analysis of the underpinnings of the Shi'a branch of Islam which enables reader to gain a better understanding of the Lebanese situation. Last but not least, is the account of the incredible impact that this organization has had on such a large portion of the population.

In conclusion, this book comprises a very well structured analysis of Hezbollah, offering a range of perspectives with objectivity. ■

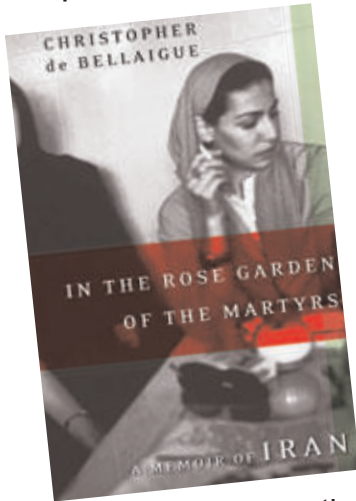


Christopher de Bellaigue

# In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs

## A Memoir of Iran

Harper Collins Publishers, London, 2007

**Jan-Hinrich Wagner**

Page 24

*Iran has been of particular interest to students of International Relations throughout the past few decades. For those interested in gaining a more thorough understanding of the country, Christopher de Bellaigue's book can prove very useful. The author aptly describes the factors which have shaped the Iranians' self-perception and elucidates religious and social concepts through the use of a language adapted to the needs of his expectedly European audience.*

**A**t no point does de Bellaigue try to camouflage his British origin and Western European perception of the country, though his insights are very detailed and reflect a rather personal outlook. By letting his protagonists narrate their personal version of the country's recent history, limiting himself to the task of incorporating this narration into a wider context, he manages to convey the Iranians' own insight. It is not him who has the knowledge, it is his interviewees. His style thereby becomes at times poetic and his tone is sympathetic and humorous, without falling into a self-indulgent display of expertise.

Iran thus becomes a real place, with real people that have real stories to tell and real needs to fulfil. Some of those needs and stories are embedded in concepts alien to outsiders and brilliantly explained by the author. This book will enable its readers to get a better perspective on why Iran is in today's position concerning international affairs and domestic issues.

Christopher de Bellaigue, born in London in 1971, graduated from Cambridge and became a London-based journalist. Since his first travel to Iran in 1999, he settled in Teheran and got married to an Iranian wife. He currently works as a journalist for The Economist and The New Yorker. ■

event



## *Mass Media in the Middle East: Covering the War and the Peace Process*

*The Centre for Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Studies (CE.M.M.E.S.) of the Institute of International Relations (I.I.R.) of Panteion University organised a debate between Greek and Israeli journalists. The debate was held in English language, on February 27, 2008 at the Institute of International Relations, 3- 5 Hill Street, Plaka.*

*The participants of the debate were, among others, Giorgos Avgeropoulos, Director and Producer of the internationally awarded the Documentary Exandas for the Greek state television. Nicholas Voulelis, Managing Director of the Athens News Agency, Michalis Mitsos, foreign/international desk chief and columnist for Ta Nea newspaper. Nir Dvori, security affairs correspondent of Channel 2 TV in Israel, covering the Israeli - Palestinian conflict, Avi Issacharoff, Middle East Affairs Correspondent for Ha'aretz Newspaper and author of the book *The Seventh War: the History of the Intifada*. The moderator of the conversation was Tassos Teloglou, columnist in Kathimerini newspaper and co-author for SKAI TV *Fakelloi* documentary.*



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