Women's Lives in the Muslim Middle East:
The "True Lies" of Cultural Stereotyping

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Western misunderstandings about the lives of women in the Muslim Middle East are legion. Westerners are still influenced by Orientalist stereotypes -- like harem-bound odalisques overseen by eunuchs who languidly await the summons of a lecherous Sheik. The assumption is made that a monolithic and exotic Islamic ethos pervades Muslim societies, shaping the attitudes of their inhabitants and setting them apart from the West. Misguided notions about how Islam correlates with the exploitation and abuse of women are reinvigorated by the popular media. For example, viewers flocked to the 1994 film "True Lies," which portrays Middle Eastern Muslim men as religious fanatics bent on terrorism who also slap women around. Lending credibility to these cinematic stereotypes of Islamic culture and its denizens are the pronouncements of supposed "experts" like Samuel Huntington, the Harvard political scientist whose influential essay on the clash of Western and Islamic civilizations reinforces old biases and misperceptions.[i] The complex realities of women's station in contemporary Middle Eastern societies are rarely deemed worthy of investigation, and the filter of cultural stereotyping obscures the commonality of women's experiences in East and West. For example, relatively few film critics seem to have pondered the significance of the

glorification of Western-style machismo in "True Lies," which tracked the demonization of Arab Muslims.[ii]

An example of the kind of measure that tends to catch Westerners' attention was a decree issued on February 28, 1990, by the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council. The decree allowed Iraqi men to kill their mothers, sisters, daughters and their mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, nieces, aunts, and female cousins for sexual misconduct. According to this draconian edict, men could not be brought to justice for acting as prosecutors and executioners of female relatives whom they suspected of sexual infractions. The measure purportedly aimed at improving Iraqi moral standards.[iii] Wives were omitted from the list, one assumes, because no legal permission was deemed necessary for Iraqi husbands to kill their adulterous wives. Was this decree the embodiment of a distinctive sexual ethos tied to Islamic culture, as people who share Huntington's vision of the exotic Orient would probably surmise?

In reality, Islamic law is not to blame for Iraqi policies. The relevant part of Islamic law endorses a policy directly at odds with the Iraqi decree. According to the Qur`an, men's and women's sexual transgressions are to be punished with equal severity and only after the most stringent proof requirements have been met. No accusations of unchastity should ever be brought against a woman or a man who has not confessed to fornication unless the accuser can bring four male Muslim adult eyewitnesses to corroborate the charge who can testify to the

actual act of illicit copulation. Without such proof, anyone who challenges a person's chastity is punishable by eighty lashes -- obviously a strong deterrent to making such charges![iv] Furthermore, in Islamic law, if a person confesses to adultery, inflicting punishment becomes the responsibility of the criminal justice system -- not the offended spouse. Nor does Islam condone a husband executing a wife for adultery. Instead, where a man accuses his own wife of adultery, Islam contemplates a special ritual of mutual imprecation, involving accusations and denials along with the swearing and counterswearing of dire oaths. No criminal sanction is provided for the straying spouse; God's curse strikes the spouse who lies.[v]

Thus, Iraq's 1990 decree was not a product of Islamic doctrine. What actually prompted this retrograde decree was not an access of Islamic piety but a political crisis. In 1990 Saddam Hussain's regime was in desperate straits, which included daunting debts incurred in its foolhardy war with Iran, that were about to lead Saddam Hussain to undertake his ill-considered gamble to seize Kuwait. Saddam's decree authorizing men to execute female relations for sexual transgressions was designed to win back some popularity by pandering to the machismo of the average Iraqi male. Conditioned by ingrained patriarchal attitudes, many Arab men feel that they should be entitled to execute women who dishonor the family by their insubordination or sexual misconduct.

In this connection, one might review a related example from Pakistan, a non-Arab country situated on the other side of Iran, Iraq's neighbor to the east.

In the summer of 1994 Pakistan was reeling with shock over the revelations in the Sharif case. Hafiz Sharif, a respected Islamic cleric in Islamabad, had viciously tortured his wife Zainab almost to the point of killing her, leaving her with life-threatening injuries. When prosecuted, he defended himself on the grounds that he had assaulted her in a jealous rage caused by suspicions of his wife's infidelity -- which in his view justified burning her with a red-hot iron bar that he had forcibly inserted into her vagina.

The Sharif case was not an isolated incident; violence within the family directed against women is widespread in Pakistan. However, such violence has generally been treated as a private matter, and the Pakistani legal system has been extremely lenient with men who abuse their wives or female relatives. Men have killed their wives with impunity, especially if they allege that they were reacting to their wives' infidelity. No Pakistani man has ever received the death penalty for murdering his wife..[vi]

The fact that the Sharif case became a scandal and mobilized public opinion suggested that things might be changing. Pakistan, a far more open and democratic society than Iraq is, was allowing women's voices to be heard and was coming to terms with the problem of domestic violence. In a breakthrough, Sharif's "explanation" for his horrendous maiming of his wife was

rejected by the court, and he was given the stiffest sentence ever meted out to a Pakistani man for injuring his wife -- thirty years in jail along with a fine, a development that heartened Pakistan's feminists.[vii] Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto visited the frail Zainab while she was receiving care in hospital to express her support and called for a moral jihad to fight domestic violence against women. Women's rights activists hoped that the Prime Minister's intervention and increased public awareness would lead to positive change and called for centers for battered women to be established.[viii]

It is certainly a gross overgeneralization to say that an Islamic ethos correlates with a pattern of devaluing and mistreating women. Blaming the Islamic element in culture involves disregarding the role of patriarchy in shaping attitudes like the ones found in Iraq and Pakistan. Many Pakistani feminists would concur with the judgment of Mohammed Shujallah, a member of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, who asserted that Pakistan's male chauvinism was rooted in its history, not Islam.[ix] Shujuallah accused Islamic fundamentalists of giving an Islamic flavor to ancient tribal traditions of keeping women veiled, at home, uneducated and effectively second-class citizens.[x] It bears emphasizing that in Muslim countries, as well as in the West, sexist attitudes can be rationalized by appeals to religious values -- and often are.

If one looks beyond the hypothesis of Islamic particularism as the explanation for both Sharif's assault on his wife and the

Iraqi decree, one might notice that 1994 provided a plethora of comparable cases in the United States. In 1994 Americans were preoccupied to the point of obsession with the notorious O.J. Simpson case, which raised grave questions about the status of women in the U.S.. Leaving aside the question of whether O.J. Simpson actually was the perpetrator of the savage murders of his ex-wife Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman, the discussion of domestic violence that the murders provoked confronted Americans with the bleak reality of how commonly men abused women and how often domestic violence went unpunished, as long as women were the victims. The failure of the criminal justice system to impose a meaningful penalty on O.J. Simpson for an earlier incident when he had beaten his wife and threatened her life correlated with the trend in the U.S. legal system to trivialize violence against wives.

In the wake of Simpson's arrest, commentators decried the prevalence of wife-beating and the killing of women by jealous husbands, ex-husbands, or boyfriends and the reluctance of the police and the legal system to take these problems seriously or to hold male perpetrators accountable.[xi] In a Ms. editorial, Marcia Gillespie reacted to the issues raised by the Simpson case, lamenting:

> there are thousands of graves in this country holding the remains of women and girls who were murdered by boyfriends, husbands, lovers, and exes who at one time claimed they loved them. . . far, far too many of the men who killed them are never appropriately punished, if they are ever punished at all. . .
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> How many millions of women are routinely beaten, kicked, punched, choked, throttled, bludgeoned? How many cut, stabbed, shot? How many threatened, stalked, terrorized? How many are

prisoners in their homes, constantly trying to appease controlling, abusive men? . . . For too long societies . . . have sanctioned the violence, by blaming the women . . . by excusing men's actions, by saying that he had the right to physically chastise "his" woman . . .[xii]

A 1994 Maryland case suggested that women in the U.S. were little more than the property of their husbands and that wives' acts of infidelity justified their execution at their husbands' hands. When a Maryland judge had to decide on the penalty that Kenneth Peacock deserved for murdering his wife several hours after he discovered her in bed with a lover, he reluctantly sentenced the defendant to 18 months in prison, saying that he did not want to send him to prison at all but felt he must do so "to make the system honest." Even though the killing was no crime of passion, not being committed in Peacock's initial fury when he discovered his wife's infidelity, the judge commented:"I seriously wonder how man men married five, four years would have the strength to walk away without inflicting some corporal punishment."[xiii] This was a judgment rendered by a court in a predominantly Christian society, but the Maryland judge's condoning of the murder of an adulterous wife by her husband hardly conformed to Christian morality.[xiv] Reminded of this, some Americans might see a common proclivity in both Muslim societies and the U.S. to ignore religious teachings when these imposed inconvenient constraints on the male inclination to treat women as chattel. One would hope that, just as they could distinguish Christian precepts from this judge's decision, they would

differentiate instances of mistreatment of women in the Middle East from Islamic morality.

In contrast, women who lashed out at their male tormentors were exposed to harsher penalties.[xv] In the same week when the judge only reluctantly gave Peacock his very lenient sentence, there was another Maryland prosecution, one where the wife was the killer. The court sentenced her to three years in jail for killing her husband after years of having suffered his beatings and on a day when he had beaten her and threatened her life and the lives of their children. In this case the judge (a woman) expressed no sympathy for the abused wife's plight or any sense that the jail sentence might be excessively severe, given what the wife had had to endure.[xvi]

The double standard of U.S. justice for men and women was further illustrated by a California case nine months earlier involving an Iranian Jewish couple that had settled in the U.S. in 1982. The defendant husband argued that he had only beaten his wife to death with a wrench because she had mistreated and psychologically emasculated him. The wife of Moosa Hanoukai, the defendant, had allegedly forced him to sleep on the floor, prohibited him from spending money, and called him "stupid" before relatives. Apparently, the final straw had been his wife's failure to prepare a festive meal to celebrate the day that marked both the Jewish Sabbath and the Persian New Year. His wife's culinary delinquency had left Mr. Hanoukai to the cold comfort of a bologna sandwich. After consuming this

disappointing repast, Moosa Hanoukai had picked up the wrench and bludgeoned his wife to death. Did the jury -- composed of Californians, be it recalled, not Iranians -- recoil with horror at this example of benighted Oriental mores? Did it scoff at the feebleness of the husband's excuse for executing his wife? Hardly. Apparently finding Moosa Hanoukai's defense both plausible and congenial, the jurors declined to find him guilty of murder, convicting him instead of voluntary manslaughter. Even Hanoukai's own lawyer confessed surprise when some of the jurors came to the sentencing to ask that the defendant be spared prison time and merely be given probation.[xvii] Thus, it turned out that no "clash of civilizations" manifested itself in this courtroom test of family values. Californians apparently found nothing exotic in Moosa Hanoukai's reaction but evaluated the situation in much the same way he had. In the jurors' eyes, a wife's humiliating her husband and failing to cook him a proper holiday dinner was sufficient justification for his murdering her. It would be difficult to imagine a jury of U.S. citizens exonerating a wife for killing her husband for similar reasons.

Against this background and as the Simpson jury was being selected, the Wall Street Journal, with no intentional irony and no apparent consciousness of its own double standard, published a front page article on the double standard affecting women in Iran's family courts. The newspaper lambasted the Tehran family court as "a horror chamber of male vengeance," where battered wives were scolded for seeking divorces from the husbands who

beat them and where "religiously privileged" males "make out like bandits."[xviii] The double standards applied by Iran's courts, admittedly real and harmful, were treated as examples of Oriental perversity, even though they closely replicated standards being applied contemporaneously by U.S. courts.

The New York Times showed similar journalistic blind spots and amnesia. Although it had been reporting on the sensational Simpson case, it did not try to make the natural connections to the Abequa case, on which it published many articles over the summer of 1994. In July in New Jersey Mohammed Ismail Abequa, a Muslim of Jordanian origin, strangled his wife, who was likewise Muslim. Both he and she were naturalized American citizens. Abequa had been enraged by his estranged wife's independence and his suspicions that she had been unfaithful. He confessed to the strangling -- although claiming it had happened inadvertently in the course of a fight.

After Abequa absconded to Jordan in an attempt to evade prosecution, the U.S. engaged in vigorous attempts to have him brought back to the U.S. for trial. U.S. criminal justice authorities, the State Department, and Senators and Congresspersons got involved in the efforts to have Abequa returned to the U.S. for trial. The Times' reportage on these efforts and on the case generally rested on the implicit assumption that Jordan was a haven for men who murdered their wives, whereas in the U.S. criminal justice system, a man who murdered his wife would be given just punishment.

The Times reported in one article the comment of Mansour Kloub, the Jordanian Attorney General, saying that, when a man killed his wife: "If he is defending his honor, it's like self-defense," which the Times called "a defense considered novel in American criminal law." The Times seemed eager to reinforce the impression that, because Jordan was Arab and Muslim, women faced a double standard. It reported that, when asked if a woman who killed her husband after finding him with another woman could similarly be acquitted for defending her honor, Mr. Kloub had paused and then said,"No comment."[xix] In addition, the article noted Kloub's statement that "here in Jordan, if she is his wife, she doesn't have the right to an affair." That similar double standards prevailed in the U.S. was conveniently forgotten. Almost grudgingly, it noted in passing that Kloub had said that Abequa would not prevail with such a defense in a Jordanian court, since he merely had harbored a suspicion that his wife had been unfaithful, which was insufficient to support such a defense.[xx]

In a sanctimonious op-ed piece in the New York Times, Anna Quindlen chided Queen Noor of Jordan for failing to intervene in the Abequa case. The queen's reason for intervening would be, according to Quindlen, that she "wants to use her position to help clear up misconceptions Americans have about Arab nations." Even though the U.S. and Jordan had no extradition treaty, according to Quindlen, the queen should use her influence to get Abequa extradited to the U.S.. The reason? "Surely she would

not want Americans to believe, amid nationwide soul-searching about domestic violence and spousal murder occasioned by the Simpson case, that Jordan takes such charges lightly."[xxi] Quindlen did not choose to address an obvious logical problem: Why would returning Abequa to a system where wife beaters and wife murderers received such lenient treatment amount to taking such charges seriously? Quindlen's own uncritical assumptions about women's inferior position in Arab countries seem to have blinded her to the implications of issues raised by the Simpson case. Surely, any careful evaluation of the record of U.S. courts in treating domestic violence and spousal murder should have led her to doubt the superior preparedness of the U.S. justice system to mete out tough punishments to husbands who abused or killed their wives. Abequa was at least as likely to receive a tough penalty in Jordan, the precedents would suggest, as he was to receive a long sentence if tried in the U.S..[xxii]

Although feminists in the U.S. reacted with exasperation at the sexist biases revealed in 1994 cases involving spousal murder, there was little inclination, it seemed, to compare these cases with developments in countries like Iraq, Jordan, and Pakistan. As Quindlen's essay shows, they avoided noticing that the plight of women in Muslim countries had many counterparts in American society and that, especially when it came to matters of life and death, women were similarly devalued vis-a-vis men both in the West and in the Middle East.

Perhaps the visuals were confusing in this regard. After all, the traditionally-attired woman in the Middle East is barely recognizable as an individual human being, and, with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the imposition of Islamic dress requirements, Muslim women are increasingly disappearing behind veils. To the average American, veils or the chador, supposedly "Islamic" requirements, probably make events in Muslim countries seem alien. But, what lies behind the veiling requirements? Is the underlying reality totally at odds with things that are familiar to Americans?

As is known, Islamic fundamentalists in countries like Iran and traditionalists in societies like Saudi Arabia's are obsessed with protecting female chastity and fighting sexual immorality. To this end, they insist on sexual segregation and the need for "Islamic dress" like the drab, concealing chadors that Iranian women are compelled to wear. In their ideology, women are presumed to be highly emotional and irrational and to lack the strength of character necessary to resist seductive overtures or to preserve their chastity. The purpose of the veiling and segregation is to avoid exposing unstable, vulnerable females to male lusts, which are presumed to be constantly raging and uncontrollable. Men cannot help themselves if they sexually assault women; women must be at fault for being in proximity with strange males or being attired in a manner that provokes their sexual imagination. In consequence, leaders like Iran's reigning Ayatollahs demand that women be kept from jobs where they would

be placed in contact with male strangers. They want women to remain in the home -- or, if they are allowed out, to be compelled to work as gynecologists and obstetricians or as elementary school teachers, jobs where they are not exposed to adult men outside the family. At least by the time of puberty, they say, if not before, girls should be segregated in special schools, ideally ones that educate them for female roles like mother and housekeeper. In their view, women must not be in the company of unrelated males or travel without male chaperons from their own families. Ultimately, the vision is of a society in which men and women who are not of the same family live and function in separate spheres and where women, when they venture outside the house, are swathed in such concealing, unattractive garments that their sexuality is negated. All of these constraints are imposed in the name of Islam and Islamic morality, even though they have to be imposed by force on protesting women, who are every bit as Muslim as the men who invoke "Islam" to impose these constraints. The constraints also have the consequence that many desirable educational opportunities and jobs wind up being designated as male-only preserves, a side-benefit that may make male beneficiaries eager to uphold the restrictions for selfish reasons even if they do not really share the fundamentalists' concern for protecting Islamic morality.

If one sticks to the level of visuals, all these "Islamic" restraints on women's rights and freedoms may seem far removed

from contemporary American experience, where the chaperon is as dead as the dodo and women's freedom to dress in outre, revealing fashions was established even before Madonna flounced onto the scene. However, if one steps back and reflects on recent public preoccupations in the U.S., one discovers that Americans are struggling with the same issues as Iranians and Saudis, albeit from a very different starting point.

In the U.S. work place, few problems have flared up with greater regularity and explosiveness in the last years than sexual harassment controversies. The most notorious recent case occurred during the 1991 hearings regarding the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court. The charges of sexual harassment made by Anita Hill, a former subordinate of Thomas,' riveted Americans and polarized public opinion.[xxiii] Male politicians felt the ire of American women, who were infuriated by Senators' insulting treatment of Anita Hill and the way male politicians and their allies in the media worked to smear her as "a bit nutty and a bit slutty" in the words of one right-wing journalist.[xxiv] If there was any sexual turbulence in the work place, those indulging in the anti-Hill slurs were saying, the fault must be with the women complainants. From this position, one does not have to go far to join Iran's Ayatollahs in their retrograde ideology, which is likewise premised on the assumption that women are unstable and sexually voracious and that, where there are sexual tensions in the public domain, it is women who are the problem.

The Senate's trivializing Hill's charges of sexual harassment and the insulting treatment meted out to her by the Senate Judiciary Committee prompted a feminist backlash and contributed to the victories of women candidates in the elections of 1992. Other major scandals erupted in the 1990s, like the Tailhook scandal in the Navy and the exposes of Senator Bob Packwood's harassment of women, as well as in the form of a variety of sexual harassment lawsuits brought against major companies. These exposed the indignities that male superiors and colleague routinely inflicted on working women.

After these exposes, no informed American could say that the problems of how men and women were to interact in a civilized manner in the work place had been successfully resolved. Of course, there were various attempted solutions -- diversity education, sensitivity training, and the setting of work place guidelines. Ultimately, there was the threat of embarrassing publicity and exposure to liability that could result from sexual harassment lawsuits. Perhaps these offered prospects of progress in the long term, but they did not reassure American women that they could expect to have their dignity respected if they chose to participate in spheres of work formerly reserved for men or where they worked alongside men. Viewing the 1994 film "Disclosure," which dramatized the highly atypical plight of a fictional male victim of sexual harassment by a predatory female boss, American women might well wonder if a backlash were under way. If so, it would not be the first time the U.S. media were

used to vilify single career women and to portray men as innocent victims of women who perfidiously alleged seduction or used false charges of sexual harassment to destroy their careers and families.[xxv]

Of course, U.S. women would not for a minute have accepted Iran's "Islamic" solution to the problem of men sexually harassing women, a solution that made women pay the price for male aggression and misbehavior, nor would they have agreed that the need to protect women from male sexual importunings justified the radical policy of mandatory segregation of men and women in schools and employment. However, if they looked beyond the exotic "Islamic" elements in Iranian policy, they would have realized that, in its own unenlightened way, it aimed at dealing with problems with which U.S. women had become depressingly familiar.

These examples suggest how stereotyping and the assumption of Islamic particularism impede recognition of the common dilemmas facing American women and women in the Middle East. That is not to say that feminists in the U.S. and the Middle East are always fighting identical battles. The historical contexts in which the battle for women's rights has been carried out in the U.S. and in the Middle East have often differed.

Women's fight for equality in the Middle East has been intertwined with national liberation wars and the challenges of nation-building. With few exceptions, Middle Eastern countries have emerged as modern nations out of campaigns waged against

direct or indirect Western domination, in which the West and its associated values were often defined as inimical to the survival of the local culture. One of the contrasts between the traditional, patriarchal societies of the Middle East and Western societies was the relatively greater autonomy accorded to European women. In the context of anti-European nationalist movements, preserving the patriarchal family often became associated in peoples' minds with pride in and respect for the local culture and religious values. Conversely, demands for women's emancipation could become associated with betrayal of the indigenous culture and servile imitation of the culture of European enemy.[xxvi] Thus, the question of rights for Muslim women and women's role in society has also often been too closely linked with defining moments in Middle Eastern history -- national crises, wars of independence, and setbacks to the nationalist agenda -- for the focus to be on the merits of women's demands for enhanced rights and freedoms.

In contrast, U.S. feminists did not have to carry out campaigns for women's rights in contexts where the survival of the nation and its culture was threatened. In the U.S., where independence and sovereignty have long been secure, feminists by and large pursued the cause of female equality throughout periods of relative calm and prosperity, with major campaigns being carried out in the decades before the first World War and then in the period from the 1960s onward. However, even in the U.S., fights against foreign enemies could become pretexts for clamping

down on feminists. During World War I suffragists who were picketing before the White House were called traitors. When male thugs violently assaulted them, the police arrested the victims, the suffragist pickets.[xxvii] By 1917, the tactics of repression directed against suffragists for their supposedly treasonous demands had escalated. Suffragists were actually arrested and sentenced to penance in the workhouse, where they lived in squalor under primitive conditions fully worthy of Solzhenitsyn's gulag.[xxviii] The arrests of the suffragists were supported by the establishment press, which characterized their protests as treasonous,[xxix] -- even though it was hard to imagine that the Kaiser and his generals were deriving much comfort from the suffragists' demands for voting rights.

The notion that U.S. suffragists menaced the national security was in and of itself ludicrous. It was particularly farfetched given that so many of the active suffragists were society matrons from America's wealthy elite. The suppression of dissident women's voices in a country as powerful as the U.S. is should be borne in mind when evaluating how more fragile regimes in the Middle East have lashed out at women who have protested discriminatory laws and patriarchal tradition, condemning them as traitors.

The mainstream feminist campaigns in the U.S. were dominated by white women and were significantly less complicated than struggles being waged for equality by American women of color. The dilemmas of Muslim women, who often had to claim their rights

in tumultuous times when the independence of their countries and the integrity of their cultures were under siege, resembles to some extent the predicament of women of color in the U.S. Like their sisters in the Middle East, women of color in the U.S. have had to fight for their own rights in the context of a larger struggle for self-determination being waged on behalf of their own people and culture. This meant that they had to wrestle with delicate questions such as whether their demands for equality were severable from the demands for equality on behalf of all members of their race and whether pushing their feminist agenda could weaken the struggle for racial equality. They also were challenged by men of their race, who asked them whether their primary loyalties were to the cause of women's rights or to the cause of the advancement of their people as a whole. To the extent that they accorded priority to the struggle for women's rights, women of color were vulnerable to charges of selfishness and betraying their people. Middle Eastern Muslim women could readily identify with their predicament.

Turkey is the exception that proves the rule. Turks are no less devout than other Muslims, but unique historical circumstances have made the accommodation of the modern model of male-female equality easier in their society than in other Muslim countries. Turkey is the one Muslim country where loyalty to the nationalist cause and the struggle against European Imperialism became identified with support for liberating women from the shackles of tradition. This successful blending of the themes of

the liberation of the nation and the liberation of the women of the nation took place under one of the most remarkable figures of modern history -- Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938), the extraordinarily bold leader who single-handedly brought together the coalition of forces that were to wage the War of Independence and to establish the modern Turkish Republic. Under Ataturk's leadership, Turkish women made tremendous sacrifices in fighting for national independence, and Ataturk was determined that their sacrifices should not have been rendered in vain.

Some members of the Turkish elite had been calling for women's emancipation since the late nineteenth century, but there was no powerful feminist lobby pressuring Ataturk to make concessions once his battles were won. Acting simply out of considerations of fairness and the conviction that granting women full rights would make the fledgling Republic stronger, Ataturk in the 1920s replaced Islamic law across the board with laws imported from Europe. However unhappy they were with Ataturk's reforms, Islamic clerics and other Turkish conservatives could not stand against this formidable personage whose heroic services had saved Turkey from the dismemberment that had been contemplated under the Treaty of Sevres.

Before taking the fateful step that would for once and for all Europeanize Turkey's system of family law, Ataturk ended his own troubled marriage by divorcing his wife Latife. He did this expeditiously, exploiting the husband's traditional prerogative in Islamic law of terminating his marriage by uttering a divorce

formula that had the legal effect of a unilateral, extrajudicial termination of the marriage. Proving that Middle Easterners are every bit as complicated as people in the West, this famous champion of women's rights seems to have been aggrieved by the assertiveness and outspokenness of his own wife, a spirited woman whom he had chosen precisely because she was highly educated and modern in her way of thinking, a symbol of what he wanted all Turkish women to become -- at least as long as he personally was not discommoded.

Although equality was granted them by the unilateral fiat of one man, Turkish women were quick to seize their new opportunities and to demonstrate that they appreciated their new freedoms. Decades later, Ataturk would have been pleased to see that his calculations were borne out, and that, except in backward rural areas, Turkish women had largely abandoned the veil, that they pursued educational opportunities, and that they were participating in large numbers in the professions. Energetic feminist groups guard the advances that women have won and demand dismantling of remaining islands of discriminatory treatment. That a woman professor with an economics Ph.D. was elected as Turkey's Prime Minister in 1993 further vindicated Ataturk's hopes that his reforms would open the door to important gains by women and justified his confidence that democratic government would serve the modernization process.

For anyone who spends time in the Middle East, the esteem in which Ataturk is still held stands out. More than five decades

after his death, pictures and portraits of him are ubiquitously displayed in Turkey, in private as well as public. Elsewhere in the Middle East, it is the custom for a leader's pictures to be on display, but only during the leader's lifetime -- and generally under duress. It is a tribute to the enduring stature of the Middle Eastern leader who did the most for women's emancipation that he remains sincerely venerated to this day.

Despite the innovative boldness that enabled him to make the clean break with Islamic tradition, Ataturk held back from using law to abolish the veil. A calculating military strategist, he eschewed battles that he deemed unprofitable, and it appears that he judged that the Turkish woman's attachment to her veil could not be effectively challenged by a head-on assault.[xxx] Ataturk appreciated that he would have to wait till the impact of women's education and his other reforms convinced women to dispense with archaisms like the veil.

Ataturk, who believed fervently that modernization was necessary, would have been taken aback by the trend that manifested itself in the 1980s for urban Turkish women to join Islamic fundamentalist groups and to don a kind of veil, often a head scarf. How, he would wonder, could women turn their backs on progress that had been achieved? He might not immediately be able to perceive that there is an enormous difference between the role of the veil in Iran and Saudi Arabia and the role of the head scarf in Turkey. Today wearing a head scarf may serve as a symbol of personal piety and a protest against the secular order,

which many consider corrupt, soulless, and decadent. Such protest does not mean that women are not affected by Ataturk's legacy. Indeed, recent observations of Turkish women who wear the head scarf and are associated with Islamic fundamentalism reveal that they are far from meekly accepting male authority or to giving up the opportunities Ataturk's reforms opened for them. They want to combine a revived Islamic culture and advances in women's status.[xxxi]

In addition, the head scarf in Turkey may also be worn without any tie-in to a particular political agenda. For example, a Turkish woman might decide to cover her hair simply because she thought it appropriate because was getting older, the reason given by a retired Turkish teacher in an April 1994 interview.[xxxii] Since the interview was taking place after the electoral successes of the fundamentalist Refah Party in several urban areas, one might have assumed that the woman was under the influence of reactionary ideologues, who have been pressing women to revert to the veil. However, in her Ankara apartment, where the teacher had a Quranic verse displayed next to a portrait of Kemal Ataturk, she asserted: "No political party has the right to say you have to wear a veil. Women will not accept it because Ataturk has given us our rights."[xxxiii] That is, for her, as for many Turkish women, her fidelity to Islam coexisted with a strong sense of women's entitlement to freedom and rights. That she herself preferred to wear a head scarf in no way disposed her to

accept the idea that it could legitimately be imposed on other Muslim women who wanted to go about bareheaded.

The exceptional situation in Turkey highlights the situation of women denied equality in other more typical Muslim countries. Naturally, the fate of women in post-revolutionary Iran affords a chilling spectacle for women in societies like Algeria that may be on the verge of succumbing to Islamic fundamentalism.[xxxiv] In Algeria, women made enormous sacrifices in fighting for the nationalist cause in the war of liberation against the French, but, when the war was won, there was no Ataturk to reward them with new rights and freedoms. After Algerian independence in 1962, women were pressured to abandon their ambitions for the new freedoms that they had been promised, and in 1984 the supposedly socialist and revolutionary regime imposed over women's protests a family law based on medieval Islamic rules that relegated Algerian women to a subordinate status. Meanwhile, members of the ruling clique oppressed Algerians while feathering their own nests and pursuing economic policies that were ruinous for the country. When fundamentalists began mobilizing the discontented masses against the government, Algerian women were faced with two awful choices -- supporting a corrupt, unpopular, repressive regime with no sympathy for women's rights or a dynamic fundamentalist movement with widespread popular appeal, which had a retrograde program that would likely tighten restraints on women and eliminate the few freedoms that they still enjoyed.

What valuable human resources have been squandered in Iran and may be on the verge of being lost to Algeria if fundamentalists take over there is illustrated by the case of Eman al-Bedah, a young Kuwaiti woman whom I came to know in the course of two human rights missions to Kuwait. Eman by herself is enough to unsettle Western stereotypes about Middle Eastern Arab women and to highlight via contrast the demeaning and misleading character of images purveyed by films like "True Lies." An independent-minded single woman with an engineering degree, Eman speaks English like an American and dresses in casual Western attire, favoring clothes from stores like the Gap. Her style of dress is not unusual in Kuwait, where women commonly wear Western clothes, whereas Kuwaiti men generally like to go about swathed in their traditional long robes. Although more soft-spoken and gentler in manner than the average American woman, Eman has an unpretentious style and a ready laugh that would put any American at ease.

Eman and her sister happened to be the only members of the family in residence in the family villa in Kuwait City in August of 1990. Instead of decamping when Saddam Hussain's forces invaded Kuwait, the stout-hearted Eman decided to stay and fight the unwelcome Iraqi intrusion. The fight was to be conducted in circumstances that might remind Americans of the scenario of the film "Home Alone," where a child suddenly takes on adult responsibilities when he is accidentally left behind when the family rushes off for a Christmas vacation in Paris. Eman and

other Kuwaitis who chose to remain in their country were "Home Alone," because, as soon as word came of the Iraqi invasion, all Sabahs (the royal family) and government officials fled across the border to Saudi Arabia. Kuwaitis suddenly had the experience of being freed from the repressive rule of the Sabah dynasty, of being able to conduct their lives without authority figures who could gainsay their plans or threaten them with punishment if they provoked royal displeasure. This was a unique experience for contemporary Arabs, who are accustomed being controlled by governments that are at the least authoritarian, and often totalitarian. Of course, the Iraqis were on the scene, but they were more like marauding, savage criminals than authority figures. Government in any meaningful sense had to come from the Kuwaitis themselves. In this situation, where hierarchical Kuwaiti society was, so to speak, decapitated, women suddenly began to play a more equal and important role. In the life or death struggle between Kuwaiti and Iraqi, the gender of a Kuwaiti ceased to matter. Changed political conditions, rather than religious change, set the stage for the unleashing of women's potential.

Eman's father was anxiously awaiting news from his daughters in London, where he happened to be stranded. He found out what Eman was doing the hard way, when a home video was smuggled out of Kuwait and played for the Kuwaitis gathered in London. The tape was of the daring anti-Iraqi demonstration that was carried out by Kuwaiti women immediately after the invasion. In the

front row was Eman, leading the chants demanding an immediate Iraqi withdrawal. This was the beginning of Eman's heroic exploits, which revealed that under the surface of this mild-mannered Kuwaiti engineer, there lurked a superwoman who was merely waiting for the opportunity to prove her altruism, fearlessness, and resourcefulness. Eman's tale is one unlikely ever to be told in Western films, which prefer to depict Arab women like the contemptible female terrorist in "True Lies."

The Iraqi military and security forces indulged in plunder, murder, rape, and torture, and they sought to capture and kill Kuwaitis who engaged in resistance activity. This did not deter Eman from collaborating with a network of other young Kuwaitis who worked for the resistance and sought to do what they could to succor their fellow Kuwaitis and to bedevil the sinister Iraqi occupiers. For Eman, however, these extremely dangerous exploits did not suffice. She was worried about the well-being of Kuwaitis who had been captured and taken away to Iraqi prisons. To her way of thinking, it was time to take action. So, she proceeded to get on a bus, rode off to Baghdad, and told Iraqi officialdom that she, Eman, wanted to check on how her fellow Kuwaitis were faring in Iraqi detention. As can sometimes happen when an initiative is taken that is so outrageous, so inconceivable that no bureaucratic obstacles have been created to forestall it, Eman won permission from Iraqi officials in Baghdad for her mission. Thus armed, she began weekly cycles of bus rounds, visiting Kuwaitis detained in various Iraqi jails,

facilitating communication between prisoners and their families, and bringing detainees the things that they most needed. To hear her speak of these rounds in her modest, matter of fact manner, one would think that undertaking these arduous, perilous trips on enemy territory should be regarded as an entirely humdrum matter.

After the Iraqi defeat in the Gulf War and the liberation of Kuwait in early 1991, the Kuwait Association to Defend War Victims was formed by young Kuwaitis like Eman who had collaborated in the resistance. This association was committed to securing the release of Kuwaitis still held in Iraqi detention, succoring victims of the occupation and the war, and defending human rights. Eman was the sole woman on the executive committee, but there were many other women in the organization. One could find KADWV members toiling away in the evenings in the modest school building that served as association headquarters. Women members came in unescorted and freely interacted with male members. Discussion was lively and uninhibited. People sported a wide range of attire, from traditional Arab dress to Western style clothes. The KADWV developed into an important human rights advocacy group, and Eman's outstanding contributions to the cause of human rights were recognized by a special award accorded her by the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights in New York.

Once the Iraqis retreated, the Sabahs returned from their safe havens abroad to resume their autocratic rule over Kuwait. With the Sabahs again ensconced in their lavishly refurbished

palaces in Kuwait City, the defense of human rights loomed as a major concern of the KADWV. Although they felt obliged to reconvene the Kuwaiti parliament, the Sabahs remained hostile to democracy and proved unwilling to tolerate free discussion of human rights issues. After waiting till world attention was distracted by other crises in 1993, the Sabahs stepped up their repression and ordered the dissolution of the KADVW and all other independent human rights organizations.

One of the questions faced early on by the Sabahs was how to react to demands for expanded rights for women in post-liberation Kuwait. While still in exile, the Sabahs had said that women would have the vote, and, given the enormous contributions that Eman and others had made during the occupation, they had certainly earned the franchise. However, voting rights were not extended to Kuwaiti women. Eman's disappointment, although expressed with her usual mildness, was palpable.[xxxv]

Kuwaiti women are not resigned to their lot. They have continued to campaign on behalf of equal rights for women. Some members of parliament are also pressing for reforms that would give women the right to vote. However, they have to contend not only with antipathy towards women's rights on the part of conservative tribal forces but also with a powerful Islamic fundamentalist movement, which would like to see women kept veiled, segregated from men, and relegated to the home. Peering over the border is Big Saudi Brother, feeling threatened by the potentially destabilizing influence of Kuwaiti freedoms and

anxious that the franchise not be given to Kuwaiti women. Kuwaiti women fear that, if there are signs of domestic progress towards giving women greater rights, the powerful Saudis will warn the Sabahs to retreat.

The contrasting plights of women in Kuwait and Iran and Saudi Arabia were striking and such as to awaken any careful observer to the perils of treating Islamic culture and the Middle East as monoliths. If Eman had lived on the Iranian or Saudi sides of the border, she would have been deprived of many rights. She would have found it difficult to study engineering. No independent human rights organization like the KADWV would have been allowed to exist even temporarily, and, being a woman, she would not have been allowed to associate freely with male colleagues. She would have been exposed to arrest on charges of immoral behavior for going about in the evenings unescorted or attending her executive board meetings as the sole female. And, she would have had to be enshrouded in a veil. However, in Iran Eman would have had the right to vote -- albeit only in elections where candidates committed to support the regime's "Islamic ideology" were allowed to run for office. If she lived in Saudi Arabia, the question of her voting would never even have arisen, since Saudi Arabia's royal family has declared democracy unsuitable for the region and allows no Saudis to vote, irrespective of sex. Of course, she could not even have driven a car, since the Saudis claim that Islam does not allow women to drive cars. In Iraq, in contrast, the secular Ba'thist ideology

would have given her rights equal to men in most areas outside the family. However, she would be crushed by living under one of the world's most brutal totalitarian regimes and by coping with the vagaries of a dictator who in 1990 had, as previously noted, effectively declared open season on Iraqi women, giving Iraqi men an unconditional license to kill female relatives.

Does Eman's situation as a woman in the Middle East have anything in common with the lot of American women? There are parallels. For example, U.S. women who worked and sacrificed for the nation in World War II, only to be dismissed from their jobs once peace came, might find that they had something in common with Eman and other Kuwaiti women. They both had first enjoyed the chance to move out of their traditional roles in exceptional times and, with a return to normality, they found that the gains that they thought they had won were subject to being canceled out. Eman lives in a country where article 29 of the constitution guarantees equality in public rights to all people, regardless of race, origin, language, or religion, but provides no protection against denials of rights on the basis of sex. After the defeat of the ERA in 1982, which was engineered by the machinations of powerful conservative forces and religious leaders, U.S. women seemed condemned to live without a constitutional equality guarantee.[xxxvi] The refusal in November of 1994 of the U.S. Senate to ratify the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was another indication that the U.S. provided no very hospitable

climate for the notion of full legal equality for women.[xxxvii] This was a convention that other Western democracies had comfortably ratified many years before.

In terms of rights, U.S. women lag behind their sisters in Europe, remaining in some respects on a par with the women of Kuwait. Furthermore, with the message sent in the November 1994 elections, which revealed white males' support for candidates with right-wing agendas, it seemed that a conservative male backlash was mounting against U.S. women who challenged traditional gender roles.[xxxviii] The conservative surge was accompanied by campaign of searing invective directed at Hillary Rodham Clinton, who seemed to be a lightening rod for the mounting frustrations and anger of men threatened by feminism. Heeding these developments, U.S. women, lacking rights guarantees grounded either in constitutional law or international treaty commitments, might ask themselves how much more secure their rights were than the rights of Middle Eastern women threatened by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

Conclusion

One can see how unproductive it must be to try to generalize about women in the Middle East by reference to stereotypes of Islamic culture. Many of the problems of Middle Eastern women have no obvious connection to Islam and are not specific to the

culture of the region. The types of discrimination and oppression they face may simply reflect the conditions of patriarchal societies or prevailing sexism. Or, they may be linked to circumstances that are specific to a given country or milieu. The problem of women's rights in the Middle East must be seen as part of the more general problems of the lack of democratic freedoms and protections for human rights in the region and the ingrained patterns of devaluing women that one finds in societies around the globe. With democratization, there is hope that women may look forward to greater progress.

In this connection, one should recall that all the three Muslim countries that have recently had free, democratic elections have wound up with women leaders -- Prime Ministers Bhutto of Pakistan, Ciller of Turkey, and Zia of Bangladesh. Unfortunately, not all women politicians are committed to advancing women's rights to the degree that Norway's Gro Harlem Brundtland is, but women leaders do at least have the potential to shake up systems that are badly in need of shaking up. Powerful women are rare in the East and in the West. If one thinks how long it may be before a woman Prime Minister of a Muslim country shakes hands with a woman who is President of the United States of America, one may wonder which side in the end will stand to learn more from the other.

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i. See Samuel Huntington,"The Clash of Civilizations?" Foreign Affairs, Summer 1993, 22-49. I have critiqued this article in "Universal Versus Islamic Human Rights: A Clash of Cultures or a Clash with a Construct?" Michigan Journal of International Law 15 (1994), 307-404.

ii. One sees this embodied in Arnold Schwarzenegger's grotesque sexual humiliation of his screen wife and the film's portrayals of women generally, who are depicted as fumbling dimwits and invariably labelled "bitch" or "pussy."

iii. See No penalty for Iraqis who kill wayward women relatives, Reuter Library Report, March 13, 1990, available in LEXIS, NEXIS Library; Iraq's Bid for Ethical Values, The Independent, March 20, 1990, available in LEXIS, NEXIS Library.

iv. Qur'an 24:2-4, 4:19-20. See also the discussion in Ann Elizabeth Mayer, "Libyan Legislation in Defense of Arabo-Islamic Sexual Mores," American Journal of Comparative Law 8 (1980), 295-311.

v. See Qur'an 24:4-9; Mayer, "Libyan Legislation," 311-12.

vi. Wife Abuse in Pakistan Driven into Open, Chicago Tribune, July 19, 1994, available LEXIS, NEXIS Library.

vii. Id.

viii. Pakistan-Women: Justice for Zainab Noor, Inter Press Service, July 17, 1994, available in LEXIS, NEXIS Library.

ix. Wife Abuse in Pakistan.

x. Id.

xi. See, for example, Ms. September/October 1994, a special issue of the magazine that was dedicated to domestic violence.

xii. Ms., September/October 1994, 1.

xiii. See "Outrage Over 18 Months for a Killing," New York Times, Oct. 21, 1994, A18.

xiv. One is reminded of Christ's words admonishing those about to stone the woman taken in adultery: "He who is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." John, VIII, 7. This is scarcely a warrant for a husband's executing his unfaithful spouse.

xv. The notorious 1994 Bobbitt case would be interesting to analyze in this connection, with its peculiar sequence of a wife's retaliation for her husband's abuse, two ensuing trials, and the strange aftermath, as John Bobbitt went on to batter again even while embarking on a new career as a pornographic movie star. Unfortunately, there are too many angles to permit an adequate dissection in the course of this short chapter.

xvi. "Again, a `Passion Killer' gets away with Murder," USA Today, October 20, 1994, 12.

xvii. See Gail Diane Cox, "Some Cry Psychobabble; others see increased sensitivity in jurors," National Law Journal, May 9, 1994, A1; Tom Tugend,"'Cultural defense' plea gets sentence lowered," The Jerusalem Post, March 29, 1994, 3.

xviii. "Divorce Iranian Style: In Court, Islamic Law Honors the Husband. The Wife Has Few Rights The Mullahs Will Concede; Battering Is No Grounds,"Wall Street Journal, November 8, 1994, 1.

xix. "Courts in Jordan: A Fugitive's Prospects," The New York Times, Aug 1, 1994, B4.

xx. Id.

xxi. Anna Quindlen, "Public and Private: Justice for Nina," New York Times, July 20, 1994, A19.

xxii. If convicted of murdering his wife on the grounds of her suspected infidelity in Jordan, Abequa was subject to a hanging penalty.

xxiii. This polarization continues. See the defense of Thomas in John Danforth, Resurrection. The Confirmation of Clarence Thomas (New York: Viking, 1994). Danforth is both a Senator and Christian minister and treats the campaign to get Thomas on the

Supreme Court as a religious crusade. Danforth's appeals to religion in connection with his admitted attempts to destroy the reputation of Anita Hill remind one of the Iranian policy of appealing to religion to attack uppity women. Like Iran's mullahs, Danforth wielded religion in a campaign to a discredit woman who challenged male authority. The discreditable tactics employed by Hill's detractors to destroy her reputation and the evidence supporting her veracity are chronicled in Jane Mayer and Jill Abramson, Strange Justice. The Selling of Clarence Thomas. (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1994).

xxiv. This catchy phrase was coined by David Brock, a journalist with the conservative American Spectator, has made a cottage industry of pillorying Anita Hill since she was elevated to the stature of feminist icon. The protracted conservative onslaught on Hill's reputation suggests how much U.S. conservatives believed was at stake in this sexual harassment case, how essential they deemed it to preserve Thomas' credibility as a mouthpiece for right-wing political tenets, and how worried they were about the damaging potential of cases suggesting that men were at fault for creating hostile work environments for women.

xxv. Susan Faludi's important study, Backlash. The Undeclared War against American Woman (New York: Crown, 1991) brilliantly dissects the strategies of leaders of the anti-feminist backlash and the way they have used the media to discredit feminism and

make independent career women into monsters. Her discussion of the evolution in the plot of the blockbuster film "Fatal Attraction" is particularly illuminating in this regard. What was originally meant to be the story about the comeuppance of a married man who strayed was transformed into a tale in which the single career woman who seduced him became the villain.

xxvi. Feminists writing in the West may also promote this point of view. See, for example, Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). The book treats Middle Easterners who in any way seem to be inclined to use Western models as traitors to their own culture. This tendency is criticized in Reza Afshari, "Egalitarian Islam and Misogynist Islamic Tradition: A Critique of the Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic History and Heritage," Critique. Journal of Critical Studies of Iran and the Middle East, Spring 1994, 13-34. For a discussion of the situation of women in Algeria written from the standpoint of an author who is preoccupied with the evils of colonialism and the struggle against it, see Marnia Lazreg, The Eloquence of Science (New York: Routledge, 1994).

xxvii. See Clarice Stasz, The Vanderbilt Women. Dynasty of Wealth, Glamour, and Tragedy (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 242.

xxviii. Id., 244.

xxix. Id., 245.

xxx. This is forgotten by Leila Ahmed, who classifies Ataturk with the Iranian ruler Reza Shah as a Westernizing reformer who savagely attacked the veil. See Ahmed, 164-65. Reza Shah imprudently decided to ban the veil long before Iranian attitudes had evolved to accept such a measure.

xxxi. See Binnaz Toprak, "Women and Fundamentalism in Turkey," in Identity Politics and Women:Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective, Valentine Moghadam, ed.(Boulder: Westview, 1994), 293-306.

xxxii. See Islamic Party's Electoral Victory Wakeup Call to Turk Secularism; Fear of Militants Still not Widespread, Chicago Tribune, April 14, 1994, available in LEXIS, NEXIS Library.

xxxiii. Id.

xxxiv. See the discussion of Iranian women's life after Khomeini's takeover in In the Eye of the Storm. Women in Post-revolutionary Iran, Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl, eds. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

xxxv. Not surprisingly, the American government has not used its post Gulf War influence to insist that Kuwait give women equal rights. Indeed, since 1991 the annual State Department reports on human rights in Kuwait have been in the way of apologias for the regime, seeking to disguise the level of discrimination against women. In this connection, compare the Kuwait chapters

in the annual State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices from the year 1991 onward with their critical appraisals in the relevant Critique, the assessment of the State Department's human rights reporting that is published annually by the Lawyers Committee on Human Rights. (The author was involved in putting together these appraisals for the Lawyers Committee.)

xxxvi. Of course, U.S. women do have the consolation of a guaranteed right to vote in the Nineteenth Amendment.

xxxvii. The U.S. had signed the convention under President Jimmy Carter. Under the subsequent Republican administrations, there was little support for ratifying a treaty that would commit the U.S. to achieving full equality for women. With the advent of the Clinton administration, the executive branch did attempt to persuade the Senate to ratify.

xxxviii. See the commentary on this phenomenon by Susan Estrich in "The Last Victim," The New York Times Magazine, December 18, 1994, 54-55.