

Political Agency of Islamist Women in the late 20th to 21st century MENA: Exploring the tension between secular-liberal Feminism and Islamism

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Islamism, or ‘political Islam’, has been central to political movements in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region in the 21st century. Islamist women have also been central to political movements in the 21st century MENA region. The contributions of Islamist women have both been integral to the social and political trajectory of their respective nations, and also gravely understudied, misunderstood, and weaponized against them by the western powers contributing to the ‘War on Terror’. Misunderstanding and prescribing Islamist women as an oppressed monolith, devoid of agency and freedom, has egregious ramifications- from Ben Ali’s regime of state-sanctioned physical and sexual violence to the U.S invasion of Afghanistan which convinced many western women’s activists that the war would ‘save’ the oppressed Muslim women of Afghanistan from their ‘retrograde’ societies.

Essentially, the dominant narrative on Muslim women, and particularly Islamist women, has placed them as powerless within their societies. To contribute to body of scholarship that is building the counternarrative on Muslim and Islamist women, I examined the contributions made by Islamist women in modern political movements in Egypt, Palestine, and Tunisia between the late 20th century to the 2011 Arab Spring and its proximal aftermath, how these contributions are driven by the larger social and religious values of their respective societies, and how these contributions have also fundamentally altered the social, political, and religious fabric of their respective societies. The focus of my research will be on Egyptian Muslim Women’s Sisterhood (a branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood), the women of Hamas (who formed Hamas’ Women’s Action Department after the second intifada), and the women of Ennahda (Tunisia’s main Islamist political party). For comparison, I studied how Tunisia’s secular feminist movement, spearheaded by the The Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) , National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT), and Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD) interacted with the Islamist women’s movement. Islamist women’s movements posed a variety of challenges for secular feminist projects across the MENA region, and Tunisia presents the most well-researched and tangible tension between the two.

Analyses of these cases worked to answer three research questions: how have Islamist women contributed to late 20th to 21st century activism across the MENA region? Does secular feminist scholarship fairly describe the political involvement of Islamist women in their respective societies? If not, what kind of analytical framework can be constructed to better understand the nuances of Islamist women’s social and political activity?

I built the groundworks of my analysis by addressing how I would define concepts such as agency, freedom, and political activism. My final product was in the form of a paper, where I conducted a case study analysis of the three fore-mentioned Islamist women’s movements and Tunisian secular-feminist movement. I concluded that Islamist women were an integral part in the upheaval of their respective secularist authoritarian regimes through protest and voter mobilisation, and once their own political parties achieved electoral success, they became a fundamental part of internal and external party politics. Additionally, I concluded that secular feminist scholarship does not come to fairly describe Islamist women’s social and political activity, and an analytical framework rooted in expanding the binaries secular feminist scholarship imposes on Islamist women is a better fit for analytical purposes.

Faculty Mentor: Barbara Elias

Funded by: Breckinridge Fund