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# ISLAMIC FEMINISM TWENTY YEARS ON: THE ECONOMY OF A DEBATE AND NEW FIELDS OF RESEARCH

STÉPHANIE LATTE ABDALLAH

In the intellectual and academic circles of the 1990s, the expression “Islamic feminism” simultaneously came into use in a number of different places around the globe. It first appeared in Iran, where a number of periodicals argued that clerics’ sexist interpretations of religious texts had been incorporated into Islamic law. These publications spread works of Koranic interpretation (*tafsir*) by men and women alike as well as discussions of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) affirming women’s rights. In particular, this school of thought asserted the right to engage in interpretation (*ijtihad*) that promoted gender equality, new roles for women in religious ritual and practice and changes in penal and family law and legal and political practice.

The Iranian debate spurred the emergence of Islamic feminism as an intellectual movement. Articles published in the Iranian magazine *Zanan* (“Women”), which was created in 1992, opened up the prospect of a feminism that took Islam as the source of its legitimacy, thereby stripping feminism of the “pejorative” connotations with which it had hitherto been associated in Iran.<sup>1</sup> Ten years after the Islamic revolution of 1979, religious women from the middle classes became involved in this movement in reaction to discriminatory laws enacted by the regime – a regime that had nevertheless made social justice a theme of its campaign and proclaimed its desire to “restore their ‘true and elevated’ status to women within Islam.”<sup>2</sup> In the long run, this implied establishing equality between the sexes.

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<sup>1</sup> Shahla Sherkat, *Zanan. Le journal de l'autre Iran*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 2009, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Stretching the Limits: a Feminist Reading of the Shari’a in post-Khomeini Iran”, in Mai Yamani (ed.) *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, London: Ithaca Press, 1996, p. 285.

At the same time, exiled female Iranian academics in the United States and Europe declared their adherence to the movement. In 1999, the sociologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini published a pioneering study of the religious debate in Iran<sup>3</sup> in which she analyzed the various currents of thought on gender within the theological seminaries of Qom and their bearing on public discussions of social and political issues in contemporary Iran. In her view, an “indigenous and locally produced feminism”<sup>4</sup> was emerging. Given its local character, this feminism was capable of reconciling principles that had hitherto been constructed in such a way as to bring cultural, religious and national affiliations into conflict with what was widely seen as a “Westernized” feminist discourse of women’s rights.

From the beginning of the 1990s, other women intellectuals from the Arab and Muslim world, including African-American theologian Amina Wudud, a convert to Islam, took part in this process of textual re-interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Some had even anticipated it: in 1978, the sociologist Fatima Mernissi challenged the authenticity of certain misogynist “hadiths” attributed to the Prophet.<sup>6</sup> Originating in intellectual and activist circles in the non-Arab Muslim world, the religious debate over feminism later diversified, becoming part of a broader reformist tendency within Islam.<sup>7</sup>

Despite its innovative anchorage point in the cultural specificity of Islam and the fact that it emerged at a moment when the social sciences were increasingly influenced by subaltern and post-colonial studies,<sup>8</sup> the concept of Islamic feminism came under criticism from all sides. This was as much due to the ambiguous status of the discourse in which it was expressed (scholarly or activist?) as to the diverse array of actors who lead the movement (intellectuals, academics and/or activists). In fact, these same criticisms had been leveled at “feminism” *tout court* several decades earlier. Like other feminisms that have been described as “subaltern”,<sup>9</sup> Islamic feminism has had difficulties establishing its individuality and position relative to the dominant secular or lay feminist schools of thought, which regard themselves as universal in nature. This has been true, not only in Europe and the

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<sup>3</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: the Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*, Princeton University Press, 1999 (London: I.B.Tauris, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xvi

<sup>5</sup> Amina Wudud, *Qur’an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1992, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006

<sup>6</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Le harem politique*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1987 (translated as *Women and Islam: an Historical and Theological Inquiry*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> See, (in this translated issue) Margot Badran, “Re/placing Islamic Feminism” (originally published as “Où en est le féminisme islamique” *Critique internationale*, 46, January-March 2010); and, by the same author, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009. See also Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, “Les féminismes islamiques contemporains: influences sur le féminisme, la sphère religieuse et l’islam politique”, *Revue Islamochristiana*, 37, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> See Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, “Féminismes islamiques et postcolonialité au début du XXIème siècle », in *Revue Tiers Monde*, no.209, January-March 2012.

<sup>9</sup> See the classic texts by Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty.

United States, but also in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The problem has been to move beyond the received idea, especially prevalent in France, of female emancipation as contingent upon some form of secularization. On this view, religion – and Islam, in particular – can only be an impediment to women’s ambitions. As a result, when not being denounced as an Islamist Trojan Horse, Islamic feminism has been seen as a scholarly non-object and even an oxymoron. Moreover, the term itself is rejected by some who, identifying with Islamic traditions (generally the most rigorous), see the muted heritage of a “Western” mode of thought foreign to the various Islamic cultures in the juxtaposition of the words “feminism” and “Islamic”.

There is thus much to be gained from opening a debate on Islamic feminism today. The aim here is to come to terms with a sociological phenomenon that is eminently political in nature but has been dismissed by many as not a proper object of study, tracing its development over the past twenty years: following its formulation in the spaces of minority or peripheral Islam,<sup>10</sup> for example, to its recuperation or invention (though in other terms) in Arab countries. The interest of such an approach is all the greater given the fact that Islamic feminism has rarely been considered as a practice – or, rather, a set of practices – with sociological and political as well as national, local and subjective aspects. These practices are associated with the production of texts (exegesis, feminist or gender-oriented theology), the emergence of new religious roles for women (women preachers and theologians, the *murshidat* and *alamat* of Morocco, female imams etc.), particular movements (women’s organizations and associations with connections to political Islam)<sup>11</sup> or groups (religious circles, courses, Koranic memorization classes, etc.) and everyday religious practices.

The aim of this collection of essays is therefore to extend the field of what has up till now been covered by the term “Islamic feminism” in order to achieve an understanding of the ways in which, in various places across the Muslim and Arab worlds, women today draw upon Islam as a resource. In pursuing this aim, we hope to lay the foundations for a sociology of Islamic feminism(s), its protagonists and the new roles, offices and female subjectivities it has created.<sup>12</sup> Feminist exegesis has played a part in women’s

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<sup>10</sup> Since the 1980s, a number of groups, including Zainah Anwar’s Sisters of Islam organization in Malaysia and Rifaat Hassan’s Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML) network in Pakistan, have played an important role in spreading this current, as have, more recently, the four conferences held by *Junta Islamica* (2005, 2006, 2008 and October 2010) in Barcelona.

<sup>11</sup> In the present text, this term refers to recognized political movements. In the case of Sunni Muslims, most of these have ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. It does not here refer to hardline or Salafigroups.

<sup>12</sup> The debate thus opened has been carried on in “Féminismes islamiques”, *Revue d’études sur les mondes musulmans et la Méditerranée (REMMM)*, no. 128, December 2010. See also the special issue of *Le Mouvement social*, “Engagements féminins au Proche-Orient XXème, XXIème siècle”, no. 231, April-June 2010, edited by Leyla Dakhli and Stéphanie Latte Abdallah.

appropriation of Islam as well as in the individualization and democratization of their relationship with the field of religion. Since the turn of the century, Islamic feminism in its various guises has also influenced female actors in political Islam and its movements as well as the feminist movements of the “Third Wave”.

In what follows, I shall argue for a broad definition of feminism, one encompassing, not only emancipation and equal rights, but also personal development, independence, power, the enlargement of the field of possibilities and the emergence of female individualities and new female subjectivities.

Without necessarily making direct appeal to the notion of Islamic feminism, the work of Nilüfer Göle on female Turkish Islamic activists,<sup>13</sup> Fariba Adelkhah on Iran,<sup>14</sup> Dalal al-Bizri on women active in Lebanese Hezbollah<sup>15</sup> and Lara Deeb on Shi'ite religious women in Beirut<sup>16</sup> have all demonstrated the role of religion in promoting women trajectories. According to these authors, religion is in this way part of a new paradigm of modernity in Arab and Muslim countries. Together with that of others, their work has opened the way to enlarging the concept of Islamic feminism to include social movements and everyday practices.

Use of the term “feminism” to refer to a range of different practices is certainly open to criticism. Nevertheless, given the present state of our knowledge, it seems clear that it is a useful expression to retain, if only for its critical dimension. It disturbs the comfortable antitheses of Orient/Occident and Islam/the West as they have been posited since the onset of women’s mobilizations.

At the beginning of the 20th century, much emphasis was placed on the role of the various colonizing powers as well as on states such as Mustapha Kemal’s Turkey and the Shah’s Iran in the articulation of discourses associating modernity, civilization and westernization with the specific ideas of women’s rights that they promoted. This type of discourse, which continues to be periodically revised up to the present day,<sup>17</sup> identified local Islamic cultures

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<sup>13</sup> Nilüfer Göle, *Musulmanes et modernes: voile et civilisation en Turquie*, Paris: La Découverte, 1993 (paperback edition 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Fariba Adelkhah, *La révolution sous le voile: femmes islamiques d'Iran*, Paris: Karthala, 1991; “Iran: femmes en mouvement, mouvements de femmes”, in Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi and Olivier Fillieule (eds) *Résistance et protestations dans les sociétés musulmanes*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003, pp. 243-269; “Islamophobie et malaise dans l’anthropologie. Etre ou ne pas être (voilée) en Iran”, *Politix*, 80, December 2007, pp. 179-196.

<sup>15</sup> Dalal El-Bizri, “L’ombre et son double: femmes islamistes, libanaises et modernes”, *Les Cahiers du CERMOC*, 13, Beirut: Centre d’études et de recherché sur le Moyen-Orient contemporain, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*, Princeton University Press, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> See Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, “Genre et politique”, in Elizabeth Picard (ed.), *La politique dans le monde arabe*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2006, pp. 127-147.

as backward or traditional.<sup>18</sup> This has led the historian of Egyptian feminism, Leila Ahmed, to label it “colonial feminism”. The earliest formulations of women’s rights in an Islamic vocabulary were thus ignored. At the same time, the links between the first two waves of feminism (from the 1920s to the 1940s and the 1960s to the 1980s, respectively) with nationalist movements and anti-colonial struggles helped establish women as repositories of cultural and national identities.<sup>19</sup> Yet the Islamic political movements of the 1970s and 1980s worked to undermine the original secular feminist movements by reinforcing portrayals of them as imported phenomena.<sup>20</sup> This tended to disqualify secular feminism in the eyes of many, a process only reinforced by the relative failure of nationalist movements through the independent regimes they established, together with the mainly left-leaning secular parties with which these movements were historically tied.

Leila Ahmed performed a crucial task for the cause of Islamic feminism by examining the writing and action of the pioneers of this movement in Egypt in the early years of the 20th century. These activists included Malak Hifni Nasif and Bint al-Shati (Aisha Abd al-Rahman) as well as, some years later, Zeinab al-Ghazali and Safinaz Kazim. However, Ahmed also reinforced the notion of two irreducible feminist paradigms: a supposedly imported (and thus objectionable) western, secular and elitist one, on the one hand, and a culturally and socially rooted one promoted by Islamic figures, on the other.<sup>21</sup> This dichotomy has been challenged by historians of feminist movements in Egypt and elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> In Margot Badran’s view, the earliest Egyptian feminism was secular but not lay (it was inclusive of the various religions and embraced both Muslims and Copts). Yet it also contained the seeds of Islamic feminism, making reference to Islamic reform and interpretations of Muslim law<sup>23</sup> in the aim of transforming the state’s legal arrangements regarding the family. Badran also noted an early form of Egyptian feminism that emerged at the same time as its European and American counterparts. Yet, while early Egyptian feminism was certainly in dialogue with the latter, its origin was endogenous and, more

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<sup>18</sup> See, in particular, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale University Press, 1992; Nilüfer Göle, *Musulmanes et modernes: voile et civilisation en Turquie*, op. cit.; Deniz Kandiyoti, “Introduction”, in Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Women, Islam and the State*, London: Macmillan, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> In relation to Palestine, see for example Julie Peteet, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement*, Columbia University Press, 1991; Rosemary Sayigh, “Engendered Exile: Palestinian Camp Women Tell Their Lives”, *Oral History*, Autumn, 1997, pp. 39-48; Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, *Femmes réfugiées palestiniennes*, Paris: PUF, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> See N. Göle, *Musulmanes et modernes: voile et civilisation en Turquie*, op.cit.; Lisa Taraki, “Islam in the Solution: Jordanian Islamists and the Dilemma of the ‘Modern Women’”, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 46 (4), December 1995, pp.643-661; and, more broadly, François Burgat, John L. Esposito (eds.), *Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East*, New Brunswick/New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Princeton University Press, 1994; Deniz Kandiyoti, “Introduction”, in Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Women, Islam and the State*, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Following the example of contemporary thinkers such as Mohammed Abduh.

particularly, Egyptian and Arab<sup>24</sup>. These early Arab (or, more broadly, southern) feminisms were all rooted and specific, particularly in the manner in which they occupied a position within the range of nationalist and anti-colonialist movements.<sup>25</sup> Other scholars have traced the influence of early secular feminism on the emergence of versions of Islamic feminism and the new female subjectivities that came into play in the 1980s and 1990s. The Islamist women of this period studied by Nilüfer Göle in Turkey unambiguously laid claim to a Turkish feminist heritage and the contribution of various strains of feminism.<sup>26</sup>

The construction of this dichotomy was reinforced by an interpretation of the initial waves of feminism in the Arab and Muslim worlds that significantly discounted the ambivalent and even repressive role played by states in relation to feminist movements and the various organizations that emerged at that time. Moreover, scholarly analyses tended to lay stress on the presentation of religious movements as almost invariably opposed to the secular, modernizing states under which early secular feminism was supposed to have flourished. The latter, in turn, were similarly portrayed as pro-Western. This view was unanimously maintained in defiance of the sociological and political specificities of such organizations and despite the particularities of national histories.

This oppositional dimension, while predominant in the Maghreb, was much less so in the Arab East and, in particular, the Gulf. In Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood provided solid support for the Hashemite regime up to the moment when it came out in opposition to the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel (1994) and that between the Palestinians and Israel (1993-1995). In the 1970s and 80s, the Brotherhood was especially courted to help counter the political opposition represented by the communists, the left and the Palestinian parties. In addition, all states began to control or even suppress independent feminist movements, which were mainly linked to leftist political parties and were in any case identified with the opposition and demands for democratizing regimes. This included states that played an obvious modernizing role earlier in the 20th century by promoting a robust form of state feminism -I am thinking here of Kemalist Turkey and, later, the Shah's Iran and Tunisia under Bourguiba- as well as those that simply extended civil rights to women and promoted women's education. Both the religious Zeinab Al-Ghazali and the secular Doria Shafik were imprisoned or placed under house arrest by Egypt's President Nasser. The aim was to replace their organizations with others affiliated with the state or co-opt the so-called "femocrats" in the interest of implementing state policies. This was the case in Nasser's Egypt (as well as in Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan and the Shah's Iran), where all

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<sup>24</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, London: Zed Books, 1986.

<sup>26</sup> Nilüfer Göle, *Musulmanes et modernes: voile et civilisation en Turquie*, op. cit.

women's organizations were dissolved after women obtained the right to vote in 1956<sup>27</sup>. These independent regimes also stood in the way of the emergence of a broadly based feminism that was inclusive of women from less privileged social classes or rural backgrounds<sup>28</sup> in favor of a form of elite feminism that was less influential and easier to control.<sup>29</sup> In Jordan, the government only became involved in the area of women's rights in the 1980s. Its objective was to recruit women's organizations that had been active since the country won its independence but had hitherto been linked to the leftist opposition and the Palestinian parties. In vain, it attempted to keep them under control. When this failed, the government temporarily banned these organizations. In contrast, women Islamic activists and those who had from the outset been adherents of political Islam often participated in the creation of the earliest state feminist networks, taking their places within the regime's institutions alongside other figures identified with the regime.<sup>30</sup>

State promotion of women's organizations and leaders in the context of official women's rights policies continued throughout the 20th century and is ongoing today, though the recent Arab revolutions, ongoing processes of democratization and the new electoral majorities they have brought to power have challenged these state feminisms. The intention of such policies was to maintain control over the social and political spheres by blocking the feminist demands of leftist nationalist opposition movements and, more recently, those of civil society groups and Islamist organizations. To achieve their goals, these states have assumed a modernizing and even avant-gardist stance, though most of them have fallen well short of meeting the demands of the public and groups that had formerly been on the social and political margins.<sup>31</sup> This is the case today in Saudi Arabia<sup>32</sup> as well as Morocco. The latter, in particular, has officially embraced the notion of religious feminism in the context of family code reform and the institutionalization of new religious roles for women (see Souad Eddouada and Renata Pepicelli's contribution to the present

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<sup>27</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, op. cit.; and "Competing Agenda: Feminists, Islam and the State in 19th and 20th century Egypt" in Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Women, Islam and the State*, op. cit., pp. 201-236; Ayesha Jalal, "The Convenience of Subservience: Women and the State of Pakistan" in Deniz Kandiyoti, op. cit., pp. 77-114; and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran", in Deniz Kandiyoti, op. cit., pp. 48-76.

<sup>28</sup> Ellen L. Fleischmann, "The Other 'Awakening': the Emergence of Women's Movements in the Modern Middle East, 1900-1940", in Margaret L. Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker (eds) *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*, Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1999, pp. 89-139.

<sup>29</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, "Genre et Politique", op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, "Vers un féminisme politique hors frontières au Proche-Orient. Regard sur les mobilisations en Jordanie (années 1950-années 2000)", *Vingtième siècle; Revue d'histoire: special issue "Proche-Orient: foyers, frontières et fractures"*, 103, July-September 2009, pp. 177-195; "Engagements islamiques en Jordanie. La part du politique, la part féministe", in *Féminismes islamiques. Revue des mondes musulmanes et de la Méditerranée (REMMM)*, 128, December 2010, pp. 183-207.

<sup>31</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, *Femmes réfugiées palestiniennes*, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> See the contribution of Amélie Le Renard in this publication.



volume). In doing so, its objective has been to root a moderate state Islam in society and particularly amongst women, who have been very heavily involved in religion.<sup>33</sup>

Discussions of Islamic feminism raise the question of the feminist third wave. In the aftermath of the first two waves of feminism – essentially secular movements that ran from the 1920s to the 1940s and the 1960s to the 1980s, respectively – a third wave of feminism emerged in the early 1990s. The unprecedented individualization of women’s trajectories and the transformation of female subjectivities – especially in the political, social and religious domains – were inseparable from this phenomenon’s rise. These new subjectivities, in particular, are clearly linked to the large-scale access to secondary and higher education enjoyed by women of all social classes in the 1970s and 1980s. We should therefore move beyond the earliest characterizations of Islamic feminism as a novel theology and discourse that has gained a global following to examine, on the one hand, its embodiment in social movements and, on the other, the role played (if any) by the Islamic mobilizations that transformed the political scene in the 1970s and 80s. Indeed, in the past ten years, an increasing number of women Islamic figures, not all of whom describe themselves as feminists, have emerged from political Islam. Yet, apart from a recent issue of REMMM, neither the influence of Islamic feminism on political Islam nor the converse has received serious attention.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, Islamic feminism should not be understood as inevitably supplanting secular feminism. Instead, it should be understood as part of an historical continuum. It has joined with existing movements – for their part, in a state of flux since the 1990s – and the new networks created by the younger generation since the turn of the century to participate in third wave feminist mobilizations.

Drawing upon the activist practices of the actors of the feminist third wave, I will examine the opposition between secular and Islamic mobilizations in national contexts. In particular, I will consider the interactions, objective alliances, comings and goings, shifts and porosity between these mobilizations. Beyond Islamic-influenced discourses and the identity-based understanding they reflect, the 1990s were indeed marked by the weakening of ideological systems (secular/religious). This was to the profit of a pragmatic mode of action and to the advantage of women’s efforts to promote their rights and affirm their chosen paths and aspirations.

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<sup>33</sup> Connie Caroe Christiansen, “Women’s Islamic Activism: between Self-Practices and Social Reform Efforts”, in François Burgat and John L. Esposito (eds), *Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East*, op. cit., pp. 145-165.

<sup>34</sup> See Stéphanie Latte Abdallah (ed.) *Féminismes islamiques. Revue d’études sur les mondes musulmans et la Méditerranée (REMMM)*, no. 128, December 2010, op. cit.. See also Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, “Les féminismes islamiques contemporains: influences sur le féminisme, la sphère religieuse et l’islam politique”, *Revue Islamochristiana*, 37, 2012, op. cit.

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## *From Discourse to Social Movements and Islamic-based Organizations*

In contrast to ideological interpretations representing feminist campaigns as allied with secular and modernizing states, it could be argued that feminist demands have most frequently situated themselves in the larger context of national or regional opposition movements.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the 20th century and up to the present day, this opposition has constantly adopted new forms as it has acquired power or influence. The demands of women have ridden on the coattails of the movements they supported. On the whole, however, these have disappointed their expectations, as was the case, for instance, in Iran, where Islamic feminism initially came into being in the wake of the reform movement (see Azadeh Kian's article in the present collection). In the context of independent states, especially since the 1980s, women's demands have been linked to wider calls for democratization and expanded social and political participation on the part of groups that were no longer part of the elite.

Margot Badran examines lines of investigation relating to the modes in which the global Islamic feminist movement has recently been structured. Local women's organizations that draw inspiration from Islam also deserve our attention. Some of them – the sections of Islamic parties and the social organizations linked to them – are geared towards social and political change. Others, more varied and less readily visible, concern themselves more with personal betterment and *techniques of the self*<sup>36</sup> (groups created by women preachers, centers of Koranic memorization and other women's religious foundations)<sup>37</sup>.

In the case of more socially oriented organizations, it is clear that political Islam has recently promoted women in the social and political domains in the wake of demands for political change. It must be said that many of its female protagonists have developed their own demands independently of these organizations. Such is the case of Turkey and Iran – both exceptional in the political context of the Islamic world – as well as Egypt, Morocco,

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<sup>35</sup> The effect of this has been wide flexibility and deep ideological heterogeneity within these movements, as well as a powerful capacity to transform themselves. See Ellen L. Fleischmann, "The Other 'Awakening': the Emergence of Women's Movements in the Modern Middle East, 1900-1940", op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> The borders between these modes of engagement and practices are not necessarily impermeable. See Connie Caroe Christiansen, "Women's Islamic Activism: between Self-Practices and Social Reform Efforts", op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> Various scholars have studied groups of this type (though they have concentrated on its strict, Salafi manifestations) as well as schools established by women preachers. On the women's movement in Egyptian mosques in the 1990s, see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, 2005. Other scholars have observed wider references among such pietist groups in Egypt, Syria, Jordan and even Saudi Arabia. See the special issue of *Le Mouvement Social*, "Engagements féminins au Proche-Orient, XXe, XXIe siècle", op. cit ; and the contribution of Amélie Le Renard in the present volume.

Jordan,<sup>38</sup> Palestine,<sup>39</sup> Bahrain,<sup>40</sup> Kuwait,<sup>41</sup> Indonesia,<sup>42</sup> Malaysia and even Saudi Arabia. What these various studies illustrate is the manner in which female activist trajectories within Islamic movements and the positions they adopt have evolved. They are in general encouraged by the movements to which they belong to launch themselves in the public sphere in order to boost the political presence of opposition parties or spread the message of religion (*da'wa*) among women. Once embarked on public life, however, many such activists redefine their role, calling upon Islam in defense of their rights (or at least autonomy) and those of all women, across all domains.

And part of these women, in search of new fields of action or of influence within (Islamic) organizations, seem to move from an Islamist form of activism towards a more independent and individualized trajectory.

In Jordan, for instance, Nawal al-Fa'ouri, an early activist in both movements, quit the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Action Front (IAF) after restrictions were imposed on her activities. In addition to differences of opinion on general political issues, such as whether or not these groups should participate in national elections, a clash arose over al-Fa'ouri's wish to take part in the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The members of the IAF were opposed to participating in an international event based on the concept of gender. In 2002, al-Fa'ouri became a founding member of a centrist Islamic political party, *Hizb al-Wasat*, which was more in line with her position. In recent years, the women's section of the Islamic Action Front has come out in favor of such events, reserving the right, however, to adopt a critical stance with respect to anything contrary to their religious and cultural values.<sup>43</sup>

The level of influence accrued by Islamic feminism is now sometimes sufficient to bring pressure to bear on Islamic political organizations and has even sometimes affected their underlying philosophy. The issue of gender equality is certainly the subject of negotiation and disagreement. According to Ndeye Andujar, for example, an Islamic feminist member of Barcelona's Junta Islamica, if the concept of equality is not "100 per cent in evidence in all spiritual, political, economic and social fields" and is spoken of in terms of

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<sup>38</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, "Vers un féminisme politique hors frontières au Proche-Orient. Regard sur les mobilisations en Jordanie (années 1950-années 2000)", op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Islah Jad, "Islamist Women of Hamas: between Feminism and Nationalism", *REMMM*, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> May Seikaly, "Bahreini Women in Formal and Informal Groups: the Politics of Identification", in Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo (eds), *Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Women's Groups in the Middle East*. Oxford/New York: Berg, 1997, pp. 125-146.

<sup>41</sup> Haya al-Mughni, *Women in Koweit: the Politics of Gender*, London: Saqi Books, 2001 (1993); and "The Rise of Islamic Feminism in Kuwait", *REMMM*, op. cit., pp. 167-182.

<sup>42</sup> Andrée Feillard and Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, "Une nouvelle génération féministe au sein de l'islam traditionaliste: une exception indonésienne?", *REMMM*, op. cit., pp. 113-133.

<sup>43</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, "Engagements islamiques en Jordanie. La part du politique, la part féministe", op. cit.

“complementarity” or sex-determined roles, it is not feminism at all.<sup>44</sup> However, in the view of many women Islamist activists, while human equality before God cannot be challenged, biological differences imply complementarities which may, depending on trends, imply a wide range of options for women in terms of concrete action.

Until recently the object of strong disapproval in Islamist circles, however, the term ‘feminism’ no longer acts as a focus for criticism and is indeed spreading within such groups, along with the older idea of Islam’s ability to guarantee “the rights of the woman” by virtue of its ideal of justice. The European network, *Présence musulmane*, which has links to Tarek Ramadan, has long been connected to the Islamic feminist movement. Nadia Yassine, whose standing within political Islam is due to her position as president of the Moroccan Islamist organization, *Al-‘Adl wa-l-Ihsan* (“Justice and Charity”),<sup>45</sup> long rejected the designation of “feminist” but now accepts it. In Jordan, women activists of the Islamic Action Front do not describe themselves as feminists but nevertheless proclaim their allegiance to Islamic feminism, at least when addressing outsiders. In 2008, they embarked on a plan to create an association called “Liberated Women” bringing together committed Islamic women of all political stripes. The purpose of the association was to define a philosophy of Islamic feminism and identify courses of action.<sup>46</sup> In such circles, the general label of Islamic feminism has become useful, if not fashionable, which is in itself telling.

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### *The Democratization of Movements*

The third wave of feminism, which began in the 1990s, is based both on Islamic feminism and earlier secular movements that have been rejuvenated, democratized and emancipated from the opposition parties (generally leftist and pan-Arab) to which they were linked.<sup>47</sup> It later also drew on the new feminist groups that appeared in the early 2000s. It was thus at this time that more radically feminist demands began to be expressed. They reflected the new positions adopted by secular and Islamic women activists and the relationships established between them. It was therefore no surprise that a new and unambiguous term began to gain currency in the Arab world in the 1990s: “*niswiyya*”. This

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<sup>44</sup> Ndeye Andujar, interview: “Féminisme islamique: chaque pays réagit différemment”, [http://www.saphirnews.com/Feminisme-islamique-Chaque-pays-reagit-differemment--Ndeye-Andujar\\_a9480.html](http://www.saphirnews.com/Feminisme-islamique-Chaque-pays-reagit-differemment--Ndeye-Andujar_a9480.html), 23 October 2008 (visited 24 February 2012).

<sup>45</sup> A group founded by her father. Profoundly opposed to the regime, it has so far refused to participate in parliamentary democracy (in contrast to the Islamic party of “Justice and Development” (*Hizb al-‘Adala wa-l-Tanmiyya*)).

<sup>46</sup> Hasan Abu Hanieh, *Women and Politics from the Perspective of Islamic Movements in Jordan*, Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2008; Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, “Engagements islamiques en Jordanie. La part du politique, la part féministe”, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, “Genre et politique”, op. cit.; “Vers un féminisme politique hors frontières au Proche-Orient. Regard sur les mobilisations en Jordanie (années 1950- années 2000)”, op. cit

term replaced its predecessor, “*nisa’iyya*”, an adjective that could be taken to refer to both “feminism” and “femaleness” indiscriminately.<sup>48</sup> From the mid-1990s onward, a number of women’s organizations connected to the earlier nationalist movements proclaimed themselves to be independent of the parties, which had broadly failed to live up to expectations in terms of women’s rights and national issues. As with other studies of Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait and Turkey<sup>49</sup>, my own work on the history of women’s organizations in Jordan shows how<sup>50</sup> women’s movements independent of state structures, parties and nationalist groups have emerged and developed a version of feminism that rejects the earlier premise of a conflict of interest between nationalist and feminist causes.

The third wave of feminism has also drawn upon a new cohort of activists. This has been reflected in the democratization of older organizations, which are now broadly open to middle class and working class women and, more particularly, groups that have hitherto been relegated to the margins of social and political representation (in other words, minority groups). In Jordan, women’s involvement independently of the state, historically identified with the communists and the left and linked to pro-Palestinian activism, has been significantly affected by women from the Palestinian refugee camps. First making their presence felt in the 1980s, these women have over time transformed the movement’s base. A similar process has been described in Bahrain, where new women’s mobilizations emerged in the wake of the 1994-97 clashes that were born of the economic and political demands of the mostly Shi’ite populations of the country’s poorest villages. Their demands resulted in the resumption of elections, with the extension of the vote to women in 2002.<sup>51</sup>

The movements of the feminist third wave imagined other ways of doing politics, turning away from historical ties with political parties and institutions of the “women’s union” type in preference to more flexible networks. In the first years of the new century, young feminist groups, such as *Nasawiyya*, *Kafa* and Meem in Lebanon and *Ishtar* in Syria, emerged. They are not formal institutions but are rather structured as a set of connected networks (notably relying on the internet and social networks) in order to retain their freedom and

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<sup>48</sup> Margot Badran, “Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond”, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 1 (1), Winter 2005, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Mervat Hatem, “Towards the Development of post-Islamist and post-Nationalist Feminist Discourses in the Middle East”, in Judith E. Tucker (ed.), *Arab Women Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, Indiana University Press, 1993, pp. 29-48; Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo (eds), *Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Women’s Groups in the Middle East*, op. cit.; Haya al-Mughni, *Women in Koweit: the Politics of Gender*, op. cit.; May Seikaly, “Bahreini Women in Formal and Informal Groups: the Politics of Identification”, in Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo (eds), op. cit.; Nilüfer Göle, *Musulmanes et modernes: voile et civilisation en Turquie*, op. cit.; Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, “Genre et politique”, in Elizabeth Picard (ed.), *La politique dans le monde arabe*, op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, *Femmes réfugiées palestiniennes*, op. cit.; “Vers un féminisme politique hors frontières au Proche-Orient” op. cit.

<sup>51</sup> May Seikaly, “Bahreini Women in Formal and Informal Groups: the Politics of Identification” op. cit.

maximize participation and democratic practices. They are non-partisan but highly political, bringing the fight for gender equality, the struggle against violence and sexism and even the right to choose one's sexuality to bear upon issues of citizens' rights, the political system and democratization. These third wave feminist networks have also been based on an alternative form of activism grounded in ad hoc coalitions of radically different groups all fighting for a common cause. This form of situational solidarity has challenged the long-standing antagonism between secular and religious movements.

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### *Pragmatism of Modes of Action and Activist Alliances*

In Bahrain and Kuwait, women's groups have thus recently challenged social, communal and partisan – that is, nationalist (whether left-wing, Pan-Arab or Islamic) – frontiers. This, together with the construction of alliances that go beyond the secular/religious dichotomy on the basis of a paradigm that puts “feminism” first, resulted in voting rights for women in 2002 and 2005, respectively.<sup>52</sup> In Iran, an “unprecedented feminist solidarity” came into existence with the emergence of Islamic feminism and has been reactivated since the election of President Ahmedinejad (see Azadeh Kian's contribution to this collection). This has given rise to communal feminist struggles that relegate the ideological dimension to second place. Something similar has happened in Jordan, where a more pragmatic and less institutionalized form of female activism, which is also “connectionist” and constructed around activities (or “projects”),<sup>53</sup> has brought ad hoc alliances into being in pursuit of common causes. This activism has taken the form of networks that are mobilized more through activity than ideology. This pragmatic approach has been shared by women activists and committed figures from a variety of political factions and schools of thought. Together, they transcend the dichotomy between the secular and the religious, which is in any case presently less salient than in the past. Such coalitions of interest are supported by the broad-based political alliances between the left and political Islam that have emerged in the Arab world since the 1990s and can assume de facto or more institutionalized forms. These alliances are fleeting but widespread. In Kuwait, for instance, on the initiative of Khadija al-Mahmit, other issues are currently the object of shared demands, including women's right to transmit their nationality to their children, especially when they are married to foreigners, as well as activities conducive to increased

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<sup>52</sup> May Seikaly, op. cit., and Haya al-Mughni, *Women in Koweit: the Politics of Gender*, op. cit.; “The Rise of Islamic Feminism in Kuwait”, *REMMM*, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> I refer to the concept of the “cité par projets” (translated as “projective city” in the Verso edition) developed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 1999; translated as *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2005.

representation of women in Parliament.<sup>54</sup> Over the past decade in Jordan, there have also been common calls for recognition of a woman's right to transmit her nationality to her children and husband, (amended) gender quotas in elections and a raft of family-related issues that had previously been the subject of clashes between secular and religious groups, including family planning and a higher legal age for marriage.

According to Margot Badran, earlier feminism's relative neglect of family issues encouraged the emergence of an Islamic feminist discourse that prioritized equal rights in both the political sphere and the family.<sup>55</sup> After the 1990s, however, groups issued from earlier waves of feminism also began to concentrate on new issues. In Jordan and throughout the region, a greater concern with everyday social and personal questions complemented these groups' longstanding focus on women's rights to full political and legal citizenship. This was reflected in a spate of new family-oriented programs, which gave particular attention to areas of dysfunction, including family conflicts and domestic violence.<sup>56</sup> And it is clear that more effective discussions of family issues will be the inevitable result of the new understandings of feminism and Islam implicit in the idea of Islamic feminism. On the one hand, feminist exegesis and its influence in Islam reinforced the strength of (non-discriminatory) religious argument, a key source of family law. On the other, the Islamic feminist movement's continuity with secular activism increased pressure on governments. Morocco's 2004 reform of the Personal Status Code governing questions of family law (the *Moudawana*) stands as a salient example of the snowball effect that can result from shared demands.<sup>57</sup> The global *Musawah* network supplies another, more general example of this phenomenon. In the interest of promoting legal equality within the family, *Musawah* has extensively criticized the concept of *qawama*, according to which the husband is responsible for the family, as the source of inequality in the area of inheritance.

In addition, such family issues have brought about convergences between Islamic feminists, secular feminisms and, more recently, figures drawn from political Islam. They have contributed to defining a common set of approaches, with some focusing on family law and others on more day-to-day concerns. This is especially so in the Middle East, where a growing number of help centers and hot lines exist to address conflict and violence in the family. More recently, Islamic organizations – including *Al-Afaf* in Jordan, which has ties to the Muslim Brotherhood – have also set up telephone call-centers and developed an Islamic discourse and set of contemporary Islamic practices meant to address such issues

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<sup>54</sup> Haya al-Mughni, "The Rise of Islamic Feminism in Kuwait", *REMMM*, op. cit.,

<sup>55</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, op. cit.

<sup>56</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, "Politiques de la protection contre la violence familiale en Jordanie", *NAQD*, 22/23 Autumn/ Winter 2006, pp 193-212.

<sup>57</sup> See the chapter by Souad Eddouada and Renata Pepicelli in this collection.

as celibacy, divorce, the one-parent family and violence. Nawal al-Faouri of the centrist Islamic party, *Hizb al-Wasat*, was in charge of setting up the first public refuge for women victims of domestic violence. The Islamic advice phenomenon is now present in much of the region, with women and other social organizations drawing upon a variety of conceptual approaches to offer advice directly or by way of the media and new technologies (television, Internet, CDs and DVDs and so on).

While the effectiveness of the recent convergence of feminism and Islam should not be overstated, it appears that both third wave feminism and Islamic values are undergoing a process of reciprocal influence and hybridization. As Oliver Roy and Patrick Haenni have noted, the successful re-Islamization of societies has led to the intellectual sources and practices of Islam to become cross-fertilized first with Marxist ideas, then with free market principles and practices, the discourse of democracy and human rights, the green movement and even the rhetoric of personal development (see the article by Amélie Le Renard in this collection).

By contrast, very few attention has been given to the phenomenon of hybridization between feminism, the international discourse of women's rights and gender, and political Islam. Yet, in addition to the existing (and fundamentally conservative) narrative of "women's rights in Islam", some of the women and men working within political Islam have increasingly drawn upon the legacy of national feminist discourses and mobilizations as well as international narratives relating to human rights and the rights of women. Their arguments have acknowledged the positive contributions of these phenomena while expressing reservations on certain points.<sup>58</sup> Such developments imply a process of re-thinking feminism in the Arab and Muslim world on the basis of new, pragmatic, post-ideological and, hence, "post-Islamic"<sup>59</sup> paradigms. In today's post-revolutionary context, marked by a string of victories for political Islam at the ballot box and government alliances with liberal forces, the advent of such paradigms suggest that new tools need to be developed for studying female activism and the novel forms of female subjectivity to which it has given rise and exemplifies. In political terms, however, these upheavals mean that we find ourselves at a crossroads. On the one hand, the resources of Islamic feminism and the experience acquired through the joint mobilization of secular and religious women's organizations can help women and feminists achieve influence and become actors in the process of democratic transition. On the other hand, the exercise of power by Islamic

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<sup>58</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, "Les féminismes islamiques contemporains: influences sur le féminisme, la sphère religieuse et l'islam politique", op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> In the context of studies of women's activism, this expression was first used by Mervat Hatem in her paper, "Towards the Development of post-Islamist and post-Nationalist Feminist Discourses in the Middle East", op. cit.



parties, together with Salafi pressure in the street and at the ballot box, could encourage the most literalist currents of Islam, thus countering the recent tendency within these movements to take the tact of Islamic feminism.

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In addition to the works cited in this article, Stéphanie Latte Abdallah has edited *Images aux frontières. Représentations et constructions sociales et politiques: Palestine, Jordanie, 1948-2000*, Beyrouth: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2005; and, with Cédric Parizot, *A l'ombre du mur. Israéliens et Palestiniens entre occupation et séparation*, Arles: Acted Sud, 2011.

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