



Women in the Middle East

By As'ad AbuKhalil

In discussions of general issues facing women in the Middle East, the diversity of female lifestyles and conditions is often lost. Accustomed to stereotypical depictions, Westerners are told that Middle Eastern women are passive, weak, and always veiled. It is often assumed that the severe conditions in Saudi Arabia—where women are not even allowed to drive cars—represent the norm for women throughout the Middle East and in the larger Muslim world. In reality, Saudi Arabia's versions of both Islam and sexism are rather unique in their severities, although the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan is now emulating the sexist Saudi model. Women enjoy political and social rights in many Muslim countries, and Egypt has recently granted women the right to divorce their husbands. In Tunisia, abortion is legal, and polygamy is prohibited. Women have served as ministers in the Syrian, Jordanian, Egyptian, Iraqi, and Tunisian governments, and as Vice President in Iran.

Yet the problems of Middle Eastern women remain acute. Islamic, Christian, and Jewish jurists and theologians—all of them males—

have provided Middle Eastern society with the most exclusivist and conservative interpretations of religious laws, which have burdened women in the family, the society, and the state. The top position in government, according to strict Islamic laws, is denied to women based on a dubious Hadith (collections of sayings and deeds attributed to Muhammad). According to the Interparliamentary Union, the political representation of women in parliaments in Arab nations lags behind all other countries of the world, and Kuwait has yet to grant women the right to vote. Yet, Muslims in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and

Turkey have all been led by women. In Israel, a woman (Golda Meir) once headed the government, although the political elite has been almost exclusively of males since the creation of the state.

Islamic clerics continue to enjoy a tremendous amount of power, and often exercise great influence in the field of education. The Middle East (including Israel) is unduly hostage to clerics, who do not allow the codification of civil personal status laws. For example, only Cyprus, of all the Middle Eastern countries, recognizes interfaith marriages. Furthermore, Islam has sanctioned and perpetuated many sexist practices and views, including

polygamy, the stigmatization of menstruation, the requirement of wifely obedience to the husband, and the inequality of inheritance and court appearances. All of these practices have at one point or another been part of Christian and Jewish practices or cultures.

Although religion bears major responsibility for the inferior status of women, it cannot be solely blamed for the gender problem in the Middle East. In reality, the role of culture has been even more prominent in perpetuating the oppression of women. Female genital mutilation, for example, is a cultural practice that has afflicted women in several cultures at different times in history. The practice, which in Islam garners dubious permission in an alleged Hadith of the Prophet, is largely unknown in most Muslim countries, though it is still practiced in rural areas of both Muslim and non-Muslim parts of Africa. Similarly, the so-called "honor crimes" have no basis in Islam. Furthermore, though veiling has become a symbol of Middle Eastern oppression of women, the practice actually came to Muslim cultures from Christian Byzantium.

In fact, the role of the West regarding Middle Eastern women is often obscured. Western colonial powers have historically shed crocodile tears over the plight of Muslim women and have vilified Islam for its role in this oppression. Ironically, in medieval times Islam was actually attacked by Christian polemicists for being too permissive and tolerant in social and sexual matters.

Western treatment of Muslim women has been hypocritical at best. Leila Ahmed, who published a study of women and gender in the Islamic world, dubs the Western attitude as "colonial feminism." According to Ahmed, colonial feminism refers to the tendency among colonial officers to champion Muslim women's rights, while at the same time opposing women's rights in their own countries. Thus the status of women in the Middle East was used merely to denigrate Islam and the culture of the region. The legacy of colonial feminism persists; feminism in the Middle East is often discredited, by governments and by local enemies of feminism, because it is associated with the sequels of colonialism.

In the present-day Middle East, the Western powers' responsibility (America's in particular) for the current state of affairs, cannot be denied. Ever since the 1950s, successive American governments have supported Saudi Arabian Islam and have funded and armed Islamic fundamentalist groups, which have tormented Middle Eastern women and frustrated their efforts at emancipation. Furthermore, since many of the oppressive governments in the Middle East survive only because of Western military and/or economic support, the responsibility for local oppression has external dimensions.

Key Points

- Although there is no gender equality in the Middle East (including in Israel), the phenomena of sexism and misogyny are global—not peculiar to Islam, or to the Middle East.
- The status of women varies widely in the Middle East, and one should not project the norms in Saudi Arabia— one of the most sexist and oppressive states in the region—onto the larger Muslim world.
- Many of the causes for the inferior status of Middle Eastern women are indigenous, but the West—especially the U.S.—has exacerbated this oppression.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

The U.S. government (especially since the days of Jimmy Carter, who hailed the Iranian shah's regime a few months before its overthrow) has for years exploited human rights rhetoric by highlighting its enemies' human rights violations and ignoring its friends' violations. The people of the Middle East have not forgotten that Washington ignored the shah of Iran's abysmal record of human rights violations while strictly scrutinizing the human rights records of Libya and Syria, for example. Of course Libya and Syria do violate human rights, but Washington's double standard is blatant and cruel.

The antipathy to U.S. economic and political interests in the Middle East stems largely from the inability or unwillingness of the U.S. to judge human rights on a universal and neutral basis. Not that the U.S. should view itself, or that it should be viewed by others, as the ultimate arbiter of the human rights situation around world. Many human rights organizations have documented human rights violations within the United States. But the U.S. presents itself to the Middle East, and to other regions of the world, as the authority on and the judge of human rights standards, and does not admit that its actions both within and outside the U.S. often worsen human rights situations.

In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia stands as a clear example of American hypocrisy. No serious and credible policy on human rights can ignore the abysmal record of the Saudi royal family, which has imposed on the Saudi Arabian people one of the most oppressive regimes in the world. Saudi Arabia's government is based on institutional sexism, misogyny, and intolerant religious exclusiveness. The brand of Wahhabi Islam imposed in Saudi Arabia is seen in no other country. (Qatar, which follows Wahhabi doctrine, has been launching a series of social and political reforms affecting women in the past few years.)

American support for the Saudi royal family has permitted that government to violate human rights and to ignore the pleas of Saudi men and women for reforms. Crown Prince Abdullah, who has assumed more powers in the past two years in the wake of the near incapacitation of King Fahd, has publicly alluded to popular demands for social, political, and legal reforms affecting Saudi women. Yet Washington, which routinely interferes in the minute affairs in the region and in the internal domestic situation of many Arab countries, has not made one public statement in support of Saudi women in the face of state oppression and discrimination. How can the U.S. government make speeches and statements in support of 13 Iranian Jews who are accused of treason and yet remain silent about the plight of millions of Arab women who are oppressed daily by a pro-American government? How can the U.S. scrutinize the human rights records of Libya and Iran but not of Saudi Arabia? Iran's political system, with all its shortcomings, is certainly superior to the archaic political system in Saudi Arabia.

U.S. support for Saudi Arabia has also harmed the cause of reforming Islam, because Saudi oil wealth helps to promote a very conservative branch of Islamic theology and jurisprudence throughout the Muslim world. The Saudi Arabian branch of Wahhabiyyah Islam targets women: they are denied political roles, they are deprived

of driving privileges, they are confined to educational institutions inferior to those reserved for men, and they are still subject to the legal practice of guardianship, which treats women as legal inferiors who cannot move or travel without the notarized legal permission of their fathers, brothers, husbands, or a remote male relative in some cases. While Saudi Arabia welcomes technology allowing it to accommodate U.S. military needs and requirements, it fights political reforms under the slogan of maintaining its cultural and Islamic authenticity. The campaign against gender equality and religious reforms spearheaded by the Saudi royal family, is directly or indirectly sponsored by the U.S., the main political benefactor of the Wahhabi government. Though the Saudi case is exceptional, it is illustrative of the determinants and consequences of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, U.S. aid programs don't help Middle Eastern women either. Although the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have belatedly accommodated themselves to the needs of civic organizations around the world, the U.S. foreign aid program is not based on need and is severely tarnished by its political agenda. The Canadian foreign aid program is geared toward the empowerment of both the poor and women, and it awards grants and aid on the basis of need. But the largest recipient of U.S. aid remains Israel, which has a per capita income comparable to that of the UK. Moreover, the U.S. government still favors rewarding and punishing governments through its aid programs. Instead of supporting the courageous feminist and human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Middle East, the U.S. aid program helps finance the defense industry in America. This type of aid only serves to promote a culture of corruption in the recipient countries and keeps unelected officials in power. In recent years, Washington has been giving some money to civic associations, but the amounts are minuscule when compared to U.S. military aid, or to the needs of Middle Eastern NGOs.

Many private philanthropic organizations in the West have shifted their largess to aid civic associations. NGOs now proliferate throughout the Arab world, and these organizations suffer not only from political repression but also from lack of resources. Feminist organizations in particular have to navigate between the hostility of the state and the hostility of Islamic fundamentalists in society. These organizations, and female-led groups promoting economic development among women, would benefit from U.S. economic aid. Yet even when some groups (like the feminist organization led by Nawal Saadawi in Egypt) receive private American aid, their rank-and-file members object. Wary of American motives and foreign policy, such groups often detest and suspect American funding.

Key Problems

- The U.S. continues to support a very conservative and intensely misogynist version of Islam through its staunch support of the Saudi Arabian government.
 - U.S. financial aid supports the oppressive regimes in the region, rather than the civil and feminist organizations.
 - American policy during the cold war promoted conservative Islamic fundamentalism, which now terrorizes the region and its women.
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Toward a New Foreign Policy

Washington's rhetoric on human rights is not taken seriously by people in the Middle East, and rightly so. Although the U.S. scrutinizes the human rights records of governments it dislikes (like Iran and Libya), it ignores similar abuses in "friendly" countries like Saudi Arabia, which perhaps has—along with the Taliban government of Afghanistan—the worst record on women's rights in the world. Saudi Arabia exemplifies the essential flaws and errors of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East: how can Washington claim that it opposes dictators and oppressors in the region (like Qadhafi and

Saddam Hussein) while it continues its longstanding policy of supporting the illegitimate rule of the Saudi royal family? Furthermore, U.S. policy on human rights has never been troubled by America's very close and "strategic" relations with the state of Israel, which has consistently violated the human rights of Arabs living under its rule, and has showered neighboring Arab countries with

unsolicited bombs. Many of the victims of Israeli oppression and bombing have been women. Furthermore, the record of the Israeli state toward Israeli women has been inadequate, to put it mildly.

A new, credible foreign policy would take into consideration the human rights abuses of all governments in the Middle East, regardless of whether the abusers were friendly or hostile to U.S. interests and regardless of the religion, gender, and ethnicity of the victims. Christian and Jewish victims of oppression in the Middle East receive far more coverage in the U.S. press and in the attention span of U.S. officials than do Muslim victims of oppression. Such favoritism leaves Middle Eastern women out of the scope of American foreign policy radar altogether.

Women's issues must rank more prominently on the agenda of U.S. foreign and human rights policy. Washington currently claims to include human rights issues in its diplomatic dealings with foreign countries, although evidence to the contrary exists. But we have yet to hear about significant U.S. interest in the plight of Saudi women, whose subjugation cannot be justified even by Islamic jurisprudence. The U.S. objects, for example, to the sheltering of Usamah Bin Ladin by the Taliban government more than it objects to the oppression of women by that government. In fact, it was the way that U.S. foreign policy handled the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that enabled the fundamentalist misogynist victors in Afghanistan to roll back the strides of

progress and success by Afghani women under the previous secular (communist) governments.

Washington should send a message to Middle Eastern governments that U.S. aid and diplomatic support will be tied to progress on women's rights. Currently, the U.S. government interferes in the minutiae of Arab politics, deciding, for example, whether the League of Arab States should hold a summit or not, and determining what words Yasir Arafat should use in his speeches. Yet, when pressed on the plight of women in Saudi Arabia, Washington pleads "noninterference in the internal affairs of Arab countries." How can one buy that argument, when U.S. planes fly freely over the skies of Iraq and when U.S. troops are overtly or covertly stationed on Arab soil?

The U.S. government must also match its rhetoric with its actions. Instead of funneling millions of dollars into corrupt state institutions that only benefit ruling elites and their cronies, U.S. aid should be aimed at enriching civic society, many of whose elements are led by Middle Eastern women. Washington can help, not in the emancipation of Middle Eastern women—they can do just fine in their own self-liberation—but in providing women's organizations in the Middle East with much-needed resources and materials, and in removing some of the blocks from the path of liberation. Unfortunately the unpopularity of the U.S. government has rendered such help controversial at times, as was the case of the feminist group led by Nawal Saadawi in Egypt.

Washington must help foster strong civic groups in the Middle East instead of pursuing the unending spiral of militarization that continues despite the ending of the cold war. Instead, the U.S. government still heavily arms both Israel and Arab Persian Gulf regimes, despite its claims to be halting the Middle East arms race.

Finally, it is important that the U.S. government avoid the pitfalls of past colonial experiences: the struggle for gender equality in the Middle East should not be equated with Islam bashing. Islam is not uniquely guilty of gender inequality, and any attempt to perpetuate the negative stereotypes of Arabs and Islam in the West will only discredit the efforts of Middle Eastern feminists, who are often dismissed as stooges of Western powers. The struggle for gender equality in the Middle East is a Middle Eastern struggle, but the U.S. government, through its wealth and influence, can play a favorable and supportive role that could enhance understanding and harmony between Arabs and Americans.

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Key Recommendations

- The U.S. needs to end its double standard relative to human rights violations in the Middle East.
- Washington must end its traditional disregard for the plight of Middle Eastern women and incorporate the interests and welfare of women into its foreign aid programs.

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The Middle East Institute of Columbia University
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