

CASE STUDY

# Iraqi Women Academics Network: The Story Behind the Scenes

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(Received 06 August 2024; revised 10 March 2025; accepted 14 March 2025)

## Abstract

During the pandemic, specifically in 2021, I established a virtual network that gathers Iraqi women academics who are based in the diaspora and in Iraq. The network is a private WhatsApp group and an X account that promotes the scholarly work of Iraqi women and fosters collaboration. We have attracted the attention of international institutions, enlarged our group to include Iraqi women academics across the continents, and introduced our work to a larger audience. Like any other group, the network has faced several challenges. We are academic women who are overloaded with endless tasks and burdened with family responsibilities, but we have found solidarity in our group. Our steps are small and slow, but we are making progress in enhancing the global visibility of Iraqi women academics and supporting the higher education system in Iraq.

**Keywords:** Iraq; Iraqi women academics; IWAN; pandemic; women of colour in academia

When the pandemic hits Melbourne, Victoria's capital city, we live in isolation for 263 days. From early 2020 to late 2021, millions of Victorians work from home and have movement restrictions limiting our travels to 5 km from where we reside. Besides limited chances to socialise and interact, I have another struggle.

At the time, I'm a fresh PhD graduate who has just finished doctoral research in comparative literature from the drama program at La Trobe University. My PhD research compares the theatrical representations of Iraqi and Australian women in plays about war. While my PhD passed with minor corrections and very positive feedback, I'm sceptical that this degree can grant me a good job in the field. The number of jobs in creative arts is rapidly declining in Victoria due to successive lockdowns and restrictions on gathering. Cuts in drama and theatre courses are justified by a revenue downturn of hundreds of millions of dollars. On the 18th of November 2020, the Drama programme at La Trobe University, from which I graduated, is terminated. The discipline of theatre and drama is collapsing. I'm a single mother with three children and a desperate job seeker for months. With the closure of the global market, I have very limited job opportunities outside Melbourne, if not none. Loneliness and isolation double my sense of precariousness and uncertainty.

The other side of the world, specifically the Southwest Asia and North Africa region – including Iraq, where I come from – is witnessing anti-government protests known as the *Tishreen* movement.<sup>1</sup> Between 2019 and 2020, protests take place in the main cities of Iraq. A new generation of young people take to the streets to voice their demands for social and political reforms. My children and I are nailed to the TV and our mobiles, following the live streams of the Iraqi protesters. Like many Iraqis I know in the diaspora, we try to support the protesters by sharing their news and educating people around us about their demands.

I can't help but think that I can champion the protest more effectively. I decide to write and talk about the protest within academia. I secure short-term opportunities in projects that examine *Tishreen*. But that means shifting my research interests from theatre and performing arts to political sciences. And I do. My bilingual research skills and my knowledge about the region facilitate this transition. It is an *aha* moment that helps me examine the tension between political powers and performing arts in Iraq from a fresh perspective.

So, instead of shifting to another field, I combine my research background in theatre, drama, and gender studies with my new redirection in political sciences. I use the analytical tools of performing arts and gender studies to examine how women's bodies in protests' places are able to "perform" social change as they occupy public squares and streets. In a book chapter, I look at how mother-protesters use their maternal performance of care and love for their missing or killed children-protesters by taking the role of their children – by continuing to protest against injustice. I come across publications generated by Iraqi women academics who have been examining Iraq through the lenses of feminism and political sciences, including Nadjia Al-Ali, Zahra Ali, Balsam Mustapha, Yasmine Chilmeran, and many others. We start connecting with each other through social media.

The pandemic proves how forms of support like gathering and sharing stories of vulnerability are valuable. It also shows how differently, and sometimes indifferently, the globe responds to the pandemic. We hear stories from developed and developing countries about how social and economic injustice is reinforced rather than eliminated while the world is fighting against the pandemic. We read about how privileged people and groups across the globe are able to travel, work, and attend gatherings, crossing the lines of health restrictions during a time when the majority of the world is striving to get the vaccine or struggling to find a place to isolate themselves.

In response to these feelings of loneliness, injustice, and helplessness, I decide to start the *Iraqi Women Academics Network* (IWAN). My goal is to create a space where Iraqi women in academia can share their stories of triumph and vulnerability. The group gathers Iraqi women academics in the diaspora whose research interests are in humanities and social sciences with a specific focus on Iraq. In August 2021, I send email invitations to the Iraqi women academics whose work I came across earlier. The email embeds two links.

The first is a link to join a private WhatsApp group under the name *IWAN* that I create so that invited members who accept the invitation can join the group easily. We (or our families) lived through the atrocities of the previous Iraqi regime. While some of us were born or grew up in the diaspora, most of us did our postgraduate studies in Western countries and are still working outside Iraq. However, we are still connected to the country through our extended families and our research interests. Often, the WhatsApp group becomes a space where we

<sup>1</sup> Also known as the Middle East and North Africa.

share our concerns and discuss uncomfortable topics. Sometimes, we share some personal news or photos of our pets!

The second link is to a spreadsheet where members add their academic profiles and their research interests to facilitate communication among the group. The spreadsheet becomes a virtual space where we share our works and solidify more opportunities to cite Iraqi women academics by building up Iraqi reference lists across the disciplines of Humanities and Social Sciences. We, as Iraqi women academics, work in a system that is frequently criticised for racial and gender bias. Like other women of colour in Western academia, Iraqi women academics are less cited than their white male peers. This inequity of citation does not only sideline our works and experiential knowledge, it negatively influences the impact of our research on our fields. In our spreadsheet, members can share their academic profiles where they compile their publications. We check each other's works for the purpose of citation. We start to build up critical scholarship about Iraq.

Joined members start connecting for collaborative projects. We start inviting other Iraqi women academics who are based in different countries across the globe, including the United States, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Our diverse cultural, ethnic, religious, and national Iraqi backgrounds encompass Iraqi women who are Kurds, Assyrians, Arabs, Muslims, Christians, and Manda'is. The group becomes a miniature version of Iraqi society and its diverse socio-cultural spectrums.

Two months after starting the group – October 2021 – IWAN launches its Twitter account, IWAN\_Iraq ([https://x.com/IWAN\\_Iraq](https://x.com/IWAN_Iraq)). The account shares news about the members' works, including new publications, contributions in conferences and symposiums, involvement in projects and events, and other professional news that also mentions their tertiary affiliation and/or publishers so as to enhance recognition of their work. IWAN creates a hashtag #IraqiWomenAcademics that the account uses in each post on Twitter.

Through the Twitter account, IWAN is approached by a number of academics, reporters, and journalists who express their willingness to connect with IWAN either for research purposes or for hosting them to comment on Iraqi issues or the region. In November 2021, the global database InterviewHer – which helps connect media to a wide range of women experts on conflict, peace, and security – contacts IWAN and offers to create profiles for members like Zainab Shukur and Taif Al-Khudari, whose research interests are in peace and security. *Voila*, our network starts attracting the attention of feminist international organisations.

That same month, two of IWAN's members, Hadeel Abdelhameed and Mariam Hassoun, write the article "To Think Is to Dream: An Iraqi Perspective." It is a rebuttal to an article written by a British teacher who was teaching in the North of Iraq. His article criticised the lack of critical thinking in Iraqi primary and secondary schools. Our piece responds by contextualising the educational system in Iraq within the socio-cultural and political background of the country. We highlight how the social and cultural factors are embedded in the schooling system and the teachers' pedagogical approach. We conclude by saying that looking at the Iraqi educational system without considering the interdependence of education and the political system is an oriental view *par excellence*.

IWAN brings our experiences and knowledge about Iraq especially when the Iraqi issue becomes popular around anniversaries of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Every year around March and April, academic institutions and Think Tanks deliver conferences, seminars, and talks that examine the Iraqi issue post-2003. Most of these platforms overlook the

experiential knowledge of Iraqi women academics in favour of white male academics. As such, on the 20th anniversary of the U.S. war against Iraq, two members of IWAN, Marsin Alshamary and Yasmine Chilmeran, edit a series of 13 articles authored by Iraqi women academics, activists, and journalists for *1001 Iraqi Thoughts*.<sup>2</sup> Ten of the contributors are IWAN members. Topics discussed included Iraqi women's mental health, women's economic and political participation in the state-building project post-2003, women artists and politics, gender and climate crisis, and many others.

The next year, a number of IWAN's members organise the seminar "Narratives of Power, Memory and Space in Post 2003 Iraqi" in collaboration with the German institute GIGA. The seminar celebrates the publication of a special issue, "Iraqi since 2003," in *The Middle East Journal*, including three articles written by IWAN members Alda Benjamin, Ula Marie, Sana Murrani, and Hadeel Abdelhameed. One of the panels in the seminar is a book launch for Sana Murrani's *Rupturing Architecture: Spatial Practices of Refuge in Response to War and Violence in Iraq, 2003–2023* (2024). The book is based on creative mapping, storytelling, and the memory of 15 Iraqis inside Iraq, underscoring a feminist perspective of the space – private and public – during times of crisis.

Around this time, I am also thrilled to come back to my first passion, theatre and drama. I am working on my first book project which will examine the developmental history of Iraqi theatre and the cultural governance in Iraq since the twentieth century. I'll be adding this book to our IWAN spreadsheet with an extra big smile.

Like any other group that is based on shared interests, IWAN faces a number of challenges. The institutional stress in the workplace of the host land is not our only source of discomfort. Local tensions in the homeland and global conflicts outside academia create stress inside the group. While the closed WhatsApp group proves to be a secure space where members bring problems to the table for discussion, the group itself has gone through several moments of disagreement and inner conflicts. Some members have left, feeling that the group was not speaking to their needs, or is a waste of time.

In these moments, I remind myself that this group is not an organisation or an institution. We are an enclosed WhatsApp group and an X account whose primary goal is to celebrate our works inside academia. This small group includes women academics who are marginalised within Western academia, burdened with family responsibilities and personal issues, and overloaded with endless work tasks. We are not aiming to bring immediate changes to the long-lasting and stubborn biased environment that is white Western academia. Our steps might look slow and small, but we do believe that we eventually can make a change.

By 2025, the WhatsApp group reaches 37 members. The followers of IWAN's X account now are around 1,300, showing that the work of Iraqi women academics is welcomed. The inner structure of IWAN is managed by two co-administrators (currently Hadeel Abdelhameed and Marsin Alshamary) who organize voting, schedule, and host meetings and coordinate events for the group. All policies proposed by the administrators are discussed and voted on by group members, with a simple majority vote. We've decided that IWAN will have a revolving social media chair who is responsible for posting events on Twitter, now called X, and on LinkedIn, advertising the work and events of IWAN members. The social media chair is staffed by four volunteers a year, each managing the profile for 3 months. Further, we've

<sup>2</sup> See Al-Shamary and Chilmeran 2023.

decided that the language of our discussion inside the WhatsApp group will be English. While we are all Iraqis, some of our members belong to a non-Arabic background or they were born outside Iraq and speak only the English language. As such, English is the common ground among us. The group sets Zoom meetings twice a year, which proves to be difficult due to time differences. But we make it!

IWAN has become a channel where Iraqi women junior researchers, including postgrad students and early career researchers, are able to connect with senior Iraqi women academics. Accordingly, we have extended invitations to Iraqi women academics who are based in Iraq. These scholars face a different challenge: the lack of access to resources like conferences, workshops, and professional training.<sup>3</sup> One of our projects in 2025 is to organise a virtual workshop that supports women academics in writing successful proposals for scholarships in Western universities.

Another upcoming initiative is for a new project in support of Iraqi academia. A number of our members are volunteering to set up an “Institutional Review Board” which will support Iraqi Higher Education institutions to approve or decline proposals for projects run by foreign researchers whose research demands fieldwork in Iraq. We know this is not an easy step. It will be based on our voluntary capacities, but we trust our collaborative members of IWAN, and I am sure we will be able to make some positive changes in the higher education system in Iraq.

**Author contribution.** Writing – original draft: H.A.

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares none.

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<sup>3</sup> See Al-Ali et al. 2012.

**Cite this article:** Abdelhameed, Hadeel. 2025. “Iraqi Women Academics Network: The Story Behind the Scenes.” *Public Humanities*, 1, e85, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.40>