Islamic Feminism: Roots, Development and Policies

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Abstract

The current and future impact of Islamic feminism within the political framework of the Arab world is profound. In order to understand the current relevance of Islamic feminism, this article first examines the roots of feminism in the Arab world, analyzing the fundamental differences and commonalities that Islamic feminism has with western feminism. The diverse categories of Islamic feminism are then discussed, focusing on universalism within the framework of hermeneutic Islamic discourse. Islamic feminism is then reconstructed around its methodologies. This article asserts that the hermeneutic strain of Islamic feminism is the overarching paradigm to be employed, as it presents women's rights within the context of the Qur'an and women's right to perform ijtihad (personal interpretation based on logical reasoning), rejecting patriarchal influences. Islamic feminism and its place within the rise of modern Islam theorizing is then shown as a viable explanatory factor in the recent shaping of political and cultural discussions on the role of religion in the political sphere, especially in the context of the Arab Spring.

Policy Implications

- Education is one of the major areas to which policy makers must devote their attention. There needs to be renewed emphasis on and encouragement of the democratic transition in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This re-emphasis must include a strengthening of Islamic hermeneutic feminism in the politics of the region. This can be achieved through an education curriculum that reinforces the concepts of dialogue, equality and tolerance, thereby liberating the thinking of conservative political parties.
- Young people and social media played a significant role in the events and momentum of the Arab Spring. As such, policy makers must encourage and invest in these two critical factors to ensure their continued success. By promoting a humanistic hermeneutic discourse, the innovative efforts and energies of young people and social media can be developed and strengthened further.
- Higher education in particular must also be a policy focus for the promotion and further development of Islamic feminism. Western universities as well as universities in the MENA region have the capability to advance and further develop the theoretical and conceptual role of hermeneutic interpretations of Islam.
- Given the context of the Arab Spring, the role that women play as a catalyst for sustainable democratic development must be recognized, promoted and developed further. Policy makers have the opportunity to redefine and re-emphasize the critical role of women in the decision-making processes of the region.

Islamic feminism: a recent phenomenon

'Islamic feminism' is a phrase that holds numerous connotations. For some, the two words are contradictory: liberal feminists see Islam as intrinsically steeped in inequalities. Others see it as a beacon of hope, an expression of enlightenment and reconciliation between religious beliefs and egalitarianism. Another meaning is finally emerging, placing Islamic feminism within the framework of human rights discourse. In light of the widespread international rhetoric featuring human rights promotion and the recent events of the so-called Arab Spring, in which western-influenced feminists and Islamic feminists alike joined the masses to demand dignity, the Arab world is finally positioned for a fresh discussion regarding Islamic feminism and its role in Arab society, promoting (perhaps inadvertently) human rights protection.

Islamic feminism is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its impact began in the 1970s and 1980s alongside the rising tide of Islamic revivalism, which essentially entailed the return to Islam as a guide for daily life as opposed to the strict observance of secularism proposed by the Arab states. Although rhetoric regarding women's place in Islam and society was discussed by women and scholars alike, the outwardly conservative change in women's dress gained attention first; feminists reacted rather harshly to the change, claiming Islam's oppression of women. This reaction, as will be shown throughout this

article, was hasty: it failed to take note of the personal choice of traditional clothing as a means to display intellect over sexuality. Eventually, true Islamic feminist scholarship emerged, with women exerting their own exegesis on the Qur'an, reinterpreting the holy texts through rationale and historical context, and finding that human rights and egalitarian principles exist in the core of Islam's teachings.

As this new hermeneutic scholarship emerged, women also became more involved in the political sphere through Islamic activism. While political participation in Islamic movements was outlawed in most countries, Islamic feminists began working within organizations' frameworks such as the Muslim Brotherhood, creating women's branches of those organizations and widespread influence on certain sections of society in the Middle East. There is expanding evidence suggesting 'that women activists have made important inroads in Islamist movements by creating strong women's branches and pushing for broader political participation and representation in the upper echelons of the entire movements' (Abdellatif and Ottaway, 2007, p. 1).

This energy gradually culminated in the series of uprisings in the Arab world as women proved that they were just as passionate as men about political and social change, despite the fact that many cases of harassment and severe abuse occurred in the act of fighting for political freedom and representation. As the process of state building and democracy finally occurs in some states and political parties with ties to Islamic movements are elected en masse, the world's attention has returned to examine the role of women in the state, questioning whether or not Islamic feminism is a productive vehicle for human rights discourse in the Arab world (Eyadat, 2012). Thus, it is essential to analyze and understand Islamic feminism in order to understand the impact it can have on the future of the region and the debate on women's role within the state and society.

In light of the Arab Spring and its effect on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, this article seeks to analyze Islamic feminism within the region, reconstructing the notion around its goals and methodologies, and asserting that its current and future impact is extremely profound within the framework of political Islam. First, it is essential to look at the roots of feminism in the Arab world in order to understand the origins of feminist thought there and the backlash against western feminism. Next, a deconstruction of Islamic feminism is required, examining the principles of universalism vs cultural relativism in the context of human rights and subsequent women's rights, focusing on universalism within the framework of hermeneutic Islamic discourse. The numerous categories of Islamic feminism are then analyzed briefly in order to demonstrate the broad diversity that exists within the discussion of women's rights in

Islam. Finally, the reconstruction of Islamic feminism is presented: I assert that the hermeneutic strain of Islamic feminism is the overarching paradigm to be used and explore women's rights within the context of the Qur'an and women's right to perform ijtihad, rather than maintaining patriarchal influences. After this reconstruction has taken place, Islamic feminism and its place within the rise of modern Islamic theorizing will act as a viable explanatory factor in the recent shaping of political and cultural discussions on the role of religion in the political sphere, especially in the context of the Arab Spring.

Women's rights: a global atlas

Feminism emerged at the turn of the 20th century to assume a strong stance against patriarchal norms, providing both a scholastic, theoretical basis for women's rights and a viable political movement. Although the academic field and mode of activism is incredibly diverse, its impact on the world has been profound. In order to properly understand the roots of Islamic feminism, it is crucial to first examine the rise of liberal western feminism and its subsequent impact on women's global human rights. Because feminist literature is extensive, this section provides a mere overview of western feminism.

The first wave of western liberal feminism essentially began in the early 1900s. It emerged as a political effort aimed towards achieving sexual equality through legislative means, suffrage being the most prominent goal. The theoretical basis for the movement and ideology was that 'men and women are the same in rational ability and capacity for autonomy and self-determination and therefore should be afforded full citizenship and its attendant rights, protections and opportunities' (Parisi, 2002, p. 572). Some feminists have challenged the strong relationship between feminism and liberalism, claiming that rationality – the basis of liberal rights – is not a gender-neutral concept (Groenhout, 2002, p. 52). Liberalism notes that human nature is characterized by rationality and autonomy because human beings are individuals, not units as a whole. Furthermore, each individual, regardless of gender, should be granted a spectrum of liberties that is protected from other individuals and the state. This is the basis for universal human rights.

> After the atrocities of World War II concluded, the subject of human rights was at the forefront of discussion as the newly minted United Nations set out to establish international norms and conventions. Though feminists were heavily involved in the politics surrounding the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), women's rights were not exclusively addressed, with the brief exception of Article

Two. As many feminists have argued, the UDHR and similar conventions perpetuated patriarchal gender norms due to the lack of legal recognition of women's unique experiences. Feminists claim that until women's experiences are incorporated into 'existing theories, compilations, and prioritizations of human rights,' the issues concerning women such as 'rape, … domestic violence, reproductive freedom, the valuation of childcare and other domestic labor as work, and unequal opportunity for women and girls in education, employment, housing, credit, and health care,' will not be addressed (Okin, 1998, pp. 34–35).

Beginning in the late 1960s and continuing throughout the mid-1980s, feminist demands included the right to equal pay, an end to economic discrimination and personal control over female reproductive processes, especially the right to birth control. Strides were made in specifically protecting the rights of women under the auspices of the UN, as several universal human rights instruments were created. These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, and later the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW-OP) (International Law, 2012).

The tendency was to universalize the experiences of women, which failed to recognize crucial local cultural factors. Many saw the privileged white female rhetoric as imperialist and racist, making western liberal feminism irrelevant to many outside the West (Hashim, 1999). Western feminist opposition to the re-emergence of Islamic dress for women is one of many examples that forced many Muslim women to lash out against the western norms forced upon them.

The third wave of feminism emerged in the 1990s: it included race and class in the rhetoric in order to counteract the movement that had so far been dominated by white, middle-class women. Although still based on liberal theory, the feminist movement has made great strides in reaching out to other cultures and is actively involved in using the international human rights framework in order to help women gain equality globally. Despite the fact that women outside the West are still apprehensive about the involvement of international women's rights movements, in view of western feminism's history and its local irrelevance, things are beginning to change as it becomes clear that local efforts for women's human rights are helped by international support (Okin, 2002).

The roots of feminism in the Arab world

The beginning of feminism as a school of thought and form of activism for women in the MENA region is rather controversial: it was directly influenced by western feminism and thus was seen by some as a vessel of continued colonial influence. Islamic feminism ultimately rejects western feminism, but its eventual rise can be directly traced to the influence of western feminist thought in the 20th century as Islamic feminists were forced to assert themselves and create a movement that revolted against the norm of western feminism, which they saw as a continuance of western dominance.

In 'Gendered Resistance, Feminist Veiling, Islamic Feminism', Fadwa El Guindi analyzes the rise of Islamic feminism by using Egypt as a case study, paying particular attention to the use of dress as an explanatory factor. She discusses the influence of the prominent Egyptian Qasim Amin, who many regard as the founder of feminism in Arab culture. Amin published the controversial book *Tahrir A'-Mar'a* [The Liberation of Woman] in 1899, in which he advocated primary school education for women and the reform of polygamy and divorce laws (El Guindi, 2005, p. 62).

However, despite what seem to be progressive views towards women's rights, Amin was instead promoting societal change for Egypt and all Muslim countries through the advocacy of Europeanization; trying to 'give a modern, liberal, reformist and feminist reinterpretation of Islam' (Darvishpour, 2003). This strand elected to adopt modernity and its western discourse as its frame of reference in its conciliatory attempts, which, no doubt, bore much resemblance to the colonizer's discourse and perpetuated its ideology (Ahmed, 1992, p. 160). Rather than advocate the true progression of women's rights, even under the auspices of liberal feminism, it only proposed advancements such as better education for the sake of achieving efficiency in the home or via traditional gender roles.

Although Amin is typically touted as the founder of Arab feminism Leila Ahmed, as El Guindi notes, instead points to Huda Sha'rawi and Malak Hifni Nasif as the two extremely distinct 'First Feminists' (El Guindi, 2005, p. 60). Sha'rawi and Nasif advocated feminism in differing ways: Sha'rawi was heavily influenced by western feminism while Nasif did not affiliate herself with that particular discourse. As will be demonstrated further in another section of this article, this large difference in feminist approach from women of the same era, country and culture proves that attempting to place one paradigm on feminism, especially under the auspices of universalist principles, is essentially ineffective.

Malak Hifni Nasif (1886–1919) was a visionary of her time, advocating principles that Sha'rawi's western-influenced claims entirely lacked. First, she demanded that all

fields of higher education be open to women. This is of particular importance: as trends in the 1950s demonstrated, women were included in modern fields such as medicine and engineering, but were entirely absent in the fields of Arabic and Islamic studies, meaning that exclusion was prevalent in the core principles of society. Nasif also demanded that space be made in mosques for women to participate in public prayer, pursuing an agenda that called for a measure of equality in society as a whole. Calling for a semblance of equality within the framework of Islam was remarkable for her time.

After the British left Egypt and other parts of the region, nationalism began to take hold but society was blatantly marked by the former colonial power. Veiling of all forms began to disappear gradually from mainstream urban places; however, in the 1970s, Egyptian society was shocked by this reappearance of traditional garb. In the wake of colonial influence, modernization and nationalism, the present societal differences and the backlash against western principles culminated in a surge of Islamic thought. Famed Egyptian feminist Leila Ahmed reflects on this sudden change in society:

> Until recently, I thought … that the disappearance of the veil was inevitable; I was sure that greater education and opportunity for women in the Muslim world would result in the elimination of this relic of women's oppression. For decades, in books, op-eds, and lectures, I stood firmly and unquestioningly against the veil and the hijab, the Islamic headscarf, viewing them as signs of women's disempowerment. To me, and to my fellow Arab feminists, being told what to wear was just another form of tyranny. But in the course of researching and writing a new book on the history of the veil's improbable comeback, I've had to radically rethink my assumptions. Where I once saw the veil as a symbol of intolerance, I now understand that for many women, it is a badge of individuality and justice (Ahmed, 2011).

Whereas some scholars may view the analysis of clothing choices instead of rhetorical devices as a waste of time, El Guindi's anthropological work, as well as Leila Ahmed's scholarship, demonstrates that these types of choices are fundamental and speak volumes when it comes to the discussion of the rise of Islamic feminism. The diversity of Islamic feminism means that it does not necessitate certain styles of clothing, but the widespread donning of more conservative garb exhibits the rise in women's self-assertion and women's rights, a measure against societal and gender norms. In direct opposition to a foreign brand of feminism, the women of Egypt and the majority of women across the entire Arab world demonstrated that their choices were their own, rather than embracing the cultural values of another society.

Deconstructing Islamic feminism: diverging methodologies within Islamic feminism

Before deconstructing Islamic feminism into its respective categories, the issue of universalist constructs vs relativist paradigms must be addressed. Although the two strands of thinking affect numerous aspects of international affairs, one of the most hotly contested implications of universalist or relativist approaches is women's rights in the overarching context of human rights. The debates over this issue have been fierce and affect both the surrounding dialogue and the implementation of women's movements and advocacy programs: if a wholly western feminist approach based on universalist principles is solely used, then Muslim women will be less likely to embrace the movement or advocacy program, as will be seen later in this article.

Universalist thought is the ideal, but its practice in advocacy typically leads to failure if it is not given the correct context: liberalism has 'the tendencies to erase differences among people and to overlook how culture and physical circumstances affect the very meaning of terms such as rights and autonomy' (Groenhout, 2002, p. 74). Such is the case with Islamic feminism in the framework of Islam. The denunciation of universalist application by Islamic feminists is not due to a lack of acceptance of human rights; rather, it is because the rhetoric fails to incorporate societal and religious norms that are of the utmost importance for implementation and legitimacy in Muslim society (Hashim, 1999). A series of interviews with leading political female activists in Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood found that these activists interpreted western feminism 'not as a struggle for the recognition of the rights of women, but as a movement to free women from all social constraints and obligations to family and community, leading to excessive individualism and even licentiousness' (Abdellatif and Ottaway, 2007, p. 7).

This article is hardly calling for the abolition of all universalist rhetoric and theory; instead, it calls for a balance of the two opposing viewpoints for the sake of successful advocacy in the field of women's rights in the MENA region. International human rights norms can hardly be ignored, especially with regard to women's rights, but western feminists act as neo-colonialists in their attempts to enforce their particular gender norms and aspirations on an entirely different society.

From apologists to rejectionists

Most scholars tend to view Islamic feminism as a monolithic entity and thus misrepresent its underpinnings.

While this article will use the hermeneutic strain of Islamic feminism as its main point of reference, as it is the most rational and has thus gained great prominence, it is essential to examine the entire spectrum of the internal philosophies regarding Islamic feminism. As Mir-Hosseini wrote when speaking of feminists within Islam, 'they all seek gender justice and equality for women, though they do not always agree on what constitutes justice or equality or the best ways of attaining them' (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, p. 640).

According to Badran, the creators of Islamic feminism are 'women and men for whom religion is important in their daily lives and who are troubled by inequalities and injustices perpetrated in the name of religion' (Badran, 2006, p. 2). Their goal is to change the system that is marginalizing them, fighting against a doctrine of male superiority that finds its manifestation in the patriarchal cultures (Cook, 2000; Badran, 2002), much like liberal western feminists' continued struggle against women's exclusion from the 'male-centered democratic political systems of Europe and North America' (Mojab, 2001, p. 127). As gender equality is part of the Qur'anic notion, Islamic feminists hold the Shari'a as 'the transcendental ideal that embodies the justice of Islam and the spirit of the Qur'anic revelations' (Mir-Hosseini, 2006). Immanent to this transcendental idea is a condemnation of exploitative relations and domination, which backs the critique of patriarchal constructions of gender relations within the Islamic framework. According to Moghadam, it is important for Islamic feminists to complement their theological arguments with socioeconomic and political questions, or in other words to combine their religious reinterpretations with a recognition of universal standards (Moghadam, 2002).

The four primary components in the spectrum of Islamic feminism are apologist, reformist, hermeneutic and rejectionist. While the names vary in scholarly work, these are the most common subdivisions provided in the literature (Eyadat, 2012).

The apologist strand of Islamic feminism is by far the most conservative, and can barely be labeled as feminist. Apologists attempt to reread the Islamist texts – primarily the Qur'an and Sunna – in order to rationalize gender equality, but they take a conciliatory approach and thus reach the original patriarchal interpretation of Shari'a and corresponding laws. Moghadam describes this brand of feminism in Iran, dubbing its proponents as state feminists and describing those who 'appear to be to the right of the independent feminists on cultural and gender issues. Some, for example, stress the importance of the cohesion of the family, stating that motherhood and domesticity keep the family together and society morally upright' (Moghadam, 2002, p. 1158). Traditional gender roles are thus reinstated and the notion of equality between men and women is seen as a compromising

western construct that holds no bearing in Islamic culture.

Next, moving away from the far right is the reformist feminists' discourse. This particular dialogue actually began in the 19th century and included notable figures such as Qasim Amin, previously mentioned as 'the father of Arab feminism'. It emerged with the intent of modernizing Sharia and textual provisions through the use of ijtihad. This reinterpretation would incorporate the modernization brought forth by the colonial experience, vanquishing the unreasonable religious traditions pertaining to women (Jada 'an, 2010, p. 24). Because of its western frame of reference, this type of rhetoric and advocacy never achieved great legitimacy in Arab countries. Rather than promoting women's liberation, it merely redefined certain notions of women's rights and gender roles in order for women to better perform their given societal duties.

On the other hand the hermeneutic category, which is the basis of Islamic feminism proposed in this article, takes the general idea of ijtihad for modern times from the reformist strain, but places it within an Islamic context. An-Na'im calls for the interpretation of a religious text as a means of understanding its purpose and normative implications to be beyond dispute. The problem here lies in the '"framework of interpretation": the set of interpretative rules, techniques and underlying assumptions which are accepted by the adherents of the religion or tradition in question as valid and authoritative' (An-Na'im, 1995, p. 234). A 'constant recourse to the moral-ethical framework of Qur'an is an important strategy for feminist interpretation of Islamic scripture', balancing against an almost exclusively male-dominated Qur'anic interpretation (Jeenah, 2001, p. 66). Many scholars argue that 'women should have equal access to scriptural truth, and their works are showing what difference the gender of the author makes' with regard to Islamic discourse (Cooke, 2000, p. 95).

The hermeneutic approach within feminism did not gain prominence until the 1980s and 1990s, when this 'tendency to reinterpret Islam in a feminist context' emerged as a powerful force across the entire Islamic world, including non-Arab countries (Darvishpour, 2003). Great contributors include Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Fatima Mernissi and others (Jada 'an, 2010, p. 37). Using all Islamic texts (but primarily the Qur'an and Sunnah) as a framework, their efforts strive to completely reinterpret the old works in light of modern Islamic theorizing, finding that egalitarian principles are extremely predominant and that disadvantaged gender roles are the result of patriarchal cultural norms from ancient times, rather than gender inequality being intrinsic to Islam. Therefore, scholars conclude that the assertion that human rights and Islam are incompatible entities is entirely baseless. As Asma Barlas asserts:

In fact, the Quran provides some of the clearest arguments against patriarchy and discrimination in addition to espousing a radically egalitarian view of equality. That is why I believe that movements struggling for women's rights in Muslim societies have the best defense of their cause in the Quran itself. As it happens, Muslim patriarchs try to discredit such movements by branding them 'western/feminist', implying that there is no room to contest patriarchy and sexual inequality from within the fold of Islam (Barlas, 2001, p. 135).

The last subdivision of Islamic feminism is rejectionist; its adherents entirely condemn the notion that Islam and gender equality are compatible. It assumes an uncompromising view that Islam is fundamentally patriarchal and misogynist. Taking a literal interpretation of the religious texts with no room for alternate explanation, they fail to note the profound influence that cultural and historical factors held over the implementation of Shari'a and corresponding jurisprudence, which placed a great disadvantage on women. Prominent rejectionists such as Shahrzad Mojab and Haiddeh Moghissi 'derive their mandate not from the Qur'an but from the conviction that Islam is a patriarchal and misogynist religion that professes models of hierarchical relationships and sexual inequality and puts a sacred stamp [onto] female subservience' (Fatima Mernissi quoted by Barlas, 2004, p. 1; Darvishpour, 2003). By denying the notion of reinterpretation without imposing profound predisposed bias, this view finds Islam and human rights to be inherently incompatible.

In order to comprehend the applicability of these four concepts, it is important to give a proper example of the concepts' diversity of interpretation; thus, the principle of the qawama will be used, although it will be fully expanded upon in a subsequent section. Traditionally, qawama has been used to assert men's dominance over women through guardianship and authority; if verse 4:34 of the Qur'an is taken at face value, women are seen as simply inferior. Apologist interpretation is simple enough: while apologists might try to reinterpret the passage, its seemingly black-and-white dichotomous nature would lead them to arrive at the same traditional patriarchal interpretation that men possess superiority over women. Reformists, on the other hand, would conclude that whereas women may not be entirely equal to men, as cited by this Qur'anic verse, women should at least be given more independence to advance their status for the good of society as a whole. Hermeneutic thought will reread the text in light of modern understanding and assert that the traditional interpretation is extremely limited and can hardly be applied at all. Finally, the rejectionist strain will simply cast aside the verse, using it as

yet another way in which Islam and feminism are fundamentally at odds. This summary of the different interpretations is very brief in nature, but its purpose is merely to show the reader that Islamic feminism is particularly diverse and thus extremely complicated when it comes to policy making and political changes.

Reconstructing Islamic feminism in the wake of the Arab Spring

Hermeneutic exegesis and its modern application

As mentioned previously, the school of hermeneutic thought within Islamic feminism has flourished with its basis in reason and Islamic jurisprudence; thus, its framework is in need of analysis in order to properly explore the rise of Islamic feminism within the discussion and movement of Islamic activism. This section, using the work of numerous scholars and activists on the matter, seeks to examine passages of the Qur'an and the hermeneutic interpretation exerted in the attempt to reconcile egalitarian principles, as well as to demonstrate the overall approach that Islamic feminists employ with regard to ijtihad.

Abdullah Ahmed An-Na'im, a scholar in Islamic thought, once wrote that the greatest influencing factor of Shari'a in relation to the status of women was the principle of the qawama. Qawama has its origin in verse 4:34 of the Qur'an: 'Men have qawama [guardianship and authority] over women because of the advantage they [men] have over them [women] and because they [men] spend their property in supporting them [women].' According to Shari'a interpretations of this verse, men as a group are the guardians of and superior to women as a group, and the men of a particular family are the guardians of and superior to the women of that family (An-Na'im, 1990, p. 37).

Obviously, this portion of Qur'anic text appears troubling with regard to the notion of equality among men and women, if taken literally. Islamic feminists, however, use this opportunity to apply ijtihad and reinterpret the concept of qawama under new scholarship. For example, Amina Wadud defines the 'parameters of the [qawama] application' and definition by suggesting that the verse introduces qawama as existent only when the two conditions of 'preference' and 'support from means' are met at the same time, thereby limiting its applicability (An-Na'im, 1990, p. 70). Feminist exegetes also emphasize the quantifier 'some' in this verse, implying that there is no dichotomy between men as a class and women as a class, but rather it is restricted to 'some' male individuals over others (An-Na'im, 1990, p. 71). The reinterpretations have been numerous, but this is just one example of Islamic feminists' push for ijtihad against solidified norms in the name of egalitarian principles.

Within the framework of constant ijtihad performed by Islamic feminists, there is much emphasis on the sociological factors influencing the accepted principles of Shari'a. Omaima Abu Bakr, an influential Islamic feminist, argued that 'injustices exercised against today's Muslim women are due to the influence of pre-Islamic ideas that "influenced religious thought and were thus incorporated and canonized"' (Abdel-Latif and Ottaway, 2007, p. 8). Through the use of Islamic feminist ijtihad, reinterpretation 'exposes the inequalities embedded in current interpretations of Shari'a – fiqh – as constructions by male jurists rather than manifestations of the divine will. This exposure can have important epistemological and political consequences' (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, p. 644).

Asma Barlas, one of the leading voices in Islamic feminism, is particularly concerned with the sociological and historical influences on women's role in Islam and the present effects that traditional discourse still has.

> I regard the Quran as Divine Discourse (God's Speech) and, in keeping with an old tradition in Muslim theology, distinguish between this Discourse and its 'earthly realization'. Thus, what I question is not the Quran but its oppressive interpretations, and the sacrilegious idea that only some of us (males) can know its real meaning, claims implicit in confusing the Quran with its exegesis. Finally, while recognizing both the influence of gender on reading and the masculinist nature of Scriptural exegesis (in every religion, not just Islam), I also hold that reading is a function not only of who reads (sex/gender), but also of how (method) (Barlas, 2001, p. 120).

The male distortion of Shari'a and fiqh is prevalent and has dominated the rhetoric of Islam since the religion's creation. Although the past few decades have shown vast improvement with the development of Islamic modernism, the need for female involvement in the exegesis of Islamic thought is increasingly important, as demonstrated by the following rhetoric:

> When I studied – I realised that there are many imams who say things that are not true. For instance, the hadith according to which 'a man, when he goes travelling, he asks his wife to stay at home'. Then her father gets sick – but the prophet has said that you may not go out, so she stays. The father dies, same thing, she must not go to condole … This is completely made up – this hadith is weak, because it is not in accordance with the spirit (and it also has a weak chain) – someone has lied. A liar who has said that this is what the rasul [the prophet] said … Completely made up. Islam does not work

that way (Kabira Naji, 28 February 2011) (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2012, p. 27).

Accordingly, one of the most important aspects of the entire field of women's rights in the MENA region is the intellectual training of women in ijtihad.

The overarching theme to hermeneutic analysis within Islamic feminism is reason within the framework of religious exegesis. While the examples are too numerous to list in this article, through the use of ijtihad egalitarian principles can be found in Islamic text and jurisprudence. Employing the Qur'an for critical engagement, there are roughly 750 allusions in the Qur'an that instruct believers to 'reflect and make the best use of reason' in trying to decipher its multifarious depths, as opposed to the 260 on legislative matters (Barlas, 2002, p. 22). It is the acceptance of reason within religion that allows for a whole new era of Islam, one that does not have to be comprised in modern times. For this transformation of Islamic thought and gender norms regarding women's rights to take place, the revolution must take place from within all walks of society, not just among professed Islamic feminists.

> The intrinsic nature of being human is not exemplified by patriarchal manipulation of the gifts females have been acculturated to practice in order to better the quality of life for all humanity. It is time for what it means to be female to become more than a utility of men's searching for self-affirmation and identity. It is time for men to be empowered with and not to exert power over female identity and contributions. It is time for women and men to accept the full humanity of women by removing the veils put over women being female (Wadud, 2006, p. 256).

Islamic feminism and political sphere

Arguably, the rise of Islamic activism in politics as a movement (political Islam) occurred simultaneously with the development of Islamic revivalism in the 1970s and 1980s. As mentioned earlier, Islamic revivalism grew in response to the failings of pan-Arabism and ever-present western influence in regional affairs. This era of history was tumultuous at best, with the Arabs humiliated by Israel, stagnant economies creating widespread suffering and repressive political regimes quashing any source of rebellion. Political Islam emerged, blatantly revealing itself with the Iranian Revolution of 1979. This, of course, was one extreme of political Islam, but nevertheless it made the West particularly suspicious and paranoid about the power of the effort, which was seen as a destabilizing threat to regimes in the MENA region. Thus, Islamophobia was born. Islamophobia led to the West's

support of cruel authoritarian regimes that played on the Islamic fears in order to receive significant funding and regime sustenance. Nonetheless, political Islam increased its influence in society in numerous ways, particularly through charity organizations (although political organization was banned by most countries, particularly in Egypt). This course of action by the longstanding regimes and the West's support was, of course, unsustainable. Thus, in the beginning of 2011, the world watched as uprisings shook numerous states across the MENA region, finally bringing the legitimacy of political Islam as a viable movement to the forefront of discussion.

Islamic feminism's place in the gradual development of modern political Islam is somewhat ironic: as Mir-Hosseini writes,

> One neglected and paradoxical consequence of the rise of political Islam in the second half of the century was that it helped to create a space, an arena, within which Muslim women could reconcile their faith and identity with a struggle for gender equality. This did not happen because the Islamists offered an egalitarian vision of gender relations; in fact, they did not (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, p. 639).

In addition to providing a new space in which Islamic feminism could grow, political Islam also inadvertently gave rise to the influence of women in the public political Islamic sphere, as they proved to be at the core of political organization operations. As a Carnegie Endowment report on women in Islamist movements demonstrates, Islamists realized the need to reach out to all sections of society; thus, women were inevitably included on a basic level. Gradually, educated women joined the ranks of the movements and as their importance was realized, they began to petition for more significant roles as political actors. Simultaneously, as this assertion developed, women's rights activists realized that this arena provided the perfect safe space for their efforts, where they were able to make demands regarding the status of women without being branded as a 'western stooge' (Abellatif and Ottaway, 2007, p. 5).

As the male leaders of these modernist Islamic movements pursued their political agendas for a viable voice in the political sphere, most of them eventually realized the key role that women played in the success of the organizations; thus, legitimacy was gradually given. Currently, mainstream groups like the Muslim Brotherhood or Ennahda realize, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring, that recognizing women's rights within the framework of Islam is crucial for further support from Arabs and foreigners alike.

The Carnegie report notes that most female activists 'display dissatisfaction at being relegated to the women's branches of their respective movements', but at the same time their growth within the organizations is gaining momentum (Abellatif and Ottaway, 2007, p. 10). Ferida Lebidi, a Tunisian, is a perfect example of the progress that has been made. Under the rule of Ben Ali, she was blocked from taking her law exams and imprisoned because of her Islamic political beliefs. Now, since the inclusion of Ennahda in the political system, she has become a member of Tunisia's constituent assembly, 'responsible for the committee drafting the "rights and liberties" section of the new constitution' (Inskeep, 2012). 'There is diversity within the realm of Islamism … and women living among Islamists are not de facto victims of oppression' (Abdellatif and Ottaway, 2007, p. 5). While there is much room for further development, the achievements these women have made in a few decades with regard to political inclusion are astounding. Furthermore, they prove that through the observance of local cultural context, the path towards achieving women's rights is indeed plausible without the direct influence of foreign entities.

The case of Jihan al-Halafawi demonstrates the brave ascension of one Islamic feminist into the public realm of politics. In 2000 she became the first female Muslim Brotherhood member to run in the Egyptian parliamentary elections. She was faced with harsh regime harassment as well as cultural and religious resistance to her parliamentary candidacy. The influential Egyptian sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi provided al-Halafawi with help in overcoming this resistance through the issuance of a fatwa. Regarding this experience, al-Halafawi states:

> There were small things that worried me. How could a Muslim woman walk/campaign in the streets? And have her picture on posters all over? … So I asked to meet sheikh Qaradawi – and told him what worried me. He told me to go ahead, that there was nothing wrong. He wrote down what he said – I distributed (and still do) his words in the street … According to sheikh Qaradawi's latest fatwa, a woman can be President. In the Quran there are precedents (Pruzan-Jørgensen 2012, p. 43).

Conclusions

The events of the Arab Spring demonstrate that a moderating trend is occurring within Islam, as witnessed by the elections in the Arab world including in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Morocco. The Arab Spring has also highlighted the significant role that women play in regional uprisings as well as in managing the transition in the MENA region. Furthermore, these two factors reinforce the necessity of using the hermeneutic context of Islamic feminism. The critical role that women continue to play

in the Arab Spring provides an ongoing opportunity for Islamic feminism to deepen its presence in the moral and political debate about Islam and politics. However, it is important to recognize that the Arab Spring is a fluid and ever-changing process. While some clear trends have emerged, it is also difficult to definitively predict the future changes and trends that will shape the region. This article is an effort to show how Islamic feminism has thus far shaped the region and to reflect on how it may continue to do so.

The discussion surrounding political and cultural Islam in addition to related efforts is hardly likely to disappear. As the Arab Spring has demonstrated and events in the region continue to show, attempts by Arab regimes and foreign governments alike to severely manipulate the political sphere are no longer valid or tolerated. That being said, it is crucial to accept the current realities and change longstanding paradigms accordingly. The importation of western feminism to the MENA region lacks legitimacy: even though universalist human rights are increasingly recognized, the purely western framework lacks accessibility with its exclusion of the cultural (Islamic) context. Despite the good intentions many western theorists or activists have had in seeking women's rights in the Arab world, the past century has shown that their models have not captured the hearts and minds of the masses.

Islamic feminism provides solutions that other feminist measures cannot: the use of an Islamic framework in combination with the concept of egalitarian human rights provides authenticity for a society based on these religious principles. While there are, of course, numerous cultural and historical patriarchal and misogynistic influences at work in the region, it is highly unwise to conclude that Islam itself is intrinsically entrenched with those unsavory values/ practices. Islamic feminists recognize this, and thus through the use of their own ijtihad they seek to retell the story of Islam and its relationship with women.

Islamic reformation as a political effort has gained significant influence throughout several decades. The widespread impact of its general message was seen, and it is still being demonstrated, through the election of Islamic political parties in the national elections of states like Tunisia. This article argues that without the concurrent rise of Islamic feminism, these movements would not have had half of the widespread impact they now possess. Through the parameters of these Islamic organizations women have proved their resourcefulness, organizational skills, ability to educate and heal and, most importantly, their ability to lead.

> A movement to sever patriarchy from Islamic ideals and sacred texts and to give voice to an ethical and egalitarian vision of Islam can and

does empower Muslim women from all walks of life to make dignified choices. This, in the end, is what Islamic feminism is about (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, p. 645).

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