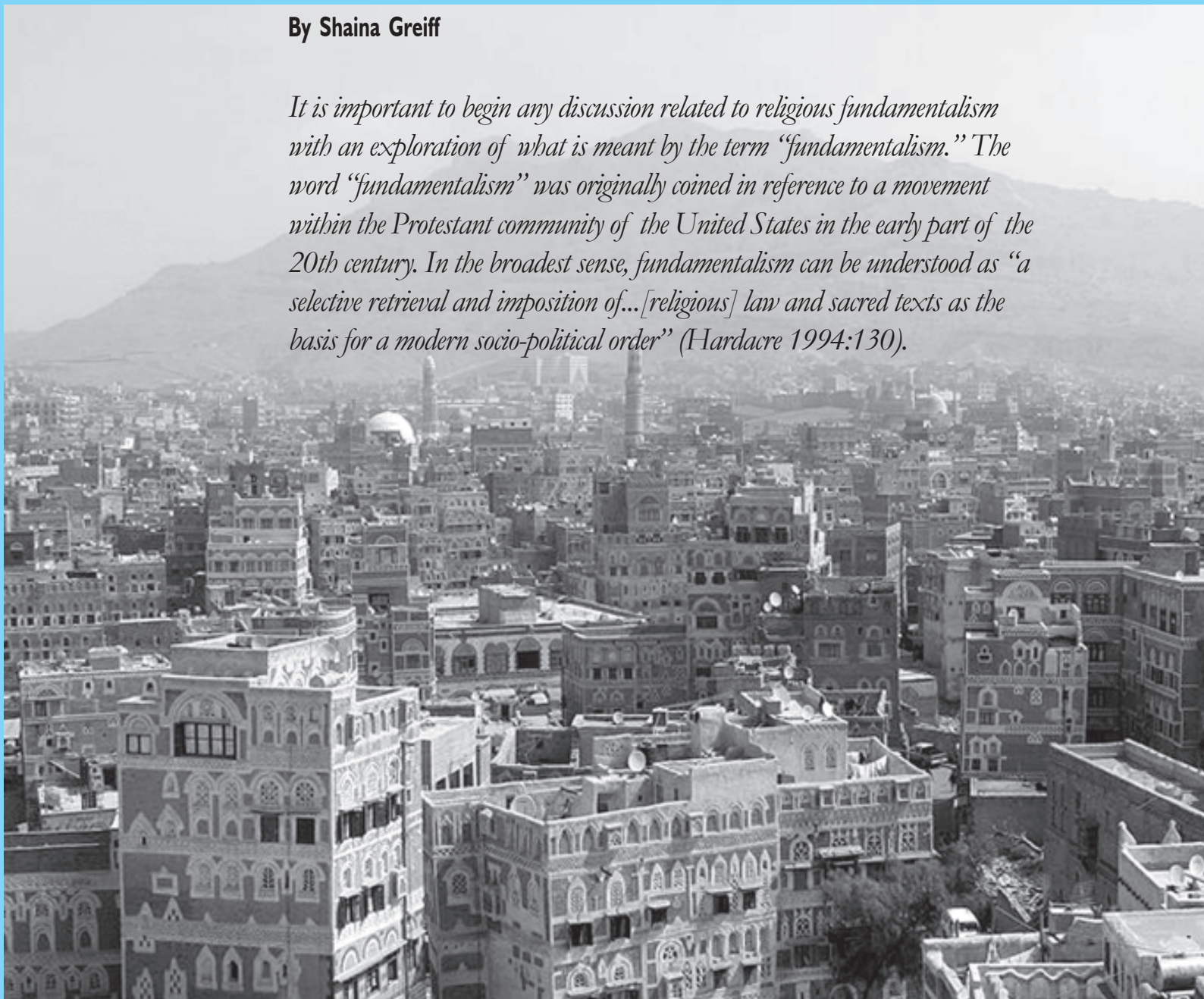


features

# More Under the Veil: Women and Muslim Fundamentalism in MENA

By Shaina Greiff

*It is important to begin any discussion related to religious fundamentalism with an exploration of what is meant by the term “fundamentalism.” The word “fundamentalism” was originally coined in reference to a movement within the Protestant community of the United States in the early part of the 20th century. In the broadest sense, fundamentalism can be understood as “a selective retrieval and imposition of...[religious] law and sacred texts as the basis for a modern socio-political order” (Hardacre 1994:130).*



**Beneath Ancient Facades.**

*Beyond the many cradles of civilisation and science lie stories that betray democracy, human rights and modernity. In November 2009, the United Nations Committee Against Torture questioned Yemen's practice of early marriages of girls as young as eight years old. Women are not deemed as credible and valuable as men in court proceedings and compensation claims. They likewise have limited access to property. It is for such reasons that women's groups are stepping up their campaigns. The year 2009 saw the successful amendment of citizenship laws, enabling children of Yemeni women with non-Yemeni partners eligible for Yemeni citizenship.*

**Source:** Amnesty International (25 November 2009). "Yemeni women face violence and discrimination." URL: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/report/yemeni-women-face-violence-and-discrimination-20091125>

In photo is the city of Sanaa from Wikimedia Commons

**But** religious fundamentalism is not a monolithic entity. Around the world, there is a wide range of fundamentalisms and fundamentalist movements that display a number of similarities – most notably their interpretation of the family, gender roles and interpersonal relations – but in no way share identical plans. Generally speaking, the ideologies of fundamentalisms have translated into movements that show little respect for the principles of human rights and have little tolerance for people of other faiths. They are often anti-women (Rouhana, 2005).

The issue of women – their status, rights, roles and responsibilities, both within the family and the community – is one of the main focuses of fundamentalist discourses.

Women are seen as the bearers of cultural authenticity (Kandiyoti, 1993) and their complicity within the religious framework is necessary to its survival. As Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis in *Refusing Holy Orders* pointed out, "(t)o conform to the strict confines of womanhood within the fundamentalist religious code is a precondition for maintaining and reproducing the fundamentalist version of society."

For quite some time, women from the Middle East and North Africa have been the subject of concern and the rallying point of feminist advocacies and campaigns whose language has been coopted by right-wing fundamentalist regimes in the West on many occasions. Yet there is much to be teased out the deprivation and violence these women experience and much more to be explored about their methods of resistance.

### **Muslim Fundamentalism in MENA**

The rise of Muslim fundamentalisms since the 1970s should be viewed through the trends towards modernisation and perceived

threats of neocolonialism. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, which is characterised by the rapid spread of globalisation, newly-formed nation-states attempted to hastily develop and compete in a globalised world.

In many regions, this often translated into the adoption of neoliberal economic policies and the further inclusion of women in the public sphere. Women had already begun to take a more active public role through anti-colonial and independence movements.

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New nation states indeed emerged in the 1950s, many of them formally severing their links to various empires. There are obvious exceptions to this trend though such as Palestine as it is still in the throes of its struggle for independence and Iran which was never a formal colony.

This resurgence could be partly viewed as a backlash against the failure of secularised states to effectively develop and maintain "cultural" integrity – the issue of women's sudden inclusion in public spaces being at the forefront. It was a period of great upheaval in reaction to social failures such as the non-provision of basic social services, rampant corruption and the growing gap between rich and poor, among others.

The dissatisfaction in the Muslim Middle East was further bolstered by the Arab states' defeat by Israel in the 1967 war and the Western powers' support for Israel, which was perceived as an outright attack on Islam and Arab "cultural authenticity" and an entrenchment of neocolonialism. All of these forces culminated in the coming of the 1979 Iranian Revolution which led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the first and only Islamic state in the region. But these factors have

strengthened the resolve of Muslim fundamentalist movements across the entire region and have shaped the essential elements of Muslim fundamentalisms in the Middle East today.

## Muslim Fundamentalisms and Women

While women's attire in Muslim contexts, the *hijab* – *chador*, *burka*, *abiya* – always receives ample attention from Western news sources, it is far from being the most important issue that women face in their confrontation with Muslim fundamentalisms.

In reality, it is the *Shari'a*-derived personal status laws governing women and the family where the influence of fundamentalisms is felt most acutely. Personal status laws govern marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance (Ziai,1997). In essence, personal status laws outline what women's rights are and what they are allowed to do within the confines of the dominant interpretation of Islam in each specific country. Whether it be "Islamisation from above" or "Islamisation from below," these are the most contentious laws around which both Islamists and women mobilise (Legrain,1994).

Although women in these contexts are sometimes represented as passive victims of fundamentalists' projects, this is far from being the case. As previously noted, women were active participants in the struggle against colonialist and neocolonialist impositions and even up to the present with the continuing fight for Palestinian statehood. Moreover, women, including those observing the *hijab*, have actively mobilised around the perceived injustices enshrined in personal status laws. The One Million Signatures Campaign in Morocco in 1992, the One Million Signatures Campaign in Iran since 2006 and the protest movement in Iraq against the abolition of Iraq's progressive personal status laws in 2003 are only a few examples of women-led mobilisations. These courageous women often expose themselves to reactionary criticism



## Battle for the Hijab

In 2008, people gathered on the streets of Ankara to protest the decade long ban on the *hijab* or the head covering in public

places and universities. While the government saw it as an aid to women who would like to participate more in public life, the ban has discouraged many women to study. The *hijab*, which covers the head up to the nape and the *niqab*, which covers the whole body save for a slit for the eyes, have been donned by Muslim women in the name of modesty. Islamic scholars remain torn though in interpreting the use of the hijab in modern times. But Open Democracy's Fred Halliday put it nicely, "There is only one consistent, universalist and secular position on the wearing of religious headwear - for Muslims, Catholic nuns, or Orthodox Jewish haredim alike: to be against it, but to defend the right to wear it."

**Sources:** Al Jazeera (6 June 2008). "Turkey's AKP discusses hijab ruling." URL: <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/europe/2008/06/200861503343579739.html>; Asser, Martin (5 October 2006). "Why Muslim women wear the veil." URL: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/5411320.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5411320.stm) and Halliday, Fred (16 December 2004). "Turkey and the hypocrisies of Europe" URL: [http://www.opendemocracy.org/globalization-turkey/article\\_2271.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.org/globalization-turkey/article_2271.jsp)

Photos from Story og a Muslimah and the Lebanese Development Network



and risk being targeted as “puppets” in the neocolonial project.

Unlike bygone colonial times, when the enemy was defined quite clearly as the foreign occupier, during the current times of neo-colonialism and ongoing imperialism, “the other” can be found in the midst of the national fabric. And, the “other within” generally turns out to be the westernised middle classes, the nouveau riche, the religious and ethnic minorities, and . . . the human rights activist trying to uncover his or her government’s atrocious human rights record. But the “real favourites” when it comes to identifying “traitors” and “infiltrators”; are those “appalling women” who dare to defy tradition and struggle for their legal rights and greater equality. (Al-Ali, 2001:5)

The concepts of women’s rights as human rights and feminism are presented by these reactionary forces as a Western import in contradiction to “authentic” Muslim culture. These forces oppose proliferation of women’s rights movements and foreign-funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs), coupled with the new rhetoric propagated by the international community of women’s rights for democracy – as if democracy is inherent only to Western culture.

But as Aili Mari Tripp in *Global Feminism: Transnational Women’s Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights* pointed out, “Regardless of the common perception in the West that ideas regarding the emancipation of women have spread from the West outward into other parts of the world. In fact, the influences have always been multidirectional, and that the current consensus is a product of parallel feminist movements globally that have learned from one another but have often had quite independent trajectories and sources of movement.”

Furthermore, various feminisms have developed in the South. But even though there is ample evidence that feminism is by no means a purely Western conception, oftentimes just the use of the word feminism evokes accusations of Western cooption in confrontation with Muslim fundamentalisms.

Feminism is not a monolithic entity. In fact, feminism in Muslim contexts, has taken many forms. I will break down these feminisms into two broad categories, but it should be noted that these categorisations are in no way static and are continuously subject to debate. There are feminists, both non-religious and religious women, who choose to work within a secular framework in the articulation of their rights. These women demand that the laws governing the family not be based on



**Another Day, Another Campaign.** One of the long-running campaigns among women’s groups in the region is the One Million Signatures Campaign on women’s human rights and gender equality.

Photo from Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty.

## Zanan

After 16 years, Iran's leading women's magazine was ordered to be closed in early 2008. Meaning "women" in Persian, *Zanan* was accused of "offering a dark picture of the Islamic Republic through the pages of *Zanan*" and of "compromising the psyche and the mental health" of its readers by providing them with "morally questionable information." *Zanan* featured articles on health, parenting, law, literature and other women's issues.

However the government's actions were read as a deliberate attempt to curtail press freedom especially as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad desperately needed to prevail in the

parliamentary elections and ultimately, the presidential elections. As a *New York Times* editorial said, "The only psychological threat *Zanan* posed was to the regime's authoritarian and anti-feminist pathology."

More than 120 academics and human rights activists like Noam Chomsky, Jurgen Habermas, Betty William and Shirin Ebadi protested the ban. *Zanan* was founded by one of Iran's leading feminists, Shahla Sherkat.



Shahla Sherkat,  
*Zanan's* founder.

Photo from the International Women's Media Foundation

Sources: Tehrani, Hamid (14 February 2008). "Iran: Protests over ban of women's magazine." URL: <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/02/14/iran-protests-over-ban-of-womens-magazine/>; Learning Partnership (8 February 2008). "Zanan, Iran's Leading Women's Magazine, Shut Down by Government." URL: <http://learningpartnership.org/en/advocacy/alerts/zanan0208> and New York Times (7 February 2008). "Shutting Down Zanan." URL: [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/07/opinion/07thu1.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/07/opinion/07thu1.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print)

*Shari'a*. They are, of course, under the most pressure from fundamentalisms.

Recently the term Islamic feminism has also joined the debate on feminism in this region. Broadly speaking, Islamic feminism works to reconcile feminism with Islam in its cultural and political forms. This is why there

is more than one conception of what Islamic feminism is. The first and most often articulated notion stresses a rereading of textual sources and a more egalitarian approach to Islam yet is also not hostile towards Western feminism. The women's magazine *Zanan*, which began publication in Iran in 1992, can be seen as an example of this brand of feminism.

As Ziba Mir-Hosseini described, *Zanan* advocated a brand of feminism that "takes its legitimacy from Islam, yet makes no apologies for drawing on Western feminist sources and collaborating with Iranian secular feminists to argue for women's rights." It reveals the lack of correlation between patriarchy and Islamic idealism but it does not conceal the gender inequalities in Islamic law. Moreover, it addresses such inequalities within the very context of Islam.

The second strand of Islamic feminism is an incredibly contentious one. It generally refers only to a small group of Iranian women who "seek the amelioration of the Islamized gender relations, mainly through lobbying for legal reforms within the framework of the Islamic Republic" (Mojab, 2001:130). These women, unlike women in the more "liberal" view of Islamic feminism, are quite hostile towards the use of the term feminism and Western feminism in general. One should also consider that these women are working to enhance their rights within the existing political structure of Iran. Its hostility towards the West might be a purely strategic choice. Hence there is an ongoing debate, both within and outside academia as to whether or not these women can actually be categorised as feminists.<sup>1</sup>

Although women in Muslim fundamentalist-influenced societies have been incredibly active and have participated in the gradual growth of civil societies, this activism has not been incorporated into official political power



**Grains behind the grandeur.** Dubai is probably the most successful city that has emerged in the region in recent years. Despite its massive and ambitious infrastructure projects, it depends on mostly foreign labour. Although Dubai has yet to respond to many labour concerns especially now with its financial woes, it is worth noting that its own nationals, especially women have yet to further penetrate and lead the labour sector.

Sources: Brown, John (19 September 2005). "Semi-Slave Conditions for Foreign Workers in Dubai." URL: <http://news.infoshop.org/article.php?story=20050919135817472>; Sharp, Heather (4 August 2005). "Dubai women storm world of work." URL: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4719639.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4719639.stm) and Shreck, Adam and Jamal Halaby (7 January 2010). "Dubai downturn sends ripples throughout Arab world." URL: [http://www.examiner.com/a2407812-Dubai\\_downturn\\_sends\\_ripples\\_throughout\\_Arab\\_world.html](http://www.examiner.com/a2407812-Dubai_downturn_sends_ripples_throughout_Arab_world.html)

Photo by Josa Piroaska from Wikimedia Commons

structures to any significant extent. In recent times there have been more women representatives in political institutions, but this has not translated into the representation of women's interests. For example, the new Iraqi Constitution requires that 25 per cent of the 444 parliamentary seats must be occupied by women. This was a hard fought battle by Iraqi women activists because as Sundus Abass stated, "the quota in Iraq was actually put in the Constitution by the influence of the Iraqi women, because even the Americans were against adopting the quota in the Constitution."

Even with women in parliament, women's issues are still not a priority or even on the agenda. Similarly Iran installed some women members in parliament but they are not interested in women's issues. Rather, they represent the party in power and are only there to toe the line.

*Even with women in parliament, women's issues are still not a priority or even on the agenda. Rather, they represent the party in power and are only there to toe the line.*

## Conclusion

I have painted a general picture here of the situation of Muslim fundamentalisms and women in the Middle East and North Africa. Even though similarities can be drawn between different movements all over the region, in truth, the details of each specific context have led to the emergence of a distinct type of Muslim fundamentalism. Thus it is difficult to compare the situation in Morocco with that in Iran. Although religious fundamentalisms have been on the rise for a long time in this region, women are in no way passive victims. Many women actively resist. They fight for their rights, engage in social justice projects, and espouse various forms of feminism. While there is no doubt that veiled, homebound and uneducated women exist, such image in no way encapsulates nor acknowledges the lives and struggles of women in Muslim contexts. ■

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## Footnotes

- 1 This is an incredibly rich debate. It ranges from people like Hamed Shabidian who believe "Islamic feminism" to be an oxymoron, to those who believe Maryam Behrouzi – Iranian Majles deputy – to be a feminist. Maryam Behrouzi, who would not claim to be a feminist herself, pushes for more female political representation within the Iranian Majles (from her own conservative Islamist party). She and many other practising Muslims do not believe in equality between the genders, because the individual is not counted as the unit of society. The unit of Muslim society is the traditional family which is constructed by marriage between one man and at least one woman). Therefore, men's and women's roles, responsibilities, and hence rights are not equal but complimentary – for the sake of the family.