



International Affairs Forum Interviews: Dr. Azhar Abdul Karim Al Shakly, Zainab Al-Suwaij and Mary Larkin

On July 20, International Affairs Forum attended an event at the Independent Women's Forum in Washington DC. The event focused on women's rights and the Iraqi constitution, which is approaching its August 15th draft deadline. After the event, IA Forum was invited to a press conference with the Iraqi Minister of State for Women's Affairs Dr. Azhar Abdul Karim Al Shakly. Following the press conference, IA Forum interviewed Zainab Al-Suwaij, Executive Director of the American Islamic Congress and Mary Larkin, Director of International Programs at Street Law, Inc. Below are the transcripts from these interviews. By Kevin DeCorla-Souza.

**DR. AZHAR ABDUL KARIM AL SHAKLY,
IRAQI MINISTER OF STATE FOR WOMEN'S AFFAIRS**

Dr. Al Shakly was approved as Minister of State for Women's Affairs by Iraq's National Assembly on April 28, 2005. Dr. Al Shakly has a PHD in Constitutional Law from Baghdad University and is the head of the Women's Leadership Institute in Baghdad. She has also served as an assistant professor in Law and Legal Sciences College in Arbil and is active in building women's civil society organizations in Iraq. Dr. Shakly is a Sunni Arab (a underrepresented minority in Iraq's National Assembly).

VOICE OF AMERICA NEWS: What are the new developments for Iraqi women after the fall of Saddam's regime?

DR. AL SHAKLY (in Arabic, through translator): The first and most important development is the quota—the percentage for the women to be represented in the National Assembly. It is twenty five percent and now we have 91 members in the National Assembly. It is a good percentage. It is not enough but it is open to being increased.

In the executive branch we have six ministers. It is not enough but we need more.

VOICE OF AMERICA NEWS: About the insurgency in Iraq: how do women handle it when they lose a loved one—a husband or a brother in the family. Does the Iraq government have a program to help them after what happens, in terms of financial support and medical care etc?

DR. AL SHAKLY: As you know, Iraqi women are used to [losing loved ones] because we have been through two wars. There is compensation for the women who lose their husbands, for the widows, for the families. But there are no specific services like medical services or medical care or education. That is due to the security conditions we are living in. Once that is changed, I hope there will be provision of services—healthcare and education—for all Iraqis.

IA FORUM: Under Saddam's dictatorship, ethnic and religious tensions were largely minimized. How has the introduction of democracy—particularly political campaigning—increased tensions between competing factions?

AL SHAKLY: You think that the introduction of democracy will stir up the tensions between ethnicities and religious groups? You think so?

IA FORUM: I think it will have an impact. Yes.

DR. AL SHAKLY: I disagree with you. I don't think that democracy will stir up tensions, ethnic or religious. I think that in a democratic environment you have the freedoms and you have the rights so that should actually be a positive factor rather than a contentious factor.

But I will also agree with you. What type of democracy? Is it a democracy for everybody or is it a democracy for only a certain segment of society?

IA FORUM: How will Islam in the government affect the rights of Iraqi women? Can you touch on marriage, divorce and inheritance?

DR. AL SHAKLY: I don't think the constitution should include the personal status laws. We have a very good distinguished personal status law among the Arab countries. If it has been applied correctly—with good intentions—it should be a very good law. So we do not need to include this in the constitution.

Even with the personal status law as good as it is, there are also recommendations by some forces to amend it, especially when it comes to the equality of men and women and also when it comes to women requesting divorce. They want to have that right.

MTN-RADIO SAWA (in Arabic, through translator): I have been reading a lot of articles in the American press. It seems to me from reading the articles that Americans don't have a good understanding of what is happening in the Iraqi society and what is supposed to be in the constitution regarding women and how women should be treated in the constitution. They think maybe that it would be better if they applied what Americans have in their constitution regarding rights and equality. What is your opinion on that?

DR. AL SHAKLY: You think that there is a misunderstanding that the situation in Iraq and specifically the women's rights are not represented correctly in the American media?

MTN-RADIO SAWA: I think so because the American media is not getting the full picture and they were maybe talking to some individuals and that's not the full picture.

I think the American media doesn't have a deep understanding of Iraqi laws and society and the uniqueness of Iraqi culture. And they think that the status of women under Shariah Islamic laws is not good for Iraqi women. But I speak to Iraqi women and some of them in the constitutional committee see it as part and parcel of their culture and don't see it as taking away from women's rights.

DR. AL SHAKLY: I think the majority of women in parliament and in the constitutional committee are from the religious party and some of them are fundamentalists so they don't see any problem with applying Shariah Islamic law when it comes to personal status or women's inheritance or women's divorce or all these personal issues. And some of it actually should not take from the women's rights if it is interpreted correctly. But it depends on who interprets the verses of the Koran or the Shariah. If it is left to the tribal or religious leaders they will interpret it in a very harsh manner and impose their will on women and blame it on religion.

There are so many examples I can give. For example, little girls are forced to wear the *hijaba* [head cover] where the *abaya* [full head to toe cover] covers themselves. It is taking away from their rights and their freedom and that is not necessarily the right interpretation of the religion.

When I speak I am not speaking of myself as a minister or the women in the government or the women who are in politics or the National Assembly or NGOs. I'm speaking about women in remote rural areas like the marshland in the south or women in Kirkuk in the north. Those women labor all day long and their husbands will take away their salary. I'm talking about women like that who are really oppressed in the name of religion.

MTN-RADIO SAWA: I am glad that you mentioned that there are some women in the parliament and they are going to be part and parcel of writing the constitution.

DR. AL SHAKLY: And that's why it looks like they are accepting Shariah and its not denying them their rights. Not only women of that type are going to like it. Men and women who are these fundamentalists we speak of, they are the ones who are going to write the constitution.

I really wanted to clarify a very important point. Women are not afraid of the Shariah law per se. We are afraid of the way that it is going to be applied because men are going to use it against women and they can take away women's rights.

ZAINAB AL-SUWAIJ
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AMERICAN ISLAMIC CONGRESS

Ms. Al-Suwaij is the Executive Director of the American Islamic Congress (AIC), and the Director of the Iraqi Women's Educational Institute's (IWEI) operations in Iraq. Born in Basra, she participated in the southern uprising against Saddam Hussein in 1991 and fled to the United States where she completed her studies. Ms. Al-Suwaij has led AIC's endeavors in Iraq since liberation, including IWEI, the *Iraq America Freedom Alliance* and the *Revitalization of Iraqi Schools & Stabilization of Education* (RISE) Program. She has been a vocal activist for advancing the human rights of women in Iraq, including lobbying the former Iraqi Interim Government Council to set minimum quotas for women in the new Iraqi government.

IA-FORUM: How do women's rights today compare with women's rights under Saddam?

AL-SUWAIJ: Well certainly the whole situation in the country has changed. To a certain extent during Saddam's time, women had greater freedom compared with other countries in the Muslim world. After the change of the regime, women got empowered more. Now they have more freedom to express what they want—to lobby the government, to demonstrate, and to gain their rights and to change and advance whatever they want in terms of women's rights.

IA-FORUM: How will the formation of the new government affect women's rights?

AL-SUWAIJ: Well certainly many of the rules and regulations have been changed. For example, during the end of the 2003 and the beginning of 2004, many women felt it was urgent to have women quotas in the parliament and government offices. So all the women organizations called for no less than 40% representation in the government. Finally the law passed with no less than 25%. When Saddam's regime was in power this would have been unthinkable. So that's a big plus. Since Iraq is now a democracy and many groups are involved within the government, certain groups wanted to impose certain laws and regulations on women. The women said "No, we don't want these rules to apply on us, especially since we represent more than half the population of the country." They demonstrated, wrote letters, and lobbied the government council. They succeeded in blocking these laws from passing in the first constitution. So this is another plus. Given the security situation in Iraq right now and all this NGO work they have been doing, we are certainly trying to help women by

providing them with the materials, education and training they need to fight any violation of women's rights.

IA-FORUM: What are the main forces pushing Iraq in a more Islamic, religious direction in terms of women's rights?

AL-SUWAIJ: Well there are certain political parties that call for an Islamic country.

IA-FORUM: Dawa [Islamic Dawa Party (IDP)]?

AL-SUWAIJ: Dawa and SCIRI [Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq]. And there are also some parties from the different religions—not only Sunnis but Shiites as well. These political parties have their own ideas and their own agendas they want to apply. But it's a democracy and we have to adhere to all of these different voices. What the majority wants, that's what's going to happen.

IA-FORUM: Do you see the possibility of any violence against women as they become more liberated?

AL-SUWAIJ: Violence depends on the area and region we are talking about. Some regions are much more conservative than other areas. There are some incidents that happened in areas that called for more conservative approach for women.

IA-FORUM: Will Iraq ever reach a level of secularism on par with Turkey?

AL-SUWAIJ: Right now I don't think that's possible. From what I witness and see on the ground, I don't see it going that far.

MARY LARKIN

DIRECTOR OF INTERANATIONAL PROGRAMS, STREET LAW, INC.

Ms. Larkin is the Director of International Programs at Street Law, Inc., a non-profit organization based in Silver Spring, Maryland. She has over 25 years experience in program management and development of civic, democracy and public legal education programs in national and international venues.

IA-FORUM: Do you think that the Iraqi constitution should set out to solve a lot of the problems dealing with women's rights or be more vague?

LARKIN: Oh no, I'm all for the vagueness of it because its very important that they produce a document that has the general principles. They'll never be able to agree on the specific principles and the more specific the document is, the less like they will be to produce some kind of consensus document. What they need to do is to consider that the constitution is the greater good and that they can

solve individual problems at a later date or else it will never happen. They have to go for the broad and the vagueness and the general principles that everyone agrees on and then make room in the structure for different opinions to prevail in different areas. One classic example of that is the way that way we deal with pornography. We have some general feelings about free speech and free press and yet we allow different regions to determine [restrictions] based on their kind of value systems as long as it doesn't contradict the basic overall [rights embodied in the US constitution]. I think they have to go that route. They have to if they want to keep moving forward or else they're going to be stuck right there arguing for the rest of the time.

IA-FORUM: So you think the constitution should develop a very federalist type of system?

LARKIN: Yes, definitely. When you've got that much diversity of opinion you've got to. It's going to be hard enough for them to have agreement on the basic overall issues like equality. Its got to or else they'll be fighting forever.

IA-Forum: What sorts of mechanisms need to be available in the constitution to ensure women's rights?

LARKIN: The referendum. They need to teach people how to change the document and how to make it work for them—how to change it, how to add the amendments to it, etc. It's real important for them not only to actually be moving forward but also to have the appearance of moving forward because the rest of their society is looking at them. And they've got to do this. They've got to move.

IA-FORUM: What will be the effect of religious pressure from the various imams on this?

LARKIN: That to me is the biggest difficulty and if I were them—which obviously I'm not—I'd start a campaign that says "which imam?" because even when you are Muslim and support the Islamic tradition, you know for a fact and you know some imams that you'll never follow. There probably isn't a person in Iraq who doesn't know an imam who they think is outlandish. So I would start a whole campaign saying "which imam?" because that's what basically the question is: you're going to lead the law up to every single imam a person decides to follow? So there is no consistency. And you know there are really some good imams and you also know that there are some really bad ones. You have to ask the question "which imam?" and when you can't figure out which imam, you go back to your constitution.

IA-FORUM: Will the new constitution have a bill of rights?

LARKIN: It's got to. You don't necessarily have to call it the "bill of rights" but its got to have rights and protections. It can't be a document where the majority vote wins. It's got to be a document that protects minority rights.

Lida Noory from the Independent Women's Forum and Leena El-Ali from CIR assisted with some Arabic language/ culture aspects of these interviews.

Comments? Send them to editor@ia-forum.org

