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# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

Over the past two years, the Center for Gender and Peacebuilding at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) brought together a community of practice to aggregate lessons learned from conflict and postconflict programs supporting women in Iraq and Afghanistan. The community comprises representatives of U.S. government agencies and departments, international and domestic nongovernmental organizations, members of congressional staff, U.S. military services, and representatives of allied embassies. The compilation of lessons learned set the basis for an invitational expert dialogue between Afghan and Iraqi women leaders in Istanbul, Turkey, in June 2012. Together, this diverse group of leaders mapped out practical steps for women in transitional countries and offered lessons learned from years of experience. These women also expressed their concerns about the negative trends they were seeing for women in North Africa. The dialogue has set in motion a process between Afghan and Iraqi women for developing lessons learned to share with women of the Arab Spring. The following report summarizes the key challenges, lessons learned, and best practices identified at the Istanbul dialogue in June 2012.

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*Kathleen Kuehnast, Manal Omar, Steven E. Steiner, and Hodei Sultan*

## Peacebuilding Efforts of Women from Afghanistan and Iraq

### Lessons in Transition

#### Summary

- In transitioning countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, women are increasingly finding their rights limited by state and religious leaders.
- Cultural and national stereotypes can be quickly overcome by the shared backgrounds, accomplishments, obstacles, and aspirations of women in transitioning countries.
- Women living in countries in transition value opportunities to network with women from other countries in similar situations.
- Women leaders from Afghanistan and Iraq have genuine concerns about the challenges facing women in the Arab Spring. Their valuable opinions are based on their own experiences of overcoming those challenges.
- It is essential that women work together and with men to further women's rights.
- Women must plan for a transition before it happens and have a strategy of work going into the transition process.
- Laws empowering and protecting women do not work if they are not enforced.
- International donors need a long-term view of women's programming, as much of the required work will take time.
- Donors should consider nonurban areas when working with women, and when possible nonelite partners, as these leaders understand the limitations of local conditions.
- It is possible for women's groups to find common ground with religious leaders.

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## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent conflicts, promote postconflict peacebuilding, and increase conflict management tools, capacity, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in conflict zones around the globe.

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The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

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- Political empowerment is extremely difficult if female political activists do not first achieve economic independence. Therefore, economic, social, and political empowerment are each crucial and intertwined.

## Introduction

The political transitions in Afghanistan and Iraq pose numerous challenges and opportunities for women to engage in peacebuilding. In Iraq, the women's rights movement has stagnated, and quotas protecting women's political inclusion risk being eliminated. In Afghanistan, women have made significant political, economic, and educational gains since 2001, though the question remains as to how to maintain and build upon those gains once the United States withdraws from Afghanistan in 2014. Advancing women's empowerment is an essential priority for the transition in each country as it contributes to long-term stability. Engaging and including women in peace processes brings to the table issues such as human rights, justice, national reconciliation, and economic renewal, which are key ingredients to enduring peace. The current political transition in the region offers an opportunity to assess lessons learned from U.S. engagement in both countries, particularly regarding women's programming. Such an assessment is timely and important given the serious budget constraints facing the foreign affairs community, potential donor fatigue, and limited resources. By identifying common challenges and best practices, the lessons can be applied to future programming for women in conflict and postconflict zones, particularly in countries of the Arab Spring, which now face many unique, yet similar, challenges.

After interviewing numerous U.S. government officials and nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives, the U.S. Institute of Peace began convening individuals from U.S. government agencies and departments, U.S. military services, international and domestic NGOs, and civil society organizations working in support of women in Afghanistan and Iraq, bringing the expertise of each organization to bear in a community of practice. Working group discussions have focused on the role of women in peacebuilding and on establishing a set of best practices to develop more effective programs to empower women in conflict or transitioning countries. Roundtables have included several dialogues with women leaders from Afghanistan and Iraq. In the past year, the working group has held a roundtable discussion with the leader of the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), met with the International Women of Courage (IWOC) 2012 awardees from Afghanistan and Pakistan, held discussions with leading women activists from both the north and south of Iraq, and had an excellent exchange of views with the Assisting Marsh Arabs and Refugees (AMAR) Foundation's president, Baroness Emma Nicholson.

In June 2012, the Institute brought together a diverse group of Afghan and Iraqi women leaders for an invitational expert dialogue in Istanbul, Turkey. This innovative dialogue dispelled mutual stereotypes between Afghan and Iraqi women as they shared their backgrounds, accomplishments, aspirations, and challenges. Effective ties were quickly established among counterparts—such as national members of parliament (MPs), whose comments in the dialogue often reflected parallel concerns—and the group mapped out practical steps forward for women in transitional countries.

The participants quickly established that women in Iraq and Afghanistan were enduring difficult transitions, at times facing the potential loss of previously guaranteed rights. Because Iraq had entered its transition earlier, the Afghans expressed interest in the Iraqis' advice on how transition dynamics affect women. One of the Afghans stated that she hoped "to have action points to take home" regarding best practices for supporting women in a time of transition.

## ***Finding Common Challenges***

Women leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan face numerous common challenges. First among them is lack of security, which affects women's sense of safety and their ability to contribute effectively to development efforts in their country. Women also suffer from a lack of educational opportunities; of awareness of their rights, particularly in rural areas; of equal access to justice; and of an understanding of women's rights among predominantly male police forces. Armed militias in both countries threaten the rights of women, and militia members now hold positions in both national governments. As a result, these governments minimize the voices and participation of women. This report addresses the challenges of divisions among women, security, economic dependency, poor communication with religious leaders, lack of implementation of laws ensuring women's rights, poor use of women's programming funds, short program length, and choice of partners—just some of the challenges that Afghan and Iraqi women have faced in their struggle for empowerment.

## ***Bridging Internal Divides***

Competition and division among women in Afghanistan and Iraq is a common concern. It has been particularly difficult to bring together women parliamentarians and women civil society leaders, though Afghan participants felt that their work on the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) law was an exception, "where we managed to bridge that gap." There is also a significant gap between religious and secular women leaders. In Iraq, it has proven very difficult to persuade secular and religious women to recognize common ground and to work together. Moreover, women in both countries frequently have been mobilized to speak out publicly against other women on rights issues, usually at the instigation of male opponents of women's rights—which is used strategically to divide women and diminish their common concerns. Exacerbating this problem is a general lack of self-confidence as women underestimate themselves and accept the prevailing notion that they are inferior to men. As a consequence, women find themselves relinquishing decision making about their lives to their male counterparts.

## **Preparing for the Transition**

With both countries facing difficult transitions, women's rights have been jeopardized by the absence of mechanisms to secure them during and after transition, as well as by governments' and citizens' lack of understanding of transitional and peace processes. In Afghanistan and Iraq, heavy emphasis continues to be placed on the military and security aspects of transition to the detriment of other national needs. In Afghanistan, women look to the 2014 Afghan presidential elections as an opportunity for a peaceful democratic transition. They also increasingly look to them both as an important marker of involvement and progress, and as ensuring that their hard-won gains are not lost. Women are thus working on obtaining better access to finance and education at every level, addressing peace and security issues, and much more, positioning themselves early to play an important role in the 2014 elections.

### ***Women's Economic Access and Politics***

Women's economic prospects figure significantly in the challenges women face in Afghanistan and Iraq. Political empowerment is extremely difficult if female political activists do not first achieve some measure of economic independence. MPs from both countries said they had obtained virtually no financial support for their campaigns other than family sources, and that female candidates often have had to jeopardize their families' finances to conduct a campaign.

***Women are working on obtaining better access to finance and education, addressing peace and security issues, and positioning themselves early to play an important role in the 2014 elections.***

### ***Religious Leaders as Allies***

Women's groups' efforts to reach out to religious leaders have had shortcomings. Afghan participants noted with regret that the Afghan National Ulema Council has not supported women's rights; in early spring 2012, the council passed a decree stating that women were subordinate to men, should not mix with men in work or education, and must be escorted by a male relative when they travel. However, opinions among religious leaders differ significantly on the role of women in society, and participants argued that women can reach out to religious leaders who potentially support women's rights. In doing so, women need to choose their terminology cautiously; advocates have learned to approach the issue of child marriage by emphasizing the need for safe marriages and to characterize the issue of violence against women as forming healthy family relationships from an Islamic perspective.

Another problem is the low number of women religious leaders or scholars, especially in Afghanistan. Afghan participants requested assistance in reaching out to female Islamic clerics and scholars in countries such as Morocco.

### ***Enforcing Laws***

Both Iraqi and Afghan women have considerable rights enshrined in their countries' constitutions, but these rights are often not implemented effectively, particularly regarding violence against women. Afghan women worked hard to bring the 2009 EAW law into practice. The law criminalizes child marriage, forced marriage, selling and buying women for the purpose or under the pretext of marriage, *baad* (giving away a woman or girl to settle a dispute), forced self-immolation, and seventeen other acts of violence against women, including rape and beating. It also specifies punishment for perpetrators. Despite the law, many cases of violence against Afghan women are withdrawn or mediated, including serious crimes that would require prosecution. Some murder cases and other serious crimes that the EAW law would criminalize are instead prosecuted under the penal code or sharia. Iraqis still lack a law such as EAW altogether.

### ***Resources for Women's Programming***

The international community offers significant assistance in empowering women in Afghanistan and Iraq, which dialogue participants appreciated, despite their sense of several major shortcomings in the international approach. The most notable of these were a lack of coordination among international donors and between international and local partners, a lack of depth in some international programs, the failure of some donors to listen and absorb recommendations from local partners, and the absence of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Resources spent on vocational training, for example, could be better used to position women to play an important role in the transition process in a myriad of ways, such as coalition building, capacity building in leadership, and higher education at the graduate-school level.

Both Afghans and Iraqis said international donors often focused on the short term, which occasionally led to prescriptive attitudes, a results-driven approach, and a lack of trust in local partners. This led to inadequate strategic planning on women's longer-term needs, such as broader women's access to higher education. In a time of major transition for both countries, the international community needs to stay engaged on issues of concern to women and to have a longer strategic vision. International donors also need to better understand the nature of transition and the difficulty of moving from authoritarian rule to democratic governance. One participant emphasized that "democracy is the friend of women," but another stated that a successful transition requires the "breaking down of the old mentality," which can take a great deal of time. Finally, international donors were slow

to reach beyond urban elite partners and often confined their outreach to English speakers and civil society organizations based in city centers. This limited the choice of partners and tended to amplify and perpetuate internal divisions among women.

## Lessons Learned

Considerable consensus still exists on the lessons learned from women's programming in Afghanistan and Iraq.

- Plan ahead for long-term positive peace. Women have to be prepared and ready for when a transition in their country provides an opening for greater empowerment. Women leaders and future leaders—both women and men—should fully understand the issues women face in their country, know their agendas, and have public statements and other initiatives prepared on key issues.
- Reach out and cooperate with other women, particularly those who are active in other sectors of society, such as business, academia, and health care. This remains a weak area in both Afghanistan and Iraq, not only across sectors, but also among the leaders of the wide spectrum of civil society organizations focused on women's issues.
- Reach out to women living in nonurban and rural areas. Part of the difficulty of this issue is the problem of safe access to remote areas in both Afghanistan and Iraq.
- Seek the support of men on women's rights. Women have successfully gathered support from men who were known to be defenders of human rights, "showing these men we could work shoulder to shoulder with them." However, much more needs to be done to gain the support of male community and religious leaders.

## Best Practices

Along with providing their sense of national and international lessons learned, participants identified effective actions women leaders had taken. The Afghan participants cited the following as accomplishments:

- Mobilizing early during the internal conflict rather than waiting for the postconflict period.
- Lobbying effectively to join the constitutional drafting process.
- Taking advantage of the political transition period in which the country's laws were in question to advocate for legal reforms that benefit women (e.g., the successful advocacy in passing the EVAW law).
- Pulling women together from diverse sectors, provinces, ethnic groups, and backgrounds to support a common cause.
- Practicing timely advocacy on key issues.
- Reaching out to men to form partnerships, especially with religious leaders and tribal elders.
- Pressing early for participation in the political process. Quotas have been an instrumental tool in women's participation and need to be maintained at the national and provincial levels.

The Iraqi participants cited as accomplishments after the Saddam Hussein regime:

- Working quickly to establish a broad spectrum of civil society groups focused on women's empowerment.
- Establishing effective internal and external communications and networking between women's groups.
- Establishing clear goals and developing effective lobbying and advocacy campaigns.
- Effectively using mass media.

- Reaching out to international and regional actors.
- Building awareness campaigns around issues of concern to women.
- Establishing parliamentary quotas at the provincial and national levels.

## Women of the Transition Countries

Afghan and Iraqi participants unanimously expressed their strong interest in reaching out to and networking with women in other countries in transition, particularly Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt. They hope to not only offer their insights and best practices for helping women in other transition countries, but also to support women in these countries use the lessons they have learned from their own experiences. The Afghans and Iraqis encouraged women in the Arab transition countries to take action on specific challenges:

- Seize the opportunity afforded by a transition and develop a strategy as soon as possible to advance the role of women in their country.
- Establish strong political and economic participation among women at the outset of the transition.
- Consult as broadly as possible with both female and male stakeholders to create a sustainable, inclusive, and feasible strategy.
- Complete a practical, proactive, and comprehensive assessment of the needs facing women in their country.
- Understand the laws women wish to see removed or created and make an early effort to press for legal reforms.
- Partner with governments wherever possible to advance their agenda and show that they do not oppose the government.
- Seek and accept government funding in areas where mutual interest in cooperation, such as health care for women, is strong.
- Work with governments and other stakeholders to institute gender budgeting and mainstreaming in government programs.
- Institute in all key sectors capacity-building training for women to include strong internal accountability checks, effective monitoring and evaluation processes, and a rigorous effort to counter corruption.
- Seek full and continuing participation in drawing up a new national constitution and ensure that the development of a constitution is a deliberative and inclusive process.
- Advocate for the establishment of national- and provincial-level quotas.
- Be inclusive and open to growth and new ideas, in part by reaching out to a broad range of national and international donors for advice, capacity building, and technical assistance.
- Build alliances and establish productive working relations with a broad range of stakeholders in country.
- Reach out to male defenders of human rights as well as other male leaders in government, political life, the business community, and civil society.
- When possible, establish a working relationship with religious leaders on issues of mutual interest.

In addition, Afghan and Iraqi participants advised women in the Arab transition countries against several approaches:

- Limiting programs to urban areas, women's centers, and interaction with "well known personalities."



- Limiting women's programming to a special set of beneficiaries.
- Mixing women's programming with military activities.

## Next Steps

Afghan and Iraqi participants are determined to work together "to amplify the voice of women." To do so, they plan to form a network among Afghan and Iraqi women leaders that will serve as a sounding board, a forum to exchange ideas, and a general resource pool for women leaders. It will also allow women to share insights on running for political office, compare research, and assess the effects of the implementation of their new constitutions. It is hoped that the network will grow to include women with experience in legislation on women's rights and female Islamic scholars. The women wished to establish connections with Morocco in particular.

The Center for Gender and Peacebuilding at USIP intends to move quickly to build on the momentum that the successful dialogue among Afghan and Iraqi women experts has achieved. In the future, USIP will convene a second expert dialogue with Afghan and Iraqi women leaders, along with a small group of Libyan and Tunisian women leaders. The goals of the second dialogue will be to build on the findings from the June 2012 dialogue and share lessons learned from Afghanistan and Iraq with colleagues from Libya and Tunisia. In addition, the dialogue will consider certain other issues:

- The merits of a Global Women's Peacebuilding Advisory Council, with women from Iraq and Afghanistan playing a critical role. This group could advise women in countries around the world that are undergoing rapid transition, passing on lessons learned and best practices.
- Development of a series of papers that participants in the second dialogue will draft on key thematic issues in the role of women and peacebuilding in transition countries. USIP will commission papers to be widely disseminated to policymakers in Afghanistan, Iraq, the United States, and other countries.

USIP also intends to continue to work closely with the community of practice that it has put together to review lessons learned and best practices in women's programming, and to continue the working group's roundtable discussions. The working group will continue to engage with women leaders from countries in transition. A roundtable discussion is also planned for late fall 2012 on the subject of reaching out to men in Islamic contexts to support women's rights.

An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our Web site ([www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)), together with additional information on the subject.

## Of Related Interest

- *Women and War: Power and Protection in the 21st Century* edited by Kathleen Kuehnast, Chantal de Jonge Oudraat, and Helga Hernes (2011)
- *Learning from Women's Success in the 2010 Afghan Elections* by Scott Worden and Nina Sudhakar (Special Report, June 2012)
- *Lessons from Women's Programs in Afghanistan and Iraq* by Kathleen Kuehnast, Manal Omar, Steven E. Steiner, and Hodei Sultan (Special Report, March 2012)
- *The Other Side of Gender: Including Masculinity Concerns in Conflict and Peacebuilding* by Kathleen Kuehnast and Nina Sudhakar (Peace Brief, January 2011)
- *Gender, Conflict, and Peacebuilding* by Kimberly Theidon and Kelly Phenice with Elizabeth Murray (Peaceworks, September 2011)
- *The Role of Women in Global Security* by Valerie Norville (Special Report, December 2010)
- *Real Change for Afghan Women's Rights: Opportunities and Challenges in the Upcoming Parliamentary Elections* by Nina Sudhakar and Scott Worden (Peace Brief, August 2010)



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