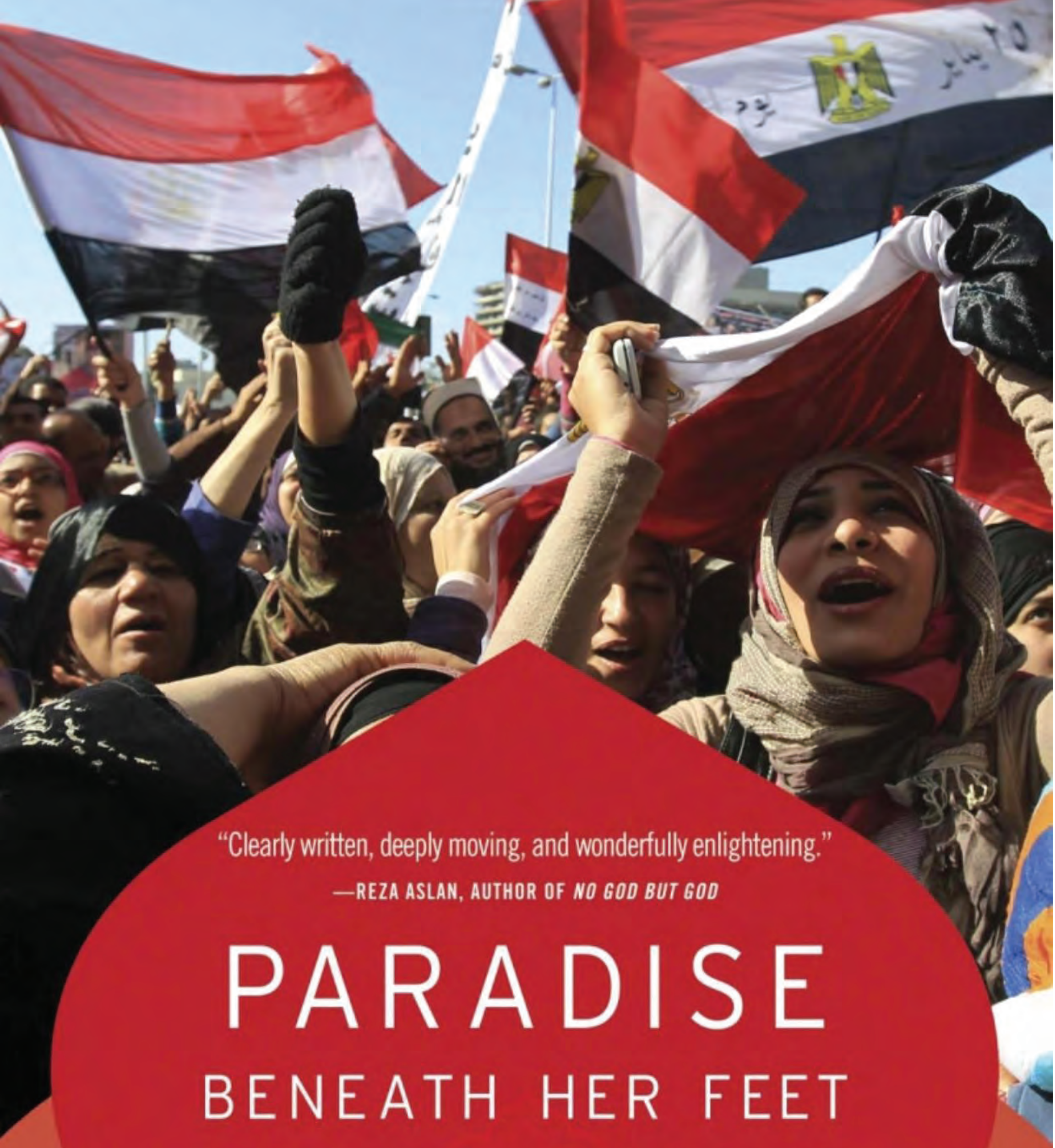

"Clearly written, deeply moving, and wonderfully enlightening."
—REZA ASLAN, AUTHOR OF *NO GOD BUT GOD*

PARADISE
BENEATH HER FEET

HOW WOMEN ARE TRANSFORMING THE MIDDLE EAST

ISOBEL COLEMAN

WITH A NEW PREFACE AND AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR

PARADISE BENEATH HER FEET

HOW WOMEN ARE TRANSFORMING THE MIDDLE EAST

Isobel Coleman

A Council on Foreign Relations Book

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INTRODUCTION

Education is like sun and water. Without it,
you can't grow anything. But if girls are educated,
they can change our whole society.
—Afghan mullah, 2004

The village is nothing more than a few mud houses clinging to a rocky hillside. A beaten footpath forces its way between stone walls, past broken orchards of stunted fruit trees, and across the dry creek bed that gouges its way down the slope and across the valley. We are in Hazarajat, the central highlands of Afghanistan. The snow-capped peaks of the Hindu Kush mountain range loom over the plains. There are no roads. After a twelve-hour overland trek from Kabul, our old Toyota Land Cruiser strains the last half mile to the village. The car's wheels bump and spin excruciatingly over watermelon-sized rocks and the hard-packed dirt of the arid winter fields.

My traveling companion, Dr. Shukria Hassan, is a quiet, unassuming woman in her mid-forties whose gray-streaked hair and ruddy face creased from the sun make her look old beyond her years. She is a local daughter, well-known in these parts for her community health work with the Hazara, an ethnic minority treated as poor cousins in Afghan society. She serves as the health director for Future Generations Afghanistan, a local nonprofit organization that helps bring health-care and educational improvements to remote villages like this.

I had heard that Future Generations was working with local religious leaders to provide literacy classes for girls, and I wanted to learn more. Afghan society was still reeling from the Taliban's severe Islamic fundamentalism that had fiercely suppressed women in the name of religious purity, even prohibiting girls from attending school. But here were Afghan mullahs, heads of their local religious communities, consciously using the mosque itself as a classroom for girls. Not only were they defying Taliban extremism against girls' education, they were also invoking Islam as justification for their actions.

Knowing my interest in girls' education in the Middle East, part of my research for the Council on Foreign Relations, the New York–based foreign policy organization where I work, Dr. Hassan offered to show me this mosque-based school in Hazarajat. I knew that if international efforts to get girls in school in Afghanistan had any hope of success, they would have to avoid the cultural backlash that had doomed previous initiatives. They would have to work with local groups, they would need the support of local leaders, like this Hazara mullah, and, most important, they would have to find ways to work with the pervasive and powerful force of Islam, not against it. Indeed, having Islam on the side of change might be the only way to move forward with sensitive cultural shifts like girls' schooling, or more broadly, women's empowerment, in conservative Islamic societies like Afghanistan.

When our Land Cruiser can go no farther, we get out and hike the path down the hill to the village mosque where the classes for girls are held. Spring is near, and the last patches of snow on the hillside are melting in the weak sun. The mosque is indistinguishable from the other houses except for a flag of green, the color of Islam, flying above its straw-and-mud-thatched rooftop. The mullah, waiting in the doorway, shoos the chickens away and beckons us inside. We give each other a traditional greeting, right hand pressed over our hearts with a nod of acknowledgment. Most conservative Muslim men refuse to touch a woman who is not a close family member so I have learned to avoid the awkwardness that usually ensues when I extend my hand to shake.

The mosque consists of one large room, lit by harsh light from the bare bulb dangling from the ceiling. It is slightly dank, with strong body odors mixing with the unmistakable smell of wet wool. A gas heater in the corner struggles to warm the room while adding a distinct propane smell to the mix. Money sent home from village refugees working in other countries paid for the mosque's windows and the thick red carpets covering the stone floor. On one side of the room is a poster of the Islamic holy city of Mecca. On the other side hangs a picture of a brooding Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution. The mosque, built and maintained by local families, is about twenty years old. These classes offer the first opportunity for women to use the mosque regularly. Usually they only enter this building for funerals or other specific occasions.

The room is packed with women of all ages, from infants in arms to wizened grandmothers. Most are between the ages of nine and sixteen and all are attending the equivalent of first grade. These students are too old to start in the national school system; about a quarter of them are married, and their mothers-in-law are taking care of their children while they attend these classes. They want to learn to read and write so they can help their children with schoolwork and better solve the family's problems at home. The youngest students—five of them are only six years old—are attending the mosque school since the only state school in the area is more than an hour away by foot, too far for them to walk.

The mullah stands and immediately quiets everyone. This is clearly a special occasion, an improvised town hall meeting in honor of our visit. Flanked by two elderly village leaders, he begins with a short prayer and then politely thanks Dr. Hassan's organization for helping to support girls' education in the village. He also thanks me for making the long journey from Kabul.

Looking around the room, the mullah speaks with the confidence of a convert to a cause. "Education is like sun and water," he says in a strong voice. "Without it, you can't grow anything. But if girls are educated, they can change our whole society." The force and faith behind these simple words could mean a whole world of progress, not just for the girls in this room but for the millions of girls around the globe who are deemed unworthy of an education.

The teacher, Fatima, stands by the mullah's side, beaming with pride. She wears a long dress over baggy pants, her hair carefully covered by a large white cotton scarf. She carefully unfolds a piece of paper and reads, a bit nervously, from a letter written by the students. "Education is better than sitting in a corner of the house . . . The Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him), says that women must be educated . . ." The women and girls sitting on the floor nod in agreement. Fatima has been teaching for eight months, her first experience working outside her home. She is one of the few literate women in the area, having completed high school in the 1960s—Afghanistan's "golden years." The 1960s were a relatively peaceful time for the country, a period of even some small progress, with the building of a few roads and schools under the benign leadership of Afghanistan's last, long-serving king, Zahir Shah.

After Fatima finishes her presentation, I ask the students what they want to be when they grow up. Their dreams come tumbling out. Gulafzar, a ten-year-old with rosy cheeks and huge dark eyes, says she wants to be a doctor; Nahid, a seventeen-year-old mother with a tired face, insists she wants to be a teacher even as she cradles her baby in her arms. Around the room, their young voices ring out: "Teacher . . . doctor . . . doctor . . . pilot . . . teacher . . ." Their enthusiasm is infectious and their dreams speak to the larger thirst for education among Afghan girls.

The closest secondary school, however, is in Ghazni, a six-hour drive from this village under the best of conditions. Since there are no female dorms at the school, it is impossible for girls to attend unless their families relocate to live nearby. I know the odds are low that any of them will be able to continue their education much beyond the equivalent of a few years of primary school. But these girls are arguably among the lucky ones in rural Afghanistan. With strong community support for their education, they at least have a chance to learn to read and write. Despite the fact that polls show that nearly 90 percent of the Afghan population approves of girls' education, nonetheless, among the 10 percent who oppose it, there are extremists who are willing to use violence to impose their conservative views. In vast regions of the country, especially in the south and east, where the conservative Pashtun tribes are predominant and the Taliban has its strongest foothold, few, if any, girls attend school. Even the most determined have been driven away by resurgent Taliban intimidation, including fatal attacks on girls' schools.

The Taliban, an extreme fundamentalist movement, came to power after the years of bitter civil war that engulfed Afghanistan in the wake of the Soviet occupation. In late 1979, Soviet forces invaded the country to prop up Afghanistan's puppet communist government. Then, for nearly a decade, Soviet advisers pushed various modernization plans on the country while fighting a brutal guerrilla war against the Afghan mujahideen, the resistance fighters who battled in the name of holy war, or jihad.

An important aspect of the Soviets' effort to remake Afghanistan focused on women's advancement. The Soviets reasoned that if they forced rural Afghan families to send their girls to school, development would follow. Indeed, female education is highly correlated with improved family health, reduced fertility, and greater national prosperity. However, the Soviets' heavy-handed educational policies, with coed classrooms and men teaching girls, even in the countryside, were seen as subverting the country's social codes and religious laws. Protecting Afghan girls from the godless ways of the Soviets became a powerful rallying cry for the mujahideen. Hundreds of thousands of Afghan families fled the country, many of them telling aid workers in camps in Pakistan that they would rather be refugees and remain true to their Islamic faith than submit their girls to the atheism of Soviet-run schools.

The Soviets failed to tame Afghanistan and on February 15, 1989, the last Soviet tanks retreated. Their withdrawal, however, did not bring the Afghans their longed-for peace. Instead, fighting broke out among the mujahideen fighters themselves, and the country was plunged into a civil war that lasted until 1996. The commanders of various mujahideen groups ruthlessly leveled Kabul as they battled each other for control of the capital city. Whatever "modernizing" the Soviets achieved during their nearly decade-long occupation was soon obliterated.

Out of this chaos, the Taliban emerged from southern Afghanistan. Many Afghans, tired of years of war, initially embraced the brutal peace imposed on the country by this conservative movement. Over time, though, the Taliban's cruelty and extreme interpretations of Islamic law began to take a toll on the Afghan people. Their harsh constraints on women, which they justified in the name of Islam, were particularly onerous. Women were beaten for not wearing the all-encompassing burqa, for appearing in the streets without a male guardian, even for laughing out loud in public. In front of crowds chanting "*Allahu Akbar*" (God is great), the Taliban stoned to death women accused of adultery. Although the toppling of the Taliban in 2001 heralded some improvements for women, educational opportunities remained slim. Even today, schools for rural girls, like this mosque-based effort in Hazarajat, are still the exception.

Later, after the class, Dr. Hassan and I sit on the floor and drink tea with the mullah. The village children press their faces against the window, watching us curiously. Most of the people in the village, including the mullah, have never met a foreigner, let alone an American. They assume that I must work for the government and that I have the power to bring their village the development they desperately need—not just a school, but clean water, electricity, and medicine. I try to explain that I am just a writer, but the mullah presses me with a list of the villagers' needs. He shakes his head sadly when the subject of the Taliban arises. "Islam is the religion of education, for both boys and girls," he explains with a defensiveness now familiar to me from similar conversations with other Afghans. "The Taliban are ignorant people who don't understand the basics of Islam. The Prophet says that women must be educated." The mullah seems proud that he's playing even a small part in reversing the Taliban's educational suicide.

"There's no other place for the women to gather, and it's important for our future that they learn to read . . ." The mullah sighs, and exasperation creeps into his tone. "But the mosque is getting too crowded. It's fine for the short term, but once a school is built, the women should study there." He looks wistfully out the window, at the desolate countryside with no roads, no electricity, and no irrigation for the barren fields. He shrugs his shoulders as if to acknowledge that it might be many years before a school is built in the village. In the meantime, it's the mosque or nothing. "Please, America," he says, looking directly at me, "don't leave us."

In 2002, Leslie Gelb, then the president of the Council on Foreign Relations where I was a senior fellow working on the Middle East, asked me to develop a program on women and foreign policy. I hesitated, protesting that I knew very little about gender issues. In fact, a program focused on women's issues struck me as, well, decidedly out of the mainstream. I had studiously avoided taking any women's studies courses in college and graduate school. "Women's rights" for me conjured up images of cranky, privileged women trying to get into all-male golf clubs. I had grown up in a "post-feminist" America, attended good schools, and achieved professional success with the support of important male mentors along the way. Gender issues had never been on my radar screen. Gelb, however, is persistent, and at his urging I read widely. Very quickly, I was intrigued and humbled.

It did not take long for me to understand that women's struggle for justice in much of the world is about the most basic human rights. It is also central to many of the most pressing foreign policy concerns: alleviating poverty, promoting economic development, improving global health, building civil society, strengthening weak and failing states, assisting democratization, tempering extremism. I soon came to appreciate that gender is one of the most critical lenses through which to examine a whole host of foreign policy priorities, and I accepted Gelb's challenge.

From the beginning, the most pressing question for me was how can women's rights progress in those places, like Afghanistan, where deeply entrenched religious and cultural traditions argue against it? Indeed, across the Islamic world, women's rights are one of the most contentious political and ideological issues. Attitudes toward women have helped to define and set apart the broader worldviews of conservative and progressive Muslims. Conservatives link women's piety to the purity and Islamic authenticity of their societies. They use religious justifications to enforce that piety through a limited public role for women, gender segregation, and harsh punishments for any perceived transgressions. Assertions of women's rights are often portrayed as anti-Islamic. For decades, powerful Islamists have successfully smeared women's groups as being slavish followers of an illegitimate, neocolonialist Western agenda.

In this toxic environment, it is clear that women's empowerment, like many things, cannot be imposed on a country or a culture from the outside. Men and women within these conservative communities must first find their own reasons and their own justifications to allow women a fuller role in society. Increasingly, they are finding those reasons within Islam itself. This book is about how those efforts are coming together, slowly, in an emerging global movement of "Islamic feminism" (or Muslim feminism, as it is also called) and how that movement is transforming the broader Middle East.*

Islamic feminism is the promotion of women's rights through Islamic discourse. Just as conservatives have used Islam as a barrier to women's empowerment, Islamic feminists are turning that argument on its head and using Islam to promote gender equality. They argue that Islam, at its core, was intended to be progressive for women and that its teachings support equal opportunities for men and women alike. By firmly grounding their arguments within Islamic discourse, Muslim feminists offer a culturally acceptable and sustainable way to expand opportunities for women. This approach also allows them to press for their rights without feeling that they have to compromise their religious identity. Their efforts hold out the promise of a more stable and prosperous Middle East. Their ideas are part of a broader reform movement within Islam, one of the great ideological struggles of the twenty-first century.

The mullah I met in Hazarajat is an unwitting Islamic feminist in his use of Quranic arguments to support girls' education, but no doubt he would cringe at the term "feminism" in any form, and he would go to great lengths to distance himself from the Western cultural baggage it carries. So too would many of the activists I would term Islamic feminists. They see themselves simply as Muslims pursuing rights for women within Islam. But asked whether they believe that the spirit of the Quran is one of gender equality, and whether Islamic discourse can and should be used to promote women's empowerment, their answers will be a resounding yes.

Islamic feminism incorporates the ideas of numerous Muslim (and

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*Some make distinctions between the terms Islamic feminism and Muslim feminism, noting that Islamic feminism can and does include non-Muslims in the dialogue. Indeed, several non-Muslims have made important contributions to Islamic feminism, including Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, whose 1998 book, *In Search of Islamic Feminism*, was one of the first to explore the emerging movement, and also the scholar Margot Badran, who has been writing and speaking about Islamic feminism for many years.

non-Muslim) intellectuals and activists. Some of its leading proponents are men—distinguished scholars who contend that Islam was radically egalitarian for its time and remains so in many of its texts. Islamic feminists claim that Islamic law evolved in ways inimical to women not due to any inevitability or intention in its core beliefs, but because of selective interpretation by patriarchal leaders. They argue that the worst practices toward women, like those of the Taliban, in fact represent a subversion of Islamic teaching, its corruption by tribal customs and traditions. Seeking to revive the equality that the religion originally bestowed on women, they advocate rereading the Quran, putting the texts in historical context, and disentangling them from patriarchal and tribal practices and other local traditions.

The great potential of Islamic feminism is its grassroots appeal. Secular feminism—both in the Middle East and in the West—has always been the province of urban elites and intellectuals, and that has long been its greatest weakness. Social change takes time to make its way from city salons and urban newspapers to the countryside, especially in places with few roads and little public education. Because it strives to work within the values of Islam, not against them, Islamic feminism has the potential to be embraced by local leaders, perhaps most importantly by religious leaders, like the Hazara mullah, who can lend their authority to the difficult changes at hand.

Islamic feminism can and should be viewed as part of a much larger struggle taking place today within Islam itself. Khaled Abou El Fadl, one of the world's leading Islamic scholars, describes these times as a transformative moment for Islam, a competition between two opposing worldviews—"moderate" versus "puritanical" Islam.[1] (Other scholars use terms such as "liberal" or "progressive" Islam versus "conservative" or "extremist" Islam to explain this same divide.) As Abou El Fadl explains, while all Muslims agree on a core set of beliefs and practices (such as a belief in monotheism, accepting Muhammad as God's messenger on earth, praying five times a day), there are several related areas of profound disagreement. These include differences in understanding and applying Islamic law (sharia), different approaches to modernity, different perspectives on the legitimacy of holy war (jihad) and terrorism, and, of course, different views on the role of women in society.

In every country across the Islamic world, the role of women is contested. Attitudes toward women represent a stark fault line between those promoting economic reform, human rights, and democratization on the one hand and those who adhere to austere, fundamentalist notions of society on the other. The diametrically opposed attitudes between the mullah who is willing to bring girls into his mosque to educate them and the Taliban who burn down girls' schools merely for existing is but one extreme example of how these disagreements play out in various Islamic societies around the world today.

The outcome of this struggle matters enormously. While the more dramatic subjects of jihad and terrorism dominate headlines, it is instead attitudes toward women's rights that will, over the long run, have a far more profound role in shaping the economic and social development of these countries and their interactions with the West.

While women's empowerment can be framed as a moral issue, it is—perhaps most critically—also a vital economic issue. Put simply, economies cannot prosper without the full participation of half the population. Investing in girls' education and creating economic opportunities for women have been proven to have tremendous positive benefits for the broader development of a country. They are powerful levers for raising per capita incomes, and the advantages are transmitted directly to the next generation. Study after study shows that women use their income to invest more in the family than do men. Indeed, as many within the international development community now recognize, women's empowerment is the low-hanging fruit of poverty reduction.

Women's active participation in the public sphere is also critical to the broader development of civil society. It should come as no surprise that countries that suppress women are far more likely to have authoritarian regimes and are more prone to extremism.

In our post-9/11 world, talk of a "clash of civilizations" between the West and the Islamic world is widespread. At the heart of this talk is the presumption that Muslim-majority countries and Western liberal democracies do not share the same values, yet there is a surprising convergence between these groups on one subject in particular: Overwhelming majorities (85 percent or more) in both Western and Muslim-majority countries concur that democracy is the best form of government and the one they desire for their country.[2] Although women's political participation does not necessarily lead to democracy, democracy certainly cannot happen without it.

The big differences in attitudes between the West and Muslim-majority countries arise around social issues. Respondents in Muslim countries are less tolerant of homosexuality, abortion, and divorce. But the biggest gaps involve attitudes toward women, especially in the perspectives of younger generations. While youth in Western societies presume equality between the sexes, younger generations in Muslim countries have, in many cases, grown up in an environment more overtly religious than that of their parents' generation and have remained deeply traditional in their views on gender roles. As these younger generations assume positions of power in their respective countries, it will become even more difficult to find common ground on these issues. As some have noted, what we really have on our hands is a "sexual clash of civilizations," an expanding cultural chasm between Muslim-majority countries and the West over gender.[3]

Undoubtedly, the rise of political Islam, or "Islamism" as it has also been called, has contributed to prevailing conservative views on women in the Middle East. Political Islam began its steady rise in the wake of Egypt's ignominious defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, when cultural pride could no longer sustain the political hopes of millions of Arabs across the Middle East. As the luster of Arab nationalism began to fade, a wave of Islamism swept over the region, filling an ideological vacuum. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the jihadi fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, the ceaseless Arab-Israeli struggle—all have served to invigorate and sustain political Islam across the broader Muslim world. In recent years, the U.S.-led war on terror, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the successes of Hizbullah and Hamas against Israel have infused new energy into Islamist movements. Throughout the region, the Muslim Brotherhood's slogan, "Islam is the solution," continues to resonate with a broad cross section of society that believes that a renewed dedication to Islam is the best way to address their problems.

Islamist movements depict women's freedoms as sowing the seeds of cultural corruption. For many Islamists, women's empowerment—social, economic, or political—represents nothing more than a slippery slope toward Western decadence and godless secularism, toward widespread adultery and prostitution and the end of family life. On these grounds, some religious and tribal leaders resist girls' education, and powerful Islamist pressure groups have successfully protected unequal laws in the name of upholding sharia, particularly in the realm of family law. Linking feminism with the "heresy" of the West is good politics, and helps turn patriarchy into patriotism. This is what makes Muslim feminism a potentially powerful force for women's rights, since it undercuts the argument that feminism is an illegitimate Western influence.

Women's empowerment in the Middle East has also suffered due to its long association with colonialism and secularism. During the tumultuous decades of decolonization in the region, as Western empires retreated, a number of military leaders came to power whose attempts to modernize their societies included forcibly diminishing the role of the religious establishment and overturning centuries of cultural traditions. The best known of these was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the heavy-handed founder of modern Turkey. His success as a leader and a modernizer inspired imitators in other countries who tried to follow in his secular footsteps.

Inevitably, these reformers focused on women since women's lack of education and rights were such a glaring difference with the West. They believed, accurately as it turned out, that improving women's status through better access to education and public life would benefit their country as a whole. While some of these leaders made real investments and reformed laws to benefit women, others made superficial changes, emulating the West to appear "modern." Their shortcut to modernization often began with the cultural touchstone of women's dress, as they struggled, and mostly stumbled, with the symbolic lifting of the veil. For opponents of these cultural changes, feminism became synonymous with a rejection of local culture in favor of that of the West. It became a class issue, with urban elites embracing social change as much as rural traditionalists resisted it. And it also became a political issue, pitting strong-armed rulers with deep ties to former colonial powers against entrenched religious authorities whose status and power were threatened by secularism.

Tied to the fortunes of the region's authoritarian rulers, secular feminism rose and fell as they did. And over the last several decades, from Algiers to Baghdad to Tehran, many of those secular leaders have fallen, undone by rampant corruption, brutality, and ultimately, their failure to deliver on the promises of modernization.

Today, secular governments across the region are constantly fighting a rearguard action against Islamism. Even in Turkey, elections in 2007 delivered political control to the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP), causing many to fear the end of Atatürk's legacy of secularism. The Turkish military threatened to intervene, as it has in the past, to keep the flame of secularism alive, and it continues to keep watch in the wings. In other secular countries, like Tunisia, it takes the mechanisms of a none-too-subtle police state to maintain a secular system.

It is fair to say that secularism as a political force is on life support across the Middle East. While secular opposition groups exist in every country, they are mostly comprised of urban intellectuals and lack a grassroots following. They struggle to compete against better-organized, better-financed, and more widely supported Islamist movements and their networks of mosque-based social services.

Given the cultural, religious, social, and political sensitivities to women's empowerment, as well as the negative connotations of secular feminism and the ascendance of political Islam in the region, Islamic feminism may very well be the most promising way to promote gender justice today across the broader Middle East. Popular or not, women's empowerment remains a crucial aspect of development in these countries. It is a goal in which the broader global community clearly has a vested interest.

While Islamic feminism explicitly works within Islam, and can therefore seem less threatening than secular feminism, it nonetheless questions aspects of traditional Islamic orthodoxy. Many Muslim feminists are strong proponents of *ijtihad*, the process of arriving at new interpretations