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The Right to Choose: Women's Political Activity in Islamic States

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Introduction

The past fifteen to twenty years have seen a significant shift in focus to the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region as well as other primarily Islamic regions and countries, including Indonesia. This shift can be seen in both academia and global politics and has only intensified since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Much of Western foreign policy has been allocated to tracking and stopping transnational Islamic terrorist networks such as Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab and working with the governments of the countries throughout which these groups operate. While there is an immediate security need to address terrorist threats that have the potential to harm and kill thousands of innocent civilians around the world, there is also a broader need for the West to understand the context in which these groups have developed. Due to media coverage of certain events and the horrific nature of attacks including those seen in London in 2005, many populations unfamiliar with Islam are tempted to brand the entire faith as extreme, inherently violent, and bent on the destruction of Western civilization. Despite what popular culture may portray, those who study Islam and its adherents have come to recognize that these terrorist groups represent a severe minority of what is often a thoughtful and peaceful faith.

However, the study of Islam by Western thinkers is still far from complete. Like any relatively new topic of study, the more extensive the knowledge, the more a society can make sense of the unknown. While Islamic politics and traditions have been studied for decades, there is one major component that has been severely limited and all too often ignored: the study of women and their role in Islamic culture. Throughout the twentieth century and still today, the West has come to recognize the important role women play in society. With a strong awareness of that role, it would seem that the study of women in Islamic society would be a natural subject to explore, yet the topic has been considered of low priority and remains underdeveloped. There are probably some who would assume that because Muslim women do not have the same rights many Western women do, there is not much to study. This assumption leads to the consideration of what roles play the largest part in Western women's progress and prominence.

Immediately two types of leadership that are currently under popular scrutiny in the United States come to mind: women as business leaders (e.g., Yahoo! Chief Executive Officer Marissa Mayer) and women as political leaders (e.g., former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton). Both of these potentially high-powered and prominent roles would be interesting to compare and contrast to those seen (or not seen) in Islamic culture. However, this paper will focus on examining the role Muslim women play in politics. A literature review of the material already compiled in Western academia will determine the degree to

which most Muslim women are politically active and whether or not that degree is established by each woman's own choice or by oppression from her male-dominated society.

This paper categorizes political activity into three types, from least active to most active: (1) political discourse and community-affiliated activities such as meetings, (2) political protests and demonstrations, and (3) holding public office. The focus is primarily on women in the MENA region, although there is much more outside of this area worth considering. The examination is mainly on the recent past (1970s to the present) with some references to Islamic history and tradition. The working research question for this study is as follows: Are Muslim women relatively inactive (compared to Western expectations) in politics due to oppression by their male-dominated society or by personal choice?

Before inspecting existing studies, this paper will explore some of the presumptions that a Western audience may have established regarding this topic. The next part will consider examples of each level of political activity, from least active to most active, as previously designated. Finally, the conclusion will analyze the examples described and introduce topics for further study as well as what role the West may or may not have in the future of Muslim women's political freedom.

Western Perceptions of Muslim Women:

Just as Islam in general has been assigned a specific image in Western media, the Muslim woman has also been assigned a specific image. Hers is one of mystery and helpless submission to her culture. As Therese Saliba has noted, the image of the veiled woman is often used "to depict Islam in general…as the enemy of Muslim women and cover over complex relations of power that define…Muslim women's agency."[1] This image assumes that these women have not been given and are unable to make decisions about their own lifestyles and that they are a victim of their surroundings. While this may be true in some cases, it is unwise to blindly apply this image to millions of women and ignore the more varied reality. Popular novels that feature Muslim women, such as Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child*[2] and *The Sacred Night,*[3] often promote ideas of a barbaric culture that purposely harms and suppresses women. Furthermore, because Ben Jelloun comes from an Islamic background, he is trusted as a valid source for established

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[1] Therese Saliba, "Introduction," in *Gender, Politics and Islam*, ed. Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen, and Judith A. Howard (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).
[2] Tahar Ben Jelloun, *The Sand Child* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).
[3] Tahar Ben Jelloun and Alan Sheridan, *The Sacred Night*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

fact rather than appreciated as an observer of particular cases in the Muslim world.[4]

In addition to not applying the popular image of the veiled woman to all Muslim women, it is also important not to strictly apply the standards and goals of Western feminism in a non-Western context. Western feminism is often based in secularism, which will inherently not be found in Islamic politics that demand "that their government and laws adhere to religious teachings."[5] While religion may have been used as a "tool of oppression"[6] throughout Western and Islamic history, it does not necessarily serve that same function in the present or future. Rather, Saliba argues that Islam can actually be used as an agent to allow women a greater political role in their societies. Another essential element of Western feminism and human rights is the value placed on the individual, which does not always resonate with non-Western societies. For better or for worse, the average Muslim woman would say that the well-being of her family, greater community, and fellow Muslims across the region and around the world come far before that of herself. This difference in focus, from the individual to the community, is important to recognize when evaluating how much freedom Muslim women may have to be politically active and expressive.[7]

A second piece of the different worldview of Muslim women is the stigma Western feminists attach to tradition. Often times, "the discourse on tradition versus modernity assumes that traditions are static, unchanging and therefore confining to women, whereas modernity is progressive and necessarily liberating."[8] This assumption not only limits the options women have to mobilize, but also ignores a massive inspiration and motivation for these women's political activities. Although it may be difficult, it is essential to not conflate modernity and Westernization, as any options modernity may offer Muslim women to express themselves politically will be lost by the women's overwhelming desire to remain true to their religious and cultural identity.

It is also important to recognize that there are certainly cases of the abuse of women, some of which claim legitimacy from tradition, and even the Quran itself, throughout Islamic culture. Verse 4:34 of the Quran reads: "Men have authority over women, by virtue of the preference that God has given them over

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[4] Tahar Ben Jelloun was born and raised in Morocco as a Muslim. For a detailed critique of Ben Jelloun's popular influence, see Anouar Majid's chapter, "The Politics of Feminism in Islam," in *Gender, Politics and Islam*, ed. Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen, and Judith A. Howard (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 53-87.

[5] Ted G. Jelen and Clyde Wilcox, "Religion, The One, The Few, and the Many," in *Religion and Politics in the Comparative Perspective: The One, The Few, and the Many*, ed. Ted Gerard Jelen and Clyde Wilcox (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

[6] Ibid., 3.

[7] Saliba, "Introduction," 3.

[8] Ibid., 4.

women."[9] This verse is often cited both in Islamic culture to legitimize men's superiority in Islamic culture and in the West to condemn Muslims. While this verse by itself seems difficult to justify, it is important to remember that it has been taken out of context and that reading it literally is only one interpretation.[10] However, the verse's apparent message cannot be ignored either. Because the Quran is such a significant authority in the Islamic faith and is often interpreted literally, such verses are particularly alarming.

Anouar Majid argues that Western academics often attempt to fit their own version of human rights onto Muslim women's circumstances and brand Islamic traditions as abusive and backward. However, he also says that, "one must expose Islamist ideologies to rigorous criticism and categorically reject all intolerant and coercive practices espoused in the name of religion."[11] Sorting through practices that are indeed abusive from ones that are legitimate is essential to communicating with and understanding Muslim women who are attempting to pursue personal liberty while maintaining their faith and valued traditions. This again allows those who study Muslim women to avoid a one-dimensional image of the religion.

It is imperative to keep in mind when studying the role of women in Islamic politics from a Western point of view that Islam is not the only faith or sector that has a history or habit of oppressing women. Christianity and secular media, to name but two such groups, have their own faults when it comes to the treatment of women. Constructing broad beliefs that condemn the entire Islamic faith as being anti-woman is too simplistic. As is the case in several other communities, there are many Muslim women who have their own range of views regarding the interpretation of the Quran and their place in Muslim society. Looking beyond the extreme examples of sexual and gender-based abuse that are indeed present in Islamic culture will allow for a more clear examination of the motives behind Muslim women's political activity. The next sections of this paper explore some examples for each level of political activity, starting from least active (political discourse and community-affiliated activities) and ending with most active (holding public office).

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[9] Author's translation from French from Josiane Criscuolo's citation in *Femmes musulmanes: Rencontres ici et là-bas* (Lyon: Chronique Sociale, 2001), 19.
[10] Christianity faces similar predicaments: see 1 Corinthians 14:34.
[11] Majid, "The Politics of Feminism in Islam," 54.

Examples of Minimally Politically Active Muslim Women

Political Discourse and Community-Affiliated Activities

Political discourse and community-affiliated activities can be difficult to measure since they are by their very nature informal. However, they also reflect an initial interest in what is occurring politically in society and may lead to further involvement. Josiane Criscuolo surveys Muslim women throughout the Middle East and some who have immigrated to France. Each profile tells the life story of a woman and how she views herself in Islamic society. As would be predicted, these profiles illustrate a diversity of opinion and activity.

One woman who demonstrates satisfaction with this lowest level of political involvement and a more traditional lifestyle is Hayat of Morocco. When addressing why she wears a veil, she explains that she wears it for "personal pleasure"[12] and for the sake of her family's tradition. To Hayat, it does not matter whether or not she is in Morocco, where much of her family lives, or in France, where she spent time at university. Hayat says, "I try to practice my religion in every possible measure."

While her faith holds an important place in her life, it does not necessarily influence her politics. When detailing her existence as a Muslim woman to Criscuolo, she does not once mention being particularly active politically or caring whether or not a Muslim leads her government. With her time split almost equally between Morocco and France, being subjected to the governance of non-Muslims does not appear to cause any moral dilemma for Hayat. References to her family and her attachment to tradition display a deep concern and love for the Islamic community and culture, but this does not translate into an action or pursuit of politics.

To expand this area of research, it would be essential to examine other women who are not politically active and compare their motives to those of Hayat. The goal of this section is to determine whether or not this group of women is politically inactive by choice, as Hayat is, or if there are other factors that contribute to their political expression, or lack thereof. The next level of political activity to explore is that of protest and demonstration, which will examine Muslim women who take their thoughts and discussions regarding politics to a higher level of commitment.

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[12] Hayat's comments are the author's translation from French; Criscuolo, 59.

Examples of Politically Active Muslim Women

Protest and Demonstration

Peteet explores what is a more typical profile of politically active Muslim women.[13] She focuses on Palestinian women in Lebanon during the civil war (1975-1991) and in the West Bank during the first intifada (1987-1993). During these periods of conflict, Palestinian political groups rallied women to do their part by properly raising their children and teaching them about the Palestinian cause.[14] Women who raised children that were able to contribute to and die for the national cause were termed mothers of martyrs. This title was one of honor and described a woman's contribution to the fight for survival.

In this sense, the natural role of mothering became political. While they may not have been part of a particular political party or group, these women saw themselves as being politically active by dedicating their lives to both the protection of young children in the community and raising them to become civilian-soldiers capable of fighting for that community. This mindset partially comes from a *hadith*[15] in which it is strongly emphasized that mothers should be highly valued and respected members of the community. They mentor and protect not only their own children, but also those of their entire community. This became particularly important during periods of conflict, as children lost fathers in battle and mothers to widespread violence.

Within the context of armed struggle, survival is the only goal. At such a point, there is nothing else that can further a people's cause. Palestinian political leaders stressed this in Lebanon, encouraging all of the Palestinians in the area to remain defiant against the bloody circumstances, if not for themselves, then for the future of the Palestinians.[16] Peteet explains, "In the Lebanon era, where armed struggle assumed symbolic prominence as an assertion of a willingness to sacrifice and an ability to organize to fight, women were not excluded on the grounds of unfitness." Perhaps women themselves were not fighting, but they

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[13] Julie Peteet, "Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone," in *Gender, Politics and Islam*, ed. Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen, and Judith A. Howard (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 134-157.

[14] Similar ideas were propagated to "Republican Mothers" during the American War of Independence. See Linda Kerber's "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment: An American Perspective," *American Quarterly*, 28.2 (1976): 187-205.

[15] A *hadith* is a belief or tradition that is attributed to the Prophet Mohammad regarding how obedient Muslims live their lives. These *hadiths* are also a source of Islamic law for most Muslims.

[16] Peteet, "Icons and Militants," 134-35.

were included in the grand strategy of survival. Motherhood became a role with political and militant implications.[17]

Similar environments can be seen throughout MENA's history. The ongoing struggle in Syria provides a useful demonstration of how battle and survival can be very political. A more abstract form of politics, seen in the development of ideas, policies, and long-term goals, is irrelevant in times of crisis. If asked whether or not they are politically active, many Muslim women in conflict zones and mothers of martyrs would say that they are, even if the form of their activity is not overt or recognized in the West. Many women do not have the time, energy, or desire to fight for individual rights when in the middle of conflict. Worrying about whether or not they are able to drive, as in Saudi Arabia, or allowed to worship with men are concerns of a lower priority.

If there is a positive note to make in regards to this type of conflict, it is that "mothering in the danger zone" tends to awaken a political interest in women. Dire circumstances allow women to take a more public role in society than in peaceful times, a role that they want to keep and expand once fighting subsides. This is a trend that can be observed throughout American history as well. Peteet described the phenomenon as the "female consciousness [being] activated as mothers [strive] to maintain domesticity in the face of danger."[18] While women (particularly Palestinians in this case) have struggled to expand their role in the public sphere, the desire has been sustained.[19] Remembering their contributions to the national cause, they want to continue to have a say in their society's development and future.

Of course, survival is a natural goal of any community, whether it is political or not. The distinction to make in this case is that this group of Palestinian women consciously made the choice, encouraged by their male counterparts, to make their natural actions of mothering and survival a political activity. Their actions were not only for their children's or personal well-being, but also for an ideal. Again, to continue this section of research, it would be useful to look at recent conflicts in Turkey, Syria, and Egypt to compare women's attitudes and actions to the Palestinian case. The goal is to determine whether or not there is a general trend of oppression towards women that are at this level of political activity.

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[17] Ibid., 137-39.

[18] Ibid., 141.

[19] Peteet notes that Article 4 of the Palestine National Charter determined that "Palestinian identity is 'transmitted from father to son'." Thus, women's desire to be more politically active in this community has not as of yet been formally recognized. Peteet, "Icons and Militants," 142.

Examples of Highly Politically Active Muslim Women

Public Office and Prominence

The final section of research is that of the highest level of political activity: holding public office. Before examining two studies that explore Muslim women's access to public office, it is worth considering Table 1, which details selected countries' parliamentary representation by women.

There are a couple of observations from Table 1 that should be noted. Out of the ten countries with the lowest number of female representatives, nine of them are Islamic states. This has two possible but not mutually exclusive implications: Arab culture is not conducive to female participation in public office or Islamic culture is not conducive to female participation in public office. Of course, Arab and Islamic influences are both significant parts of culture throughout the MENA region. Regardless of which plays the greater role in the lack of women's participation, these numbers clearly demonstrate that there is some factor that distinguishes Islamic states from Western states in terms of women's participation in public office at the national level. On a more positive note, ten out of the fifteen Islamic states have a percentage of female representation (in the lower house) of ten or above. These numbers are comparable to those observed in Western states.

Having considered general statistics of MENA for female representation in government, two studies are presented that explore specific cases to examine some of the reasons behind these statistics. Kassem determines that Muslim women in Lebanon tend to fair better in municipal elections than in national elections for parliament. Before delving into her research, she addresses two factors that are typically cited as the determinant for women's success in politics: Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita and the type of regime. Kassem determines that while GDP per capita may have some influence on society's willingness to elect a woman, she notes that, at least in the case of Lebanon, this explanation is insufficient. Likewise, Kassem notes that while arguments regarding the necessity of a democratic regime for the possibility of women's participation in politics (most notably argued by Fish) are indeed important, they still do not quite fully explain the dynamics in Lebanon, and possibly in other countries where women are attempting to become more involved in politics.[20]

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[22] Steven M. Fish, "Islam and Authoritarianism," *World Politics* 55.1 (2002): 4-37.

Table 1. Parliamentary Representation by Women in Selected Countries

Country	% Seats held by women in Lower or single House	% Seats held by women in Upper House or Senate
Netherlands	38.7	36
Germany	32.9	27.5
Algeria	*31.6*	*7*
Switzerland	29	19.6
Austria	27.9	31.1
France	26.9	22.2
Tunisia	*26.7*	*N/A**
Iraq	*25.2*	*N/A*
Canada	24.7	37.9
United Kingdom	22.5	22.6
Saudi Arabia	*19.9*	*N/A*
United States of America	17.8	20
United Arab Emirates	*17.5*	*N/A*
Morocco	*17*	*2.2*
Libya	*16.5*	*N/A*
Ireland	15.7	30
Turkey	*14.2*	*N/A*
Jordan	*12.2*	*11.7*
Syrian Arab Republic	*12*	*N/A*
Kuwait	*6.2*	*N/A*
Islamic Republic of Iran	*3.1*	*N/A*
Lebanon	*3.1*	*N/A*
Yemen	*0.3*	*1.8*
Qatar	*0*	*N/A*

Note. The statistics in this chart have been selected from the Inter-Parliamentary Union and reflect the situation as of September 1, 2013. Western countries are in plain text and are present to serve as a reference point for a Western audience. Countries that are either explicitly affiliated with Islam or have a significant Muslim population and are located in the MENA region (Islamic states) are italicized. A complete list of all countries' statistics can be found at www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm.

  *N/A indicates that a country has a unicameral legislative structure as of October 31, 2013, according to the CIA *World Fact Book* (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/). This is not to be confused with a country having zero female representatives.

Kassem determines, based on five rounds of elections that have taken place in the post-war era beginning in 1992, that success at the municipal level is due primarily to two factors. First, women already tend to be seen as community leaders. Many community members see electing women as more of a formality, since they already fulfill similar duties of community organization, whereas taking on a role of leadership at the national level is seen as going beyond what had traditionally been socially accepted and appropriate. Second, there is less risk involved for national parties to support female candidates in a local election than a national election. Most women are only allowed to run in districts that the party does not think it can win, or that already have demonstrated its willingness to elect a female candidate. Of course, it is difficult to know which districts are willing to elect a female candidate if they have never had the opportunity to do so. This creates a political system that is difficult for women to break into.

A second element of Kassem's research involves the religiosity of political parties in Lebanon as they relate to women's success in becoming public officials.[21] She found that, generally speaking, parties that were less conservative and had less of a connection to Islam tended to support a greater number of female candidates. With more institutional support, these women tend to win more votes than women who attempt to run independently. This is true for municipal elections but circumstances become even more stringent in national elections. While more liberal and non-affiliated parties still support more female candidates than their conservative and religious counterparts, there are still fewer women running for national elections overall.

This implies that, while Islam certainly plays a role in people's views of women as public officials in Lebanon, there may be a cultural or non-religious element involved as well. Parties that might theoretically be supportive of women still do not do so at the national level for strategic reasons. Culture and religion have a common factor of influence in the form of patriarchy. For example, even if a legal system does not currently express patriarchal values overtly, it often has evolved from a system that did. Kassem notes, "since men continue to dominate the theological realm, they exercise a near monopoly over jurisprudence and the interpretation of doctrine,"[22] which still plays a role in how national law is interpreted as well. Essentially, because of their perceived inferiority to men, women will almost inherently have a disadvantage in that they were not originally

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[23] Fatima Sbaity Kassem, "Can Women Break Through? Women in Municipalities: Lebanon in Comparative Perspective," *Women's Studies International Forum* 35 (2012): 233-55. Kassem developed a five-point continuum to designate parties based on religiosity (highest to lowest): extremist, conservative but not extremist, tolerant religiosity, confessional but civil secularism, and secular a-religious.

[24] Ibid., 237.

considered when the legal and political system in Lebanon was created. Even as people become more progressive in their views toward women as politicians, governmental institutions may not naturally incline in the same direction.

Sater's research focuses on women's success in politics in Morocco, which necessarily includes the introduction of a ten percent quota system in 2002 for the lower chamber of parliament.[23] While the implementation of a quota system seems to imply that women would otherwise not be elected, there are varying opinions among Moroccan women as to whether or not the system has been effective in empowering women to take a greater role in politics. It is worth noting, as Sater does, that Morocco is "often considered a democratically more advanced Arab country."[24] This should be kept in mind before extending any of his conclusions to other countries in the region.

Before the implementation of the quota system, there were two waves of activism for women's rights and empowerment, which points to the long-standing desire of Moroccan women to expand their roles in society and politics. First, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Sater notes:

> Socio-economic advances and modernization, combined with increasing education for young women and professional opportunities for graduates meant that legal disempowerment in family matters became very controversial among activists for increased rights for women.[25]

The second wave took place between 1999 and 2000. The most notable development of this period was an action plan, *Plan d'Action pour la Participation de la Femme au Développement*, that the government began creating due to increased demands for change. This plan primarily addressed reforming the conservative family code, but it also set the stage for the introduction of the quota system two years later.

Sater found that most women in Morocco believed that a quota system was and is necessary for women to have any role in government. In its relatively short post-colonial history (like many of its neighbors), Morocco has had essentially no influence from women on its political development. An example of why the political system developed without women is cultural and partially based on the Islamic value of modesty for women. Many party meetings take place in the evening and often go on into the late hours of the night, at which time it is considered inappropriate for women to be outside of their homes. A practice as

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[25] James N. Sater, "Changing Politics from Below? Women Parliamentarians in Morocco," *Democratization* 14. 4 (2007): 723-742. The lower chamber has a total of 330 seats.
[26] Ibid., 723.
[27] Ibid., 728.

simple as this has contributed to a cultural assumption of women not being suitable to effectively participate in politics. Additionally, terms such as "countrymen," and "political prisoners" are thought of as inherently male. Because the very language used in politics does not recognize the presence of women, let alone their capacity to lead, many women and some men believe that an imposed election of women is necessary to at least begin the process of female political empowerment and representation.

While Sater does not focus directly on Islam's role in women's political activity in Morocco, his findings have an important implication for the current question of Muslim women's political activity. He does mention that many of the women interviewed and considered are Muslim, and many of these women have the desire to either participate in politics or see their fellow women participate in politics. These two facts would seem to support the conclusion that many Muslim women, at least in Morocco, have an interest in greater female participation in public office. As mentioned earlier, because Morocco is not a typical Arab country, more research should be conducted before extending these conclusions to other parts of the region. However, Sater's work on the history of the quota system in Morocco and current dialogue surrounding that system demonstrates that the desire of political empowerment among Muslim women is present.

Conclusions and Further Research

Well-intentioned human rights organizations and concerned citizens throughout the West wonder what they can do to contribute to Muslim women's cause of political liberty. This paper has surveyed what Muslim women are doing for themselves to become more involved in politics and whether or not they want to be politically active in the ways that the West thinks that they should. Through this survey of Muslim women in politics in the MENA region, focusing on the recent past, we can begin to understand the historical context and circumstances in which these developments are taking place. Of course, Muslim women's role in politics is a massive and emerging topic that requires much more research and observation than fits within the scope of this paper. There are several ways in which this research could be expanded.

Despite the limits of this paper, a particular theme has been repeatedly demonstrated through the information that has been collected. It seems that the Islamic community in MENA is tolerant of women's participation in politics to a certain extent and up to a certain level. This paper examined three levels of activity: (1) political discourse and community-affiliated activities such as meetings, (2) political protests and demonstrations, and (3) holding public office. These categories provide a means of surveying Muslim women's motives for

becoming politically active to different extents. When determining whether or not Muslim women are relatively inactive (again, compared to Western expectations) in politics due to oppression by their male-dominated society or by personal choice, this framework helps identify patterns and trends that can be used both in the development of policy and a better understanding of this population's political desires and empowerment.

The information collected in this paper leads to the conclusion that women who are minimally or mildly politically active are so by choice, not because they are pressured to be any more or less active. There are a couple of examples of this. First, through Hayat's testimony regarding her satisfaction with a fairly traditional lifestyle, there is a case for Muslim women who do not have a desire to be politically active; there are plenty of other social roles for them to fill. Then there is the instance of "mothering in the danger zone," in which women participate in politics through raising their children to value political ideals. Finally, there are Kassem's observations of women having more success in municipal than national elections, implying that Muslim populations tend to accept women's political leadership to a certain extent.

The second part of this conclusion is that women who are highly politically active, or wish to be, do indeed face oppression and obstacles in their progress and development as leaders. While the Palestinian mothers of martyrs, so highly praised for their contributions during times of particularly intense conflict, were encouraged to participate in politics through their natural role as mothers, this encouragement did not extend into more peaceful times or beyond the limits of motherhood. As the Palestinians have continued to organize themselves, women have been forgotten or ignored. This limit in accepting women's political leadership is again demonstrated by Kassem's observations. While it appears to be socially acceptable for women to run for municipal office, there is still a glass ceiling barring them from winning national office. Sater comes to a similar conclusion based on his observations of the quota system in Morocco; despite women's long-standing desire to become more involved in their country's political system, this can only be achieved (at the present time) through an imposed legal requirement.

Topics that would be particularly interesting to consider in greater detail include the role of the economy in Muslim women's political activity, especially as it relates to oil.[26] This addresses elements that blend with cultural structures that may have as significant of an influence as Islam. While this paper briefly touched upon this point, it would be essential to further research the role of Arab cultural influence, as opposed to Islamic influence, to assess Islam as an agent of Muslim women's political activity. A similar survey conducted in another region,

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[28] See Michael Ross's "Women, Oil and Islam," *American Political Science Review* 102 (2008): 107-23.

the subcontinent for example, would also be an important next step to take in continuing this research.

Additionally, there are two other forms of political activity that would be relevant to this topic. While seen as a basic form of political activity in the West, voting implies various levels of political activity in different countries. In one country it may be considered an example of minimal political activity, but in another it may be a dangerous task that implies a woman's willingness to risk injury or even death to voice her opinion. A study comparing voting patterns among Muslim women would provide further insight into which issues they care about and the extent to which they are willing to go to participate in the political system.

The second form of political activity that would also contribute to the development of this topic is the use of suicide bombings. The use of women as suicide bombers is a fairly recent phenomenon. There is still much to be discovered regarding a woman's reasons for participating in this form of protest and violence. While it can easily be argued that suicide bombings serve political purposes, it is not always clear that the women killing themselves in this manner are taking on this task for political reasons. There may be other more social reasons that motivate this act.

This survey has demonstrated that Muslim women who are content with being minimally or mildly politically active have the freedom to choose how involved they become. It appears to be socially acceptable for a woman to hold a position of leadership within a particular community, but there must still be a man of higher rank who can counter any of her decisions. Women who aspire to higher levels of leadership and a more overtly political role in society are often prevented from achieving these aspirations due to oppression by her male-dominated society. It is difficult to say when women may have more success in attaining positions of political leadership, but the trends of Muslim women's consistent desire to become more and more politically active seen throughout this study do point to an optimistic future for their success.

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