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Basma AlKhateeb — Iraqi Aid Worker

By Shireen Khan



Al-Khateeb is a humanitarian worker based in Baghdad, where she works for the non-profit group Iraqi AlAmal Association. A former program coordinator for the U.N. Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), she rallied women to participate in Iraq's first elections and now uses her twelve years of technology experience helping local women learn e-business software.

Iraq Before 2003

We've been through 12 years of sanctions. We've been through two gulf wars. We had a traditional war with Iran — a lot of casualties. We were barely trying to survive. Being an Iraqi woman, actually trying to have a family — I have three daughters. Just surviving the sanctions.

On life after Saddam

We had a really bad situation before our infrastructure was demolished, but after 2003, it was chaos. There was no rule of law. After 2003, everybody's wearing a mask. After 2006, nobody is wearing a mask, they just do whatever [they want], they're not afraid of anyone. You don't have to work [as a] humanitarian actually. You're living in crisis, you find your way out and just survive it. In Iraq, you have to provide electricity, water, everything for yourself.

On becoming an aid worker

Iraq civil society has no background before 2003. It was all controlled by government, a totalitarian regime. Iraqis couldn't do any humanitarian work — government does everything. You're not allowed to question anything. If you question it, either you're persecuted or you're an outlaw. After 2003 July, I joined UNIFEM and NGOs started to form in Iraq, women NGOs. They were quite active in thinking of the future, trying to make something. After 2006, it was really difficult, [there were] a lot of humanitarian violations. Networking was completely something new to the Iraqi culture. This kind of work gave hope.

On women's rights in Iraq

We have women who have been working professionally in administrations and institutes, but they're not aware about their rights. In the beginning, women were collateral damage,

but now we feel that they're targeted. We have a lot of unprecedented incidents of women [being] brutally killed. Reports being collected do not mention any investigation, nobody speaks about it. People who speak about it, humanitarian workers, are persecuted and threatened. Journalists are also threatened. So nobody is speaking on it or taking any measures.

On the problems facing Iraq

We have also the problem rising, like, IDPs [internally displaced people]. We have women trafficking, and prostitution. We have juvenile detainees suffering. Before we didn't have child soldier problem, a lot of drug victims, complete failure of public services. These things need to be identified. This is the job of all civil society and media, just to draw attention that the humanitarian crisis needs to be worked at different levels.

Who are these IDPs?

They are families who have been driven out by militias in the middle of the night — and Iraqi families invest all their assets in their houses. They leave their houses without taking anything, and if they were very lucky, none of them will get killed or brutally murdered. They go nowhere. Then they will have no food-ration card, they won't have IDs, their children will not be able to attend school. If they are lucky, they will find neighbors or relatives. They lack all kinds of public health services. Many of them are living in camps. We have really hot summers and in the winter it's even worse, no water, no electricity, food, unemployment.

On Iraqis who have fled the country

I don't believe there is a serious humanitarian aid effort in neighboring countries. Yes, there have been announcements about programs, but there aren't any concrete programs to deal with these problems. Neighboring countries are recipients of Iraqi refugees. Most of the burden should lie on the Iraqi government on what to do. We do not feel it is a priority for them to solve these problems. Inside Iraq, we have around 5 million scattered all over the country after 2003 February. This is a problem and I don't believe the international community is doing enough work, nor the Iraqi government. Any surge or any military activity should be parallel with political measures and activities. We don't feel this is happening seriously.

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