Islamic Roots of Feminism in Egypt and Morocco

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Women’s bodies continually serve as the contested territory for debating tradition and modernity, and for measuring the prospects for democracy in Islamic nations. In the Middle East women’s lives are governed by a wide range of Islamic ideology and practice, from gender equality and progressiveness in Tunisia to the far extreme of Wahhabi doctrine in Saudi Arabia, along with internal spectrums of interpretation as well. This paper will focus on the positioning of women in Morocco and Egypt, countries that have seen improvement in legal recognition of women’s rights in the past decade and are making prodigious efforts towards gender equality. The Middle East/ North Africa (hereafter MENA) region gives a rich base of comparison and variety of interpretation regarding women’s roles in Islamic contexts. Redefining women’s roles in the region began with the founding of Islam itself, reforming cultural practice to enhance women’s lives in the seventh century CE. To
understand the positioning of women in the MENA region in the wake of the Arab Spring, it is essential to first contextualize Islamic tenets and history, and the cultural and political histories in Egypt and Morocco. These two cases provide a rich context for the discourse on power, access, and agency for women and Islam.

In the MENA region, marriage and child custody are regulated in the Personal Status Codes and Family Laws (mudawana), codifying social expectations of women into law. The source for these laws is Sharia or Islamic law, from the three revered texts of the Qur’an, the Hadith (writings that describe what the prophet did), and the Sunnah (the prophet’s actions that serve as examples of ideal behavior)—a wide expanse of interpretive documentation. Since 1999, reforms to the Family Law or Personal Status Codes in Morocco and Egypt show legal recognition of women’s advancement in the struggle for equality in the region. This paper seeks to reconcile the intellectual gulf between Islam and progressive, feminist ideals by exploring Islamic roots of feminism and providing examples from Egypt and Morocco’s Personal Status Codes.

Widespread practice of Islam and, to a lesser extent, the collective memory of colonialism, plays a significant role in Morocco and Egypt today. The colonial experience is often a painful one for the colonized to endure. The clumsy colonial experiments of European powers in the Middle East have influenced many of the issues that states cope with today and have created much of the sensitivity surrounding contemporary western efforts at society building and civil change.1 In both Egypt and Morocco, many locals are hostile to foreign imports of feminism in their societies and view it as a direct challenge to their interpretation of Islamic faith. However, Islam creates its own basis for gender equality, precisely thanks to a Divine recognition of each person’s individuality and importance.2 In the discussion that follows, we will look at historical pushes for feminism in Morocco and Egypt in the twentieth century and up to today, examining Personal Status Codes and discussing the future of feminism in the wake of the Arab Spring. From this analysis we will see that Islam and feminism are indeed compatible, and follow twin histories of parallel development.

The end of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of the modern Islamic feminist movement, starting with the Egyptian poet Aisha Ismat


Taimuyira (1840–1902) and the Lebanese author Zainab Fawwaz (1860–1914). Taimuyira and Fawwaz highlight conservative readings of Islam as inaccurate and illegitimate, rejecting the veil and the principle of women needing to cover.3 There has been a consistent call rejecting the need to cover—an interesting juxtaposition with the emergence of a recent form of Islamic feminism in which women embrace conservative dress as a form of empowerment. In the 1970s in Cairo, college women began to dress in traditional Islamic dress, without any political, external, or masculine pressure. By doing this, women developed a dress code that rejects western materialism and western reification of the feminine image.4 I believe that this counterexample and evolution of the Islamic feminist movement illustrates the fact that the debate over Islamic feminism cannot be reduced to issues of dress code, but should instead focus on the construction of a social identity of equality, whose components are evolutionary and protean in nature.

Theoretical Foundations

Constructivism forms a theoretical basis for studying marginalized identities and is particularly relevant when combined with feminist theory and Islamic studies. Constructivism is “[t]he view that some aspect of the world is an artifact of social practices, including language and institutionalized ways of categorizing the world.”5 The two main characteristics of the constructivist approach to social studies, analytical and multidisciplinary, make constructivism a suitable set of methods for the present study. In order to deconstruct the roots of feminism in the Middle East and North Africa, this multifaceted approach recognizes the complex, multilayered, and composite social phenomenon. It cannot be reduced to the textual sources of religious activities, the political support for advocacy groups, or the economic conditions of social progress individually; rather, they are integrated factors. Regarding the definition of feminism, I will use scholar and theorist Sa’diyya Shaikh’s definition, “a critical awareness of the structural marginalization of women in society” seeking to engage in “transforming gender power relations in order to strive for a society that facilitates human wholeness for all based on principles of gender justice, human equality and freedom from structures of oppression.”6

Kecia Ali writes that there are two types of modern discourses on Islamic (Sharia) law, the neoconservative and the feminist reformist

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3 Ibid., 136.
approaches.\textsuperscript{7} As Kecia Ali writes, neoconservatives are the leading group calling for scaling back and (re)defining the proper legal and social rights of Muslim women. Their views are published for worldwide distribution and financed by the Saudi government and organizations.\textsuperscript{8} Feminist reformists use the Qur’an to challenge conservative juridical interpretations, both relying on its legal authority and providing new interpretations. Ali draws on interpretation from the early Islamic jurists in the ninth century. These early teachings continue today with four main schools of Sunni interpretation, Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi‘i, and Hanbali.\textsuperscript{9} Each of these schools differs in its interpretation of women’s roles in relation to their husbands and fathers, and their expected roles within the home and marriage. For example, Maliki, Hanafi, and Shafi‘i jurists deny any wifely duty to perform housework, while Hanbali texts don’t specifically address it. For both modern progressive and neoconservative readings of Islam there are centuries of history and an expansive literary canon to draw upon, giving both movements the ability to construct arguments that support their ideology. In order to compare these ideologies and movements I will briefly compare the foundations of progressive Islamic belief with foundations of the ultraconservative Wahhabi reading of Islam.

In discussions of identity, personal constructions of the self and external constructions of womanhood are distinctly modern,\textsuperscript{10} and moreover, distinctly postcolonial in Egyptian and Moroccan contexts. As paradigms constantly shift, so do understandings of nationhood and women’s roles within them. Discussing identity theory, Craig Calhoun states that modernity has created complexities and struggles for collective understandings of identity. For postcolonial nations, understandings of identity are complicated by the legacies left by colonial powers. Part of these identity complications are with the term feminism itself. Feminism is a polarized, contentious word in the Middle East, often carrying the historical legacy of forced modernization by rulers such as Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nationalism in early postcolonial Egypt was framed as westernized and secular, isolating much of its population in favor of a new ideal that only fit the upper class. In Morocco, a previous French protectorate, change had to be rooted in Islam to be seen as legitimate and acceptable. Therefore, modernity has made identity problematic: without the presence of foreign powers in Egypt and Morocco, women’s social improvement may have developed organically and would not have been constructed as a foreign import. In the words of Shaikh, “Gender discourses in

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 168.
contemporary Islam are prefigured by the history of a political conflict between Islam and Christianity, the European colonial encounters in different parts of the Muslim world, and the nationalist responses by colonized peoples.\textsuperscript{11}

Women’s Advancement with the Inception of Islam

In seventh-century Arabia, Islam was revolutionary for women’s rights, elevating the status of all women and codifying it into law and Islamic practice. There are many examples in the Qur’an of female leadership and independence. Women were cited as sources of religious doctrine and contributed to the Hadith, a source of Sharia law that recounts the prophet’s decisions and life. The prophet’s first wife Khadija exemplified today’s understandings of an independent woman—running a successful business in Mecca, and notably, fifteen years the prophet’s senior. The prophet Muhammad revered Khadija, and she was his closest confidant and source of support.\textsuperscript{12} Moroccan-born sociologist Fatima Mernissi writes that in histories and religious texts recounting the prophet Muhammad’s life, “women are acknowledged and their contribution generously praised as both disciples of the prophet during his lifetime and as authors of Hadith.”\textsuperscript{13} The prophet Muhammad’s third wife Aisha exercised political power, advised civil disobedience, and even led troops into battle in armed opposition in 656 CE.\textsuperscript{14} The lives and examples of Khadija and Aisha provide a rich source of women’s independence, agency, and contributions to society, at Islam’s inception. The history of women’s involvement in Islam and society through Khadija and Aisha is one that progressive Islam celebrates, though it is rejected and ignored by neoconservatism.\textsuperscript{15}

Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Feminism in the Islamic World

Feminism in Egypt draws its roots in several historical events, including colonization by France\textsuperscript{16} and the educational reformism of Mohamed Ali.\textsuperscript{17} The rule of the General Ottoman Viceroy from 1805 to 1848 saw an increase in girls’ education, until then limited to the upper class. Schools for girls and professional training centers were created. Political leadership played an equally important role in raising the level of women’s participation in society.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Fatima Mernissi, Women’s Rebellion and Islamic Memory (London: Zed Books, 1996), 99.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 192.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 92.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 99.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Kumari Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World (London: Zed Books, 1986), 44–45.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 45–47.
\end{itemize}
However, the fight for women’s rights is deeply rooted in the civil society, where both men and women stand up for modernization and equality.

There is a strong tradition of feminists in Islam who have advanced women’s rights. Before the founding of the modern Egyptian state, there were two prominent Egyptian men who espoused progressive ideals, Muhammed Abduh (1849–1905) and Qasim Amin (1863–1908). Both men were modernists and prominent voices on women’s rights. Abduh, an Islamic scholar and journalist, actively denounced repressive practices against women. Abduh was educated in Paris, a reflection of economic privilege, and reconciliation of Islamic and feminist ideals. He focused his writing on marriage practices and sought to debunk the misinterpretations within Islam. As a Muslim reformist, he demonstrated that there was no ground for women’s subordination in Islam, and that this subjugation of women in the Arab world came from the texts’ misinterpretation. Abduh became Egypt’s grand mufti in 1899, the state’s most senior interpreter of Islamic law, and through this position encouraged new interpretations of Islamic text. Abduh’s religious credentials were essential to his legitimacy as an agent of social change, although his opponents still accused him of importing foreign ideologies.

Abduh’s contemporary Qasim Amin was also seen as a pioneer of Islamic feminism. Amin made women’s rights in Islam a central feature of his scholarship in his 1899 publication, “Liberation of Women.” Amin’s scholarship is seen as influential because it fuses religious arguments to reconcile Islam with contemporary views on women. He called for women’s emancipation, condemned polygamy, and explained in depth the social and economic costs of women’s seclusion. Overall, Amin’s work, and particularly his book “Women’s Emancipation” (1899), focused on the status of women in the family, calling for a reform of marriage and divorce laws that granted statutory superiority to the husband. As seen here, Amin’s progressive views on women were based on the idea of separation of the political and the religious sphere rather than a simple opposition to religious interpretation. Both of these men promoted the feminist cause by bringing women’s issues from the margins to the forefront of sociocultural consciousness. Notably, these authors were not alone in voicing their concerns. Progressive calls to action in Egypt occurred on multiple levels and movements simultaneous to the work of Abduh and Amin, exemplified by the intellectual Huda Sha’raoui.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the struggle against female domination by men in Arab society gathered a generation of intellectuals, starting with Huda Sha’raoui. She advocated for increasing the minimum

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18 Ibid., 49.
19 Isobel Coleman, Paradise Beneath Her feet: How Women Are Transforming the Middle East (New York: Random House, 2010), 46.
20 Ibid., 47.
21 Jayawardena 1986, 50.
marriage age, demonstrated against British colonization, and helped to establish the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923. Also at this time, the question of divorce begins to appear in Arab feminist writing. In the Arab feminist press, which thrived before World War I, some writers and journalists voiced concerns about the imbalance of divorce laws that left women in disadvantaged situations and constant fear of divorce. Journalists stated that this changed the dynamics for both women and men, as “[f]ear of divorce may distort a woman’s character and mind, drive her to conspire against her husband, and treat him as she would treat a wicked enemy rather than a love companion.” The threat of divorce distorted women’s power dynamics towards men and compromised the equality and agency of women in their marriages. Leila Abouzeid, a writer and freelance Moroccan journalist, captures this conflict in her work, particularly the short story titled “Divorce,” in which she depicts the easy process for a man seeking to divorce his wife.

The foundation of neoconservative thought in Islam today is rooted in Wahhabism, a puritanical movement from Saudi Arabia. Exporting Wahhabism became official state policy of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the 1960s in the Pan-Islam movement. Undertaken by King Faisal, the Saudi head of state, the Sunni fundamentalist interpretation was exported along with aid to conflict zones such as Afghanistan. The oil wealth of this rentier state, and the weak states accepting aid, created an easy transfer of ideology and funding. Wahhabism demands the covering of women’s bodies and strict codes for moral policing, as demonstrated by its proponents, al Qaeda and the Taliban. The constructed ideology of Wahhabism, and its recent appearance in Saudi Arabia, is a distinct political history separate from mainstream Islamic history, and is leading the neoconservative movement to restrict women’s lives and to claim it is legitimate Islamic practice.

Islamic Interpretations Today

The scholarship regarding women in the Middle East produced outside of the region often fails to recognize Muslim women’s dynamic roles and reduces women to static and passive roles. Theorist Sa’diyya Shaikh writes that often, contemporary Euro-American feminist approaches reinforce reductionist views of Islam as peculiarly sexist. Western conceptions of Muslim women are overwhelmingly constructed negatively as submissive, veiled, and helpless—denying the agency that all individuals have. Power dynamics are fluid and changing, as are women’s relationships with education, employment, and marriage. To avoid the trap of reductionism, scholars of progressive Islam

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23 Shaikh 2003, 149.
contextualize this discussion as circulations of power among cultural and religious forces in addition to political forces. This interdisciplinary approach aims for a nuanced, comprehensive scope by engaging with tradition, Islamic text, and contemporary and historical realities, with the aim of pursuing social and gender justice, and pluralism. This addresses tension within the discourse of identity politics, since women in Egypt and Morocco define themselves in globalized, post-9/11 contexts in opposition to external discourses surrounding their lives. Western understandings of Muslim women result in tangible decisions regarding aid, governmentality, and foreign policy.

In the Egyptian and Moroccan contexts, social constructivism seeks to dismantle a constructed narrative that fuses ideas about gender roles with Islamic holy texts—a generalization or essentialism that locks definitions and conception of women’s role into society by preventing debate over the characteristics of this role. Sociologist Fatima Mernissi questions the foundations of these ideas. For example, an oft-quoted Hadith in Morocco states that “those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity.” Mernissi researched Islamic jurisprudence and consulted religious scholars to discover that the source of the Hadith was of questionable legitimacy, despite the Hadith’s inclusion in a collection of a highly regarded ninth-century scholar. The textual source of this anti-woman edict was recorded 25 years after the death of the Prophet, by a man who was seen as dishonest. As with oral histories, the honesty of individuals contributing to Hadith was an important consideration for inclusion in the text. By dismantling the Islamic theological basis for a normative gendered idea, Mernissi is able to contend with the constructed reality to suggest a different reality. Mernissi continues the work of many Islamic scholars from the nineteenth century onwards who seek to highlight the distinction between culture and religion and ground practice more firmly in the precede of Qur’an.

This approach to feminism, achieved through a decodification of religious interpretation, matters in terms of political reality. Approximately all 60 countries in the Muslim world have Personal Status Codes or Family Laws that govern behavior for marriage, divorce, and child custody, and the application of a conservative reading of religious principles to the everyday life of women is done through the writing of these laws. Without a full understanding of the social conditions that led to the adoption of these laws and regulations, understanding the relation between determining factors such as religious authority and the kinds of rights advocated by feminists is apt to be misconceived and incomplete. The result is a prevalent male dominance over women in the Muslim world, sanctioned by law and the authority of religion. It

is crucial to understand the fundamental nature of marriage in Islamic contexts, since it is virtually compulsory and is the only acceptable avenue for sexual experiences. Marriage and raising children are the way that Islamic societies are organized and understood; therefore, laws governing marriage impact women’s lives to a higher degree than they may in non-Islamic contexts, where there is more opportunity to remain unmarried. In both Morocco and Egypt the recent changes in Family Law offer increased political and social safeguards for women.

Previously, gender inequality was explicit in the Moroccan legal code, and women began organizing for reform in the 1990s. In 1993, the Union for Feminine Action emerged as it gathered one million signatures demonstrating for social change and presented its petition to King Hassan II. A series of reforms were presented to the king, and after their validity and accordence with Sharia law were confirmed, all reforms were accepted in 1999. Notably, these reforms were presented to the public not as a means to improve women individually, but as a return to a true Islam that benefits the family. The Moroccan example clearly exemplifies the need for a constructivist assessment of the relations between women’s rights and religion: the social conditions of the progression of women’s rights in Moroccan society point to a relationship between Islam and feminism that not only contradicts the simplistic view of opposition, but reveals a dynamic of progress within the religious framework. The 2004 reform of the Moroccan Personal Status code was a watershed moment for women’s rights. The family law reforms declared men and women equal partners before the law, declaring a universal minimum marriage age of 18 years and outlawing polygamy. Problematic aspects of the previous code were revoked, such as wives’ legal obedience to husbands. Additionally, the right of a man to verbally divorce his wife was outlawed. An added stipulation was passed, ensuring that all money owed to the wife and children had to be paid in full by the husband prior to the divorce.

In Egypt, reform movements called for overturning the degraded status of women inherent in the legal code. In 1979, a series of reforms that restrained women’s rights were enacted with the 1979 Egyptian “Law of Obedience,” declaring that women were subject to their husbands’ authority, and the “Law of Return,” which allowed for a forced return of women to their husbands, even in cases of abuse. These laws relegated women to second-class status, and under the jurisdiction and de facto ownership of their husbands, simply on

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28 Ibid., 81.
29 Ibid., 82.
30 Ibid., 82.
the basis of gender. Women’s rights activists also demanded the abolition of polygamy, which continues to be legal. In the minor reforms of polygamy law in 1979, women simply gained the right of notification by the husband of his polygamous intentions, and were only granted grounds for divorce in court if they were unaware of his simultaneous marriages. The same year, minor positive reform in personal status law occurred when President Anwar Sadat, with the support of the Cairo Family Planning Association, restrained the right of men to divorce unilaterally. Previously, the legal code enforced a verbal declaration of divorce, a right solely for men, one that could occur in the woman’s absence and without her notification. In 1979 a clause was included to notify women of the divorce. On the other hand, the law expanded the basis for calculation of alimony and expanded situations granting women automatic custody of their children.

The task of progressive reform is to tease apart religious interpretation and cultural practice in the legal code. The broad spectrum of outcomes and interpretations in Egyptian and Moroccan law shows the value in reconstructing notions of gender roles in marriage partnerships.

A recent reform of the pivotal Family Law occurred in 2000 and 2004 in Egypt. In the 2000 reforms, Egyptian women gained improved legal support for travel and mobility and expanded grounds of divorce. Women were given the right to travel internationally without the written approval of their husbands, and recognized women as equal partners who have access to mobility on their own accord—thus giving them the right to flee potentially violent or harmful situations. Law 1, the divorce reform in 2000, for the first time in the Arab region, gave women the right to file for a no-fault divorce, and the right to file for divorces from unregistered marriages. The no-fault divorce allows a person to divorce without the partner’s consent, although forfeiting any rights to financial support. Unregistered marriages were previously not recognized by the law and deprived women of spousal maintenance, alimony, and inheritance. And finally, the 2004 reforms introduced a system of family courts, and a Family Insurance Fund was established to give women a means of collecting court-ordered alimony and child support.

Therefore, in addition to social reform successfully passing through the legislative processes, it demonstrated ways of reconstructing identities of women within Islam. The new legislation is a victory for Egyptian women. Women now have avenues of escape and resistance from unsafe or unhealthy marriages, and these are instituted in the legal system. However, a 2008 study conducted by the American University of Cairo discovered that these landmark reforms have been poorly publicized: women and their families were unaware

33 Ibid., 229–230.
of their new rights. As the rates of divorce increase in Egypt, there are numerous civil society organizations, such as the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights, that are addressing the issue of rights-and-equality education as the need becomes more evident.\textsuperscript{34}

Conclusions

This study would not be complete without considering the contemporary sociocultural context of the Middle East and North Africa. In that respect, the situation of women in Egypt demonstrates the fragility of the rights gained by previous generations. Women like Esraa Abdel Fattah, a blogger and political activist known as “Facebook Girl,” participated in the Egyptian revolution in a leadership position. Women participated as equals with men, creating a social contract for a different, more egalitarian future for Egypt. Notably, commentators called the Egyptian revolution a women’s revolution. However, with the growing influence of conservative Islamic interpretation throughout the Arab world comes a worry that these advances will be overturned. There is a risk of reform movements being “hijacked by the sort of Islamists that reject a pluralist version of democracy, oppress women and fly the flag of Jihad against Christians and Jews.”\textsuperscript{35} The fears over an elimination of women from the political process are particularly relevant in the Egyptian case, considering that no women are part of the current committee formed to draft a new constitution.\textsuperscript{36} In Morocco, the feminist movement has matured and prioritized a political path to attain women’s rights. Constructivism helps to explain the religious understandings of social change affecting women. The reforms in both countries are a product of civil society. Without prospects of free and fair elections, activism and lobbyism will continue to provide the movement with the necessary (male) political support to achieve its goals.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, democracy can only be complete with an inclusion of all parties to the political process, including the Islamists, and likewise is incomplete without full and inclusive participation of women. Earlier attempts to reconcile Sharia law and feminist progressiveness have looked at the details of the political process that led to the adoption in Egypt of the legislative reforms mentioned in this paper.\textsuperscript{37} Clearly, inclusiveness in a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item “Islam and the Arab Revolutions,” The Economist, April 2, 2011, 11.
\item Isobel Coleman, “Is Revolution Bad for Women’s Rights?” Washington Post, February 20, 2011, B03.
\item For a detailed analysis of legal changes in Egypt, including parliamentary debates, votes, and actual legal effects of the recent reform of divorce law in Egypt, see Amira Mashhour, “Islamic Law and Gender Equality—Could There Be a Common Ground?: A Study of Divorce and Polygamy in Sharia Law and Contemporary Legislation in Tunisia and Egypt,” Human Rights Quarterly 27, no. 2 (May 2005): 580-584.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
broad political debate clears the way for progressive views and creates the conditions for success in the search for common ground between Islam and women’s rights. Now that Egypt seems to be heading to a democratic form of government, this inclusiveness must be preserved, despite *prima facie* opposition from religious conservative parties against the right of women to continue participating in the political process. Through women’s involvement, the socially constructed theory of democracy will be transformed into a tangible reality that can set the conditions for a sustainable model of human rights. In the Mubarak regime, political developments in Egypt highlighted the limitations of women’s rights, as they were dictated by nonelected leaders who sought to contain religious influence. President Hosni Mubarak, before being overthrown by a popular movement, saw in the Muslim Brotherhood the only credible and organized opposition to his rule. Reforms favorable to women were introduced to further reduce the Islamic grip on Egyptian politics. Post-Mubarak, there is today a serious risk of backlash against women’s rights in the region.

Feminism in the Middle East and North Africa is at the crossroads of a new era. It may, perhaps, choose to strengthen itself on the basis of religious mores, by way of the textual reinterpretation and Islamic progressivism explained here. But if the political balance shifts too much in favor of conservative religious forces, or if the feminist movement loses ground with the intellectual base at the forefront of the textual debate, it will continually be threatened by fundamentalists and conservative religious interpretations, especially at a time when these movements are gaining prominence. In Morocco, complex challenges lie ahead, including the need to transform legislative change into legal reality. The Moroccan feminist movement faces the risk of having produced, through the reform of the Family Law, a purely legal artifact. New rights need to be explained, understood, and made enforceable, which requires new skills as the target of activism shifts from politicians to judges for a full enforcement of the law.

In conclusion, there has been a strong line of feminist ideology and support among scholars and interpreters from the seventh century onwards. Islam today must be understood along an ideological spectrum that acknowledges the presence of Wahhabism on one side and progressive readings on the other. In Egypt and Morocco, there has been a vibrant presence of reinterpretation and distance from conservative readings since the yoke of colonialism was removed. Human rights lawyers, academics, religious scholars, and activists have been working to refocus Islam on the plurality and equality that have always existed within it. The bonds between cultural tradition and

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Islamic practice are slowly being teased apart, an essential part of the discourse of women’s lives in the Middle East and North Africa. Although the Wahhabi movement is pushing against these reforms, it should be understood as only one voice among many, and not a dominant one. Feminist scholars are using the text of the Qur’an to legitimize their public presence, and they are constructing women’s empowerment as a benefit to all society and a return to true Islam. Due to postcolonial contexts, imported western feminisms have failed in the Middle East. Indeed, feminism has to be reshaped and reconstituted to fit the needs of women, by women, in each society. There will always be social forces pushing for change, and for resistance to change. The work of identity politics and political reform continues for women; challenges will be reconstituted as solutions are reconfigured. Esraa Abdel Fattah and the trailblazing women in the Egyptian Revolution worked to overthrow President Hosni Mubarak and create a new political landscape.39 Fattah and millions of others continue carrying the legacy of independent and politically powerful women from Islam’s inception to today. The world is watching as these women and men create a new social contract in Egypt and elsewhere in this dynamic region, one that honors the progressive beginnings of Islam and egalitarian visions for future.