

Short description	In May 2015, a forum to address women's security issues in the MENA region was held in Iraq. Ala Ali reflects on the discussions of the forum and its recommendations for strengthening women's rights in contexts of extremism.	<i>Appears on the homepage – amongst other places</i>
Author biography	Ala Ali has over seventeen years of experience working in the field of civil society in Iraq including Kurdistan Region, and has substantial experience managing and administering programmes funded by UN agencies and other international donors. Ala is a specialist in conflict analysis studies, peacebuilding strategies and organizational democracy. She has been a member of the Iraqi al-Amal Association since 1995, and was elected to the board of trustees in 2008 and 2012.	<i>Appears alongside blog post</i>

Women's resistance to extremism: a report from a recent forum on women's security in the MENA region



The past year has witnessed a series of dramatic events commencing with the ISIS invasion of large areas of Iraq. The most heinous crimes of ethnic and religious cleansing have been committed by ISIS terrorists, including the displacement of about 2.6 million civilians - mainly from minority groups such as Christians, Yazidis, Turkmen and Shebak.

Violence against women: the current situation

A large number of Yazidi women and girls have been abducted and harassed. Many are assaulted in atrocious practices including the sale of women into sexual slavery, rape, murder, and the forced conversion to Islam. The destiny of most of the abducted women and girls remains unknown.

In the areas controlled by ISIS, extremely intolerant views against women are promoted. They restrict female access to schools, the workplace and public spaces. Women are required to wear the heavy veil, and a penalty of whipping is imposed on women who violate these strict rules. A number of women; activists, candidates for elections, physicians, lawyers, judges, journalists and academics have been killed by ISIS. Women across Syria are subject to inhuman practices at the hands of ISIS and other armed extremist groups.



Abduction and sexual exploitation are becoming common practice in the lives of Yazidi women. Image credit: trust.org

Many countries in the MENA region are witnessing unrest and armed conflict. The rise in forces of extremism and terrorism have led to a decline in gender equality and women's rights. Sexual harassment and other violent acts against women are becoming common practice, even at work.

In addition, there remains the prevalence of religious 'Fatwas' (legal pronouncements) that promote child marriage, polygamy, female circumcision and the sexual exploitation of women under strange nomenclature, such as temporary marriages, including 'Jihad almonakhah'. This allows girls to offer themselves to combatants in Syria for sexual intercourse to raise their morale in combat.

Women's Security Forum: May 2015

The current situation for women constitutes a serious setback to obligations of the states within the region. Thus, an Iraqi NGO –Iraqi [Al-Amal Association](#) - took the initiative to organise a MENA Women Security Forum in Erbil, Iraq on 10-11 May 2015. The forum was conducted with a number of governmental and non-governmental institutions, and regional and international NGOs. These included the [International Civic Action Network](#) (ICAN), the Kurdistan High Women Council, and the Kurdistan Ministry of Interior. The title of the Forum was: 'Women's Resistance to Extremism and Terrorism & their Struggle for Rights, Peace & Security'.

The importance of the Forum is summed up in the words of 2 Yazidi girls who attended, both survivors of ISIS violence: 'Please rescue our Yazidi girls, women and children from ISIS and stop our suffering'. This message was shared with the 150 participants of the Forum, amongst whom were female victims and activists, experts in law, religious scholars, and

researchers. Governmental representatives, INGOs and inter-governmental bodies including UN agencies also participated.

The main focus of the Forum was on [UNSCR 1325](#). It sought to enhance mutual understanding, interactions and joint action amongst local, national and international organisations. It addressed the dangers and consequences of the ideology of extremism and terrorism in the MENA region for women's rights, security and peace. It aimed also to highlight the plight of the internally displaced and refugees, reflecting specifically on women's human rights activists in the MENA region. The Forum mobilised support and created a political will for adopting and/or implementing plans of action at the local level. It also mobilised international support to expose the inhuman practices against women in MENA, leading to the drafting of a new resolution on the protection of women under conditions of terrorism and extremism.



Amongst the 150 participants of the Forum were representatives from international and local NGOs, as well as government ministers.

The Forum promoted common understanding and joint action to counter the threat of extremism and strengthen the role of women in building peace and security. It also assisted in filling in the gaps of knowledge in terms of women's participation in areas which are less documented, such as conflict negotiation, mediation and national reconciliation. Ideally, it will lead to the creation of networks of solidarity among women across the public and private sectors and across countries in the MENA region.

Recommendations of the Forum

The results of the Forum were a number of recommendations for future action, which include:

- Freeing the Yazidis and other women from ISIS prisons, and providing them with medical and psychological treatment services.
- Releasing the detainees and prisoners in Israeli prisons, as well as in Syria, Libya and Egypt.
- Ensuring the necessary protection of women and children from the dangers of military operations, and the use of excessive force by security forces and armed groups.
- Providing basic services for the internally displaced, such as housing, food, medical and psychological services and education.

- Empowering women to participate in decision-making positions, national reconciliation negotiations, peacebuilding operations and establishing security and a culture of nonviolence.
- Strengthening the role and status of civil society organizations in the monitoring and documentation of violations and providing legal, psychological and social services to victims of sexual violence.