

# Islam, Women and Politics

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## Lindsey Hilsum

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Chatham House and to this session on 'Islam, Women and Politics'. We've got a great panel here, and I can see we've got a great audience. This event is in association with the Johns Hopkins University, the School of Advanced International Studies, and particularly the Women's Alumnae Network, which keeps the women who've graduated together and continues the debate. Also the Chatham House Under 35s Forum – actually, looking around, I think a lot of you are under 35. What are we going to do, Maha? Each of our panellists is going to speak for about six to eight minutes. If they speak for any longer, I cut them off ruthlessly. Then we're going to open it up for discussion.

Sanam Vakil is adjunct professor of Middle East Studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Bologna. She's going to speak about women's experiences in the Islamic Republic. I'm also going to mention the book that she had published in 2013, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*. So I think a lot of what she says will be based on that.

To her right, we have Najah Al-Osaimi, who's a columnist on the *Saudi Gazette*. She's going to talk about political participation in Saudi. She has a long citation here. She's won a very important award, the Every Human Has Rights Media Award. There were 30 winners, she was one of those, in the whole world. She's working on her doctoral thesis at the University of East Anglia at the moment, which is about public diplomacy and domestic policies, specifically looking at Saudi.

On my left here, I have Intissar Kherigi. She is the president of Europe's largest Muslim youth network, the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations. She has a BA in law from King's College, Cambridge, and she is also a solicitor.

Then on my far left, Maha Azzam, who will be familiar to many of you from many years as a fellow here at Chatham House. A great expert on the Middle East, particularly on Egypt, Saudi Arabia and so on. She is now the head of the Egyptian Revolutionary Council. Alas, it is not running the country. It is a broad platform of opponents to the military regime in Egypt.

I'm going to go to Sanam first, then Najah, then to Intissar. Then Maha will sort of pull it all together for us at the end. Then we'll open it up. Sanam, can I ask you to start?

## Sanam Vakil

Thank you. I think it's a really fortuitous time to be talking about women's issues. We just celebrated International Women's Day. For Iran, this is a very relevant day, because most women in Iran would like to celebrate International Women's Day but they can't, because the national day of women in Iran is the Prophet Muhammad's daughter's birthday. So that little divide between women and the state is already visible in having limitations on International Women's Day celebrations. Every year, if you try to see how women document or celebrate Women's Day in Iran, you realize it's a bit of a tussle between women and the state.

So this brings me to what I would like to talk about today. Over the past 36 years, since the Iranian revolution, women have been the surprising beneficiaries of Islamicization policies in Iran. I don't want to be overly rosy or optimistic, but 36 years ago the Islamic government put in shari'a law as the legal structure in the country, and with shari'a law came numerous restrictions on women's rights. Iranian women gained the right to vote in 1963, long before the Swiss did and many of its regional neighbours, so they were very proud of a number of the gender gains that they had achieved before 1979. Women also

supported the Iranian revolution in large numbers. Many women were very frustrated by the imposition of shari'a law and the rollback on women's rights that was experienced in the aftermath of the revolution. In practical terms, women in Iran have lost divorce rights, custody rights, inheritance rights. Women are not allowed to attend football matches. Women are not allowed technically to spend time in the company of men who are not in their immediate family. There are many restrictions of the like that came with shari'a law.

As part of a second tandem to shari'a law, and this is the most important outcome of the revolution for women, was the Islamicization of society. This came in terms of a cultural revolution. The government tried to put forward an idea of women in society that was exulting women as the mothers of the revolution and the mothers of the future generation of Iran. So women were encouraged to go forth and multiply, and they did. In the first ten years, from 1979 to 1989, Iran experienced a demographic explosion. This was one of these first sort of turning points, where an Islamicization policy turned against the state. The state realized they couldn't afford this policy.

There was a second event that comes with Islamicization and it's within the realm of education. Because we're now in this Islamicized society in 1979, lots of young women from traditional and religious families became beneficiaries of an Islamic education system. What we've seen over the past 36 years in Iran is very successful literacy and education rates among women and, most importantly, women have overtaken men at the university level, such that – again, to the government's surprise, unprepared for this – they have had to put quotas at universities to make sure men have enough places. So this is a second development that has been surprising.

The third is that despite the imposition of shari'a law, ironically – or very pragmatically – the Islamic government kept women's voting rights, because they wanted women to continue to participate and support the Islamic state at the ballot box. And for the past 36 years, they have. But there have been shifts, because women have become an important constituency supporting and calling for reform within the Islamic Republic. They voted in 1997 and 2001 overwhelmingly for Khatami, who was a reformist president. They were big drivers in the Green Movement protests after the 2009 elections, and again in 2013 when Rouhani was elected, it was women who were at the ballot box, supporting political and social liberalization as articulated by these various politicians.

So as an outgrowth of the Islamic revolution, what we have today in Iran is a demographic shift, social shifts and political shifts. These shifts have come to benefit women, and women are now agitating and challenging the state for greater rights and greater agency in Iran. These rights have been stalled for two reasons. One, after the 2009 Green Movement, women were among the principal groups who were repressed in the government crackdown. The second reason is the nuclear programme. The whole country is just waiting to see what's going to happen in a few days or a couple months. As a result, there has been a sort of standoff between state and society with regards to any serious domestic issues.

But there is a silver lining, and that's what I would just like to end here: there is hope, because the demographic changes, the economic changes, the social changes, have provided many more opportunities and ambition for women in society. I'm talking all women, not just secular women or moderate women – religious women and conservative women too. So once we put this nuclear issue to bed, rest assured that women's issues will come back into the news in Iran.

## Najah Al-Osaimi

I'm one of ten sisters, and we belong to a middle-class Saudi family based in Riyadh. I was sent to London in 2009 to study politics. This opportunity was not only given to me, it was given to thousands of girls who would like to study politics, human rights and gender studies. Over the last ten years in Saudi Arabia, there was increasing interest among the government to increase the participation of women in the political and social development. This is demonstrated by two major decisions which were taken in 2011.

The first one was giving 20 per cent of the Shura Council seats to women. The Shura Council is an advisory body – it's like a parliament. It's the direct link between citizens and the king. So 20 per cent of these seats were given to women. This is a very interesting percentage because it shows that Saudi women's participation in politics is very high, even compared to democratic countries like the United States, for example, where women represent 18 per cent of the political seats. Also similar to the United Kingdom, where women also occupy 20 per cent of the political seats. So there is an interesting wish by the government to increase the role of women in politics.

The other decision which I would like to discuss today is allowing women to participate in municipal elections. This is a new development in Saudi because the election will be conducted this November, where women will be able to participate as not only voters but also as candidates. Men and women will have equal opportunities to participate in this election.

So what is the motivation behind the Saudi move? In my personal opinion, I think there are two reasons for this. First, because the Saudi government started to think about itself as part of the international community. Saudi Arabia is part of the United Nations, it's part of the World Trade Organization. It signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. So it's part of the whole international community. For this reason, it has to adjust with the international standard.

The other reason is because women started to be more persistent and more courageous to demand their rights. A lot of women today are demanding social and political participation in the national development. So this can't be really ignored. That's why women are becoming really engaged and are taken really seriously.

There are opportunities and also challenges from these elections. In my opinion, I think it is important for women to exercise democratic experience, like the elections, because this will show that they can be partners to men. Also, in the long-term it could change the perception of the society towards women. They can hold higher positions, they can be like men. Because I think the problem with Saudi Arabia is the perception of women. There is a lack of trust of women holding higher positions. So this has to be changed and I think this will change through seeing women competing in the elections.

But of course, there are some challenges also facing this election experience. One of the challenges is that there is a possibility that conservatives take over all the seats, which means there would be a kind of marginalization of women's demands. In the last ten years, there were attempts by the government to reform and make some changes. For example, the government wanted to set 15 as the age for women to get married. Because people, like conservatives, opposed this, the government couldn't carry on and set this through. So things like this might be affected.

Also women may not have enough votes because there is, again, a lack of trust in women. Women don't drive, they need permission, they need supervision. So maybe some people will think, why would I vote

for a woman who doesn't drive, who is not given responsibility or given trust to do things like this? So this is also one of the challenges.

Also, I'm personally worried about how much women, even if they win, they can create actual or practical change in the social and political realities. This is a new experience for Saudi Arabia so we don't know how far they can achieve. But it's going to be really interesting to see what will happen next November. I will stop there.

## Lindsey Hilsum

Thanks very much. Can you tell us, what is the age for marriage now in Saudi Arabia?

## Najah Al-Osaimi

There is no specific age, but a lot of activists and intellectuals and media, they always push for having a minimum age, which is 15 or 18. The government is also trying to do it but this is faced by opposition by conservatives.

## Lindsey Hilsum

So at the moment there is no minimum age for marriage.

## Najah Al-Osaimi

At the moment, no. It is a matter for discussion. It's very much debated at the moment in the press.

## Lindsey Hilsum

Okay, thank you very much indeed. Let us now turn to Intissar Kherigi, who's going to talk a little bit about Muslim women's participation in European politics.

## Intissar Kherigi

Thank you very much. I'm bringing it back to Europe, I don't have expertise in the Muslim world, unfortunately, like these women. But I want to speak specifically on the context in Europe because there is a large Muslim population in Europe and women are becoming an increasingly active part of this population.

I represent a Muslim youth organization which is faith-based, but our work is not religious in the sense of proselytizing. It's more about engaging young Muslims in Europe in active citizenship, in mainstream youth work. Like most Muslims growing up in Europe in the last two decades, there are a lot of issues that we've been confronted with, that you're asked on a daily basis: about religion, about identity, about belonging, and about women as well. I don't like to get drawn into speaking just on women's issues, but it is obviously something that has been in the headlines for the last decade.

I think this is something that's stimulating, in fact, a reflection and a reinterpretation of religion also among European Muslim women, because they are being confronted within themselves with all these questions about their own faith. I think this has prompted in myself and in many others a revisiting of religious texts, in fact, to ask these questions. You get asked: why don't women drive in Saudi? I don't

know why women don't drive in Saudi. I think it's ridiculous, personally. But you have to address these issues and you have to try to understand how it relates to theology and to political and economic structures also, which also have a role to play.

I think that, like many European Muslim women, this in itself, this revisiting of religious texts, has been an empowering factor in many cases, because when you go back to religious texts, it allows you to cut through all this interpretation that is imposed by people from their own interests, from their own attitudes and prejudices. Those who are interpreting texts tend to be male, who tend to input their own patriarchal attitudes. So what we've seen in the last few decades is actually women also approaching these religious texts and approaching Islamic history as well, and seeing: are these interpretations really justified? Are they objectively reflective of the religious traditions? In fact, what I found myself and many other women have written about also (such as Asma Barlas, such as Ziba Mir-Hosseini and other scholars) is that Islamic history is actually full of examples of very active women – active politically, economically, within the community, within social work, academically.

We have a lot of interesting work that's coming out now – for example, Dr Akram Nadwi from Oxford University wrote a book recently in which he went back to look at the influence of female religious scholars in Islamic history. As he kept digging further and further into history, he found thousands of examples actually of Muslim female scholars who were at the height of intellectual knowledge transmission at that time, who were teaching at the top seminaries and universities. In fact, he documents 8,000 female Muslim scholars in the space of a few centuries who taught political leaders in fact, who were engaged in travelling widely to transmit knowledge. Women who were economically active in business, women who set up foundations, who set up universities. In fact, the oldest continually operating university in the world, according to UNESCO, is al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco. It was set up by a Muslim woman, Fatima al-Fihri, in 895.

So really what you discover is a big gulf in terms of what the religious texts say and how they are made to speak by those who are interpreting them, who are often male and who are often coming from their very own set of interests. So that's the first thing, I think, the positive thing that's coming out with the fact that we have Muslim women engaging more in religious interpretation. This is a form of emancipation, in fact, to be able to access directly to the text and to be able to challenge male supremacy in terms of religious interpretation.

But in terms of the topic itself, 'Islam, Women and Politics', as it relates to European Muslims and Muslim women, I think it's important not to overstate the role of religion. What we've seen in the past few decades is that anything to do with Muslims in Europe is approached primarily through the lens of religion, and I think we forget that there are also many other characteristics that Muslim women have. Gender, obviously – gender identity. A particular racial or ethnic identity, their educational experience, their socio-economic position. So when we're talking about Muslim women participation in politics, it's important not to just explain behaviour or preferences simply through the prism of religion. In fact, I went and looked at some statistics that the Electoral Commission of the UK has about voter behaviour and some studies relating to religion. If you look purely through the prism of religion, you find some interesting findings: Catholic voters are significantly more likely to vote Labour than Anglicans, as are Baptists and United Reform Church adherents, while Methodists, Anglicans and Jews are more likely to vote Conservative. Sikhs, Muslims and Buddhists are significantly more likely to vote Labour. So this is just an example. If we were to take religion as the main explanatory factor of why these groups vote as they do, it would be very difficult to find within their religious texts some kind of justification for voting Labour or Conservative (unless they have some esoteric kind of science).

But the point is, I think we tend to approach the participation of religious groups purely through the prism of religion, and in fact it's a function of many other issues, whether it's migration patterns, whether it's socio-economic experience, etc. I think it's this intersectionality that's made it challenging also to talk about issues of Muslim women in particular, because they come at the intersection of gender, of ethnicity (because they come from very different backgrounds), of class as well, and of religion, of course.

I think this has become particularly challenging for Muslim women in Europe, particularly in the last decade, because they have become hyper-visible, in fact, as a sort of marker of the Muslim community and its place in debates about integration, in debates about modernity and traditionalism. I think this is quite problematic in terms of Muslim women's participation, because it has been exploited by the far right also, who use the image of Muslim women to conveniently draw on a multitude of hatreds – against immigrants, against racial minorities and against Muslims.

I think this kind of exclusionary discourse is making it quite difficult for people of minority background but particularly Muslims, our Muslim youth, to participate. We actually conducted a study within our organization, with a university (Aston University), where we looked at the psychological impact that far-right discourse is having on Muslim youth's sense of belonging and identity. It is clear that it's having a far-reaching psychological impact which has not been really highlighted. When we talk about the far right we talk about it as a political phenomenon, but we don't really talk about its psychological ramifications in different groups. I think this is posing a real obstacle in fact to political participation. We know also that the vast majority of victims of Islamophobic hate crime are women. In France, for example, 78 per cent of Islamophobic attacks are on women, because they are visible.

There is good news, of course. We have women of Muslim background becoming more visible in politics. We have the first female Muslim ministers in France, in the UK, in Sweden – the youngest-ever minister, who's 29, is from a Bosnian Muslim background. She became the deputy mayor of her city at 23, which puts all of us to shame, I think. In the UK, in the last elections, we had our first female Muslim MPs, three who were elected out of eight, so that's not a bad proportion. In fact, out of all the Muslim candidates, 24 per cent of them were women.

So I think we are making headway, but there are still many issues around identity and integration, particularly to do with the religious symbols which seem to pose a particular challenge within public discourse. For example, in Belgium there were several cases of women wearing headscarves who were prevented from running for elections, who were taken off the electoral list by their parties when they chose to wear a headscarf. So I think there are certain structural obstacles and a sort of quadruple level of structural obstacles because of this intersectionality.

The thing I wanted to finish with is there is a new phenomenon which we're experiencing right on our doorsteps in Europe, which are that Muslim women are actually becoming the majority in civil society organizations. For example, in my organization I'm the first female president in 20 years and also the majority of our committee are women. We see the same thing happening in higher education, we see the same thing happening in terms of Islamic studies as well. More Muslim women are choosing to study Islamic studies and actually to acquire the tools that will allow them to revive more feminist interpretations of religious texts. Only this weekend there was a big conference, I don't know if anyone attended, at SOAS, where Ziba Mir-Hosseini spoke about religious interpretation. We see that there is a revisiting of religious jurisprudence.

So I think that these kinds of developments and also the use of social media, in fact – social media is being used also by Muslim women in Europe and the US to create new spaces for challenging patriarchal

attitudes. For example, in the US, Muslim women have been using Twitter to raise the issue of access to mosques, because not all mosques allow women to enter, even though that's completely unjustified in terms of religious texts. And they have created this hashtag called #SideEntrance to talk about the most embarrassing kind of experiences of having to use a side entrance to enter a mosque. So I think there are many interesting spaces we can look out for, for the development of discourses about Muslim women and political participation.

### Lindsey Hilsum

Thank you very much, Intissar. Maha, do you want to try and sort of – we've heard such different presentations here. Any threads you can pull together?

### Maha Azzam

I think everything we've heard is something that I can relate to in different contexts across Muslim-majority countries and among Muslim communities. The main characterizations would be the urge for participation, and that participation can take the shape of resistance, as has happened since the so-called Arab Spring in much of the Middle East – or in some parts of the Middle East. I think it even happens in Saudi Arabia. The issue is the search in a country which didn't experience what Tunisia and Egypt experienced – you still have this urge for participation in order to ensure that there are greater rights for women.

I think the second characteristic that is apparent from what we've heard is the continuing repression of women. That repression can happen due to the political system itself or to the culture, to an array of reasons.

I think the third thing that struck me as well is the anticipation, if you like, among women and the hope for a better future. I think that is shared almost – if we talk about the Middle East region, which I know best, but I think also it applies somewhat to Muslim women in Europe and North America. There is an urge for participation in the political system, a greater role in society, the realization in one way or another of the right to participate politically, to engage in education, to ensure that certain things don't happen to women in terms of abuse. We saw across the few years now since the Arab Spring in 2011, in Egypt, women struggling against either the military regime and coming out onto the streets and wanting to ensure, for example, their right to engage in political protest without their rights being violated. We know and we've all probably heard about the virginity tests for women, peaceful protesters being picked up – and this continues to this day – and put in prison because they are determined to speak out, where they have to face either torture or some form of abuse or rape. This is documented by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and so on.

So there's the very real political struggle for rights that is ongoing to this day. I'm relating to Egypt because it is such an important country in terms of women being at the forefront of a kind of revolutionary struggle, if you like. It reminds me a little bit of Iran historically and then what happens next when there is a change, if you like. Things don't necessarily go as planned. The aspirations and the hopes aren't always realized. But the struggle is very much about rights and empowerment, I think, across the board.

I think maybe because of my own interests, I always look back at the kind of political system that enforces a particular kind of oppression of women. I think much of the Middle East region, what we face is perhaps a greater role for women, more space for women. That can be encouraged even by the political system.



But ultimately, what kind of impact does a woman's participation have on ensuring rights for herself or for society at large? I think it remains very limited, despite the vast majority of women who are going to universities now, who are going into higher education. The numbers often exceed those of men, as we heard in the case of Saudi Arabia and is the case elsewhere in the region. The reality is that they will come out of university educated, maybe even take up positions in ministries and leading professions or as doctors and lawyers and so on, but ultimately the political system is so closed that neither for men nor women is there any real prospect of changing the system as a whole.

I think specifically in terms of women's rights, the challenge is how to ensure that religious institutions engage – because they do still have such an important say – engage in a reformed outlook in terms of women's role and women's place in society, one that is perhaps in keeping with the actual principles for many of Islam. Whether it requires a re-reading or whether it's actually the original interpretation that has somehow got lost along the way, the fact remains that women are searching for rights that are equal to others in society, to other ethnicities in society (if they belong to a Western European society) or equal to men in their own societies. I think that search is still continuing.

I think there is a lot to be done in terms of the educational system in much of the Muslim-majority countries, to ensure that there is a real sense of equality and of understanding that a lot of the imposition on women's rights come from a misunderstanding of certain principles of Islam, and also are very culturally related to a particular place and time, and also to economic reasons, obviously. I think there is a big role to be played by the media because – again, I'll relate this back to Egypt, where the media has often played a role in encouraging certain stereotypes, encouraging the repression of women. For example, where there was harassment and abuse of women protesters, often the media that supported a particular system – and today supports, for example, the military in Egypt – will justify the acts of certain security forces against women.

I think an important point that was raised as well is that we've got to be very careful not to constrain the struggle of women within certain ideological lens. We mustn't compartmentalize it ideologically, because again, women – whether those that belong to the Islamist trend or whether those (and I'm using very broad terms here) who are perceived or perceive themselves to be secular and liberal – are engaged in a very similar struggle for rights and ultimately come under the same kind of repression. Only recently, maybe just over a month ago, two women died in close proximity in Egypt, only maybe a week apart. One young woman of 17 called Sondos Abu Bakr, who was shot as a peaceful protester in Alexandria – she was part of a movement called Students Against the Coup. I think around a week later, Shaima El-Sabbagh was also shot trying to lay a wreath near Tahrir Square. Both peaceful protesters, both belonging to different political trends, but ultimately engaged in a very similar struggle for rights.

So it's really about the struggle for empowerment, and that struggle for empowerment has gone on for over a century. I think the issue of basic rights for women has not yet been realized because political rights for both men and women have not been realized in most of the Muslim-majority countries. Thank you.

### Lindsey Hilsum

Thank you, Maha. One of the very interesting things I note from all our panellists is that none of you have been angry. In this country, to get the vote, we chained ourselves to railings and we threw ourselves in front of race horses. To get abortion rights, we marched through the centre of London. Some of us are still very angry about a lot of things. But you all seem incredibly reasonable. I have a question for Sanam but let me throw it open now.