

# Challenges to Women's Security in the MENA Region

In Celebration of  
International Women's  
Day 2013

Women's Voices from Around the World

Middle East Program



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## Table of Contents

Haleh Esfandiari _____	1	Mouna Ghanem _____	20
Haifa Abu Ghazaleh _____	3	Shahla Haeri _____	21
Raya Abu Gulal _____	4	Lina Hundaileh _____	21
Raghda Abu-Shahla _____	4	Hind Aboud Kabawat _____	22
Muna AbuSulayman _____	5	Sema Kalaycioglu _____	23
Wajeeha Al-Baharna _____	6	Moushira Khattab _____	25
Hala Al Dosari _____	7	Lilia Labidi _____	25
Fahmia Al Fotih _____	8	Jaleh Lackner-Gohari _____	27
Eman Alnafjan _____	9	Faiza Mohamed _____	27
Honey Al Sayed _____	9	Musdah Mulia _____	28
Safia Taleb Al Souhail _____	11	Caryle Murphy _____	29
Ferdous Ara Begum _____	12	Marina Ottaway _____	30
Hayat Arsalan _____	12	Smadar Perry _____	30
Margot Badran _____	13	Hanan Saab _____	31
Kahina Bouagache _____	14	Fatima Sadiqi _____	32
Nadereh Chamlou _____	15	Fatima Sbaity Kassem _____	33
Ümit Cizre _____	16	Edit Schlaffer _____	34
Isobel Coleman _____	16	Nayereh Tohidi _____	35
Rangita de Silva de Alwis _____	17	Robin Wright _____	36
Shirin Ebadi _____	18	Najat Zarrouk _____	37
Yasmine ElSayed Hani _____	18	Dalia Ziada _____	38
Hanin Ghaddar _____	19		



**Haleh Esfandiari**, *Director, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*

On the occasion of International Women's Day 2013, the Middle East Program at the Wilson Center invited a cross-section of women activists, politicians, academics, and entrepreneurs to give us their views on the challenges women face to their security. 42 women from 20 countries including the United States, Malaysia, Indonesia, and countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region shared with us their concerns, disappointments, and hopes for women.

In 2010 and 2011, when the Arab Spring spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and other countries in the MENA region, women from all walks of life appeared in the tens of thousands alongside men in the streets of Arab cities. They took part in street demonstrations and sit-ins. They addressed the crowds, calling for individual dignity, government accountability, and the rule of law. They pushed for democratic change. In that brief, heady moment, barriers between men and women in the public sphere seemed to be crumbling, and women felt as secure and as protected on the streets across the Arab world as they felt at home. But once the revolutions succeeded, the ugly face of discrimination and violence against women reappeared. There were those intent on forcing women out of the public sphere by making the streets unsafe for them.

Today, in Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, and other countries, women are experiencing physical violence against their persons in the form of rape, beatings, arrests, prison, and torture. There is more. Women political activists are subjected to virginity tests. Little girls are forced into marriage. Under the threat of physical punishment, women are told what to wear and how to behave in public. Women face a creeping segregation; they are being pushed out of the political arena and the workplace. The number of women in public and political office in a number of Arab countries is actually falling. Only a handful of women were elected to the now disbanded Egyptian parliament and to the constitutional assembly. The number of women holding cabinet posts in Egypt, Tunisia, and Iraq has declined sharply. As the economic situation worsens in the countries of the Arab Spring, women are the first victims in the workplace. The traditional view that men are the main, if not the sole, breadwinners in the family is returning with a vengeance.

The new constitutions of Egypt and Tunisia are vague on women's rights, while the push in these and other countries for adherence to *shari'a* threatens women's aspiration for equality under the law. Here, the experience of Iranian women should serve as a warning to women in the countries of the Arab Spring: the 1979 Islamic constitution, defining women's rights under Islamic law, has meant institutionalizing unequal status. Iranian women have been waging a 30-year struggle to regain lost rights.

There are other danger signs. Progressive personal status laws in the countries of the Arab Spring are under threat. In Egypt, there was a move to lower the marriage age for girls to nine and to permit female genital mutilation. In Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, there is talk of permitting polygamy once again—although polygamy and female genital mutilation are both barred under current laws. Governments in the region—signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security—openly flout their international undertakings. In many countries, women can no longer obtain the necessary protection for their persons under either domestic laws or under international conventions.

2013 is the year for an all-out effort by women’s organizations, the private sector, civil society institutions, NGOs, and individuals to ensure the enactment and enforcement of laws to protect women against violence and marginalization.





**Haifa Abu Ghazaleh**, *Special Representative to Civil Society for the League of Arab States Secretary General, Jordan*

Between 2010 and 2012, the Arab region has witnessed one of the most important developments of the past century: the wave of protests, demonstrations, and revolutions aimed at overthrowing regimes in several countries. Starting on December 18, 2010 in Tunisia, these events eventually led to the end of the rule of entrenched leaders in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and Syria.

Despite the fundamental role that women played in political mobilization during the Arab Spring, a post-revolution shadow has started to hang over their political, social, and economic rights. Women have begun questioning whether the rights gained under the previous regimes would be canceled, especially after the victory of mostly conservative parties in many countries of the Arab Spring.

Women are also asking questions regarding the repercussions of the uprisings on their social, economic, and human rights at the national, regional, and international levels, as well as how to amend or repeal laws that impede their progress in various fields.

The issue of women's rights after the revolutions is controversial, especially with the rise to power of fundamentalist movements. Management of this transitional phase into democratic transformation—and women's role in this stage—is vital, particularly the process of redrafting national constitutions that currently guarantee full and equal citizenship for women and all classes.

The future is still unclear, especially for women's rights. The lack of clarity about women's present and future roles raises many questions about the gains women have made—especially those related to laws, policies, and strategies aimed at their empowerment. Some say that the Arab women's dream may be turning into an "Arab nightmare" if the fundamental parties who came to power in most of the Arab Spring countries were to annul women's rights after years of struggle.





**Raya Abu Gulal**, *Lawyer and Co-Founder, Women Lawyers Group-Middle East, Iraq*

In celebration of International Women's Day 2013, we must not forget the security challenges women are facing in the MENA region. In particular, in Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria, women are facing security challenges on a daily basis.

Security issues for women have a serious impact on the society as a whole. Growing exploitation of women, particularly from extremist groups, such as in Iraq and Syria, has seen a steady growth in rape, violence, suicide bombing, trafficking, prostitution, narcotics smuggling, and other adverse social trends. This has also led to an increase in women suffering mental problems and other acute illnesses, which further impact society and families, with especially severe effects on children.

Governments in countries such as Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria do not appear to be concerned with taking genuine steps to improve the security situation for women. This is also the result of the bureaucratic and inefficient nature of the political process in these countries.

Security challenges in the MENA region will remain an issue for women in the next few years until governments stabilize themselves. However, efforts should be made to offer more security for women in the MENA region, particularly in areas affected by war. Policymakers on a national and international level should recognize the importance of security for women by implementing actions and laws protecting women.



**Raghda Abu-Shahla**, *Interpreter, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Gaza; and former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center*

Women's security in Palestine is challenged not only by local traditions or by local conflicts. It is also hugely affected and threatened by outside challenges.

Palestinian women in Gaza, without exception of age or social status, are facing violence, bombing, shelling, and destruction, all of which is topped by the Israeli blockade imposed on Gaza.

In normal countries, if a woman's security is threatened, she might have the option to leave or escape, while in Gaza there is nowhere to hide as the tiny enclave is sealed from all sides. There is no place to go and no option for an escape, especially under the conservative culture of Gaza. These women are left on their own to deal with their local challenges of inequality, discrimination, ignorance, poverty, blockade, conflict, occupation, and war.

Palestinian women were beaten when they went to the streets to protest the national rift and call for a national reconciliation. Their lives are under threat of Israeli F-16 bombings and shellings of the crowded Gaza Strip, and their future is full of limitations.

With the Gaza Strip's unemployment, poverty, tension, and illiteracy, many women and girls are suffering from domestic violence caused by their families. They are living through systematic discrimination and deprivation of their most basic rights including the right to security and self-determination.

Several women died in Gaza recently from severe burns, not only because of bombings or because of stray bullets. Some women were burned to death with their entire families while asleep simply because of fire accidents caused by candles or electricity generators, which are frequently used in Gaza due to systematic electricity cuts and the lack of safety and security measures in the entire Strip.

Nevertheless, Palestinian women celebrate International Women's Day. They aspire and work toward a better future for themselves.



**Muna AbuSulayman**, *Partner, Directions Consultancy LLC; Co-host Kalam Nouam; Partner Glowork, Women Employment Opportunities, Saudi Arabia*

Who am I?

The women in the Arab world, as many of the contributors to this publication will point out, face problems in achieving equality, fair treatment, adequate health care, and security. Many lives are endangered both on the front lines of protest as well as in women's everyday lives through physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, or murder. This is the background noise of an Arab woman's life no matter which class she belongs to or which country she lives in.

Many women accept horrific circumstances and unjust laws not because they don't know their rights, but because they don't understand who they are. They don't feel ownership of their lives and are not in charge of writing their narrative. Rather, they are helpless recipients of interpretations through the lenses of others—from the orthodox religious establishments to liberal leftist groups. As a result, women sometimes become enablers of those very same

practices that stifle them. Additionally, many of the reforms that take place don't fully impact the lives of those most concerned. It is especially troubling to see the disconnect between the few females in political office and decision-making positions and the average woman. Even when these (usually appointed) women are fighting for specific rights for their countrywomen, the lack of connecting it to shared commonalities with other women undermines all but the most basic reforms.

What is the modern female Arab identity? What is the type of life that she wants to lead? What are her priorities? What does it mean for a woman in her own locality to be female? Serious efforts must be made to deconstruct the culture surrounding the women, in each of their villages, cities, and countries, and to rebuild an understanding that fits with their vision of the future, with the reality of their present and which references their past.

Women in the Arab world must take control of their own narrative and their future. It is through this control, this ownership that they can understand who they are, take charge, and become the organic center of the solution to their problems.



**Wajeeha Al-Baharna**, *President, Bahrain Women's Association for Human Development*

Women in the MENA region face many challenges. One of the most prominent challenges is discrimination against women and gender-based violence, which consequently affect women's stability and security and act as obstacles in their humanitarian role and contribution toward development. Women feel threatened and insecure even under normal conditions, so during times of war and conflict, these challenges become more challenging and usually result in more suffering due to the chaos, insecurity, and economic recession.

During the uprisings and the Arab revolutions, the economy was affected and the number of development projects has decreased, thus leading to the closure of many companies and foreign regional enterprises. Women were on top of the list of employees to be fired and left without a source of income. This situation is even worse for women who are the sole breadwinners of the family. Moreover, in some cases, women's positions are abolished or women are denied promotions because of their political views against the government.

Furthermore, many women lost their husbands during these revolutions when they were killed, displaced, or arrested. This doubled women's burden as it became their responsibility to provide financial and emotional support to their families. In addition to that, women were subjected to rape and sexual harassment during the uprisings and have been left with no means to protect themselves due to an absence of laws to protect women during conflicts.



On the other hand, some political parties took advantage of women's issues and started to politicize them in order to serve the parties' interests and political agendas. It is unfortunate that many women have gone along with these parties and stopped demanding the rights that they previously used to push for. Also, there have been some defections and political alignments in women's organizations that led to the weakening of collective action and efforts toward common causes.

One of the challenges that does not receive attention from the community is the deferment of some women's issues that ensure their rights as citizens (such as the right of citizenship, family laws, anti-violence laws, etc.). As a result of the current situation, these issues have become low priority, which means a delay in gaining the rights for which women have fought for a long time.

Despite all these obstacles, women did not hesitate to participate in protests demanding reform and had a strong presence in the arena of change. Women also made many sacrifices in order to carry out their duties for their country, only to be rewarded in the end by being further excluded from the decision-making process and not being involved in national committees.

Thus, we find that women in wars and conflicts are the first to be affected, and during times of prosperity and development, they are the last to benefit.



**Hala Al Dosari**, *Ph.D. candidate in health services research, Saudi Arabia*

Saudi women have been a common denominator in most socio-political equations. Decades of the institutionalized guardianship system and gender segregation have rendered women vulnerable with limited autonomy in most aspects of their lives. Take education and work, for instance. Though women outnumber men in university graduation rates, they end up competing for limited work opportunities due to the country's gender segregation policy. Many educated women accept either low-paying jobs or travel on a daily basis on dangerous roads for distant appointments. Tragic accidents on poorly-maintained roads leave many women dead or disabled. Photo identification continues to be a challenge to permit women access to courts, whether as lawyers or as plaintiffs. The newly-appointed women members in the Shura Council are no exception. A complete remodeling of the Shura building to allow for separate work spaces was required prior to the women beginning their duties. Segregation is a potential barrier to the meaningful engagement of women in shared decision making.

The guardianship system represents a serious threat in situations of domestic violence. Without a written penal code to address violence against women or accessible resources, the problem becomes insurmountable. Initial figures from small-scale studies suggest that domestic violence

has become an epidemic, affecting one in every three women and half of all Saudi children. Vulnerable populations of women such as migrant workers, institutionalized mentally-ill and disabled women, and women prisoners at risk of family retribution are of particular concern.

The institutionalized guardianship system, with its severe impact on women’s autonomy, the gender segregation policy, and the limitations of political decision making must be revoked to ensure the secure and sustainable development of women in Saudi Arabia.



**Fahmia Al Fotih**, *Communication Analyst, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Yemen*

For a long time, security has been a crucial issue for people in the MENA region, particularly for women and especially in countries where war and turmoil are prevalent. The conflicts have gravely affected women’s well-being in general.

Economic insecurity is one of the challenges that women face at present. Due to conflict, like in Yemen, many women have lost their sole breadwinners (usually a husband, father, or brother), leaving them economically susceptible. This is because illiteracy is shamefully high among those women, especially in rural areas where the majority of women live.

Yemen, for instance, also has witnessed conflicts and wars in recent years that resulted in the displacement of massive numbers of people in the North and South. Women and girls composed a large portion of the internally displaced persons (IDPs). Women and girls caught in such circumstances are the most vulnerable groups. In such settings, women are subjected to different forms of gender-based violence (rape, sexual exploitation, etc.) as well as deprived of access to life-saving and basic services that put their lives and their children’s lives at risk. They are psychologically, socially, and economically battered.

Apart from displacement, women do not feel secure anymore. With the spread of arms in cities on a daily basis and an absence of the rule of law, “systematic” violence against women has been amplified. For instance, women are being sexually assaulted publicly, and women have been subjected to violence at the hands of security forces—forces that should protect them. This has negatively affected women’s participation in the public domain. Moreover, women cannot seek security and justice within legal institutions because of existing discriminatory laws.

Women in the MENA region feel that they live in an unsafe environment, and security is still a pressing issue for all women that needs to be genuinely and seriously addressed.





**Eman Alnafjan**, *Riyadh-based blogger at Saudiwoman's weblog*

Things are looking up for women in Saudi Arabia. While they are still second-class citizens required to have a male guardian to grant them permission to travel and are banned from driving cars, women now make up 20 percent of the appointed advisory council and are allowed to fully participate in municipal elections. Women are also finally allowed to work openly in malls as sales clerks. Moreover, any day now, the Ministry of Justice plans to grant licenses to women lawyers and maybe even implement child protection laws. Thus, generally we're on the right path. Yet that path could be derailed with the slightest sign of upheaval or war. When attempting to pacify or recruit ultra-conservatives on a particular cause, the first issue to be put on the negotiation table is women's rights. To get Islamist sheikhs to endorse (or at least be silent over) arbitrary political detentions, a possible outbreak of war between Israel and Iran, or the use of drones by American forces in neighboring Muslim countries, all that has to be promised is the status quo on women's issues such as maintaining the ban on women driving or agreeing that a legal age for marriage will not be assigned.

In any national turmoil, women are usually the first to be sacrificed. Nowhere is that more true than in Saudi Arabia. Independent civil societies are outlawed. The only organizations outside of the government are those of Islamists who abuse their religious power, calling on men to attend a literary club meeting just to protest women being allowed to attend in the same hall. They also went in scores to the royal court to protest women being allowed on the advisory council. These incidents were at a time of relative stability; can you imagine what would happen to women's rights if this stability were to be shaken?



**Honey Al Sayed**, *board member, RO'YA Association For a Better Syria; co-founder, board member, host, and producer, Radio Souriali; Middle East positive media and art and cultural advisor, Syria*

Women of the Arab Spring have not only been marginalized; they have been sexually exploited through rape as a tool of torture, physical and mental violence, and, in many cases, death. Today, Syrian women are heads of households with no means to manage their responsibilities and no homes to head up.

Such traumatizing occurrences are being inflicted today on women of the Arab Spring, mainly Syrian women. Since the start of the Syrian revolution, Syrian women have been abused, one way or another.

To add to the vicious tools of torture by the Syrian regime, Syrian women have had to suffer the double indignity and crime of being cast away by their society and families. For those who have been raped, they are kept quiet, forced into marriage, divorced, abandoned, and even pressured to commit suicide by demand of their own families. Thousands of Syrian mothers have been abandoned, caring for children they now need to nurture and raise on their own. These mothers have no craft, have never been the breadwinners in the family, and now are forced to take the lead with no ready skills. In many cases, mothers are all alone, their children and families having been killed, forcibly disappeared, or detained. Such brutal conditions leave women physically, mentally, spiritually, and financially insecure if not destitute. Women of the Arab Spring, across socio-economic, sectarian, and political lines, can and will become leaders, starting from their homes. These women need to be recognized and mentored within their society and the international community.

“Women constitute half of the society”—this is a very popular Arab saying that means a society cannot be built without its women. Starting with the upbringing of their children and going as far as parliament, women are the leaders and makers of society.

Unfortunately, this is not observed in practice. Today, we need to walk the talk of such sayings. Today, Syrian women must exercise their right to at least 50 percent representation across the social, economic, and political spectrum. Today, Syrian women must rise to the challenge of rebuilding a society that has been decimated by the genocide being perpetrated by the Bashar al-Assad regime. In the case of Syria, as Rafif Jouejati, the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) spokesperson says, “It is only natural to have 50 percent women’s representation as they make more than half the population today. Keep in mind that the median age in Syria is 21, and many of our young, emerging female leaders have worked side-by-side as equals to their male counterparts. No way are these women going to take a back seat in rebuilding their country.”

Today, Syrians have the opportunity to build their society from scratch, and it starts with the women.





**Safia Taleb Al Souhail**, *Independent liberal Iraqi politician and Member of Iraqi parliament (second term), Iraq*

Women and girls in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries have faced both insecurity and violence during and after the Arab Spring. The weakness of government institutions in the region and the spread of militias and extremist armed groups have had a doubly negative effect on women and girls. Their personal freedoms and rights have been violated through killing, kidnapping, and threatening and abusive behaviors, especially for secular and educated women and girls as well as those who are members of minority groups.

Women in my country of Iraq are completely absent from all aspects of official peace and security negotiations, mediation, and drawing up national security policies at all levels. It is still difficult and unusual for Iraqi women to work in the security sector. There is also no commitment from the leaders of the country to promote gender equality in security institutions despite our repeated demands and calls for equality.

Women are often underrepresented in government and sometimes offered certain soft positions in cabinets, but mostly they are excluded from most forms and mechanisms of important decision-making positions, especially those related to national strategic and internal security matters. Women have no presence in peace negotiations or national reconciliation processes. If they are present, their presence often ends with the end of the conference or workshop in which they participate.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is generally not known in the parliaments or governments or societies of our region. There is a need in MENA countries to improve women's knowledge and attitudes about peace and security. It is also crucial to increase women's leadership roles in decision-making positions and to empower women politically, socio-economically, and culturally.

The increase of women's seats in parliaments alone, despite all of its importance, is not sufficient in an emerging democracy. Women must be seen in the society as ruling and leading actors and a strong factor to be contended with and respected.

The society must know more about the impact of war on women, and women must learn more about their role in determining national security issues. This is very much needed in Iraq and the region. Moreover, women need to both build their own capacity and also enhance their own role in all aspects of peace building, mediation, negotiations, and conflict resolution, including enhancing their role and ability in monitoring and evaluation through civil society organizations, academia, and government.





**Ferdous Ara Begum**, *gender issues specialist; former member of UN CEDAW Committee and Chair, Working Group for CEDAW General Recommendation on Rights of Older Women; and Former Director General, Bangladesh Television, Bangladesh*

This year, as the world observes International Women's Day on March 8, world women activists will attend the 57<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women. This will take place at the UN headquarters in New York on March 4-15, 2013, with the primary theme of elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls.

Challenges to women's security in the MENA region are mostly caused by war-like situations and armed conflict, resulting in a large increase of widows, orphans, and displaced populations. They are most vulnerable to sexual violence, trafficking, forced marriage, and denial of all basic human rights, including inheritance and property rights. Conflict and post-conflict contexts exacerbate violence against women, including rape as a weapon of war.

In the absence of reliable data and qualitative information on the challenges to women's security in the MENA region, the issue has never been addressed in the right manner. National governments need to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and 1820, along with the Concluding Observations of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to eliminate all forms of violence and discrimination against women and widows of all ages. State Parties need to prepare National Action Plans and allocate budgets on the basis of the Security Council Resolutions so that women are incorporated in the national reconstruction, empowerment, and nation-building process.



**Hayat Arsalan**, *President of the Committee for Women's Political Empowerment and Head of Media and Public Relations for the National Commission for Lebanese Women, Lebanon*

That women played a role in facilitating the Arab Spring is a historical fact that will be highlighted in any record of the region's uprising. This role should be documented as an achievement of women's equality, meaning that women are equal to men in shaping the history of nations. This will help women with a global objective to implement the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) with clear evidence of women's merit.

Lebanese women accompanied the outstanding performance of their sisters in the Arab Spring with heart and soul. They supported them morally and verbally in conferences, through the media, and all possible means. Women's achievements necessitated the reactions of domestic politicians, which were positive in some countries and negative in others; Lebanon fell in the second category. For example, in Saudi Arabia, 30 women were appointed to the Shura Council by the decision of King Abdullah, who governs the most conservative Arab country. Those achievements and performances did not touch on the aspired change in Lebanese women's political status. Thus, Lebanese women are partners with other Arab women in enduring injustice, discrimination, and marginalization. This is not to mention the sexual harassment intended to deter women from playing their desired role.

That is why in Lebanon this year the Committee for Women's Political Empowerment called upon women's organizations, civil society associations, and people at large to commemorate and to celebrate International Women's Day as a "National Mourning Day" because of the persistent discrimination against women. Until now, there was no women's quota for political participation and no ratification for the two drafted laws on women's rights, which address domestic violence and the right of Lebanese women married to non-Lebanese to grant their nationality to husbands and children.

We are sad and protesting, expressing ourselves by organizing the "National Mourning Day." We address all women and men in Lebanon and abroad to stand during a moment of silence at noon to support us and be part of protesting against the injustice practiced against women.

We are still struggling to eliminate all kinds of discrimination against women on our road to a Lebanese Spring.

International women's unity is the real International Women's Day.

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**Margot Badran**, *Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; and Senior Fellow, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, United States*

Challenges to women's security are challenges to the security of the entire state and society. Mobilizing, or even allowing, physical and sexual attacks on women, including rape, is by now well recognized as a disruptive political act. De-stabilize women and you de-stabilize revolution. Denigrate women and you denigrate revolution. Egypt, as the world sees, is currently experiencing an epidemic of attacks on women whether emanating from state security forces, from political opponents, or from free-wheeling predators. The state and oppositional political factions are engaging in bitter contestation over the control of the public turf of the nation. Women—sidelined by the state and political groups—are holding their own. As the state is ineffective in providing security to the people (its monumental apparatus seems more intent

upon protecting the state against the people), young women, along with outraged young men, as political and social revolutionaries, are jointly taking women's security into their own hands. They are out in the *midans* (squares) and metros aiming to pre-empt attacks against women or stop assaults in motion. Women declare they are there to stay as the revolution itself is there to stay. They will not allow themselves to be pushed out whether by Islamists of any stripe in government, including at the pinnacle, or at large, by those who enlist an atavistic patriarchal version of Islam to control and brand women and other "recalcitrants." Women will also not be shunted aside by (male-dominated) secular liberal oppositional groups, who, exhibiting their own (secular) patriarchal shenanigans, do not include women in the front ranks of their political work. If the Islamist-headed state is delinquent in providing security to women, so too are the political oppositional forces that call for mass rallies but fail to take measures to protect women supporters. They do not connect the dots between women's security, the nation's security, even their own security as independent political forces, and the revolution whose aims they claim to uphold. It appears that security will be a mirage in Egypt for some time to come.



**Kahina Bouagache**, *women's rights activist, and corporate and international lawyer, Algeria*

It's very disappointing to see where women stand in the region two years after the "Arab Spring," a movement where men and women stood together hand-in-hand against failing regimes, demanding the same rights. Another historical moment was when women took a heroic role by invading Tunis, Cairo, Benghazi, or Sanaa streets.

Two years later, women are, if not at least harassed, prosecuted or raped in their "public spaces." We have been witnessing a horrifying spread of violence against women with the failure of new states to provide the required security to their female citizens. Even worse, most of the violence is allowed—if not performed—by state agents. We all have in mind "the blue bra march" in Cairo streets after the military ripped off a young woman's clothing during a demonstration, or the gang rape performed in Tahrir Square, or the rape of a secular Tunisian woman by two state police officers for walking with her boyfriend, or the 16-year-old Libyan girl prohibited from attending school after refusing to wear a scarf, and so on. There are too many other examples of the consequences of revolutions and their impact on women's rights.

For many years and today still, the objective of women's rights NGOs is to break the silence and to amend laws that reduce the horrifying statistics of gender-based violence in women's domestic spaces. But today I believe we have to campaign to regain the right to use public infrastructures and public spaces and to be able to walk safely in our streets, considering the failure of the police and state authorities to provide the needed protection for half of their citizens.







**Nadereh Chamliou**, *Senior Advisor, Office of the Chief Economist, Middle East and North Africa Region, The World Bank*

I was in Tunis recently, shortly after the burial of the assassinated opposition leader Chokri Belaid, who was killed on February 6. I have gone to Tunisia to attend the same meeting for the last 11 years, roughly around mid-February, giving me time-lapse snapshots of Tunisia and my counterparts, whose major life milestones I observed. Some got married, had children, and others married off their children and became grandparents, while others lost loved ones and grieved. I also witnessed the joy and euphoria at the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and saw the future with hope and optimism. This time, I found Tunisians all in a state of shock and depression, regardless of whether they were men or women, young or old, rich or poor. Some more educated Tunisians told me that for the first time they were considering getting the passport of a different country. Just in case. A middle-class woman told me that she wanted the economic situation to get worse, not improve, so that the shortcomings of the government would be evident to all. A veiled woman told me that she was concerned about the future of her daughters, whom she had encouraged to study and work. And then I had my usual conversations with my drivers as they drove me around to my appointments. One of them had two daughters, one in university and one in high school. In earlier times, he told me, he never worried where they were and when they came home. Now, if they were not home by 7:00 p.m., he would drive around to pick them up, and they could no longer go out at night or go far in general. His story made me think that at times of uncertainty and lower security, women's freedom outside the home is the first victim. Either women themselves or their relatives force them to retreat to home and away from the public sphere. As one of the meeting participants from Egypt recounted, violence against women is on the rise, as a tool for power of one group over the other or because of a break-down of security. In such cases, women are even less likely to seek government help to pursue justice, either because the government is ineffective or unsupportive. In fact, the 2012 surveys of the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index in Tunisia and Egypt, which surveyed 1,000 men and women across three major cities, show a markedly lower likelihood of women filing a complaint with the government or against a government inaction or misconduct, when compared to men and when compared to other MENA countries such as Iran, Lebanon, and the UAE. Safety and security is important for all, but even more critical for women if they are to take their space in the economy and society.





**Ümit Cizre**, *İstanbul Şehir Üniversitesi, Modern Türkiye Çalışmaları Merkezi Direktörü*  
*Istanbul Şehir University, Director of Center for Modern Turkish Studies, Turkey*

The status, identity, well-being, personal security, rights, and liberties of women in the MENA region were undermined by competing and multiple realities and repressions under the *anciens regimes*. More specifically, Islam, modernization, authoritarian secularism, conflict, violence, tradition, patriarchy, and even free market forces all negatively impacted women, which in turn infringed upon their sense and sensibility, clearly resulting in their political mobilization. As such, women played a significant role in the downfall of these regimes, some more proactive than others, yet all were supportive of change due to the heavy burden of their continuing grievances.

In addition, ongoing changes and trends in the MENA region since 2010 have shown more convincingly than ever that the minimalist definition of democracy as the existence of elections can be clearly meaningless: elections have, in fact, aggravated women's insecurities and fears, which are directed now against both new autocrats as well as electoral majorities who are uninterested and unsympathetic to the empowerment of women in their societies. Without further guarantees for full and equal rights, the fundamental goals of women in the MENA region cannot be resolved.

The so-called "Arab Spring" has also revealed the need for a two-tiered women's struggle in the region. It is true that "modern-secular" women are trying to avert the threat of a rollback in their status and lifestyle. But this is not enough: they need to also transcend the fundamental fault line that secular nationalist rulers have managed to draw between religious-traditional and modernized women, as if these identities are mutually exclusive. The resulting disconnections and distrust among women have stunted a united women's movement in this region, lessening their effectiveness in fighting against the real culprits of their repression, and preventing them from effectively addressing their common problems, such as domestic violence, honor killings, and an enduring absence from public office.



**Isobel Coleman**, *Senior Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy, Director of the Civil Society, Markets, and Democracy Initiative, Council on Foreign Relations*

In the chaos of political change in the MENA region today, women face a number of security challenges, from rising lawlessness to backsliding on legal rights. But the rising incidence of politically motivated sexual violence against women is especially worrying, particularly in Egypt where women have been the victims of horrible and systematic mass sexual assaults.

The good news is that women—and men—are saying “enough.” Concerned activists have formed new groups like [Tahrir Bodyguard](#), [Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault](#) (OpAntiSH), and [At3 Eidak](#) (literally, “cut your hand” and figuratively, “don’t you dare”) to protect women and, more broadly, shine a spotlight on the harassment of women in general. Many of the activists involved believe that the attacks [are organized](#) with the intent to terrorize women and deter them from participating in the political sphere.

The activist groups have helped muster national and international outrage. For the first time, victims of sexual assaults have [appeared on television](#) to speak publicly about their horrific experiences; all of the major political groups have been compelled to comment, and U.S. officials have [recently reiterated](#) that women’s rights must be prioritized in the ongoing transition.

Still, politically motivated violence against women has probably not crested. [Members of the Shura Council](#), Egypt’s upper house of parliament, have made statements that women who protest in Tahrir cannot expect the government to protect them, and some have called for separate areas for women to gather at protests. [Another preacher](#) said that women who go to Tahrir to protest have no shame and want to be raped. At stake in the battle against sexual violence is not just a woman’s personal safety and dignity, but also her right to move in public space and participate in the ongoing political transition.



**Rangita de Silva de Alwis**, *Director, Global Women’s Leadership Initiative, Woodrow Wilson Center, United States*

Women’s exclusion from decision-making processes constitutes the single biggest challenge to women’s security in the MENA region. Women’s marginalization from leadership positions erodes the promise of democracy and undermines the rule of law in the emerging democracies of the region. Attacks against women in the name of traditional notions of purity are a threat to human security. Women’s access to justice demands a responsive police force, independent and gender-sensitive courts, and redress mechanisms and an effective legal system built on equality under law. While the rule of law can be strengthened by women’s equal participation in decision making, a functioning rule of law often ensures that women have greater control over their bodies. Women’s agency is a building block of democracy and the rule of law. A rule of law that rules women out threatens the security of all in the MENA region. As former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said, “Women’s physical security and higher levels of gender equality correlate with security and peacefulness of entire countries.”





**Shirin Ebadi**, *Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and Iranian Human Rights Lawyer and Activist*

Unfortunately, during revolutions, unrest, upheaval, and war, the first victims are women. Women become the targets of harassment, particularly sexual harassment. When women come out in the streets for political protest, they are subjected to sexual violence. In Cairo, women who came out into the streets to protest political conditions were subjected to sexual harassment. Perpetrators make the street insecure for women in order to silence them. Not long ago, before television cameras, people in Cairo attacked a female French journalist. They wanted to undress her. In Libya, a woman who sought refuge with journalists was forcibly removed from their hotel by men. Sadly, numerous instances of the rape of women have been reported. In my opinion, the ultimate aim is to make the streets unsafe for women and to push them back into the home.



**Yasmine ElSayed Hani**, *Foreign Affairs Editor, AlAkhdar daily, Cairo, Egypt*

Words last longer than one's life. Therefore, writing on the suffering of women in Egypt two years after the revolution is an account to support those, maybe years later, who want to judge how things have developed since the uprising aspired for dignity for all.

In Egypt's conservative society, the bodies of women, typically identified as sacred, have turned into political battlefields. The sexual harassment that was used against women activists under the dictatorship of former President Hosni Mubarak is now used intensively under the new autocrats who affiliate themselves with religion.

A famous incident under Mubarak was the attack on female journalists in front of the Syndicate of Journalists in Cairo on May 25, 2005, when they were protesting proposed amendments to the constitution by Mubarak, widely seen as facilitating the political succession of his son, Gamal. During what was known as "Black Wednesday," thugs attacked women, undressing and sexually harassing them, within the sight of onlookers. The aim was to deter those who were attacked (women), those who were hurt (families), those who were "onlookers" (neutrals), and all those who heard of it from ever thinking to resist the regime.

Unlike what was intended, the incident drew nation-wide condemnation as a scandal for the regime and was assessed as one of the events that further fueled the anger among Egyptians, particularly the youth.

The same tool, frequently used under the military's transitional rule, is now harshly used in the protest fields in Cairo and elsewhere to do the same job. The same scenario of "thugs harassing women activists" is repeated under the current regime to instill fear among the same women; to deter their willingness to oppose, to go along with the same threats typically aimed at "families" and "onlookers."

The political struggle that has now turned into "body politics" adds to the already mounting suffering of Egyptian women as the weaker side of this developing society, whether economically, politically, socially, or now even humanly.



**Hanin Ghaddar**, *former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; and managing editor, NOW News, Lebanon*

Between sexual harassment in Egypt and organized rape in Syria, the Arab Spring has toppled dictators but created new ones that have nothing on their agendas but undermining women. What was supposed to be an "awakening" of the Arab street resulted in rhetoric that is obsessed with women and their bodies.

Islamists taking over in Tunisia and Egypt forgot that the Arab Spring was first and foremost about dignity and justice. All they can think of now is how to make Islam and *shari'a* the predominant features underlining all decisions and rhetoric, ignoring the dignity of women and their rights.

Women are victims of both old dictatorships and new. In Syria, the Bashar al-Assad regime is using rape as a weapon of war to punish rebellious communities and push them to revengeful behavior and to carry arms. While the rebels, embracing the Islamist trends, are also taking it out on women, who are pushed back to the private sphere and to their traditional roles as caretakers of families and communities.

In the Idlib town of Saraqeb, Syria, when the Al-Nusra Front (affiliated with al-Qaeda) took control, the first thing they did was to force women and female journalists to wear the veil.

Democracy is not only about the ballots. When elections bring a ruler who is obsessed with putting more chains on women and their bodies, it only means one thing: democracy is incomplete and freedom is still farfetched.

Today we suffer from the dictatorship of the majority; a new reality that resulted from our misunderstanding of democracy. Without proper guarantees for women, and religious and sexual minorities, ballots could become a tool for another dictatorship to reach power and stay. It is time for an uprising of women in the Arab world.



**Mouna Ghanem**, *Deputy for the President of the Building the Syrian State (BSS) Movement, Syria*

It has been almost two years since the unrest started in Syria. The peaceful demonstrations of March 2011 were turned into armed conflicts, nurtured by domestic and international interventions. The conflict is hitting not only militants but also properties and other individuals. The suffering is extended to families, children, and women.

The conflict is resulting in increased challenges for Syrian women throughout the crisis and will continue to do so beyond its conclusion. The armed conflict forced more than three million of the Syrian population to flee their homes, becoming either refugees or internally displaced persons. The situation broke up families' security, privacy, and wellbeing, affecting mainly vulnerable women and children.

Crimes against humanity and war crimes were reported in Syria and in Syrian refugee camps in neighboring countries. Crimes included rape, forced marriage, sexual harassment, slavery, and physical and psychological pains. All are considered violations of international human rights and the rights of women.

The economic burden is no less than the burden of war; families have been left with no source of income as a result of losing a breadwinner, closing businesses, leaving agricultural lands, or having property destroyed. Women in many cases are in charge of a family's livelihood, recovery, and sustainability.

The Syrian women have enjoyed some of their rights and autonomy, being in a secular country that respects diversity. The challenge ahead is the possibility of women's rights and autonomy not being respected as a result of the fundamentalist nature of the uprisings in the MENA region. Women might lose some of their rights gained from decades of struggle. It is a tremendous challenge to remain part of the decision-making powers and to enhance such positions.

Peace-building is another challenge where women are asked to play a major role. With hundreds of women joining the peace-building and capacity-building activities, the challenge is how resources will be channeled to assist the processes.





**Shahla Haeri**, *Associate Professor and Director, Women's Studies Program, Boston University*

As the complex and multifaceted political drama is unfolding in the MENA region, I am riveted by the anxious and unexpected twists and turns the gender dynamics is taking. Now I am exhilarated by the sight of gender unity and harmonious chants demanding freedom and dignity, now demoralized by the painful manifestations of patriarchal brutality. Now the gentle breath of the "Arab Spring" lifts my spirit and fills me with hopes of flourishing democracies in the region. Now the shameful cruelty of a woman's ripped shirt and her exposed body clad only in a blue bra chokes me with terror. The heartlessness of the policemen dragging the woman in the blue bra (whose face was covered by her headscarf) through Tahrir Square symbolizes the structural violence in all its poignant ugliness. Violence against women in the public domain has a long history and is replicated in the legal and political institutions following the uprisings: polygamy was immediately reinstated in Libya; and many Egyptian and Tunisian women lost their seats in the parliament.

But the "Arab Spring," brief though it was, has already engendered new gender awareness and political identity in the region. By their active presence, women have shed the age-old cloak of fear and are challenging their governments to guarantee their social safety and political security. Meaningful changes, however, do not happen overnight. The challenges to women's security in the MENA region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century require genuine desire to change, and a sustained multi-pronged approach, involving women, men, and governments. While patriarchs and patriarchal regimes are changing places, "patriarchy" is not an unchanging monolith and does not work in a vacuum. Many potential and actual "patriarchs," i.e., fathers, husbands, brothers, care deeply for their women and willingly and honestly want to advance women's causes. What these "patriarchs" and their womenfolk need is governmental policies eliminating legal discriminations, supporting gender political participation, and advancing meaningful national education.



**Lina Hundaileh**, *Chairman and CEO, Printing for the Manufacturing of Chocolate and Chairwoman of the Young Entrepreneurs Association, Jordan*

In October 2000, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1325, which calls for women's equal participation in decisions regarding peace and security. This is the first resolution that addresses the impact of armed conflicts on women's lives. We are underestimating what women can do to prevent and resolve conflicts.

UNSCR 1325 stresses the importance of women's full participation as active agents of peace and security.

So the priority is to advocate for implementing the resolutions and, above all, to stress the importance of women's role in decision-making with respect to starting or ending war. Our positive impact should not be ignored or neglected.

Women are targets of extreme violence in wars and conflict, so we need to work harder in saving the lives of these women by bringing them together with their male counterparts at the negotiation table.

As women are trying to lobby to create a quota for their participation in the board of directors of companies, decision-making positions, senior positions, government, and parliament, etc., it is now time to do the same in the case of security and conflict.



**Hind Aboud Kabawat**, *The Syrian Centre of Dialogue, Syria*

While normally the Arab Spring has given space for a broader discussion on social and political space, including women's issues, in Syria the context has limited this space due to military escalation and what can be politely called a war. As such, the means to discuss women's issues related to emotional and physical security has been greatly restricted. Certainly, looking at this from a traditional point of view, women are most vulnerable during times of war, whether because of sexual violence (a recent study indicated that rape was a significant reason for women fleeing Syria) or because women and children tend to make up a disproportionate number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). It is difficult to step outside this context to discuss this issue. Normally we would have discussed legal frameworks, civil society, emerging roles, tradition, etc.; unfortunately, we are not in the time and space to be able to discuss these issues with confidence. We are addressing women's security in a time of war, working to prevent and document rape and to ensure a livelihood for female-headed households. Also, the Syrian regime used the rape of women to stop the uprising. Such sexual violence against women is a significant problem in Arab and Islamic countries.

In Syria, Human Rights Watch has documented more than 600 rape cases; this is an indication that the Syrian regime is using violence against women as a tool to spread fear and to scare revolutionaries away from rebelling against dictators. Women are paying a high price in Syria, but, at the same time, they are the ones who are uniting families and encouraging their children to continue the fight.



I met Oum Abdo, a Syrian woman refugee, in South Turkey in the Orient Hospital; she was taking care of her son, Mohammad, who had been injured in the fighting. When I asked her if she had other children, she replied, “Yes, I have one who died fighting for our freedom. The second is in the Assad prison. The third son disappeared, and I don’t know where he is. And the fourth is this one,” she said, pointing with love and tenderness to her son. “I am waiting for Mohammad to get better to send him back to continue his struggle to bring us dignity and freedom.”

When I asked her if she ever fears for her life, she replied, “I gave birth to four heroes. I gave them life, and my children are heroes fighting for your life. So I have no fear. I only carry in my heart love and hope.” Oum Abdo is an example of a Syrian woman who is providing hope and faith to her country.

I believe the reason that so many women are being kidnapped and raped now is to scare people into going back and accepting the oppression. But the Syrian women say it all—they will never be forced to return to the way things were. Raped or kidnapped, as Oum Abdo said, “We are life. We provided it and we won’t fear to lose it.”



**Sema Kalaycioglu**, *Professor of Economics, Yildiz Technical University, and Founder of The Middle East Studies Program at Isik University, İstanbul, Turkey*

Turkey is often cited as a model in the MENA region, from its economic success to its experience in democracy, and from the legal, administrative, and institutional reforms that it has launched to its success in combining modernization with traditional values in recent years. However, Turkey’s rapid progress is challenged by diverse contradictions, which also deeply affect Turkish women in all spheres of life. These are summarized as follows.

*Legal:* Although Turkey has the necessary modern legal foundations for gender equality, with amendments made to the civil law in order to empower the role of women in the Turkish society in 2001, implementation problems exist to the point of impeding the rule of law.

*Political:* Women in Turkey seem more active in political life with 14 percent of the Turkish National Assembly composed of women for the first time in three decades. However, politics has overburdened them, at the epicenter of the clash between modernity, tradition, and religion, which is often symbolized by informal and formal dress codes and preferences.

*Economic:* For many years, Turkish women have enjoyed gender equality in economic life in terms of equal pay for equal work. As the level of education increases, Turkish women can access professional positions with greater ease than counterparts elsewhere. However, in

recent years participation of Turkish women in the workforce has been rapidly declining to a low of 21 percent in the latest figures, from 44 percent only 10 years ago.

*Social:* Women have become more visible as professionals, as members of Turkish civil society, media, art, and culture, but they also stand as the main pillar of Islam in Turkish society as they have for more than a decade now.

*Security:* Despite legal, political, economic, and social progress in recent years, women have become increasingly subject to violence from honor killings in tribal rural parts of the country to the day-to-day beatings and murders in cities. This fact generates a major gender security problem in the country. The following show examples of gender security issues:

*Honor Killings:* The honor killings of girls and other women reflect the ills of traditional Turkey, where the crime is often related to a “sexual offense” conducted by a relative or stranger.

*Urban Violence:* Big metropolitan towns also witness brutal violence against women by husbands, former husbands, and boyfriends. Despite police protection, which may be granted upon court order, effective protection that ensures gender security is far from reaching its full objective.

*Under-aged Brides and Suicide Attempts:* Another aspect of gender security takes the form in the marriage of under-aged girls with parental consent. It may also take the form of a polygamous marriage with under-aged or over-aged men depending on the motive, which also frequently leads to attempted suicides of young girls and women, some of which are successful.

*Moral Turpitude:* Mothers giving consent for sexual harassment, abuse, and even violation of their daughters in exchange for material benefits; fathers selling their young daughters to over-aged men; forced prostitution by husbands and partners; violation of young girls and women in the form of incest—these stories are often heard and they often lead to brutal killings of young girls and women.

In my opinion, they indicate a moral turpitude in Turkish society despite increasing religiosity. Therefore, the security of women in Turkey needs to be analyzed not only from the perspective of criminology, but also from economic, political, and psychological perspectives.





**Moushira Khattab**, *Former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; Former Egyptian Ambassador to South Africa and to the Czech and Slovak Republics; and Former Minister of Family and Population, Egypt*

Egyptian women co-starred in the revolution that inspired the world. Prejudices and chauvinism long ingrained in the minds of some Egyptian men were set aside, as men and women united to fight for freedom. As the revolution enters its third year, Egyptian women couldn't be farther from co-stardom. In fact, they have been condemned to sitting idly by and watching as they deliberately and methodically get stripped of their rights. Excluded from the process of constitution-writing, women watched as the new constitution officially marginalized their contributions—recognizing only their domestic role. It deprived them of an explicit guarantee against discrimination based on sex or gender. The constitution introduced subjectivity; bestowed a vague role on religion and the clerics; and based the family on religion, morals, and nationalism with no mention of equal rights for spouses. Reference to international human rights conventions disappeared from the post-revolution constitution, depriving women and other rights holders of yet another guarantee. It's not that women's power is not recognized. In fact, it is because they have emerged as such a powerful voting block of 23 million that women protesters have been subjected to flagrant acts of sexual terrorism that are designed to deter their political activism. Women's representation in parliament is dismal and will not regain usurped rights. Women, nevertheless, are not giving up. They rally and unite behind a political agenda that is aimed at regaining their lost rights and furthering these rights. They are keen to avoid the costly mistake that has thrown Egypt in the abyss of chaos—namely political fragmentation. Egyptian women will take back their rights, and will not wait for other political actors to give rights to them. Only when women enjoy equal rights can we call it a democracy and only then can we celebrate the "Arab Spring."



**Lilia Labidi**, *Visiting Research Professor, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore; and former Minister of Women's Affairs, Tunisia*

Since the revolutions and uprisings that began in Tunisia in 2010-2011, women have been facing various forms of violence. Two examples seem to me to present a challenge both to the model of democratic justice that populations have been seeking in the subsequent turmoil and to the social sciences, which, if they do not draw attention to the varieties of political violence that target women and to women's responses, will be participating in the construction of a masculine heroism throughout the MENA region.

The first example: since the fall of the Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regime, the media, freed from censorship, have been able to discuss the various forms of violence done to women. Yet there has been little discussion of the implications of events involving women's political mobilization, such as the massive demonstration of women, both younger and older, who came out on the streets of the capital city Tunis on October 2, 2012 to protest the appearance before a judge of a young woman accused of "violation of decency" (*atteinte à la pudeur*)—when she had, in fact, been raped by two policemen. This event revived the memory of police brutality under the Ben Ali regime, clearly exposed the vacillations of the judicial apparatus issuing from the revolution, and showed the capacity of women to mobilize for political purposes in public space.

The second example concerns self-immolation, which is not a new phenomenon—Mohamed Bouazizi was not the first case in Tunisia—and suggests how the social sciences participate in the construction of a masculine heroism of dying. Between January and June 2011 in Tunisia, of 111 cases of suicide, 69 were by immolation and 31 of the 111 suicides were by women.<sup>i</sup> Between 1992 and 1995, of 650 burn cases admitted to one specialized hospital, 15.1 percent were suicide attempts by immolation. This was a relatively youthful population and 63 percent of those were women, with 74.6 percent of the women coming from rural areas and not having a profession. The men who attempted suicide were twice as likely as the women to have psychiatric records.<sup>ii</sup>

The political dimension of these women's acts has not been explored. Press reports during 2011 show that, in almost half the Tunisian cases, the younger the woman is the more likely her act was for private reasons and was carried out in family space, as is the case for women who self-immolate in Afghanistan. As we know, the private/personal dimension is also political. Other cases, comparable to those of men and of an overtly socio-political nature, were carried out by older women in public space, in front of official buildings like the provincial office or the police station, and were meant to denounce the lack of resources and the administration's deficiencies. These women's cases are not highlighted although their acts have been eminently political.

These two examples may help us reflect on the relationships between, on the one hand, the administration of justice and the role of the social sciences, and, on the other, the violence suffered by the region's women and the perils of perpetuating a view of women that denies them the political significance of their acts.

<sup>i</sup> Mona Gamra. 111 cases of suicide since 14 January 2011, of which 69 were by self-immolation. (Le Temps, 16/6/2011).

<sup>ii</sup> Messadi A. et al. "Contribution à l'étude des aspects épidémiologiques des brûlures suicidaires en Tunisie: A propos de 94 cas." Annals of Burns and Fire Disasters. Vol. XI, N.1: March 1998. [www.medbc.com/annals:review/vol\\_11/num\\_1:textvol11n1p7.htm](http://www.medbc.com/annals:review/vol_11/num_1:textvol11n1p7.htm)





**Jaleh Lackner-Gohari**, *Medical Doctor and Vice President, Vienna Office, innerCHANGE associates international (iCHai), Austria*

Change in MENA countries will have to include change for its women citizens. What is underway in this region displays characteristics of crises, which favor abrupt change, not gradual reform. Women were visible participants in the uprisings. By going for change in the MENA region, they are also going for change for their future standing in society, including full and independent citizenship, which is a prerequisite for security against domestic, legal, and other forms of violence. The current radical atmosphere of crisis in the MENA countries and its inherent potential for aggression is a threat to women's security. From women's perspectives, if this dynamic is not carefully attended to, it may result in the strengthening and continuation of patriarchal traditions, in the name of religious beliefs. Neglecting this core issue is like the amputation of change in the MENA region. As participants in the uprisings, the present crises provide momentum for women to push for a deeper change in their status. This fundamental shift can minimize future challenges to women's security, within family and society, in peace and conflict. Women's issues must be at the heart of demands for change in the MENA region now. Women in the MENA region must strive to assume full rights and responsibilities as citizens within their democracy-aspiring societies. It is urgent to understand that mindsets that exclusively see women in their reproductive role have no place in shaping emerging democracies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And women need to deliver this message and act accordingly. Being subjected to masculine benevolence, physically and legally, is no longer an acceptable alternative. Women leaders must insist on change, explain, and obtain it. This is a long and cumbersome journey that must begin now.



**Faiza Mohamed**, *Director of the Nairobi Office of Equality Now, Somalia/Djibouti*

Arab women like their counterparts elsewhere are lagging behind men in terms of education and acquisition of skills to equally compete with men for leadership positions. Additionally, the nature of patriarchy existing in Africa and elsewhere has stronger roots in the Arab world and reduces women to an inferior position that discriminates against them. The Arab Spring has created opportunities for women to assert their human rights, but the majority of the Arab population, which is traditional and attached to/upholds the patriarchy values and norms, remains the biggest obstacle to women's progress and their right to enjoy equality. The characteristic of the majority of the population has also created an enabling environment for conservative groups to emerge, contest elections, and take over the seats of government,

notably in Egypt and Tunisia. Arab women are therefore faced with a mountain of challenges to overcome. Real positive change needs to be grounded on a sound foundation that currently looks to be farfetched due to the threats to human security, which doesn't spare women either. If anything, women are more vulnerable to the impact of the human insecurity that prevails in many parts of the Arab region (notably conflicts in Somalia and Syria, conservative rule in Egypt and Tunisia, and overall widespread economic and environmental threats), which is hampering these nations' livelihoods and opportunities for human development. In this situation, Arab women find themselves at the bottom and are burdened with carrying their nations' many problems. Multi-pronged strategies are needed to deal with these challenges and to create spaces for women to inject and blow a new wind that carries them forward in their struggles to enjoy their human rights and contribute to building human security and development for the generations to come.



**Musdah Mulia**, *Chairperson, Indonesian Conference on Religion for Peace (ICRP), Indonesia*

Women's experience in conflict areas provided a new dimension to conflict theory and analysis, because it revealed how conflict's original character and structure are very gender biased.

Conflict functions as a means to reach a specific purpose—to reach community consensus on (male) power competition among political elites; to control the stability of national politics and security with military efforts; to have monopoly on natural resources; etc. Conflict itself has a potentially masculine character, which could easily bring the community into a larger conflict.

In the context of this patriarchy and masculine character of conflict, women are not given any rights with which they can assume and give meaning to a conflict. But they are expected to support men's assumption and meaning of conflict. In conflict, men have jobs to maintain violence, to defeat their enemies, and to protect and guard their villages. Meanwhile, women are positioned as supporters, helpers, or even instruments to defend enemy attack. They have no opportunity to ask or question why the violent way is chosen by men or the community's leaders in order to solve their problems.

Configuration of that patriarchy and masculine conflict can be clearly seen when the parties involved in conflict initiate a peace agreement. We see that peace is defined as a war accessory—as part of male war ritual, full of symbols, and very theatrical. Why? It is because parties sit and talk to one another in negotiations that are covered by public and mass media.

It is very important to note that most of this kind of "peace theater" is only attended by male participants. From this specific experience, and by understanding the masculine character of conflict, women necessarily need to be more critical, not only in analyzing violence or conflicts

but also in redefining the meaning of security, particularly because of its meaning as currently understood by society and the state.

In agreeing to a new trend in international society, women define security especially in its relation to the concept of humanity, rather than defining as it a territorial security concept, which rests on a state-oriented and military-oriented assumption. The concept of humanity security is focused on individual welfare and also on social environment. This concept of humanity security will operate effectively to prevent and decrease the possibility of armed conflict and violence that has always placed women as its victims.

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**Caryle Murphy**, *former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center, and author of A Kingdom's Future: Saudi Arabia Through the Eyes of Its Twentysomethings, United States*

Political upheavals, sectarian conflicts, and civil war in the region have seriously degraded women's physical security over the past couple of years as sexual assault, rape, and forced dislocations have been intentionally used as weapons to advance military or political goals. Women in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq are no strangers to these ordeals. There are, however, other challenges to women's security that are less visible but no less threatening. One is the economic deterioration of the region and the continued inability of governments to provide a pathway to middle-class status for most of their citizens. Egypt in particular, with 80 million or more citizens, is in dire economic distress and on the verge of economic collapse. As is Yemen. Economic conditions in both countries mean intensified food insecurity for homemakers (mainly females) and fewer job opportunities (for everyone, but certainly for women). The other challenge to women's security is more intangible but no less important, for it affects the mind. This challenge is the misogynist cultural attitudes grounded in ultraconservative interpretations of Islamic scriptures that are far too prevalent. Such interpretations give women an inferior status to men in society and deprive her of the personal autonomy that is her birthright. Developing interpretations that are more fitting to contemporary conditions in the Arab world admittedly is a project that will take decades, perhaps even a century, to fulfill. But this theological reassessment of Islam's message as it relates to the role of women is necessary in order for them to acquire and maintain the security that they deserve.

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**Marina Ottaway**, *Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center, United States*

This is a particularly difficult time for women in the MENA region. Change, even much-needed change in the direction of equal rights, in the short run results in a decrease in their security. As women seek to break out of the roles that society has traditionally allocated to them, they challenge both laws and traditions and become more vulnerable.

In all countries, there are two major threats to women's security. One comes from laws that actively discriminate against them or at least fail to protect them—in many countries women who find the courage to report rape receive neither help nor sympathy, but risk instead being accused of having instigated the violence by their improper behavior. But women's security is also threatened by the behavior of men in their families, a problem that remains common in all countries, not just in the MENA region.

As women push for greater rights and take on a more assertive public role, as they did in uprisings of the Arab Spring, they open themselves to attacks from men resenting the change—this has been happening with particular intensity in Egypt, for example. Even when laws are changed to give women more protection, it takes time before laws are truly enforced and even longer before they affect well-established social behavior.

There is no instant path to women's security in the MENA region. A long battle looms ahead, being waged by courageous, determined women willing to put their own security in even greater danger to bring about change for all.



**Smadar Perry**, *Senior Arab Affairs Editor, Yediot Ahronot, Israel*

Thirty women—senior university graduates, human rights activists, two princesses, and prominent businesswomen—were sworn in recently in Saudi Arabia to the Shura (advisory council). These women will not make any important decisions, however. Their role, along with the role of 120 male members of this council, is to advise and to contribute practical ideas to the leading authorities.

One is not supposed to belittle this step that was taken with the blessing of the Saudi monarch. For the first time in the history of the conservative kingdom, known for its oppressive rules toward women and their social status and rights, the picture of a group of women standing in



front of the ruler and his senior advisors (though they were fully covered and veiled) tells an interesting story.

Here is the key point: “The development that we are working on must be gradual,” said King Abdullah in a brief statement that was broadcasted on state television. Women's organizations in Saudi Arabia expressed their satisfaction and gratitude to the palace in Riyadh. But not everyone was happy. A senior Saudi cleric invited himself on a television program to call the new members of the Shura by names, insisting that this unprecedented step will shake the society. The new Shura members are “prostitutes,” said the sheikh bluntly on air.

Two years after revolutions took place in six Arab countries, the situation of women has become troubling, to say the least, especially in Egypt. The challenges of women's status in Saudi Arabia has become an issue that should be dealt with, especially in the eyes of experts who try to follow the quiet, creeping changes from afar.

By coincidence, I was lucky to watch the first historic Saudi movie film *Wajdah*. Done with permission from high authorities in Riyadh (though the film will not be screened inside the kingdom since they don't have cinema houses), the story of *Wajdah*, written and directed by a local woman, Haifaa al-Mansour, illustrates the tale of two generations fighting between themselves about the future face of their country. The story shows the Islamic, conservative-style of daily life on the one hand and a call for modernity with equality and women's rights for empowerment on the other hand.

It ends with saddened optimism. The young (and brilliant) girl who symbolizes the future achieves her goal by surprise. Her mother, the product of the old generation who wants to continue neglecting women's equality, bitterly loses her fight.

*Wajdah* is not just a film. It's the story of the ongoing discreet and sophisticated efforts—now backed by growing numbers of Saudi males—to make gradual changes come true within their society. The end of this script in real life is not yet known. It is still surrounded by troubling question marks as Saudi women find themselves caught in between two camps, two schools of thoughts.



**Hanan Saab**, *Managing Director, PHARMAMED, Lebanon*

Another year down the road from what was perceived as the “Arab Spring” has elapsed with growing concerns over the use of violence, and the shift in the objectives of the uprisings. In most countries of the uprisings, women stood alongside men; they assumed an active and integral role in the demonstrations and through social media.

Women and men both challenged the existing regimes and acted out against it. Some women leaders stood out across the MENA region. In holding such a stance, they became subjected to harsh attacks by those refusing the change. The violent acts exercised by state representatives against women from Egypt to Tunisia were brought to the forefront by media; though in the eyes of the world those were violations of human rights, such acts were well tolerated based on some societal beliefs, in a similar manner to how domestic violence is accepted and perceived. While the whole region's security is at stake, women are more vulnerable to this threat and are apt to suffer more in view of the unfolding of events—in particular because there are no laws that protect them.

Such acts threaten to marginalize women and keep them away from participation in both the business sector and in the public sector. In particular, the ongoing current political discussions will determine the future status of women in these countries, hence the challenges are immense. The status of women across all the MENA countries will be impacted, because what goes around comes around. Thus, now more than any other time, women across the MENA region cannot on afford to remain in their comfort zone. They should engage in a collective action; this is because the future of our children, region, and future generations is at stake.

The gains in women's education over the past decade across the whole region have been remarkable. Education provides women with the basics to engage in business and public life. Women are equipped to impact change through collective action. A strategy that involves collaboration between the different strata of society, and involving NGOs, should be carefully planned with smart objectives that organize their efforts and build on each other's strengths. Effective training should be provided to women in leadership, start-up business management, running peaceful advocacy campaigns in support of women's legal rights (particularly in rural areas), highlighting financial independence for women's empowerment, and providing women with security. Such tactics will pave the road for secure societies; only then women will be able to stop violence and war.

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**Fatima Sadiqi**, *Senior Professor, Linguistics and Gender Studies; Co-Founder, International Institute for Languages and Cultures (INLAC); Director, Isis Center for Women and Development; UN Gender Expert; and President, National Union of Women's Organizations, Morocco*

Having started various reforms in the 1990s, Morocco is considered an exception in the Middle East and North Africa region. However, it has not escaped political Islamization, and though the country has been propelled to the forefront of the Arab-Muslim countries in what concerns women's legal rights, it is at this level that women's security is seriously threatened. A teenager, Amina Filali, took her life on March 10, 2012 at the age of 16 because she was obliged

to marry her rapist; two other girls followed suit for the same reason. Amina Filali's death galvanized women's rights activists, who took to the streets asking for the repeal of Article 475 of the penal code, which allows the rapist to marry his victim. This in turn ignited a nationwide debate that brought violence against women to the center stage.

Although the Morocco House of Councillors (the upper house of parliament) approved the proposal to change Article 475 and delete the statement, "the kidnapper cannot be prosecuted if he marries his victim on the complaint of persons entitled to request the annulment of marriage and cannot be ordered until such annulment is pronounced," the government has recently proposed to revise Articles 20, 21, and 22 of the Family Code in order to set the minimum age for marriage at 16 years instead of 18.

This proposed amendment is in blunt contradiction to the Convention on the Rights of the Child that Morocco ratified. The danger of this proposal resides in the fact that it will allow guardians to use it to marry their girls even younger than 16. Statistics show that 12 percent of current marriages (more than 40,000 cases) were marriages of girls under 18 years old, although the current legislation stipulates that the legal age of marriage is 18 years. Changing the age of marriage for girls will have a serious negative impact on the modern and democratic society that Morocco is trying to build. Early marriage will have disastrous implications for the education of girls in a country where the majority of females (over 60 percent) are illiterate.

Overall, a woman's security in present Morocco has a name: legal security. The Moroccan feminist movement has always prided itself on its legal achievements and its capacity to negotiate legal rights. Indeed, legal rights constitute the pool of the Moroccan feminist movement with its three heads: academe, activism, and politics. The regression in legal rights constitutes a serious blow to this movement. This regression is a genuine challenge to the promise of the new Islamist government to protect women's rights.



**Fatima Sbaity Kassem**, *Former Director, UN-ESCWA Centre for Women, Lebanon*

In the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings, challenges to women's security have taken a multi-dimensional face. Women's safety and security have intertwined. Women are threatened not only by physical but mental and moral violence. This is reflected in increasing incidents of gang rape, virginity tests, abduction, and humiliation as they stand alongside men calling for democracy, freedom, dignity, and equal citizenship in the Tahrir squares of Arab cities. Women's hard-earned acquired rights (family, marriage, and citizenship) are being challenged as Islamists gain electoral victories and succeed in hijacking popular movements and revolutions.

Women's economic, social, health, legal, and political security is constantly being challenged with outbreaks of violence and chaos taking to the streets. Poverty and unemployment are on the rise, challenging women's financial and economic independence. Social cohesion is under tremendous pressure as geo-political demographics take a tough turn for the worse: populations are torn by widening social, ethnic, and religious cleavages. These have unfortunately split countries (Sudan) or threaten to do so (Iraq, Libya, and Yemen); and are creating separate enclaves within societies that might lead to more hostilities (Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Bahrain).

Both women and men are facing these daunting challenges to overall security. Nonetheless, such challenges have a different impact on women. Women suffer from double and triple jeopardy in wars, civil conflict, political upheaval, globalization and economic recession, social turmoil from poverty, unemployment, marginalization, and all forms of discrimination and violence.

The ongoing popular upheavals in the Arab world saw religion swiftly moving from the private to public sphere, from privatization to de-privatization. As public Islam becomes communal religion under the Islamists' rule and hopes of moderation subside, women face greater challenges of insurmountable dimensions to their security, safety, and well-being.

With uncertainties looming large, I wonder whether public Islam will ever lead to Arab democratization as public Christianity did for the West; and, while celebrating 2013 International Women's Day, will an Arab women's spring ever dawn?



**Edit Schlaffer**, Chair and Founder, Frauen ohne Grenzen, SAVE

The Palestinian conflict is the foundation of grievance of across the MENA region. Palestinian women are under such incredible pressure to honor the resistance that they are expected to hold back their tears when their sons become martyrs. When the body is brought to her house, a mother should fall to the floor and praise God. Yet when I spoke with several mothers of suicide bombers, they were stunned by their son's actions. One mother commented, "I have lost my son, why would I celebrate?" Women are gradually rejecting this celebratory act and are seeking alternative narratives for their youth.

Nida, a young, open-minded and well-traveled journalist from Ramallah, believes that dialogue presents a promising alternative to ancient, futile ways. She explained how seamlessly and with what relative ease the youth are lured into martyrdom. Like many of her peers, Leila, a university student, experienced a common albeit brief sense of "duty." She recalled her reaction to seeing a suicide bomber on television in her teenage years: "[I thought to myself

then that] this could be me—this is what I should do. Maybe I did not believe it but I said it out loud, and my mum just told me the biggest ‘NO!’”

There need to be more mothers who are on guard like this, who have the confidence to challenge the status quo. Mothers have the potential to be instrumental in the development of the mindset of the youth. They are uniquely positioned as educators of the next generation to channel the frustrated energies of their children into safer, more progressive strategies.

Security in safe hands means tapping into the smart power of women and utilizing the roles in the family on the front lines against the fear, frustration, and anger that impels people around the world to do the unthinkable. Around the world, the role of the mother is acknowledged and respected, and we must now recognize and apply this incredible resource to the security space.



**Nayereh Tohidi**, *Human Rights Activist, Professor of Gender and Women’s Studies, and Director of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at California State University, Northridge*

Many Arab and non-Arab women took active parts and played important roles during the uprisings for freedom, dignity, and justice in the MENA region. But, instead of gaining more security and rights, many of them seem to feel less secure as they are losing part of the rights they had achieved prior to the “Arab Spring.” The ruling Islamists are conveniently using *shari’a* to revive or further strengthen patriarchal domination, not only in the public but also in the private sphere, by reinstating polygamy and the like. To succeed in this goal, in some countries sexual terrorism is used against women who transgress traditional roles and enter into unconventional public spaces such as Tahrir Square in Cairo. A threat against equal rights for women is not the only challenge to women’s security in the MENA region. Declining economies, rising unemployment, instability, and unsettled political situations have aggravated a sense of insecurity for women and men alike. In addition to organized sexual terrorism against women, they have become more likely to be the target of sexual harassment by unemployed and frustrated members of the youth wandering in the streets.

But many of the MENA societies are still in a state of flux. Along with alarmingly negative and retrogressive trends, there are also hopefully positive and progressive developments. For instance, the dismal representation of Egyptian women—hardly 2 percent—in the new parliament (which has since been disbanded) can be contrasted with some encouraging facts, such as the removal of reservations to CEDAW in Tunisia and Morocco. Additionally, thanks to a progressive electoral law in Tunisia, women have been placed on each political party’s list; thus, 5,000 women were able to run for office, which resulted in women representing 27 percent of the new constitutional assembly. Cynicism and withdrawal from engagement with the process of democracy building is tantamount to subjugation under another form of tyranny. Despair is

not an option. Fortunately, many advocates of women's rights have not given up; they seem to be determined not to allow the exclusion of women from the public space or to submit to an insecure and second-class status. Educational efforts and organized resistance against discrimination, violence, and sexual abuse are underway in different forms.

Based on what I have learned from the experiences of women's rights advocates in Iran, post-Soviet Central Asia, the United States, and more recently Egypt, I suggest: 1) In this increasingly globalized world with new communication technology, we need to effectively mobilize our resources; learn from each other; and exchange ideas and build support networks, locally, nationally, and transnationally; 2) We should not get trapped within simplistic binaries such as Islamic versus secular, or Western versus non-Western. We can instead pursue a pragmatically smart feminist strategy by insisting on the necessity, usefulness, and relevance of international secular discourses of human and women's rights and universal conventions such as CEDAW; 3) At the same time, many of us should continue dialogue and negotiation as well as debate with Islamists in order to find allies among Islamic women activists around gender-specific common concerns; 4) We can also seek allies even among some male religious authorities who are capable of upholding more liberal and progressive views and interpretations of Islam; 5) We should build inclusive non-sectarian coalitions beyond ideology, religion, ethnicity, class, and even national borders; 6) In addition, we need to safeguard the positive reforms and achievements made for women's rights under the former regimes instead of throwing away everything indiscriminately; 7) We should rely on the transformative force and impact of women's grassroots feminist movements from the bottom up without neglecting the usefulness of dialogue, negotiation, and lobbying among the state elites including legislators, the judiciary, and executives on the top; 8) Egalitarian changes in gender roles, relations, and attitudes, and in sexual mores, need to be brought about at micro, mezzo, and macro levels in the wider society and culture as well as the state, legal, and legislative realms; and 9) Only optimists have been able to bring about positive changes. With a strategically non-violent, comprehensive, patient, yet persistent collective feminist interventions, women—along with men's support—can become the primary agent of democratization, pluralism, and peace with justice in the MENA region.

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**Robin Wright**, *USIP-Wilson Center Distinguished Scholar, United States*

In 2013, women face growing challenges to both their political and physical security, despite their unprecedented role on the frontlines of the Arab uprisings over the past two years. Widespread reports chronicle increasing social harassment, political marginalization or intimidation, and sexual assaults, notably in Egypt but also in other countries undergoing tumultuous transitions. The rise of ultraconservative Salafism may be the most ominous trend to women because it limits their ability to shape the new political landscape in ways that deal

with these threats. In Egypt, women once had a guaranteed quota in parliament. In the last parliamentary elections, the new Salafi Nour Party banned female candidates (mandated by electoral law) from showing their faces on campaign material or the ballot. And physical security cannot be ensured without political security.



**Najat Zarrouk**, *Governor, Director of Training of Administrative and Technical Staff, Ministry of the Interior, Kingdom of Morocco; Member of the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration; and Governor, Member of the Board of the Arab Women's Leadership Institute of Amman*

The Arab Spring was and still is considered as an excellent opportunity to move toward a new world in the region, based on the state of law, respect of human rights, freedom, and good public governance. Many countries are currently dealing with a lot of issues, especially the issue of the place and the condition of women.

The history of civilizations shows us that the first victims of revolts and revolutions, in all societies, are unfortunately women.

Security for women is one of the main and serious problems that they have to face daily: within the family, in the street, and in the workplace.

*Within the family*, women face domestic violence, the violence of the family, and sometimes children do too. Laws are often established at the expense of the rights of women (adultery, crimes of honor, etc.).

*In the street*, women are more vulnerable than men. For multiple reasons, women are assaulted verbally, physically, and morally. Many countries in the region still do not have protective legislation for the dignity and rights of women. The fact that women have access to employment (public or private) makes them more vulnerable in the street. Many women are abused once they leave their job or factories.

*In the workplace*, women continue (often in silence) to face different forms of discrimination (wages, benefits/advantages, promotion, etc.) or harassment, in the absence of protection of legal rights, or due to the failure of the judiciary, or the basic minimum for social protection.

This is why the initiative taken by UN Women (Safe Cities for Women) seems a good approach, among others of course, if it is implemented properly and if all stakeholders take their responsibility (state, local authorities, private sector, civil society, schools and universities, police, justice department, donors, etc.). Each of these stakeholders has an important role to

play in order to create and enable a supportive environment for the development, progress, and dignity of women, not only in the Arab-Muslim world but in all over the world.

As the international community is celebrating International Women’s Day, allow me to welcome and salute any person who works at the global level to make this possible, particularly in the current context.



**Dalia Ziada**, *Egypt office director, American Islamic Congress, Egypt*

The biggest burden of Arab women is that they are seen as the honor of the family. Since she is born, the Arab woman is held responsible for keeping the honor and goodwill of the family. That makes her fragile to physical and verbal assaults and constantly suffering from security threats. Arab women today are facing several forms of security threats: social and political. History told us that at the time of war, women are usually used as: 1) a tool to motivate and mobilize larger numbers of men to participate in the life-risking acts of war, and 2) as a tool to suppress and humiliate the opponent. We have seen this in the war between tribes in Darfur, for instance. And, we are seeing this today in the political wars between different groups competing over power in Egypt and Tunisia. For over a month now, Egyptian women have been facing systemized sexual assaults ranging from verbal harassment in crowded places up to strong physical assault in protests. Those assaults are mainly targeting the activist women who are participating in protests against the Muslim Brotherhood with the purpose to scare them away and keep them home. In my opinion, marginalization from political and social participation is the biggest security threat facing not only the Arab women but the whole Arab world.



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