

“Advancing the Rights of Women and Girls in the Middle East: An Analysis of Current Trends and U.S. Policy”

Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism
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As prepared

Mr. Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, Members of the House Foreign Affairs Middle East North Africa and International Terrorism Subcommittee:

My name is Jomana Qaddour, and I am a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Rafik Hariri Center. I would like to emphasize that I am here speaking only on my behalf and not on behalf of the institution.

Twenty years ago, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, at the time seen as a landmark event in promoting greater attention to gender perspectives in the work of the United Nations. While increased attention has been given to this issue as a result, women in the Middle East have yet to play a pronounced, systematic role in political negotiations, security apparatuses, and governance mechanisms. Women striving to be involved in peace and security face three primary challenges: one, the lack of women involved at all levels of governance; two, when women are involved, they are often tokenized and expected to be politically neutral; and three, women involved in politics often have no support structures to assist them in developing sound political proposals and the ability to nurture future women leaders.

Let me start off by addressing my first challenge: there are too few women involved in political activity in the Middle East. Like everywhere else in the world, women in the Middle East make up at least 50% of their populations. However, advocating for them to occupy even 30% of seats in government, in all branches and at all levels of government, has been met with local hostility. Data across the region reflects that women in the Middle East remain underrepresented in parliaments in almost every country. For example, in Lebanon, only six women serve in a the 128-member parliament. And although there is now a quota in Egypt mandating 25% of seats in parliament to go to women, in 2015, prior to the establishment of the quota, only 13% of members elected were women. Compare this to the world average, which – although far from ideal – is around 23%.

Having quotas is not sufficient. We can all agree on this. The kinds of women, their qualifications and more importantly, what type of system they are operating in are all determinative of whether or not such women will have any impact at all on political decision making. But in Middle Eastern context, on its face, the law does not treat men and women equally, setting them at a disadvantage from the outset. For example, in Syria, women and men are treated differently under the law for the crime of adultery. Similarly, the Syrian constitution allows Syrian men to pass along their citizenship to their wives and children, but doesn’t allow Syrian women to do the same. They are also prohibited from running for president. So long as women are not found in consequential numbers at levels of government – the legislative, executive, and the judiciary – the drafting of laws, their execution, and their interpretation – will likely remain disadvantageous to them.

Let me now turn to my second challenge facing women: too often, they are tokenized and expected to be politically neutral. As a woman working on the Syrian conflict in a variety of capacities, I have seen this first hand. With the best of intentions, in 2016, former UN Envoy Staffan de Mistura created the UN Women’s Advisory Board to include more women in the Geneva process. Unfortunately, this became a way to show women were involved, but their role was limited to that of informal advisors, never as actual negotiators. After seeing the women supposedly included through the Advisory board, the opposition and regime felt little need to include women as negotiators.

Further, the Advisory’s task was to reach consensus on a variety of issues, which ultimately perpetuated the notion that women were neutral, conciliatory, and didn’t have firm political positions. Given the fact that the Advisory Board included women who were both pro and anti-Syrian government, Kurdish women, Syrian civil society activists and feminists, as well as lawyers, this couldn’t have been farther from the truth. Women may approach conflicts differently, given their specific vantage point and experiences, but they will approach it as individuals just like men. Expecting otherwise is in fact sexist.

The final challenge I will highlight is the lack of structures available to support women in the Middle East. Throughout the region, women lack access to consistent, systematic support to run political campaigns and see political objectives through, as well as to nurture future feminist leadership. Women who do make it into government are usually expected to toe the line of the governing party, like men, and are discouraged from giving singular attention to issues plaguing women disproportionately. This was definitely the case for women in Assad’s Syria.

Without the support of solid structures, women in emergency contexts have managed to address security through unconventional yet short-term means. For example, in places like Idlib, Syria, where the al-Qai’da affiliated Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham recruits men to solidify its control, Syrian women lead regular peaceful protests against the group and shame males around them to prevent them from giving into terrorist organizations. Women are expected to do this with little resources and with no mechanism to providing long-term solutions for such problems; they are often sidelined in local governance structures that negotiate the safety of the community.

In a region where state budgets are often allocated disproportionately to the military, women have pushed for security to be understood holistically, to include economic security and mental health and social development programs. They have highlighted the most vulnerable groups, including children, young women, and the elderly, because they themselves know what it means to be exceptionally vulnerable.

In conclusion, women’s participation in the political space should not be optional; it is necessary for lasting peace and security in the Middle East. However, there are very real and challenging obstacles currently preventing this. I want to end with a few recommendations for the US government.

— First, the United States should insist that, wherever possible, any multilateral diplomacy in the region include a holistic examination of the issues at stake, which will necessarily include issues that have been historically derided as “women’s issues.”

— Second, the United States should model best behavior by including women in its diplomatic delegations to the region, in both multilateral and bilateral fora.

— Third, the United States should encourage the countries in the region and relevant non-state actors (such as the Syrian opposition) to include women among their negotiating teams. If nothing else, it would be helpful for main State to send a cable to our embassies in the region that requires the U.S. ambassador both to track the number and percentage of women put forward by the host country in such negotiations and to formally ask the host government if it plans to include women in their delegations. These women should not just meet a numerical target but should be comprised of qualified women.

— Finally, Congress can request that the State Department report on the results of such analysis, so we can know which countries in the region — indeed in the world — are including women’s voices in their diplomacy and what impact such voices are having in order to move the needle forward on issues disproportionately impacting women.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify and stand by to answer any questions you may have.