



Arab Women on the Move: Trends - Countertrends

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Women in the Middle East are on the move, but in decidedly different directions, depending on where you look. In less than forty years, Cairo has gone from a city of Western fashion and tendency toward the secular to a city in which the majority of women wear the *Hijab* (head scarf) and an increasing number, particularly in poor neighborhoods, are wearing the *niqab*, covering their face and body. Many attribute this trend to mounting Islamic radicalism, which is often blamed on the brand of Salafism imported from Saudi Arabia. Yet, in Saudi Arabia the King has just inaugurated a new university in which women will study alongside their male counterparts without being forced to wear the *Hijab*. Thus, observers of the Middle East now find it almost impossible to generalize about changing social patterns in different communities in the region or about the causes for these transformations.



A case in point was made this month through a series of events that exemplified the dichotomies in the Middle East, particularly on issues surrounding the status of women. *PI Online* examines events in the Arabian Peninsula, viewed as the bastion of Salafism, and in Egypt, which is supposedly more liberal, that are defying the conventional wisdom and creating an intriguing mosaic.



Dr. Rola Dashti

We turn first to political, scientific and cultural events on the Arabian Peninsula, in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi. In Kuwait, two women in parliament, *Rola Dashti* and *Asil Al-'Awdi*, defied a fatwa ordering them to resign from parliament for refusing to cover their head in accordance with the Islamic *Shari'a*. Both women stated categorically that *Kuwait* is governed by a civil code and that there is no room in the country's politics for Islamic dicta. The women viewed the *shari'a* as without any authority in the matter and considered the *fatwa* inconsistent with the constitutional rules governing parliament, a matter constitutional expert *Muhammad Al-Dallal* referred as "very thorny". In the past, such defiant pronouncements would have been condemned as blasphemy with dire consequences for the women. Today, some Islamists were still appalled at the audacity of the women, but remarkably many other members of parliament supported them and the Kuwaiti legal system backed them up.

A few days ago, the constitutional court ruled that the women could retain their seats in parliament.¹ The same court also ruled this week that Kuwaiti women no longer require their husband's approval to travel overseas, a custom still enforced in many other Arab countries. Both decisions were regarded as major victories for women.²

¹ Source: Al-Arabiya [Oct 28,2009] - <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/10/28/89482.html>

² Source: Al-Arabiya [Oct 20, 2009] - "Kuwaiti Women Obtain Right for Traveling Without Husbands' Approval" <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/10/20/88670.html>



Meanwhile in Saudi Arabia, the King, unrelenting in his endeavors for reform, once again made history on a grand scale by inaugurating King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), an impressive high-tech \$10 billion campus that is drawing on top-caliber scientists



from around the world. At KAUST women students and faculty are not required to cover their head or face and will live on campus, studying and mingling with their male counterparts. Such an atmosphere, while common in the West, was unthinkable in the Saudi Kingdom only a few years ago. The turn of events is so striking that when a friend first related the news to me while I was visiting the Middle East, I was certain that she was mistaken. I am pleased to report that I was wrong. The King, in fact, went further a few days later, reaffirming his support for co-education by firing a hard-line cleric from the prestigious assembly of scholars who had criticized the new university, calling it “a great sin and evil”.



And in Abu Dhabi this past week *Haifaa Al-Mansour* became the first Saudi woman filmmaker to claim the “Screen Award” for her screenplay *Wajda*. The award, which honors new talent, was bestowed at the International Film Festival, considered the most prestigious in the Middle East. Ms. *Al-Mansour* is known for championing women’s issues. She previously created a stir with her documentary “Women



without Shadows” defending the right of women, such as herself, to go without wearing the *Hijab*.



These positive events on the Arabian Peninsula involving women in politics, science and the arts stand in stark contrast to events in Egypt during the same period. The people and the parliament of Egypt were irate over remarks by the dean of *Al-Azhar University*, *Sheikh Muhammad Sayed Tantawi* who said that women could not totally cover their faces with the *Niqab* when attending classes at the university. He considered the *Hijab* sufficient and said that he will issue a religious edict banning the

Niqab, which he referred to as merely a tradition that has nothing to do with the Islamic faith. *Tantawi* caused such an uproar that some members of parliament representing the Muslim Brotherhood asked the Egyptian prime minister to fire him, and they filed law suits against the Sheikh and the University. *Al-Azhar* later clarified that the ruling only applied when women were in all female classrooms with a woman *teacher*. Ironically, the Islamists teamed up with some liberals to argue that this is a matter of civil liberty, a woman’s freedom to choose what she wears, while others applauded *Tantawi’s* decision to ban the *Niqab* because they see it as a reflection of the rise of Islamic Puritanism.



When these events are juxtaposed, important questions emerge about the reasons for the trends and countertrends in the Middle East concerning the status of women. Economics, education and leadership seem to be at the center of the changing trends regarding the status of women in the Gulf countries versus the women in Egypt.

The inauguration of KAUST leaves no doubt that when the Saudi King decided to propel his country into the twenty first century he recognized that education must be a cornerstone of that endeavor. It is evident that he was equally aware that nothing short of a revolution against the old guard of the religious establishment was necessary to reverse years of a policy of exporting the rigid Islamic brand of *Salafism* to other Muslim countries by building religious *madrasas* financed with petrodollars. [See: “The King’s Quiet Revolution [PI-566]³].

The standard of living in the Gulf is also one of the highest in the world and the benefits of the economic boom are being enjoyed by the younger generation, many of whom are foreign educated and yes, many are women. The slow but steady progress of women in the Gulf countries is unquestionably attributable, at least in part, to economic prosperity and education, an advantage other Arab countries like Egypt, Syria or Jordan do not enjoy.



Sheikha Mozah addressing UNESCO on Oct 7th, 2009

The architectural wonders of Dubai, U.S. universities opening campuses in Qatar, Dubai and Abu Dhabi and the positive involvement of Gulf leaders, all reflect a changing, more educated mentality that is breaking with the past and re-envisioning the future of their citizens. When sheikha *Mozah*, the chic wife of the Emir of Qatar, addressed UNESCO this month, she spoke of creating a new culture and changing mentalities more in harmony with the needs of society. Her words were as much a message to her Muslim counterparts as to the rest of the

international community.

Why when we see more progressive attitudes about women emerging in the presumably more conservative Gulf countries, do we see the opposite trend in countries like Egypt, where Cairo was once considered “Paris on the Nile”? In Egypt today, debates about the status of women, both in the streets and in the halls of parliament, are like scenes from a prior century. The deteriorating status of women is evident throughout Egyptian society, which has become increasingly less civil and more narrow-minded. The caliber, tenor and direction of discourse on the status of women in Egypt are like a cauldron of poverty, population and poor education about to boil over. Ironically, in addition to Sheikh *Tantawi* at *Al-Azhar*, it is another religious figure, *Ali Gomaa*, the Egyptian Grand Mufti, who has attempted to bring some limited sense into an Islamic fervency run wild by partially protecting the rights of women and preaching a moderate Islam.

Although there is little doubt that wealth, or the lack thereof, is contributing to the diverging trends in the region, it does not fully explain why we do not see the regressive trends in Egypt manifest in other Arab countries like Syria, Jordan or Morocco, which also lack the Gulf’s wealth. The trends in Egypt are in part the result of an inferior educational system, at all levels. For the past thirty years, Egypt has invested little in its education system and managed it poorly through an endemically corrupt and inefficient centralized system. Teachers can only make a living by tutoring outside the classroom to the few who can afford it. So, they don’t teach inside the classrooms and the majority of the children don’t learn. As a result, the educational system has produced little of the human wealth needed for Egypt to prosper. This systemic ignorance coupled with a devastating population increase is paralyzing the country. Shallow arguments and slogans have replaced serious, knowledgeable cultural debate.

It is too early to decide if either of these trends on the status of women in the Middle East will continue. What is certain however is that the divergent developments we are seeing today are as

³ Source: PI Online 3/11/2009 - http://www.politicalislam.org/embed_doc.php?ArticleID=260

much a function of economic, educational and social factors as religious ones. It is therefore imperative for the United States and the West in general to understand the changes taking place and to support institutions that encourage further emancipation of women and discourage the counter-trends in countries like Egypt.

Words are not enough. The tens of billions in AID dollars the United States has spent on the Egyptian armaments over the past twenty years served the military establishments in both countries well, but have done little to educate the population or lift Egyptians out of poverty. These military expenditures were once justified as an incitement to assuage Egypt's security concerns when the peace treaty was signed between Egypt and Israel. This was however thirty years ago and since, the Egyptian as well as the American interests have changed. If the American people spent even a fraction of that money building and staffing schools in Cairo and the Egyptian countryside, those investments could have paid dividends in the form of the type of progress for we see on the Arabian Peninsula. Many in the executive branch and the corridors of Congress know this fact but nobody is willing to take the initiative.

The Bush Administration formed a coalition of the willing to wage a war in Iraq – the Obama Administration needs to form a coalition of the willing to wage a war on poverty and ignorance in the Middle East. They should start by reallocating U.S. AID funds to projects that will improve education for all but particularly for women. Moving funds from the military to the masses will equally engender an appreciation among the population that is the most effective means to combat Islamic extremism. The Egyptians, for their part, must embrace the dream of leaving the next generation always better off than the present one. Realizing that dream will require a conscientious dedication to hard work to replace the fatalistic attitude of "*inshallah*" where everything is entirely a matter of God's will. If either Egypt or Western policy makers fail to focus their attention on these core issues, we will soon be facing another Pakistan on the banks of the Nile.

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