



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

THE ARAB AWAKENING AND GENDER: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

CONFERENCE REPORT

BY

MARWA SHALABY, PH.D.

POSTDOCTORAL FELLOW IN WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST
JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

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Conference Report: The Arab Awakening and Gender

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Conference Report: The Arab Awakening and Gender

Abstract

To acknowledge the critical role played by Arab women in the Arab Awakening and to shed light on the challenges and opportunities facing women in the Middle East and North Africa post-Arab Awakening, the Kelly Day Endowment on the Status of Women and Human Rights in the Middle East of Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy hosted a conference on February 21, 2013, titled "The Arab Awakening and Gender: Challenges and Opportunities For Women." The goal of the conference was both to highlight the challenges facing women in the Middle East and to demonstrate that, despite the uncertainty that still surrounds the future of these uprisings, women in the region are increasingly aware of the obstacles ahead, and are determined more than ever to overcome these hardships and to realize their long-awaited aspirations of equal citizenship, parity, and equal opportunity.

The conference featured prominent female figures from the Arab world with backgrounds ranging from social media and journalism to business, economics, religious law, sociopolitical activism, and civil society organizations. This diverse group of women represented several different countries in the region, including Palestine, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt. Each of the participants detailed challenges facing women in their respective countries and proposed policy recommendations for promoting gender equality in the region.

Preface

The winds of change are blowing through the Middle East. The Arab Awakening has revolutionized not only the face of Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, but also the entire region. Voices across the Arab world calling for dignity, social equality, and better economic conditions can no longer be silenced. Events of the past few years show that the barriers of fear have been demolished, and that now is the perfect time for real change in the region.

During the course of the uprisings, Arab women have been on the front lines organizing, volunteering, and even leading the protests across Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia. Arab women have been revolting not only against their authoritarian regimes and political

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injustices, but even more importantly, against the long-standing forms of gender discrimination and social injustices. Now, more than two years after the first uprising—Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution—Arab women continue to fight for their dream of a better tomorrow—one of equal citizenship, hope, and gender equality.

Today, women in the Middle East are still facing many hardships and challenges across economic, social, and cultural levels. They have made many sacrifices to attain their fundamental rights, but there is much more to be accomplished. Even after the democratic surge swept the region, there is still uncertainty on how and whether the Arab Awakening will result in greater gender equality and safeguard women’s rights.

To acknowledge the role played by Arab women in the Arab Awakening and to shed light on the challenges and opportunities facing women in the Middle East and North Africa post-Arab Awakening, the Kelly Day Endowment on the Status of Women and Human Rights in the Middle East of Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy hosted a conference on February 21, 2013, titled “The Arab Awakening and Gender: Challenges and Opportunities For Women.” The conference featured prominent female figures from the Arab world with backgrounds ranging from social media and journalism to business, economics, religious law, sociopolitical activism, and civil society organizations. The conference discussions and presentations echoed the social, economic, and legal challenges currently facing women in the Middle East, and the speakers proposed policy recommendations for promoting gender equality in the region.

Among the topics covered were Arab women and societal transformation post-Arab Awakening, leadership opportunities and challenges for women in the Arab world, and Arab women in the judicial arena. The event drew more than 200 policymakers, academics, community leaders, and interested citizens to the Baker Institute. This conference report presents a summary of the discussions and recommendations.

I. Introduction

“What is the Arab Awakening?” asked Baker Institute founding director Ambassador Edward P. Djerejian in opening address at the conference. Defining the revolutions, he said, would provide the framework for a broader discussion on the role of women in the Arab world and how it is evolving in the wake of these uprisings. Djerejian described the Arab Awakening as a tectonic shift, not only in the Arab world, but in the Muslim world in general. “The significance of these events was that [they were] a bottom-up revolution. The Arab Awakening had no political leadership, nor party structure. It came from the people, it was a youth movement, and this was phenomenal,” he stated. He also observed that these popular revolts were not only against resilient dictators, some of whom ruled for over 40 years, but also against obstacles to political participation, lack of education, unemployment, and the people’s inability to choose their government representatives.

Reflecting on the sustainability and the future of democracy in the Arab countries currently in transition, Djerejian asserted, “Elections are only one facet of democracy. Democracy is the rule of law, equality, and it is the principle of peaceful alteration of power. . . . Will [those coming to power] respect these fundamental principles of democracy?” He added that it is not surprising that Islamist parties are coming to power, for “when you open up the democratic process in countries in which Islam is such a dominant factor, Islamist parties are going to be in power. The big challenge is the question, how are they going to govern?” Djerejian argued that these Islamist governments should have a “coherent economic, social, and political programs” to solve the epidemic problems presently facing many countries in the region.

Djerejian also drew attention to the important role played by Arab women in the success of these uprisings, as well as to the centrality of gender equality post-Arab Awakening. “It is impossible to imagine a democratic Middle East based on the respect of the rule of law and the protection of human rights and freedoms while more than half of its society is being marginalized from the decision-making process,” he remarked. He also argued that, despite the fact that the revolutions have paved the way for change in the region, they also have brought about a whole set of challenges. Especially with the rise of the Islamist governments in Egypt and Tunisia, very little

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is known about the true commitment of these countries to safeguarding women's rights and advancing gender equality. Thus far, women have had a minimal presence in the region's transitional political structures. Djerejian observed, "Just four members of Egypt's recent controversial Constitutional Assembly were women, and only six women in total participate in the post-revolutionary cabinets in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia." Despite these numbers, Djerejian remained optimistic, noting that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has recently appointed 30 women to Majlis Al-Shurah for the first time in [the kingdom's] history.

"There is a window of opportunity for American foreign policy to devote more attention to female empowerment in the region, and to advocate for increased substantive participation for women in government and civil society. We must do this not from a Western point of view, but we have to do this intelligently with a keen appreciation for the Arab and Islamic culture," Djerejian concluded.

II. Arab Women and Societal Transformation Post-Arab Awakening

The first panel of the conference focused on the societal and political consequences of the Arab Awakening on the status of women in the region. Amid the frenzied events that took place over the course of the last two years, the contribution of women to the success of the popular uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia has been largely overlooked. In this vein, Nabila Ramdani—a prominent journalist and columnist from Algeria—highlighted that "women were on the frontlines leading demonstrations, blogging and tweeting passionately, and helping and caring for the wounded." She also reiterated the fact that "the supremacy of men was exactly what women were fighting against—it was not just the supremacy of ruthless dictators that needed to be overthrown."

Referring to the challenges facing women post-Arab Awakening, Ramdani argued that women's fundamental rights continue to be under real threat given the current political and societal conditions in the region. "Parliaments are struggling to find the balance between the secular forces and the rise of conservatism in Arab societies," she explained. Ramdani underscored the fact that most of the institutions established post-Arab Awakening are reluctant to challenge

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cultures that traditionally relegate women to lower-class social roles. Thus, while change is certainly coming, Ramdani emphasized that it will not happen overnight; rather, she argued that “the true Arab Awakening will dawn only when democracy has roots in a country [that] has ousted its dictatorships, and when women in these societies are allowed to take part in society.”

Ramdani also summarized the results for female candidates in the most recent elections in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. In Egypt, just two percent of successful candidates were women, she said, adding, “Post-revolutionary Egypt no longer has a sense of imminent emancipation for women,” and that “there is a strong feeling that a combination of complacency and fear has reversed the successes of the early day revolution.” In Tunisia, on the other hand, female candidates won almost 28 percent of seats in the Tunisian assembly, but there have still been setbacks as the original constitution “officially render[ed] women as second-class citizens.” Finally, Ramdani commented that she was surprised that the issue of women even became a topic of discussion in Libya, as “the fledgling democracy had so many other problems to consider.”

In response to a question on the future of women’s rights in the region under the rule of Islamist parties and whether these parties were creating a theocracy, Ramdani agreed that the rise of Islamists in the region might be a reason for concern. However, she noted, the Arab Awakening has shown that the people in the Middle East have become “fearless,” especially Arab youth. She also added that what is actually troubling to her is how Islamist groups are trying to silence secular opposition. “The creation of blasphemy laws is of [particular] concern because it is an articulated effort to diffuse and get rid of any criticism of government, especially when it is Islamic inspired,” she observed.

“It is [too] early to say if the Arab Awakening has truly empowered women, Ramdani said in closing. “This is a time of opportunity, and the goal of the Arab Awakening is to provide access to the corridors of power for citizens.”

The next panelist, Nabila Hamza, president of Foundation for the Future, focused on the challenges and opportunities for women in the region. She began her presentation by reiterating that “women have been in the forefront of the revolution advocating for democracy. [At the very

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beginning of the revolutions], women were not advocating for women's rights but for change, dignity, freedom, and for social justice." Hamza argued that the Arab Awakening has completely changed the stereotype of submissive Arab women. Throughout the region, women have taken their grievances to the streets, challenging not only their government, but also the hierarchical gender structure as a whole.

In response to a question about the role of social media in the success of the uprisings, Hamza asserted that, despite the considerable role played by Twitter and Facebook during the course of the revolution, the importance of this technology should not be exaggerated. She did, however, urge women and feminist activists in the region to "use the Internet to launch a new kind of activism that will connect all the issues in the region and ask the international community of supporters to really make the women's agenda one of the main issues of diplomacy and negotiation."

Referring to the challenges facing women post-Arab Awakening, Hamza argued that women's rights "have fallen by the wayside of the revolution." She believed that the rise of the Islamist movements in the region have "hijacked" gender equality in many countries. She added that violence against women is a serious issue, as it has become "a method of political conspiracy used to force women to stay home."

Hamza also acknowledged the fact that the Arab Awakening by no means guaranteed advances for women. "Revolutions in the world don't necessarily lead to gender equality," she observed. She added that the processes and the mechanisms for ensuring gender equality vary significantly from one country to another, depending on a country's history, domestic issues, cultural and societal background, and the capacities of women's movements in each country.

Although Hamza agreed with Ramdani that the road to gender equality will not be an easy one, she argued that there are many reasons to be optimistic now more than ever. First, many countries in the region are rewriting their constitutions, a process that represents a unique opportunity for women to push and advocate for their political and social rights. Second, many political parties, including Islamist parties, are encouraging women to run for political office to

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create a gender balance on their candidate lists. Hamza asserted that women should seize this opportunity to have a meaningful impact on formulating egalitarian electoral laws and to be fully represented.

Citing recent progress in the region, Hamza expressed that it was remarkable to witness the candidacy of Bothayna Kamel, the first Arab woman to run for the Egyptian presidency in the most recent elections post-revolution. The region has also witnessed the nomination of female prosecutors in Kuwait and the appointment of women in the Saudi Majlis Al-Shurah. Finally, Hamza added that the rise of women and feminist movements in the region could play a crucial role for empowering women in the region. “Now, women are more educated, more sophisticated, more diversified [...]—a new generation with a totally new agenda,” Hamza concluded.

Addressing gender-related societal transformation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) post-Arab Awakening, Hatoon Ajwad Al-Fassi, a prominent historian specializing in Saudi women’s history at King Saud University, stated that “Saudi Arabia did not officially have a revolution, nor has it acknowledged that it had any form of revolution or acknowledged that the rest of the Arab world had a ‘Spring.’” She did, however, underscore that the KSA faced numerous internal and external challenges during the course of the Arab Awakening.

Internally, the KSA witnessed a series of sporadic, issue-specific demonstrations and movements against the monarchy. The aging of the royal family, the succession dilemma, and the limitless authority granted to the Ministry of Interior to suppress all forms of demonstrations or unrest have created additional challenges for the kingdom. Externally, Al-Fassi stated, “The Arab Spring surrounded Saudi [Arabia], with Yemen in the south and Bahrain in the east,” and Saudi Arabia was in a very difficult position in terms of how to deal with the situation in these neighboring countries. In an attempt to face these imminent external threats, the KSA—along with the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries—managed to reach a settlement with the Yemenis to include more monarchies in the GCC, and to strengthen the diplomatic ties across the GCC countries.

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With regard to Saudi women post-Arab Awakening, Al-Fassi argued that “the spirit of the Arab Spring has brought a fresh air of freedom. [. . .] Women broke the barriers of fear, of hesitation, of accepting the status quo, and they expressed their views and their position in different ways.” She stressed the need to redefine the concept of activism within the context of Middle East politics. She claimed that activism took different versions and forms, and that there was indeed a “revolution in words” among women and youth in the KSA. As an example, Al-Fassi mentioned various movements in Saudi Arabia, including “Baladi” movements, which organized women-led street stand-offs to put pressure on the Saudi government and to push for a faster implementation of legislation allowing women to participate in the municipal councils; the Saudi women’s driving Campaigns, in which women stood up for their right to drive and advocated for legal permission to do so; and other women’s education reform movements that took place in the monarchy during the course of the Arab Awakening.

Al-Fassi also spoke about what motivated women finally to speak out in the KSA. “It is a problem of justice, a problem of failure to apply justice. This is what motivated women and made them come out of their caves,” Al-Fassi said. She stated that women in the KSA were the first to use the term “revolution” on a website that they called “Saudi Women Revolution” in February 2011. In an unprecedented move, this widely popular website was legitimized by one of King Abdullah’s daughters, Princess Adillah. The site was also unique because it presented a comprehensive and well-structured list of demands for women in the KSA.

In a similar vein, when asked about the role of technology in promoting women’s issues in the KSA, Al-Fassi stated that social media “gave women a space, a freedom. It helped organize and see [the revolution] in a better way, it brought a new generation into activism and this is what was really gained from social media. [. . .] It has brought a change to Saudi women.” She explained that social media has introduced various outlets through which a woman could “bring her voice to the public and the world in a new way.”

Al-Fassi then explained that another significant move for the advancement of women’s rights in the KSA post-Arab Awakening was King Abdullah’s declaration in September 2011 that women would be granted seats in Saudi Arabia’s Majlis Al-Shurah (Upper House) and in the municipal

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councils. A royal decree followed this declaration on December 25, 2011, granting Saudi women political rights, including voting and running for elected office on the municipal level. A year later, 30 women were nominated to hold seats in the Majlis Al-Shurah. The enactment of the decree occurred on January 11, 2013, and the oath of office took place in February 2013.

Al-Fassi noted that the process to include Saudi women in the municipal councils, however, has been more complicated, even though activists' began advocating for women's inclusion in municipal councils in 2004. In 2010, there was an outbreak of 'Baladi' movements throughout the KSA. As a result, King Abdullah announced that Saudi women would be able to participate in the upcoming 2015 elections for municipal courts. Al-Fassi concluded, "Baladi has moved from a campaign to an initiative [striving] to include women in all facets of Saudi society."

Al-Fassi also drew attention to the various challenges currently facing Saudi women entering Majlis Al-Shurah—specifically, that they will have to operate within a new environment of men who already know one another and their customs: "It's an old boys' club and [women] don't know their language [or] strategies." Other major challenges facing Saudi women holding power, she mentioned, include "the problem of high expectations that the nation is putting on them, [as well as] the pressure of the religious establishment."

In a response to a question about the significance of the inclusion of women in the Saudi Majlis Al-Shurah and if it will bring broader reforms related to women's issues in the KSA, Al-Fassi replied, "I consider [the appointments] very positive and telling, and it was a strong message to the conservative elements in our society that this is the time [for change]." Al-Fassi elaborated more on the immediate significance of this development, explaining, "This appointment is a revolutionary decision that we have looked forward to since it first came out in the media in September 2012. [. . .] The 30 women have equal capacity of voting or revising laws, of questioning orders, and of suggesting and proposing issues. They are all on the same level with men."

Al-Fassi fielded another question on women's selection mechanisms in the KSA to clarify why women have been nominated to the Majlis Al-Shurah but are still facing barriers to municipal

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councils. She explained that while the members of Majlis Al-Shurah are appointed, the members of the municipal councils are expected to be partly appointed by the minister of municipal and rural affairs, and partly elected by local constituents in the representative's district. Finally, Al-Fassi expressed her optimism for future women's rights victories, stating, "The new generation is very daring and unafraid. They came from an environment, education, and background different from ours. Women with education from abroad bring new opportunities, and social media is a great partner in this change." She predicted that change is inevitable, though no one knows when and how.

III. Leadership, Opportunities, and Challenges for Women in the Arab World

The second panel featured three presentations on leadership, opportunities, and challenges for women in the Arab world. The first two presentations focused on leadership opportunities for women in the economic and legislative arenas; the last presentation focused on the challenges facing Arab women post-Arab Awakening on both the political and the socioeconomic levels.

Daisy Khan, the executive director for the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA), moderated this second panel. In her introduction, Khan shared her personal experiences and the impact of her work on the advancement of women's issues across the globe. She stated, "Most of the Muslim women worldwide have endured many injustices that have no justification in Islam." Khan also acknowledged that women have always been leaders of change in their societies, noting, "Women led the suffrage and the civil rights movements in the U.S. We are currently observing a similar pattern across the Middle East." However, she stated that the struggle for women's rights is still ongoing. "We can't let the extremist define the global agenda for the Muslim community," Khan said. "We can't let them marginalize the moderates and subjugate women. [. . .] A strong Muslim woman is a defeat to extremists. A determined Muslim woman who can vote and bring democracy will bring social change, not only in the family, [but also] in her community and society."

Panelist Neveen El Tahri, founder and chairperson of Delta Shield for Investments in Egypt, shared the story of how she became one of the most successful businesswomen in the Arab world.

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Although she was the first woman in Egypt to start her own stock exchange company, El Tahri noted that the road to success was fairly straightforward for her, in part because she started her business in Egypt when the capital markets were just opening after years of nationalization. El Tahri also benefited from the fact that “Egypt has always been an open society. We don’t have salary differences, and so you don’t really feel these gender differences in the workplace.”

Despite the relative pay equality in Egypt, El Tahri maintained that the revolution in Egypt came about “because of economic issues.” She also noted that her experience in the business world would enable her to contribute to solving some of these economic problems, and that she has various ways to give back to her community. “In my case, I have a seed accelerator in Egypt [that] started after the revolution. I have always employed a lot of women and given much support and mentoring for women in business.” This support, El Tahri said, is extremely important given the fact that about 27 percent of Egyptian women are the main source of income for their families and about 80 percent of Egyptian women contribute to their household income. There is no way to bring these women back to their homes as implicitly advocated by the radical Islamists these days; they are already “ingrained into the society” as wage earners.

When asked about what she thought was the most important ingredient for reform, El Tahri stated, “I think education is the key; however, it might take a whole generation to change.” In a response to another question about whether gender equality in the region would bring about more religious tolerance, she argued that, despite the regular attempts to relate gender equality with Islam, the issue has little to do with religion; Islam has been politicized and used by political parties to “get the votes.” El Tahri concluded by asserting that she was very optimistic about the future of women in Egypt, even though progress would most likely be slow and incremental.

Judge Kholoud Mohammad Al-Faqeeh, the first female sharia law judge in Palestine, shared her experience of becoming an influential part of the judicial process in her own country. In spite of the fact that the road to success was difficult, she was determined to pursue her dream of becoming the first woman in her country to be a sharia law judge. Al-Faqeeh realized that women are an influential source of peace and generosity; therefore, she said, “women are important in all positions, and especially this position.” She added that, after going through most

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of the legal and sharia texts, she has yet to find any written justification for denying women the opportunity to be judges in sharia courts. Rather, she argued that there is a strong need for women to occupy this position, as women “are better able to adjudicate matters that are important to women. Women [. . .] go to courts and talk about very personal issues, and it is very important for women to adjudicate [on women’s issues].”

Al-Faqeeh succeeded in becoming the first female judge in a Palestine sharia court in 2009 despite the fierce resistance from her male colleagues and the state’s supreme judges. Though these judges cited religious reasons for their resistance, Al-Faqeeh believed that the refusal from her colleagues “was mainly a matter of personal interest and control that ha[d] nothing to do with religion.”

Dr. Malika Benradi, professor at the Faculty of Law in Rabat and consultant on gender and law, focused her discussion on the challenges facing Arab women both before and after the Arab Awakening on the political, legal, and socioeconomic levels. Benradi noted that most of the Arab countries, except for the Gulf countries, are still considered developing countries. Moreover, there are stark variations in education, gender, and income levels not only across Arab countries, but also between rural and urban areas within each country. “In Morocco, illiteracy is as high as 60 percent in the rural areas,” Benradi explained. In contrast, illiteracy in urban areas is less than 30 percent. She added that these rural areas have already witnessed a strong presence of the Islamist parties that used religion for political means, claiming that they were capable of using Shariah to solve the economic and social problems created by former dictators.

The situation seems even grimmer for females in regions where “women are considered second-class citizens [and have the] highest levels of illiteracy, poverty, [and] maternal mortality, and lowest levels of political participation,” Benradi asserted. She added, “Women in the Arab world are indeed citizens in public, but minorities in the private spheres.” She attributed the unequal status of women in many Arab societies to the ambivalence of their legal systems and to the fact that modern laws govern the public sphere, while the private/family issues remained subject to sharia laws.

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Benradi further elaborated on how modernity has affected women's status in the context of the Arab world. She argued that, despite the sweeping forces of modernity that already exist in the region, these forces are not strong enough to improve the societal and cultural conditions for women because the majority of intellectuals who have influence in Arab countries have not played their part advocating for women's issues. Benradi believes that moderate groups have been silenced by pressure from several aggressive religious groups, or by having to acquiesce to the state, or by erring on the safe side and conceding to the ideological trends of the majority. "The intellectual field is consequently abandoned in favor of the ideological field, in which the conservative discourse has developed against all forms of modernity," Benradi maintained. "They oppose modernity because they believe it will lead to the colonial and imperialist actions that have historically come from the West." This debate has created a dilemma in the region, where Muslim leaders and intellectuals have failed to create a model for a modern Islamic society. This split between intellectuals and Islamists in turn, has tremendously impacted the status of women in these societies especially in relation to the legal status of women and the adaptation of family laws throughout the Arab world. Benradi argued that there is a "judicial schizophrenia," in which modern laws dominate the public sphere while Islamic laws are still prevalent in family laws. Benradi highlighted this as a major problem because interpretations of Muslim religious law differ across countries. "We already have at least four different interpretations of sharia laws across Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Jordan," she said.

Furthermore, Benradi asserted that calls for gender equality were met with ferocious cultural and religious resistance throughout the region. Proponents of *Ijtihad* (i.e., the idea of the interpreting Quranic text in light of society's changing circumstances) were immediately labeled atheists simply for addressing women's human rights. This harsh reaction, she argued, indicated that the people of the Arab world "need to start working on a set of universal values, [including] dignity, responsibility, and equality. Benradi continued, "The goal of sharia is to get to the universal value of equality. The primary challenge to empower women post-Arab Awakening is to reform the family law throughout the region."

IV. Conclusions

Participants at the conference “The Arab Awakening and Gender: Challenges and Opportunities For Women” underscored the urgent need to put in place institutional and sociopolitical mechanisms to address challenges facing women in the Middle East. Participants agreed that now is the perfect time to take serious steps toward empowering females in the region, as most of the Arab countries currently in transition are in the process of redrafting their constitutions and revising electoral laws and institutional arrangements. This offers the crafters of U.S. foreign policy a unique window of opportunity to play a more active role in supporting and advocating for women’s rights in the region: if the United States fails to act now, women in the Middle East may have to wait for decades before attaining their social and legal rights.

Many participants also underscored the fact that promoting the status of women in the Middle East should be a multi-dimensional and comprehensive process that takes into account the complexities of the region. Besides introducing top-down changes by means of institutional and legal mechanisms, policymakers should also pay special attention to empowering women at the grassroots level. Increasing education opportunities for females in the Middle East has been cited as one of the most efficient tools for improving the status of women in the region. Also, economic advancement of women is deemed an essential tool for the promotion of women’s status throughout the region. The ultimate goal should be granting Arab women equal citizenship on all economic or social fronts, and allowing them to be an essential part of the decision-making process in their countries.

Another major step toward female empowerment in the region would be to redraw the dividing line between custom and religion. This distinction has been blurred for decades throughout the region. Many experts at the conference agreed that Islam has had little to do with gender inequality in the Arab world. There was consensus on the need to distinguish between religion and social norms and customs if Arab women are to be granted fundamental rights. For their part, Arab women should work with international women’s coalitions in their fight against exclusion and marginalization, especially in the decision-making processes. A strong presence of women in the legislative arena is crucial to achieve gender equality in the region, which is why increasing

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women's numerical presence in decision-making positions has been one of the United Nation's 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDG) top priorities in the region.

Addressing the state of research and practice in the field of gender equality in the Middle East, participants remarked that, prior to the Arab Awakening, excessive restrictions on researchers and field workers significantly hampered the quality and the quantity of scholarly work done in the region. However, now that many Middle Eastern and North African countries are either in the process of democratic transition (i.e., Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen) or undergoing deep democratic reforms (i.e., Morocco and Jordan), these obstacles have mostly been cleared. At present, there are many promising research opportunities in the region that should focus on crucial research questions pertinent to women's rights. In addition, participants stressed the need for original research on gender in the Middle East conducted by experts who are fully aware of the specific customs and traditions of the region. Most of the widely circulated, published work has only just scratched the surface of the problems facing the Middle East, including women's issues. More in-depth studies addressing the most pressing challenges facing women in the region are needed during this critical time of transition.

Finally, participants also highlighted the need for more comparative regional studies. They stressed that the state of research on gender issues in the Middle East and North Africa region has not advanced much during these last few decades due to the individual nature of studies conducted in the region. Discussants agreed that multi-country studies that take into account the specific context of the Middle East are essential to the advancement of women's issues throughout the region. Despite the important contribution of previous research to the advancement of women's issues in the region, there still exists a considerable knowledge gap on what actually works across the various political systems in the Middle East. Further work in this area would help bridge that divide and hopefully lead to greater gender equality in the region.

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Appendix I. Conference Agenda and Bios

Thursday, February 21, 2012

9:30 am Registration and Breakfast

10:05 am Welcoming Remarks and Introduction
The Honorable Edward P. Djerejian
Founding Director, Rice University's Baker Institute

Panel I — Arab Women and Societal Transformations Post-Arab Awakening

Moderator: Dina Alsowayel, Ph.D., Associate Director of Women's Studies, University of Houston

10:30 am The Arab Awakening: What has Changed for Women?
Nabila Ramdani
Columnist, The Guardian

Addressing Gender Issues in the Arab World's Transitional Agendas
Nabila Hamza
President, Foundation for the Future

Saudi Women Amid the Arab Awakening
Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi, Ph.D.
Saudi Women's Historian, King Saud University, Riyadh

Noon Lunch

Panel II — Leadership, Opportunities and Challenges for Women in the Arab World

Moderator: Daisy Khan, Executive Director, American Society for Muslim Advancement

1:15 pm Is the Arab Awakening a Spring?
Neveen El Tahri
Founder and Chairperson, Delta Shield for Investments

A Woman's Faith and Persistence
Judge Kholoud Mohammad Ahmad al-Faqeeh
Sharia Law Judge, Ramallah, Palestine

Women's Rights in the Arab World: What are the Ramifications of the Arab Spring?
Malika Benradi
International Attorney and Professor, Faculty of Law in Rabat, Agdal

3:40 pm Closing Remarks

3:45 pm Reception

Participant Biographies

Kholoud Mohammad Ahmad al-Faqeeh was appointed a judge in the Sharia Court of Ramallah in 2009, making her the first female sharia judge in Palestine, as well as in the Arab world, with the exception of Sudan. From 2003 to 2008, al-Faqeeh represented and defended battered and abused women in civil, sharia and criminal courts, during which time she gained extensive litigation experience. She received her license to practice law in 2001, and has worked as a lawyer in private office as well as the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling, an organization dedicated to assisting battered women. In 2009, al-Faqeeh was selected as one of the 300 most influential Muslims in the world. Arabian Business magazine named her number 10 on its "100 Most Powerful Arab Women" list in 2012, and she was also included on its "500 Most Powerful Arabs" list that same year. Al-Faqeeh received a law degree with honors from Al-Quds University in 1999, as well as a master's degree in international private law from the same university in 2007.

Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi, Ph.D., is a historian specializing in Saudi women's history at King Saud University, Riyadh. Her work focuses on ancient and Islamic women's history, Saudi women's issues and Islamic rights, gender studies, women's religious rights, women writers, history of the Arabian Peninsula and human rights. She currently writes a column for Al-Riyadh Newspaper and is a frequent commentator on Saudi women's issues for the national and international media. Al-Fassi has published numerous books and peer-reviewed articles in Arabic and English. Most recently, she contributed a chapter on "Women of Eastern Arabia: Myth and Representation" for the book "Gulf Women," edited by Amira Sonbol (Bloomsbury/Syracuse University, 2013). In 2012, she was decorated a knight in the National Order of Merit by the president of the French Republic. Al-Fassi graduated with a Ph.D. in women's history from the University of Manchester, U.K.

Dina Alsowayel, Ph.D., is the associate director of women's studies at the University of Houston. She joined the university in 1998 as a postdoctoral fellow in religious studies. Alsowayel teaches a variety of courses in the History Department on topics including the history of the modern Middle East, state and society in the Middle East, women and Islam, history of Islam, war in the Middle East, and history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. She also takes students on educational trips to the Arab and Muslim world each year. Alsowayel received her M.A and Ph.D. from Rice University in political science and her J.D. from the University of Houston Law Center. She received her B.A. from Wellesley College.

Malika Benradi is an international attorney and a professor at the Faculty of Law in Rabat, Agdal. She also serves as an associate professor at the Sorbonne in Paris and a consultant on gender and law.

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Benradi's research focuses on the role of women in the Arab world, gender and law, international immigration, and child labor. She has also directed a course on family law in North Africa and was a missionary professor at l'Universite Paris Diderot–Paris 7 in France. She has served as a consultant for BIT and UNICEF on the question of child labor and social dialogue for the countries in the Mediterranean Rim, for the European Union on women's rights in Morocco, and for PNUD and FNUAP on gender and law. She is a member of the National Commission for the revision of Penal Code and also directed the 5th Congress of Francophone Feminist Researchers. Benradi is president of the Association of African Women for Research and Development, vice president of the Forum of Arab Palestinian Women and former president of the Moroccan Association of Studies and Research on Immigration. She is also a member of the International Association of Women Lawyers; Association for Women's Rights in Development of Montreal, Canada; Network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws in London, U.K.; and the Moroccan Organization of Human Rights. Benradi received her doctorate in private law in 1981.

The Honorable Edward P. Djerejian served in the U.S. Foreign Service for eight presidents, from John F. Kennedy to William J. Clinton (1962–1994). Prior to his nomination by President Clinton as U.S. ambassador to Israel (1993–1994), he was assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs in both the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations (1991–1993). He was the U.S. ambassador to the Syrian Arab Republic (1988–1991). He also served as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and deputy press secretary for foreign affairs in the White House (1985–1986). After his retirement from government service in 1994, Djerejian became the founding director of Rice University's Baker Institute. His book "Danger and Opportunity: An American Ambassador's Journey Through the Middle East" was published by Simon & Schuster Threshold Editions in September 2008. He has been awarded the Presidential Distinguished Service Award, the Department of State's Distinguished Honor Award and numerous other honors, including the Ellis Island Medal of Honor and the Anti-Defamation League's Moral Statesman Award. He is also a recipient of the Association of Rice Alumni's Gold Medal, the group's most prestigious award, for his service to Rice University. In 2011, Djerejian was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and named to the board of trustees of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Neveen El Tahri is founder and chairperson of Delta Shield for Investments, an organization she founded after the Egyptian 2011 revolution focusing on youth and entrepreneurship. El Tahri has 33 years of financial and business experience. She is the country's representative to the Royal Bank of Scotland and sits on their Middle East Advisory Board. She has also sat on several private- and public-sector boards, including Banque Misr, General Authority for Investment (GAFI), Telecom Egypt and Egyptian American Enterprise Fund. El Tahri began her career in 1980 as corporate banker with

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Chase Manhattan Bank's joint venture. After the revival of the Egyptian Capital Market, she helped established Delta EAB Brokerage, ABN AMRO Delta Asset Management, Delta Financial Investments, Nuun Fund Services and Upper Egypt Leasing, all of which were either fully or partially divested by 2011. El Tahri was the first woman to sit on the board of the Egyptian Stock Exchange. She was twice named by the Financial Times as one of the leading businesswomen in the Arab world. She has won awards locally for her contribution to Egypt's investment environment, and internationally for her economic empowerment of women. She is also involved with numerous nonprofit and professional associations. El Tahri graduated from the faculty of economics and political science at Cairo University and is an alumna of both the London Business School and Harvard Business School.

Nabila Hamza is the president of the Foundation for the Future (FFF), an independent, international nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting civil society initiatives in their efforts to promote democracy and human rights in the Middle East and North Africa region. Prior to FFF, Hamza served as the executive director of the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research. She has also worked as an expert in the Arab League for 10 years. Hamza has held prominent positions in the Tunisian public sector and has worked as a consultant for the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund, the European Commission, and the Economic and Social Commission for Eastern Asia. She has coordinated many regional programs such as the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation's initiative for combating violence against women, and currently sits on the CIVICUS board of directors. In 2009, Hamza received an award from the Arab Pioneer and Innovators Forum for her role in FFF's continuing efforts to support civil society initiatives. In November 2011, the Arab-European Center of Human Rights and International Law recognized her with its 2011 Arab Human Rights Award. Hamza is a well-known and respected researcher in social and political science and is an expert on gender issues. She has published and contributed to a wide range of books and articles on public policy, social development, good governance, gender issues, poverty alleviation and employment in the Arab region. She holds an M.A. in international relations and political science from the Sorbonne in Paris.

Daisy Khan is executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA), a New York-based nonprofit dedicated to strengthening an expression of Islam based on cultural and religious harmony. At ASMA, Khan has launched two groundbreaking flagship programs: Muslim Leaders of Tomorrow, a global network of young civic leaders, and Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality, a global movements to empower Muslim women. She lectures around the globe and has participated in panels with Christians, Jews and Buddhists, as well as produced cutting edge interfaith events like the theater production "Same Difference" and the Cordoba Bread Fest. Khan has lectured at prestigious forums such as Council of Foreign Relations, Aspen Institute and

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Chautauqua Institution. She has appeared on numerous media outlets, including CNN, Al Jazeera, BBC, Fox, NPR and Doha Debates, and she often contributes to documentaries on Islam and Muslims. She is a weekly columnist for the Washington Post's "On Faith" and is frequently quoted in print publications such as Time Magazine, Newsweek, Chicago Tribune and The New York Times. Born in Kashmir, Khan spent 25 years as an interior architect for various Fortune 500 companies before committing to full-time community service. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Interfaith Center's Award for Promoting Peace and Interfaith Understanding, Auburn Seminary's Lives of Commitment Award, the Annual Faith Leaders Award, Shalom Center's Prophetic Voices and New York Open Center's Award for Interfaith Understanding. Additionally, she has been named to Women's eNews' "21 Leaders for the 21st Century" and the Arab American Family Support Center's "Women Who Inspire."

Nabila Ramdani is an award-winning French-Algerian freelance journalist who specializes in French politics, Islamic affairs and the Arab world. She covers Arab/Muslim issues in France and rose to prominence during her coverage of the Arab Spring as both an on-the-ground reporter and a commentator on international TV and radio networks. In the U.K., Ramdani writes regular columns for The Guardian, The Observer, The Independent, London Evening Standard and New Statesman. She also produces features and news stories for a wide range of other Fleet Street publications. Ramdani contributes to Middle Eastern outlets including The National, The Majalla and Gulf News. Her work also appears in French publications, and her articles are syndicated worldwide. Ramdani is also a political commentator for international outlets such as NPR, BBC, Sky News, ITV, Channel 4, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, as well as a regular contributor to flagship program including the BBC's "Today," "Woman's Hour" and "Newsnight." She is completing her doctoral thesis in international history at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), where she has already received an M.Phil. She has an agrégation (France's highest teaching qualification) in English and has held lecturing positions at Oxford University, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and Paris 7 University.