Foreword

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It's happening. The country, the complex, dynamic society that is Iraq, is becoming "Iraq," just as the complex, dynamic society that is Vietnam has become merely "Vietnam." Starting as early as the late 1970s, one began to hear people casually saying, for instance, "Vietnam should have taught us a lesson" or "That song was popular during Vietnam." As if Vietnam—with its history of Chinese and French colonizations, its poetry, its rice and rubber economies, its ethnic tensions between highlands and low country, its women activists' fascination with the heroic Trung Sisters and the rebellious George Sand—as if Vietnam could be reduced to "Vietnam," merely a brief late-twentieth-century American (and Australian and Filipino and Korean) wartime experience.

Today, as this terrific book is going to press, a similar shrinkage is being imposed on Iraq. Iraqis are being shrunk down to a narcissistic "Iraq." Listen, and you will hear Americans and British men and women say things such as "Iraq should teach us a lesson" or "Iraq is the reason he killed his wife." As if Iraq—with its history of ancient civilizations' achievements, British colonial rule, multiethnic marriages and lively urban neighborhoods, prolific writers and filmmakers, Communist and Ba'athist parties' competitive courtings of activist women, a disastrous war with Iran—as if Iraq would be squeezed into "Iraq," a newly blown small glass bottle of American and British angst.

One sure way to release Vietnam from its imprisoning "Vietnam" and Iraq from its currently hardening confines of "Iraq" is to start pay-

ing close, detailed attention to Vietnamese and Iraqi women's long histories of theorizing, debating, alliance-making, organizing, and campaigning. By taking seriously the historical and contemporary political lives—and ideas—of women, we can inoculate ourselves against the temptation to treat any society simplistically or, worse, narcissistically. I've found that when we observe carefully the twists and turns of women's relationships with men, with each other, with the state, and with international allies and invaders, it becomes impossible to imagine that society to have ever been merely frozen in a timeless "tradition" or dominated by a monolithic elite. Instead, by taking any country's diverse women seriously, over not just five years but over generations, we are compelled to come to grips with the crucial watersheds, disparate movements' and state officialdoms' failures and successes, as well as the sources of pride, ambivalence, contradiction, and fissure that shape any society and fuel its ongoing dynamism.

We are now building up a substantial body of literature on Vietnamese women, much of it researched and written by Vietnamese women scholars. It is becoming available, however, at the very time when most non-Vietnamese readers aren't paying much attention to Vietnamese affairs and even less to the ideas and activist strategizing of Vietnamese women. They have already become content to think of Vietnam as "Vietnam."

Yet here in Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt's groundbreaking book we do have a chance, before our alarmingly short attention spans turn elsewhere, before we consign Iraq to "Iraq," to engage with Iraqi women's continuously evolving political lives.

By doing so, we can not only throw sand into the works of the shrinkage machine, but we also can make ourselves smarter about larger puzzles with which so many of us today are struggling:

- When has a nationalist campaign been liberating for women and when, conversely, has it become mainly a movement to refurbish patriarchy?
- What strategies employed by women's advocates have the best chance of narrowing the formidable class, ethnic, religious, generational, and rural-urban gulfs separating women from each other?
- What are the most effective ways for local women's rights activists to have an impact on neocolonial powers' decision-makers, without opening themselves up to cooptation?

- What erroneous assumptions made by well-meaning mid-level women in an occupying bureaucracy allow them to be unwitting tools of their patriarchal superiors?
- What criteria distinguish a pawn from a genuinely transnational feminist effort?
- What will it take to make the historic passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1325—calling on all member states to insure women’s meaningful participation in peace accord negotiations and post-accord nation rebuilding—a practical tool for dismantling masculinized political cultures and practices?
- When are political party-based competitive elections not empowering for most women?
- How exactly does decision-makers’ fixation on “ethnic reconciliation” and “ethnic balance” marginalize women and silence feminists?
- Why should feminists become constitutional experts?
- When do patriarchal officials find the discourses of “women’s liberation” useful for their own patriarchal ends?
- How integral are masculinized politics to the perpetuation of militarism?
- And, of course, what does the process of authentic democratization really look like?

Yes, this is a tall order. But, as I read and then reread these rich chapters (there is something to learn on literally every page here), I found myself nudged by Nadjé Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt to think of their implications for answering each one of these important questions. That is what such a sophisticated one-country feminist case study, such as *What Kind of Liberation?*, does: it helps us craft answers to questions we are asking elsewhere.

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