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When States Need Refugees

Iraqi Kurdistan and the Security Alibi

Kali Rubaii

Introduction

While nation-states often claim that refugees threaten their political and territorial integrity, this chapter shows how the opposite can be true: sometimes states need refugees. In late 2014 and early 2015, when parts of Iraq and Syria were overtaken by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), people seeking refuge in semiautonomous Iraqi Kurdistan became central to the public story told about Kurdish sovereignty. Their ethnic or regional group affiliation determined their integration or rejection by the Kurdish authorities. For example, on the one hand, Anbari people were suspected of being ISIS supporters because of their regional origin. They found themselves the target of suspicion, even as they were provided with refugee status and aid. On the other hand, minorities such as Yazidi and Kurds were brought into camps that looked more like planned cities.

Ultimately, refugee presence in Kurdistan reinforced a garrisoned security state. In the name of protecting refugees, Kurdistan received international humanitarian support, but also a major thrust of military expertise and supplies by which to enforce its borders. By 2017, the Pentagon signed an agreement to give the Kurdish army, known as the Peshmerga, US\$415 million (Al Jazeera 2016), along with part of the US\$13 billion it was spending in the fight against ISIS. Defining and placing refugees became a core alibi to the construction of

a security state that held the potential of becoming a U.S.-backed independent Kurdistan. This was ultimately not the case, and the United States quickly withdrew its support for Kurdistan after ISIS was officially defeated. Nevertheless, the centrality of refugees in the story of a weak nation-state reveals insights about the political role of refugees more broadly, even for states whose status is less tenuous or less obviously linked to refugee protection.

Methods

I was living and conducting ethnographic dissertation research in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Anbar Province in 2014 and 2015. While many journalists were on the ground in Iraq at the time, only a handful of anthropologists were conducting longer-term ethnographic studies. It was important for me to be physically present on the changing social and physical landscape of northern Iraq, so my research included traveling to and from Anbar Province with displaced Anbari farmers, crossing the Kurdish border with them, and doing some farming in Anbar amid geopolitical struggle. While the majority of my fieldwork focused on mainland Iraq, the fascinating position of Kurdistan in the “ISIS-era” struggle for geopolitical control enfolded many of the displaced Anbari farmers with whom I conducted the bulk of my research.

Like others working in the region, I dropped my primary research for a brief time in order to respond to the immediate needs of displaced Yazidi and Anbari people arriving in droves to Iraqi Kurdistan after ISIS had captured territory from Sinjar to Ramadi to Mosul. I was involved in minor emergency relief to displaced people in multiple camps and noncamp settings, accompanied doctors on medical visits to camps, visited refugee camps with local directors, and conducted interviews with displaced families. I also organized crowdsourced emergency support through the *Islah Reparations Project*, a nonprofit of which I am a cofounder. It was through this organization that I engaged in some truth and reconciliation dialogues among Kurds and Arabs, and learned how many Kurds felt that supporting displaced families was an act of forgiveness for violence by Iraqi Arabs upon Iraqi Kurds at the behest of Saddam Hussein. The variable treatment of the displaced—from the integration of Yazidis and Kurds to distrust and ill treatment of Anbari Arabs—by the semiautonomous Kurdish government, secret police, military, and charitable foundations inspired the insights in this chapter.

Kurdistan in Iraq

The semiautonomous Iraqi Kurdistan was utterly packed with people in 2015. In every hotel room, every hotel lobby, every construction site, and

every square meter of every highway underpass, people languished after arduous escapes from violent encounters with ISIS, Shia militias, or government bombings in Iraq or Syria. From all parts they had fled: Yazidi and Kurds from the north, Anbari Arabs from the west, and others from cities that were divided into Kurdish and Arab parts, such as Kirkuk. The sheer number of people compounded an already dense influx of displaced people living in camps and hotels from earlier in the year. Nearly two million displaced people resided in the small region of Iraqi Kurdistan (UNHCR 2018).

The moment posed geopolitical opportunities and dilemmas for Kurdistan, as an influx of refugees might for any nation-state that shares its cartographic edges with war. Kurdistan is situated at the four corners of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran, and Kurds on each side of these national boundaries face different degrees of integration, expulsion, and confrontation. When displaced people from Iraq and Syria fled to Iraqi Kurdistan, and when the possibility of ISIS expansion was headlining in international news, it opened space for the whole of a Kurdish national entity to amplify its call for independence.

Since the 2003 U.S. and coalition invasion of Iraq, a series of legal, political, social, and economic unravelings fragmented Iraq's territory into three parts. An ad hoc system of tripartiteid formed, sometimes nicknamed Sunnistan, Shia-stan, and Kurdistan (Rubaii 2019). Tripartiteid has been devastating for the people and regions for whom Iraqi nationalism was a boon. Many Anbari people experienced relative favor under Saddam Hussein's rule. For them the dismantlement of Iraqi sovereignty posed major hardship, an opening up of Anbari territory to outside militias, and a new, negatively viewed government (Bassam 2017). For Iraqi Kurdistan, however, some geopolitical ruptures made dreams of sovereignty feel more possible. When, in 2015, the presence of ISIS in Syria and northern Iraq peaked, Iraqi Kurdistan found itself experiencing some of its greatest territorial autonomy.

Iraqi Kurds were active in resisting persecution by Saddam Hussein, who cracked down on their insurgency with genocide, or what Kurds call "the Anfal." The regime used chemical weapons, Arabized the region with settler Arab villages, banned Kurdish language in schools, and disaggregated Kurdish villages by forced displacement (Chatty 2010; Kelly 2008; Talabany 2001). The then-rebel Peshmerga forces hid in the mountains and fought guerilla style against Iraqi armies for decades (Lortz 2005). Some of the rebel militias in other parts of Kurdistan, such as the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, remain on the U.S. Department of State (2019) list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, in spite of suggestions to remove them because they were instrumental as allies in the region. Others, such as the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, formed more recently in 2004. In Iraq today, the Peshmerga is a national army, operating with international

legitimacy. It operates its own checkpoints, alongside the Kurdish police, and the Asaish (Kurdish secret police).

Iraqi Kurdistan has transformed its militias into an army and operates like a state in many ways, but it relies on the central Iraqi government in Baghdad for the distribution of currency, medical supplies, and other resources. Once evading checkpoints, the Kurdish Peshmerga now operates them, an irony not lost on the Kurdish public. At some checkpoints in Kurdistan, there is a popular image of Masoud Barzani, president of Kurdistan from 2005–17, going through a checkpoint while smiling and laughing (see figure 1.1). Part of building statehood is performing security as a state ap-



Figure 1.1. Picture of Kurdish President Masoud Barzani Passing through a Checkpoint. Photo by the author.

paratus: independence includes operating the systems that once oppressed them (Ladwig and Roque 2018).

The mass movement of refugees justifies and excites security regimes, and it did in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2015. The security alibi enables states to perpetuate violence and repression in the name of security for the public. The logic of a contemporary security state is that certain repressive military interventions are necessary to protect the vulnerable from the strong (Schirmer 1998), and that such illiberal measures ultimately serve liberal ideals. From a spatial perspective, the security state might best be defined as one that manages the comings and goings of human beings with a fascination for their propensity to conspire against the state (Goldstein 2010). It is from this perspective that both security apparatuses and Western cultural norms modulate the significance of certain types of refugee movement and operationalize security campaigns against those who move in problematic ways (Lancaster 2008).

The Role of Refugees in the Security Alibi

Performing security by and through refugees generated stronger conditions for a weak, semiautonomous state to leverage international liberal, feminist discourse to expand its militarization. The genealogy of refugees as a legal category is not humanitarian, but rather rooted in military security. In Europe, concern about displaced people repatriating themselves in a postwar context was perceived as a threat to military stability, particularly that of states (Malkki 1985). This genealogy partly explains why refugees can serve as central characters in the stories states tell about protecting the weak from the strong, sometimes by terrorizing, containing, and oppressing those it claims to protect (Ticktin 2006). Historically, because refugees inspired military intervention, the basic model for a military camp was appropriated ad hoc in the construction of refugee camps, with military barracks serving as an architectural model and spaces arranged according to Foucauldian surveillance and discipline.

It was not until 1951, with the establishment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), that refugee management became a humanitarian, rather than a military, concern. This did not occur before certain militarized apparatuses had become a generalized standard (Wyman 1989). Policies of military-style confinement have become a global standard for managing refugees and potential insurgents alike (González 2009; Khalili 2012). The project to contain refugees, not only for their protection but also and equally for the protection of states from them, is one that legitimizes contemporary security states. Other forms of coercive control—the detainment of political dissidents or journalists; the internment or imprisonment

of the poor, racial minorities, or those deemed “insane”; or the militia-style policing of such groups on the streets—are less palatable to liberal democracies and therefore less convincing alibis for further militarization. Refugees, who are explicitly not citizens and therefore the subjects of both mistrust and public concern, work to bolster states’ legitimacy when they are publicly and properly cared for and when they are appropriately policed. Thus, Iraqi Kurdistan carefully cultivated a simultaneous international narrative about the refugee crisis that supported its need to enforce and expand its territorial borders, framed its military interventions as part of a free-world campaign against a morally corrupt enemy, and physically positioned refugee camps in particular arrangements that helped to fashion a territorial vision of the future Kurdish state.

“Refugees Are Not IDPs!”

In order to be legally considered a refugee, a person must cross an international border. If they do not cross an international border, they are considered internally displaced persons (IDPs). Thus, identifying a person as a refugee, rather than as an IDP, is crucial for a state that seeks to legitimize itself by establishing a border. Throughout my fieldwork and volunteer work in Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdish aid workers used the term “refugee” (in English), and sometimes corrected one another, as well as international colleagues, when the term “IDP” was used. At a camp outside of Dohuk, I overheard a senior camp administrator scold a junior administrator in English, saying emphatically, “Refugees are not IDPs!” Similarly engaged in the confusion of categories, a local aid worker in Shaqlawa said of Anbaris who frequently crossed the Kurdish border, “On this side of the border they are refugees. When they go home, they stop being refugees. So, what are they, half-refugees? And when half the family is there and some stay here, are the people who stay really refugees?” The movement of Anbari people, already flagged as potential terrorists because of their affiliation with a region of Iraq reputed for militia-based dissidence, undermined the strength of Kurdistan’s border. Their movement also muddled their representation as refugees, which was central to creating a sense that the Kurdish-Iraqi border was official. When one family I knew was rejected by the UNHCR for a resettlement appeal, they said that a United Nations worker told them they had to go to Turkey to be resettled officially through the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In spite of its claim to independence, Kurdistan was not an official international boundary, so their United Nations files would not count them as refugees but instead as IDPs. Other United Nations employees had advised them differently. The UNHCR website on Kurdistan noted in 2018 that Erbil hosts 12,000 “refugees” (from Syria, who

crossed the Iraq-Syria border) and 600,000 “displaced Iraqis,” drawing a careful distinction between the categories (UNHCR 2018). Confusion at the local level about whether Iraqis in Kurdish territory were actually refugees, or refugees just in name, had everything to do with international diplomatic politics regarding Kurdish statehood.

Iraqis from Anbar with whom I worked closely were as eager to be counted as refugees as Kurdish aid workers were to name them as such: to them, refugee status felt like a greater layer of protection, even as it also meant they were treated negatively as outsiders of a Kurdistan they had easily visited in earlier times. A crackdown on Anbari movement, even within Kurdish territory, became part of the Anbari experience in seeking relief in Kurdish towns. For Arab refugees from Anbar Province, their protection was inflected with being “secured” in highly undesirable ways. The security state directly policed refugee movement in more targeted ways, such as night raids and threats of forced repatriation, in the name of protecting the weak from the strong.

The logic of protection is always imbued with a logic of control, and refugee protection is no exception. Suad, an Anbari woman who had recently received a three-month card for food aid, described how her allotment of flour and oil came from one central location in Mirawa Valley. “The place where we get food told us to stay nearby. They said that good refugees don’t move around.” She mentioned that some of her family was in Suleymania, further south, and that she would not be allowed to travel there to visit them for Eid (holiday celebration). “We are very restricted, as if we do not have homes to go to, or family that we need to visit.” As Arabs and Iraqi others, Anbari people were carefully talked about and managed as refugees, not IDPs: there was nothing “internal” about them to a Kurdish public or a Kurdish state. Policing the movement of refugees from Anbar and holding them at bay as outsiders helped to internationalize the border between Iraqi Kurdistan and mainland Iraq. It also served as a rhetorical and legal move to instantiate statehood.

Refugees as Spatial Objects

The securitization of national boundaries worked alongside a parallel cartographic seizure of territory. Even as the border of Iraqi Kurdistan was made more real, it was also made more flexible. The security side of the refugee-security state dyad was visible in Kurdish expansion, especially around places like Kirkuk, where oil reserves on the border could be accessed and captured from ISIS, but also from mainland Iraq. Kurdistan embarked on a spatial project of setting up refugee camps strategically, near factories for extractive industries and military units along the Kurdish “borders” with

mainland Iraq. A simple Google search of maps depicting refugee camps in Kurdistan shows the strategic placement of Kurdistan's forty to sixty camps to expand Kurdish territory.

The camp I visited near Kirkuk had been set up as far toward the Iraqi interior as possible, like an outpost holding ground. Residents of the camp complained that they felt unsafe so close to ISIS and had asked to be moved further inside Kurdish territory. At the time of my visit, I could hear the noises of gunfire and see rising smoke just over the hills, and I empathized with refugees' desire to distance themselves from the ongoing battle between the Kurdish Peshmerga and ISIS. It felt as if they were being kept outside of Kurdistan as untrusted Others and simultaneously being kept in a brand new "inside" made real by the military capture of oil-rich land only a few weeks earlier. Camps in Kirkuk hosted families that the Kurdish government did not plan to integrate long-term into its ethnonational state.

Not only were human beings securitized with geopolitical interest in mind, so too were mineral resources. Oil moved inward in long lines of large trucks; Anbari people did not. Upon visiting the camp in Kirkuk, I traveled by car from Suleymania to the Kurdish side of Kirkuk, and from there to the Arab side of Kirkuk. Along this road I witnessed endless oil trucks rapidly extracting as much resource as possible from the formerly "Arab side." Limestone and other mineral resources were also rapidly trucked out of the area and back toward more central Kurdish processing facilities. At the time, Kurdistan made a deal with Israel to sell the sudden windfall globally (Zhdannikov 2015).

Policing the movement of displaced people through checkpoints and camps is not only a question of securing borders from potential militant or terrorist infiltration—a story often told in the management of displaced people (Wilson 2005)—but a critical step toward articulating nationalism. A politics of ethnonationalist exclusion was made visible through the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. In contrast to the camps hosting Anbari Arabs, refugee camps in the north near Duhok hosting Yazidi and Kurdish families were better equipped for planned inclusion. The camp I visited in Domiz was already being turned into a permanent city with urban plans and a major investment of resources designed to integrate Yazidi communities more fully into Kurdish citizenry. My walk through the camp included a visit to the trenches, where pipes were beginning to be laid for a permanent sewage and water system. Thus, the Kurdish state activated the long genealogy of refugee camps functioning as military instruments by leveraging increasing spatial control as it was able to establish increasing autonomy.

Military attempts to establish elusive control of Iraqi landscape have generated territorial approaches to security and therefore a spatial understanding of what it means to be an enemy or ally of the security state (Graham 2011; Houry 2008). Bad refugees (in this case, Anbaris) and good

refugees (in this case, Yazidis and Kurds) serve similar functions as spatial military objects, depending on their territorial placement by the security state.

Liberal Feminism and the Free World's Gaze

Establishing clearly defined (but also expanding) Kurdish national borders in a semiautonomous geographic context was partly mechanical and partly discursive. Hosting refugees meant that Iraqi Kurdistan received international support and recognition through aid organizations, but also that it was able to position itself as an ally of the free world in the fight against Islamic extremism. In doing so, Kurdistan confronted global Orientalism by leaning into it, de-exotifying its women and centering them at the heart of public discourse (Jacoby 2017; Said 1978). Aligning itself with liberal democracy in juxtaposition with so-called backward Islamism facilitated the flow of military resources toward a political enterprise by the “free world.” In much the same way Israel positions itself as a minority nation-state in the Arab world, so too Kurdistan represented minority struggle against Arab/Islamic repression, carefully tucking the fact that its population is majority Sunni Muslim out of transnational public discourse (Mamdani 2005). Many of the Yazidi refugees I interviewed, however, felt ambivalent about receiving visibly Muslim Kurdish solidarity. For example, some families I met under a highway overpass relied heavily on a local mosque for water. The women expressed concerns about relying on the mosque because they had been so brutalized by Muslim persecution in Sinjar that they felt the mosque here might try to force conversion in exchange for water. For those religious minorities being “saved” by a “less-Islamic” Peshmerga from a “more-Islamic” ISIS, dominant religious orientations still governed refugees’ tenuous sense of wellbeing and safety.

Kurdistan’s alignment with the free world also required a demonstration of feminism in popular global discourse. Media campaigns featured women Peshmerga liberating Yazidi prisoners from Mt. Sinjar. Such stories were consumed with great interest in English language media alongside stories of the kidnapping, sale, and rape of Yazidi women by ISIS. The stories embedded neatly, and deeply, into public discourse in the United States. For example, on the 2019 anniversary of September 11, Fox News published a short piece titled, “Yazidi Sex Slaves Set Fire to Their Burqas after Being Freed from ISIS” (McKay 2019). It was on this popular discourse that Kurdistan sought to capitalize in seeking support for independence in 2015: in the name of protecting minorities and women, Kurdistan received humanitarian support (World Bank Group 2015), but also a major thrust of military expertise and supplies by which to crush Islamic extremism.

The militarization of feminism, quite popular as a trope for women's equality in many security states, articulates itself here as an implied un-Islamic quality of Kurdish society: women, whose bodies often stand in as symbols of the nation, are bearing lethal force (Enloe 1988). They therefore become symbols of national independence, secular feminism, and vulnerability all at once (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). Often depicted with free flowing, sometimes blonde hair, women Peshmerga were all over the news, and in graphic design like the one featured here (see figure 1.2). They were often quoted as speaking against the sexism and oppression of the Islamic State upon other women, as “white” women saving brown women from



Figure 1.2. Feminist Kurdistan against ISIS. This photo was found 22 December 2019 at <https://linkezeitung.de/2017/09/22/der-mythos-moderater-kurdischer-rebellen/comment-page-1/>. Every effort was made to identify the artist.

brown men (Spivak 1988). In reality, Kurdish women made up a very small minority of the fighting forces.

While Kurdish women were featured as leaders in a military campaign, refugee women were represented as downtrodden victims of abuse or as dangerous women who could not be trusted. The tale of Yazidi women being kidnapped and trafficked as sex slaves or forced brides of ISIS tapped into deep-seated voyeuristic fantasies about the colonial harem (Alloula 1986), and worked to galvanize international public opinion about the value of sending military support to Kurdistan to save refugees. Media coverage of Yazidi women rarely featured the proud, straight-backed elderly women I met, with traditional white and purple dress, but instead young women looking dejected and abused. The dignified representation of refugees, especially those who have just undergone extreme turmoil, was foregone for the more strategic juxtaposition of proud, strong Kurds and abused refugees who needed saving. Saving refugees not only offered the opportunity to partner directly with nongovernmental organizations and internal organizations like the United Nations; it further enhanced international relations otherwise regulated through the Iraqi capital in Baghdad.

Meanwhile, an internal security state worked very differently to harass other refugees in the name of protecting them. Displaced Anbari women were targeted as suspicious allies in a terrorist network. Widows faced interrogations, night raids, and extensive surveillance by the Asaish because their men were imagined to be still alive, fighting with ISIS in Anbar. The terrorism burden, by which I mean the burden of personally explaining and accounting for the existence of Islamic terrorism in the world in daily interactions, fell upon Anbari women who were suspected by the Kurdish security state of aiding and abetting terrorism if their husbands, sons, or siblings were missing. Some of the women I interviewed and lived with were even threatened with deportation to mainland Iraq. Were Kurdistan an official state, keeping refugees just outside of national territory would be illegal, as was the case with Palestinian-Iraqi double refugees on the Syrian border in 2007–10. But in this case, semiautonomy generated ambiguity that prevented any claims to this practice being illegal.

While Muslim Kurdish women were presented as nearly-Western feminists, non-Muslim Yazidi women were presented as downtrodden victims in need of saving, and Muslim Anbari women were treated as manipulative allies of a backwards Islam: all were caricatures of refugees and their protectors. International media leaned into Orientalist discourse about Islam in order to flip the script about Kurdistan. Thus, refugees—both the menace they could be (in this case, Anbari women collaborating with ISIS husbands), and the menace they run from (in this case, Yazidi women raped and kidnapped by ISIS)—serve as vectors for military support for those who fight the menace (in this case, Kurdish women soldiers).

Kurdistan's Military-Displacement Complex

On 10 February 2015 in an NBC News (2015) interview titled, “Kurdish Fighters Need Guns,” Masrour Barzani, head of the Kurdish Security Council, expressed gratitude for the U.S. airstrikes against ISIS but called for weapons, tanks, and other supplies to help garrison the Kurdish state in the fight against Islamic extremism. It was no secret that such weapons would not only be used to preserve U.S. and Kurdish joint interests in regional stability, but also for Kurdish independence.

The Kurdish relationship with both refugees and international military support forms a military-displacement complex, by which I mean a political economy predicated on the simultaneous protection and violation of refugees as a rhetorical and pragmatic catalyst toward geospatial control. Beyond humanitarianism, military control of the region was enabled by mutual opportunism: the United States, which had previously portrayed Kurdish militias as terrorist groups, was now actively engaged in training and partnering with Kurdish militias and the Kurdish Peshmerga. While short-lived and paltry compared to other cases of U.S. military backing, millions of dollars in military aid went into reinforcing Kurdish territorial control. Kurdish national freedom was not something the United States or any other geopolitical power planned to fully support, but it was promised as a way of garnering regional military advantage against ISIS.

On the other hand, the threat of ISIS incursion was actively exaggerated by Kurdistan in an effort to gain military and economic support in both hosting refugees and garrisoning—if not expanding—its borders. Capitalizing on international fears of ISIS, Kurdistan—posing as a beacon of light and liberalism—procured a major influx of military capital, including training in counterterrorism to secure border areas and their natural resources. Security states often practice repressive tactics in the name of liberal values, like protecting minorities and women, in order to make military strides for spatial control of territory (Foucault 2009). Refugees and their protection worked to establish a publicly acceptable reason to explain why Kurdish secret police and the Kurdish military might be busting into refugee hotel rooms to do periodic sweeps in the name of counterterrorism.

Conclusion

The politics of who counts as a refugee and who does not is fraught not only for those who stand to be (dis)counted but also for the regimes doing the counting. It is widely accepted that countries hosting refugees are burdened by them and that displaced people can threaten a host country's sense of sovereignty. However, this is not always true, and never evenly

so. For Kurdistan, and perhaps other semiautonomous states and historically persecuted communities, refugees can sit at the heart of sovereignty movements.

Between 2010 and 2020, Kurdistan leveraged refugees and their salvation as a central alibi for securing its own national boundaries and its displaced populations, leaning heavily on international stereotypes and discourse to advance its security apparatus. The uneven treatment and identification of displaced people, from Yazidi and Kurds as integrated and welcomed to Anbari Arabs as excluded and distrusted, highlights the powerful role of refugees in forming and amplifying Kurdish ethnic nationalism. Furthermore, Kurdistan's alignment with the "free world" against Islamic extremism was solidified in international discourse through emphasis on variable caricatures of women, from downtrodden victims to ISIS accomplices to gallant fighters, even as Kurdish security policed certain displaced women in the name of protection. Spatially, the geographic placement camps and the careful classification of refugees versus IDPs helped Kurdistan both define and make flexible its physical borders in service of territorial expansion. The result of these measures was that, in the name of feminism, refugee protection, and freedom from Islamic extremism, Kurdistan received an influx of tanks, weapons, and training to reinforce an increasingly garrisoned security state.

Refugees—their camps, bodies, and social status—served as moral, spatial, and legal objects around which a national call for security and sovereignty could be amplified. Their actual treatment, however, depended upon their functional use value in the project of building a deeper security state via a military-displacement complex.

Kali Rubaii is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at Purdue University. Her research explores how less-than-lethal military projects (re)arrange political ecologies in the name of "letting live," facilitating certain relations among humans, plants, animals, and molecular agents, while precluding others. Rubaii's current book project examines how farmers from Anbar, Iraq, struggle to survive and recover from transnational counterinsurgency projects. Overall, her research on displacement, security, temporality, and war ecologies aims to sharpen resistance strategies that target the vulnerable nexus between coercive power and the physical world.

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