Gender, Religion, and State in the Middle East

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Abstract

This essay discusses the major trends in the study of gender, religion, and state in the Middle East from colonialism to the Arab Spring. Showing how the field started as a critique of colonial representations of women in the Middle East as passive and subordinate, it reviews briefly the foundational studies. It then indicates the major frameworks that scholars have used subsequently to show the complexities of the linkages between gender, religion, and state. Diversity within Islamic law, the role of kinship and states, and the significance of women's agency are highlighted. The essay proceeds with a discussion of cutting-edge issues raised by the Arab Spring and suggests future directions for research.

In 2011, a woman journalist from Yemen, Tawakkol Karman, won the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her peace-building efforts and her nonviolent struggle for the safety of women. She was the second woman from the Middle East to win the prize. In 2003, the Nobel Prize for Peace went to Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian lawyer and activist working for the rights of women and children. Through the year 2011, international media coverage of the Arab Spring showed women demonstrating along with men and contributing to bringing about the collapse of authoritarian regimes. 9/11 had already produced intense curiosity about the Muslim world, including Muslim women. Together, the events have brought considerable attention to the linkages between gender, state, and religion in the Muslim countries of the Middle East. This essay paints in broad strokes the scholarship from the emergence of gender in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as a field of inquiry in the 1970s to the Arab Spring in 2011. It outlines foundational studies, dominant themes and frameworks, and cutting-edge issues following the Arab Spring.

FOUNDATIONAL STUDIES

The Arab Spring, which started at the end of 2010, prompted new questions and an ever-growing flow of scholarly writings on gender, Islam, and politics. Before that historical event, the literature on gender, state, and religion in the Middle East had already exploded over the past four decades and especially since 2000. As an illustration, a search on several databases produced only 5 books and 10 journal articles published on the topic during 1960–1969, compared with 170 books and 670 articles during 2000–2009 (Charrad, 2011b). We focus in this essay on the literature that pertains to the region bounded by Morocco on the west, Iran on the east, Turkey on the north, and Yemen on the south.

Two pioneering edited collections published in the late 1970s, Fernea & Bezirgan (1977) and Beck and Keddie (1978), following Fernea's (1965) ethnography of an Iraqi village, *Guests of the Sheik*, represent the foundational studies that marked the beginning of gender in the Middle East as a general field of scholarship in the United States. Including several pieces written by women from the MENA region, the two volumes had as a major objective to bring the voices of these women directly to American audiences and, in so doing, to challenge the image of passive Muslim women. Shortly thereafter, writings by feminists from the region engaging in a critique of gender injustice received much attention in the academic and public discourse and strengthened the development of the field (Mernissi, 1987 [1975], 1991; El Saadawi, 2007 [1980], respectively, from Morocco and Egypt). Two peer-reviewed journals dedicated to the study of gender in the Middle East appeared several years later, providing legitimacy and publication outlets to scholars working on the subject. *Hawwa: Journal of Women in the Middle East and the Islamic World* was created in 2003, and the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* in 2005. The *Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Culture* (Joseph *et al.*, 2003–2007) started in 2003 and, now standing at six volumes, is another major illustration of the growth of the field (Charrad, 2011b).

A common denominator in the literature on gender, religion, and state from its beginnings to today has been a critique of Orientalism, colonialism, and Western hegemony. In his well-known critique of Orientalism, Edward Said (1978) has shown how Orientalist representations, which include essentialist and binary categories dividing the East and West such as traditional/modern, secular/sectarian, universalistic/particularistic, and active/passive, served to legitimize European colonialism starting in the early nineteenth century and continuing onward. Convinced of their cultural and moral superiority, colonizers often claimed their intent to liberate women from their own culture. They placed gender at the center of the binaries, depicting women in their colonies of the Middle East and North

Africa as victims of tradition, sectarianism, particularism, and passivity. Building on Said's work, scholars have shown how the colonizers treated colonized women as symbols of what they declared as the cultural inferiority of the colonies (Ahmed, 1992; Boddy, 2007; Clancy-Smith, & Gouda, 1998; Thompson, 2000). Aiming at rejecting this perspective, scholars asserted the significance of women's agency in its various forms.

Addressing the contemporary period and asking *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, Abu Lughod (2013) shows that cultural deterministic thinking is far from moribund in the international discourse on women. Challenging that form of thinking, she argues that generalizations about Islamic culture cannot explain the hardships that women face in the Muslim world and that the problem of gender inequity cannot be attributed to religion. She sees poverty and authoritarianism produced out of global interconnections that implicate the West as more decisive. In a similar vein, other scholars have critiqued Western involvement in the region and its discourse about the liberation of women, as in Iraq (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009). Coining the term the term "Muslimwoman" Cooke (2008) has shown how it evokes a monolithic, invariable identity used to obscure differences by country, class, region, level of education, or ethnicity and how the identity is then imposed on women whose individuality and self-expression are denied in the process.

MAJOR FRAMEWORKS: LAW, KINSHIP/STATE, AND AGENCY

In countering the notion of Islam as monolithic and the source of gender inequality, scholars have followed several analytic paths. They have shown the diversity of interpretations, laws, and practices in the Islamic tradition. They have called attention to institutions that have restricted women's rights in the MENA region, such as states or the kinship system in particular. They have also shown how women in MENA have expressed their agency in organizations and in daily life.

ISLAMIC FAMILY LAW

Focusing on Islamic family law, or the Shari'a, scholars have examined how regulations and practices in regard to marriage, divorce, custody, and, to a lesser extent, inheritance have varied with time and place (Hinz, 2002; Keddie, 2007; Peirce, 2003; Tucker, 2008). Evidence of legal diversity appears in the very existence of four schools of Islamic jurisprudence, the Maliki, the Hanafi, the Hanbali, and Shafii, which all share a common perspective on the family, but also exhibit noticeable differences on specific regulations. The diversity of interpretations was reinforced by the fact that, before they became sovereign nation-states in the worldwide wave of decolonization

in the twentieth century, most countries of the Middle East and North Africa had a decentralized legal system. With few exceptions, the law was essentially in the hands of separate communities, which operated on the basis of rulings and court decisions by religious judges in each community.

Islamic law usually became codified when postcolonial nation-states enacted national bodies of legislation following the end of colonial rule. In many countries, this was the first time that Islamic law was presented in the form of a legal text to be followed by the entire judicial system. With reforms occurring at different times, some countries transformed their family law in the direction of expanding women's individual rights, as for example Tunisia, Turkey, and Morocco. The range goes from these three countries to Saudi Arabia where there has been remarkable historical continuity in the system of law, with many countries in between such as Lebanon and Jordan. A survey published in 2010 by Freedom House (Kelly & Breslin, 2010) illustrates the extent to which countries in the region vary on dimensions relevant to family law and gender. Figure 1 shows the variation, with the higher scores indicating greater gender equity. The first category, "nondiscrimination and access to justice," assesses women's equality under the constitution, protection from gender-based discrimination and citizenship rights. The second category, "autonomy, security, and freedom of the person," refers to equality within marriage, freedom of movement and freedom from gender-based violence. The two categories together capture issues relevant to family law and gender equity (Figure 1).

KINSHIP AND STATES*

Taking another analytic path in their effort to counter the notion of Islam as all determinant of gender, scholars have looked to institutions other than religion as sources of gender inequity in the Middle East and North Africa. They have emphasized in particular a history of patriarchal, extended kinship in which men had prerogatives over women not only in their roles as husbands but also as kin, who had control over women in the roles of fathers, brothers, sons, and male cousins. This form of patriarchy was part and parcel of a social system where solidarities anchored in kinship, or "kin-based solidarities" (Charrad, 2001, 2011a), historically were central to people's social, economic, and political lives, especially in areas where central states were underrepresented or absent altogether. Built around extended patrilineal kinship ties, patriarchal networks often restricted women's life choices to what was deemed beneficial to the network as a whole, particularly in regard to marriage alliances.

Scholars have considered the place that the postcolonial state has accorded to patriarchal networks in the family law of several countries. Joseph (2000,

	Non-discrimination and access to justice	Autonomy, security, and freedom of the person	Economic rights and equal opportunity	Political rights and civic voice	Social and cultural rights
Algeria	3.1	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Bahrain	2.2	2.6	3.1	2.3	2.9
Egypt	3.0	2.9	2.9	2.7	2.6
Iran	1.9	2.1	2.7	2.1	2.5
Iraq	2.7	1.9	2.6	2.6	2.3
Jordan	2.7	2.7	2.9	2.9	2.8
Kuwait	2.2	2.4	3.1	2.4	2.9
Lebanon	2.9	3.0	3.0	2.9	3.1
Libya	2.4	2.6	2.8	1.8	2.5
Morocco	3.1	3.2	2.8	3.1	2.9
Oman	2.1	2.1	2.9	1.8	2.5
Palestine	2.6	2.4	2.9	2.7	2.6
Qatar	2.1	2.3	2.9	1.8	2.5
Saudi Arabia	1.4	1.3	1.7	1.2	1.6
Syria	2.7	2.3	2.9	2.2	2.5
Tunisia	3.6	3.4	3.2	3.1	3.3
UAE	2.0	2.3	3.1	2.0	2.5
Yemen	1.9	1.9	1.9	2.0	2.0

Figure 1   Variance in country ratings for family law and gender equity in the Arab world. *Source*: Kelly and Breslin (2010), 23.

p. 129) shows how Lebanon maintained the authority of kinship networks in regard to the law along with sectarian pluralism in politics. Sonbol (2003) indicates how the state in Jordan placed family law in the hands of religious courts, which favor kinship norms over women's individual rights.

Considering the aftermath of colonial rule in North Africa, Charrad (2001, pp. 145–241) focuses on the degree of reliance of powerholders on kin-based patriarchal networks and its effect on gender policy and family law. She argues that, when the state developed in opposition to these networks, as for example in Tunisia, powerholders tended to consolidate their influence in newly formed national institutions by further weakening kin-based groups, placing legislation in the hands of civil rather than religious courts, and forging a law that challenged the control of women by extended kin and husbands. By contrast, in Algeria and Morocco, the newly formed national states at the end of colonial rule, in alliance with sociopolitical forces anchored in kin-based solidarities, opted for conservative interpretations of family law.

Most prominent when central states are weak or in formation, the place of patriarchal networks in national politics has receded in the past half century in several countries as a result of urbanization, even though they remain significant in some such as Iraq or Saudi Arabia. Some countries have made reforms of family law in recent years, often in response to the growth of women's demands since the early 1980s and to international pressures, as in Morocco in 2004. Yet, even with recent reforms, the path taken by each nation-state at the end of colonial rule has left an imprint on its legal system. Although Morocco, a late comer in reforms, is getting close to Tunisia in terms of gender equity in family law, the latter, which promulgated reforms in the 1950s, remains to this day the country with the most liberal policy on women's rights in the Arab world, thus retaining the place indicated in Figure 1.

AGENCY

Another major paradigm in the literature has focused on forms of women's agency. Women's associations, organizations, and movements have developed since the 1980s due in part to policies expanding mass education in the previous two decades in most countries of the region. Women have created associations to promote women's issues; they belong to women's sections of political parties, trade unions and professional associations; and some women are active in public debates on national politics. In regard to religion, discourses and ideological orientations range from open secularism, to a language that blends Islam and modernity, to Islamism. (Arat, 2005; Badran, 2009; Charrad, 2010; Hasso, 2005; Moghadam, 2005; Meyer, Rizzo, & Ali, 2005; Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2010; Yadav, 2010).

In discussing women's agency, scholars have considered work and employment (Doumato & Posusney, 2003; Singerman, 1995), and participation in political parties or social movements (Arat, 2005; Charrad, 2011b, p. 125; Hoodfar & Sadeghi, 2009; Salime, 2011; Stephan, 2010; Yadav, 2010). The religious sphere, however, has received particular attention (Deeb, 2006; Haeri, 2013; Mahmood, 2005; Saktanber, 2002). Scholars show how women have brought religion to daily living often by developing ties to other women who share the same religiosity. They indicate how Muslim women actively mold their lives in accordance with their own understanding of their faith by organizing exclusively female gatherings or in individual prayers.

Others scholars have focused on Islamic feminism, a major trend that developed in MENA in the 1990s. Islamic feminists argue that original Islam asserted equality between men and women but that misinterpretations in the course of time have lead to the distortion or abandonment of the

egalitarian message (Badran, 2009; Majid, 1998; Mojab, 2001). Referring to a history of innovative analysis of texts in Islam, they call for a rereading of the Quran and other scriptures in order to challenge patriarchal interpretations. They wish to overcome what they see as sclerosis and restore the original spirit of equity in favor of women. While it is likely to resonate with a large proportion of the population, Islamic feminism has an uncertain future in the region. How Islamic feminism evolves will depend largely on political developments, as governments or powerful groups could hinder it by imposing a more restrictive interpretation of the Islamic tradition.

CUTTING-EDGE ISSUES: THE ARAB SPRING AND CHANGE OR CONTINUITY

The uprisings that engulfed the MENA region in the spring of 2011, popularly termed the Arab Spring, have inaugurated a new era in politics and scholarship. There have been changes in gender relations, systems of governance, and the role of religion in popular politics since the Arab Spring protests began. Women have been embroiled in civil society-driven debates about their rights in emerging state constitutions. Islamist parties now occupy central positions in contemporary politics after years of marginalization. Amid these changes, transitions, and dynamic upheavals, however, continuities remain. Women still seek recognition of their rights and engage in new struggles for gender equality.

   These developments call for new perspectives on gender, religion, and the state in the region. While prevailing studies sought to contest Orientalist assumptions about Muslim women, studies emerging since the Arab Spring have addressed what women (and men) do with their agency, through their multiple roles as activists, citizens, family members, workers, and political leaders. At the structural level, while previous studies focused on the transition from colonial to postcolonial states, scholars considering the Arab spring examine the transition from authoritarianism to new political forms that may or may not qualify as democracy. This new historical moment inspires critical questions about whether and how women's extensive participation in demonstrations and protests will be followed by expanded rights for women and the distribution of political power, particularly in countries that have experienced the collapse of long-standing authoritarian regimes.

   The analysis has taken two forms: firstly, scholars focus on women's political organizing during the initial protests of the Arab Spring and in the moments that have followed. At issue are the ways in which women have participated in protests as part of broader movements, including Islamist movements, and the kinds of demands they have made on the state. Secondly, scholars examine how gender politics have changed or remain

the same in regard to women's formal political power, particularly in those cases where there was a formal regime collapse and a transition of power is under way, as in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.

Demonstrations and Demands

A resounding feature of discourse about the Arab Spring concerns women's extensive roles in the demonstrations that engulfed the region from Morocco to Iraq. Literature emerging in the years following these initial protests has considered the modes by which people organized and the claims they sought to make in the protests. Recent special issues of *The Journal of North African Studies* and *Feminist Media Studies* were dedicated specifically to the multiple roles women assumed in the protests (Khalil, 2014; Eltantawy, 2013). Scholars have focused on women as organizers online through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and their occupation of public spaces such as Tahrir Square in Egypt, the Avenue Bourguiba in Tunis, and the Lulu Roundabout in Bahrain.

Given the participation of women across the region in the events, greater attention is now being paid to the intra- and transnational variations in women's activism. Individuals may have engaged in similar forms of social organizing across the region but nevertheless had different subjective experiences of the uprisings and face different outcomes in their ongoing aftermath (Anderson, 2011). In Egypt, some women were sexually harassed and assaulted at protests and exposed to forced virginity tests under police custody, which has reinvigorated debates about masculinity, security states, and violence against women (Amar, 2011; Skalli, 2014). Meanwhile, in Bahrain, many Shia women remain imprisoned for their activism and their detentions are a continued source of collective outrage. Recognition that women's political and social engagement is not uniform across nationality, class, age, and ethnicity is central to further studies of gender and the Arab Spring.

Power and Policy

Demands that activists have made when participating in social movements have included the formal institutionalization of rights and representation in the body politic. The sites of analysis here include the presence of quotas and women's inclusion on party lists as well as women's representation in new laws, policies, and official state documents. At issue is how women are translating political organizing into institutionalized power.

On the level of formal political power, understood as women's inclusion in the political process through elections, on party lists, and in political office,

the Arab Spring has inspired hope for a broader inclusion of all sectors of the population in politics, including women. Arab women, however, are confronted with different historical legacies regarding women's rights that impart significant influence on the present. In 2009, a few years before the onset of the Arab Spring, *Al Raida* published a special issue concerning gender quotas in the Arab world, illustrating the power of the states in the region to expand or contract women's rights through promulgation of gender-related policies (Dahlerup, 2009; Moghadam, 2009).

For some women, past history of gender policy in their country invokes fear of future reversal of rights previously granted authoritarian postcolonial states often for reasons of political interest or expediency, thus sobering contemporary hopes for change. It is against these historical legacies that contemporary struggles for recognition and representation are waged, further underlining the changes *and* continuities inherent to the Arab Spring events. This is the case, for example, in Tunisia where previous regimes had promulgated laws expanding women's rights (Figure 1). The uncertainty about women's rights following the Arab Spring is attributable in large measure to potential backlash from reformists seeking to distance themselves from any and all policies and initiatives of the former regime.

Women's representation in state documents such as the constitution, are among the most recent arenas within which such discussions have unfolded. Charrad and Zarrugh (2014) examine how networks of women's organizations in Tunisia successfully opposed the inclusion of a reference to women's status as "complementary" (rather than "equal") in drafts of the country's new constitution. Importantly, this intensified debate elicited multiple positions, with some women who identify as Islamist supportive of the initial clause. In addition, the case also attests to the changing role of religion in states after the Arab Spring. Several countries are debating the place of Islam in politics, the role of shari'a laws in the state, and the rights of organizations embracing an Islamic identity.

A separate, less explored, arena of discussion about the Arab Spring is the way in which women were subjected as well as central to some of the most pernicious policies of the authoritarian state. Sustained study of how different sectors of women, particularly young women, were subjected to violent abuse by the state remains to be undertaken (Cojean & de Jager, 2013). In addition, elite women who were the spouses or family members of autocrats were and are responsible for maintaining an apparatus of violence in MENA authoritarian states (Ibroscheva, 2013). More research ought to focus on how women in positions of power circumscribed political freedoms of the citizenry.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The literature on gender, religion, and the state in MENA has exhibited several major currents since its beginnings in the 1970s. It engaged in a solid and sometimes passionate critique of Orientalism, the legacy of colonialism and cultural or religious determinism. It showed the diversity of interpretations and regulations inherent in Islam. It challenged narratives about passive and subordinated Muslim women. It underscored the place of kinship or patriarchal networks in society and their implications for family law. It considered the role of the state and the significance of women's agency in the religious sphere. Although attention has been swept toward the Arab Spring since 2011, there is still work to be done about the earlier period. In particular, now that we have an array of studies on several themes such as law, state policy, or women's associations, it has become possible to engage in the kind of comparative work that is at the center of sociological theorizing. For example, we may want to know where and how different kinds of women's movements develop or compare gender policy on the law in a wide range of cases to expand our knowledge of the conditions under which we witness the presence or absence of reforms of Islamic law. More needs to be done along the lines of comparative research.

The events of the 2011 uprisings open up a new phase in scholarship on gender matters in the MENA region. They raise new questions about gender politics in the context of struggles for democratization sometimes combined with Islamization. Central to scholarly work that develops from the Arab Spring protests must be a careful consideration of changes and continuities in political arrangements, gender policy, and the place of religion in the state. In terms of politics, scholars are faced with the task of parsing the differences in political systems between the authoritarian states in North Africa that underwent regime collapse such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and their monarchical counterparts in Morocco, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia that survived the uprisings. Part of the task involves considering the implications for women in each of these contexts.

In terms of social movements, future research should lend new insights into how modes of activism among women have changed over time, particularly with the advent of new technologies that permit rapid communication. The role of the diaspora and transnational networks in activism in the Middle East also ought to be an important component of these discussions. The emerging literature has thus far focused on the cases of women's activism in states transitioning from authoritarianism but this effaces some of the continued work of women and men in states where activists remain in detention for their calls for social change.

Acknowledgment of the diversity of interests, aspirations, and statuses of women and men in the MENA region is central to work inspired by and emerging from the Arab Spring. Significant empirical work remains to be done and should focus squarely on change and continuity. Not simply an event, the Arab Spring is best seen as a transformative process that continues to unfold and impart new meanings to the interconnections between gender, state, and religion in the MENA region.

*The section on "Kinship and States" draws on M. M. Charrad. Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, Agency. *Annual Review of Sociology* 37: 417–437.

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Amina Zarrugh is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. She has coauthored "Equal or Complementary? Women in the New Tunisian Constitution after the Arab Spring," with M. M. Charrad, *Journal of North African Studies* (2014), and "The Arab Spring and Women's Rights in Tunisia" with M. M. Charrad, *E-International Relations* (2013). Her research interests center on gender, nationalism, and religion in North Africa and the Middle East from a postcolonial perspective. Her dissertation focuses on regime violence in Libya and the mobilization of women in a family movement that developed in response to a contested prison massacre at Abu Salim Prison in Tripoli in 1996. She received her undergraduate education in sociology and government from the University of Texas at Austin.

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