

**WOMEN, DEMOCRACY, AND VIOLENCE IN THE ARAB WORLD**  
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It is becoming more clear every day that Arab patriarchy, oppressive everywhere it exists and on the rise in several nations, severely hinders the formation of a civil society and promotes personal and societal violence.

First, let us look at a sampling of excerpts describing conditions for women in the Arab world from the U.S. Department of State.<sup>1</sup> These examples are, by no means, unique to the countries mentioned here.

- **Bahrain:** *Women's groups and health care professionals state that spousal abuse is common, particularly in poorer communities. Further, ...because marital relations are governed by Shari'a law, spousal rape is not a legal concept within the law.*
- **Egypt:** *FGM [female genital mutilation] ... is common despite the Government's commitment to eradicating the practice and NGO efforts to combat it. Traditional and family pressures remain strong; a study conducted in 2000 estimates the percentage of women who have ever been married and have undergone FGM at 97 percent.*
- **Jordan:** *The Criminal Code provides for leniency for a person found guilty of committing an "honor crime," a violent assault with intent to commit murder against a female by a relative for her perceived immodest behavior or alleged sexual misconduct. And One forensic medical examiner estimated that 25 percent of all murders committed in the country are honor crimes.*
- **Kuwait:** *Some employers physically abuse foreign women working as domestic servants, and, despite economic and social difficulties for a domestic servant who lodges a complaint, there are continuing reports of the rape of such women by male employers and male coworkers.*
- **Libya:** *...a significant proportion of rural women still do not attend school and tend to instill in their children such traditional beliefs as women's subservient role in society.*
- **Oman:** *Government officials frequently deny women land grants or housing loans and prefer to conduct business with a woman's husband or other male relative.*
- **Qatar:** *The Government adheres to Shari'a as practiced in the country in matters of inheritance and child custody. Muslim wives have the right to inherit from their husbands. However, they inherit only one-half as much as male relatives. Non-Muslim*

*wives inherit nothing ...*

- **Saudi Arabia:** ... *women have few political or social rights and are not treated as equal members of society. There are no active women's rights groups. And Women are not admitted to a hospital for medical treatment without the consent of a male relative.*
- **United Arab Emirates:** *Trafficking in women for the purposes of sexual exploitation is a problem.*

Let us now look at just a few examples illustrating the lack of advancement of democracy in these same countries, also as reported by the State Department.<sup>2</sup>

- **Bahrain:** *The government faces few judicial checks on its actions.*
- **Egypt:** *There are significant restrictions on the political process and freedom of expression for non-governmental organizations, including professional syndicates and organizations promoting respect for human rights.*
- **Jordan:** *Executive authority is vested in the king and his council of ministers.*
- **Kuwait:** *No political parties exist in Kuwait ...*
- **Libya:** *Qadhafi exercises near total control over the government.*
- **Oman:** *Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id rules with the aid of his ministers. And The Sultanate has neither political parties nor legislature ...*
- **Qatar:** *The Basic Law of 1970 institutionalized local customs rooted in Qatar's conservative Wahhabi heritage, granting the Emir preeminent power.*
- **Saudi Arabia:** *The central institution of Saudi Arabian Government is the monarchy.*
- **United Arab Emirates:** *There is talk of steps toward democratic government, but nothing concrete has emerged.*

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (an arm of the Arab League) issued, on July 2, 2002, the first “Arab Human Development Report.” The report cites three critical “deficits” that face all Arab countries: freedom; women’s empowerment; and human capabilities and knowledge relative to income. In the Overview of the report we are told: *The utilization of Arab women's capabilities through political and economic participation remains the lowest in the world.*<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the first of these deficits, freedom, the report, using a “freedom score” based on

a ... set of aspects of civil and political freedoms<sup>4</sup> says that *Out of seven world regions, the Arab countries had the lowest freedom score in the late 1990's.*<sup>5</sup> Another set of indicators, for “voice and accountability” are used. For this, ... *the Arab region also has the lowest value of all regions of the world...*<sup>6</sup>

For the “women’s empowerment deficit,” the report applies the UNDP’s “gender empowerment measure” (GEM). As noted, *The GEM measures the participation of women in economic, professional and political activities using the indicators of income per capita, women’s percentage share of professional and technical positions, and women’s percentage share of parliamentary seats, respectively.*<sup>7</sup> The Arab world fares only better than sub-Saharan Africa in this measure.

As to education, ... *illiteracy rates in the Arab world are still higher than the international average and are even higher than the average in developing countries. Moreover, the number of illiterate people is still increasing, to the extent that Arab countries embark upon the twenty-first century burdened by over 60 million illiterate adults, the majority of whom are women.*<sup>8</sup>

All in all, this report, conceived, written and reviewed wholly by Arabs, paints a pretty stark picture.

Admittedly, there is a widely varying picture concerning women’s rights and democracy throughout the Islamic world. In Syria, where there is an almost total dictatorship by President Asad, the government has worked to overcome traditional discrimination against women and to promote women’s education. In Algeria, there is a functioning democracy, yet women have been

the particular target of scores of thousands of viciously cruel rapes, abductions, and murders by rebel Islamists. In the presence of a total dictatorship in Iraq, the Government has enacted laws to protect women from exploitation in the workplace and from sexual harassment; to permit women to join the army and police forces; and to equalize women's rights in divorce, land ownership, taxation, and suffrage. (The State Department does note that: *It is difficult to determine the extent to which these protections are afforded in practice.*) Iran's theocratic oligarchs have been in pitched battle with the forces of reform for a number of years. Even though the ayatollahs remain in command (and actively promote and underwrite terrorism), Iran has some quite progressive laws. For instance, there are three months of paid maternity leave, two half-hour periods per day for nursing mothers to feed their babies, pension benefits for women, and the requirement that companies provide day-care facilities for young children of female employees.

As one Islamic feminist wrote recently: *Distinctions should be made between countries that pursue a more moderate form of Islam, allowing for women's civic and professional participation, as in present-day Iran, and those like Afghanistan under the Taliban that practice a distorted and politicized Islam.*<sup>9</sup>

Let's listen a little more to the voices of Arab women. The extraordinarily eloquent Moroccan writer and feminist, Fatima Mernissi, has published a number of important books, and has also been an activist in organizing the feminist movement throughout the Arab world. In "Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory,"<sup>10</sup> she writes about a number of things, including the politics, the psychology, and the history of women and democracy in the Arab world. A principal

theme running throughout, however, is that the virulent anti-feminist hysteria of the last decade or so in much of the Arab world is backlash against democracy: *...the mystery of this hostility towards women became clear: it was not so much a war against femininity that was going on, as a war against democracy.*<sup>11</sup> And, *A rebellious Arab female has been identified since the dawn of Islam as a potent threat.*<sup>12</sup> The patriarchal repressions of the past couple of decades have reached new depths. It is my opinion that if this is not in fact the last gasp of these authoritarian, patriarchal cultures against the perceived “onslaught” of Western democratic pluralism - and therefore the end of the Arab history of oppression by class and sex (as Frances Fukuyama might term it) - but rather the establishment of a new radical political Islam that will sweep the Arab world and beyond (as Osama bin Laden and his colleagues in Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, and others so devoutly wish), then the democracies are faced with a nightmare of political reaction, and all the violence that attends it, that will make the Nazi and Stalinist regimes look like Sunday School.

The conservative states, led by Saudi Arabia, have given untold millions of dollars to the fundamentalists thereby weakening the civil societies of these states. This “petro-Islam” promotes an anti-democratic culture. In the context of the Arab world’s drive to veil women beginning in the 1980's, Mernissi says this *...was not in fact an offensive targeted at women, it was an assault on democratic process, and an attack on civil society’s burgeoning hopes.*<sup>13</sup>

As we in the Western democracies now have learned, billions of dollars have been given to fund religious schools (madrasahs) that teach only the Koran - and hatred of all things Western. Of course, as both Amiri and Mernissi point out, feminism is decried as a sort of Western

pollution. The Islamists give no credit to the women in their societies who cry out for basic freedoms. In fact, they are severely repressed for their efforts.

Jan Goodwin, in discussions with women, feminist and otherwise, in Islam from Pakistan to Egypt, reports on the panoply of repressive measures inflicted on them.<sup>14</sup> For instance, she recounts the story of prominent Jordanian television commentator and newspaper columnist, Said Faisal. She began in the 1980's to question the wisdom of the tenets of the fundamentalists who were gaining more power every day throughout the Islamic world. In 1984, the conservatives started to strike back. She became the target of lawsuits and death threats. In fewer than ten years, she had been reduced to near poverty, her husband, a doctor, forced to leave the country to work, her work in television and as a writer utterly destroyed. Another Jordanian, Professor Aarwa al-Amiri, at the University of Jordan in Amman, has seen the changes. *When I first started teaching here in 1973, I could freely say in class what I thought. Now we have to be very careful that we do not say anything that is construed as anti-Islamic.*<sup>15</sup>

Another practice on which Goodwin reports is hymenorrhaphy, or hymen restoration, a procedure performed on women who have lost their virginity prior to marriage. This is done to allow them to be married and, in many cases, to protect them from "honor killing" if they are found after marriage not to have been virgins. Gynecologists are also called on to certify that the new bride was a virgin prior to her wedding night if she doesn't bleed during sexual intercourse. The price of not being a virgin is often death. Mernissi has a lot to say about this too, in her chapter, "Virginity and Patriarchy." That the Arab man, in most things, acts out of fear and shame stems, in part, from his deeply acculturated confusion - Mernissi calls it "Social

Schizophrenia.” She says: *For the patriarchal sexual act is childish, it is the act of a man who has never outgrown the terrible fear of his insignificance in relation to the life-giving mother, and who has never become adult enough to see sexual pleasure as a relation between equals rather than as a mechanism for establishing a hierarchy and enforcing power, domination and therefore dehumanization.*<sup>16</sup>

Earlier, Mernissi writes: *The subjugated, scorned and humiliated Arab will be transformed into an autonomous, self-governing person the day he is suckled by an autonomous mother.*<sup>17</sup> This, in the end, is the heart of the problem: the patriarchy and misogyny that rule the Arab psyche create individuals who are incapable of performing even the rudimentary tasks that allow for a civil, democratic society. The men, in particular, are left little outlet for their innate need for self-expression so that, given the frustrations of poverty and the perceived “humiliation” of being second-class citizens to Americans and Europeans, but especially Israelis who are of the same ethnic origin and who live in the center of their world, they seek to redeem their “honor” through violence. The Arab rulers, intent on maintaining their reigns, underwrite the Islamist politicians and the imams who stoke the fires of this frustration with their invective against women, Jews, and the West. The power relationships that exist today in Arab Islam impede the entire society. The cruelty, then, lies not just in the oppression of women, and the hatred is not just of Israelis and Americans. It is **self-hatred** that underlies the Arab psyche and fosters the violence that plagues us all.

How does this come to be? Let us look at the example of Nazi Germany. Adolph Hitler had an experience analogous to those of his countrymen who later rallied around him to serve as

his “willing executioners,” to use Daniel Goldhagen’s term. The German approach to child-rearing, for many generations prior to the rise of Nazism, was to inflict regular and brutal corporal punishment on children, from a very early age. This was certainly Hitler’s experience. He was beaten, humiliated, even summoned by his father not by name, but by a whistle, as you’d call a dog. This is the “poisonous pedagogy” that Alice Miller in her brilliant exegesis on the roots of violence, “For Your Own Good,”<sup>18</sup> identified, traced, and demonstrated to have drenched the psyches of the generation that wreaked the firestorm of Nazism on the world. Imagine the repressed rage and humiliation of an adult who has endured constant severe beatings from the earliest age, at home and at school, and has never been allowed to express how hurt he’s been. Multiply that by several million individuals, and multiply that again by six or seven generations. Now catalyze that repressed rage with defeat in war and a staggering economic depression, and bring the whole angry potion to a full boil with a political program founded on lies and hatred, and you have Nazi Germany.

Miller writes: ... *Hitler was certainly not an isolated phenomenon. He would not have had millions of followers if they had not experienced the same sort of upbringing.*<sup>19</sup>

In correspondence between the “New Yorker” writer, Jane Kramer, and myself (prompted by my reading of her excellent review of Ian Kershaw’s biography of Hitler), she wrote: *I hadn’t really considered - until your letter - the extent to which that childhood might be an important clue to the “why” and “how” of the millions of little Hitlers Germany produced, and Goldhagen, of course, took on as his subject. We tend to laugh off the traditional German kind of Schreber’s “posture rod” cliche. But you’re right.*<sup>20</sup>

Lloyd de Mause, the psychohistorian, writes: *Wars are clinical emotional disorders, periodic shared psychotic episodes of delusional organized butchery intended to turn a severe collapse of self esteem into a rage to achieve justice. Wars are both homicidal and suicidal; the Germans who cheered Hitler on as he promised to start an unwinnable world war against the overwhelming power of opposing nations knew deep down they were committing suicide.*<sup>21</sup>

He writes elsewhere in the same work: *Children who grow up to be Islamic terrorists are products of a misogynist fundamentalist system*<sup>22</sup> ... and *Like serial killers—who are also sexually and physically abused as children—terrorists grow up filled with a rage that must be inflicted upon others.*<sup>23</sup> Further - and heartbreaking to tell - *According to the recent survey of Palestinian students, boys report having been used sexually even more often than girls – men choosing to rape little boys anally to avoid what they consider the “voracious vaginas” of women.*<sup>24</sup>

DeMause cites a prominent Muslim sociologist: *In our society there is no relationship of friendship between a man and a woman.*<sup>25</sup> Men and boys in the Arab world are taught that they are superior to women and girls. What sort of cognitive dissonance must this message create when their primary caregivers from birth, the very source of their lives, are considered third-class citizens, mere chattel?

John Stuart Mill: ... *when a boy is differently brought up, how early the notion of his inherent superiority to a girl arises in his mind; how it grows with his growth and strengthens with his strength; how it is inoculated by one schoolboy upon another; how early the youth thinks himself superior to his mother, owing her perhaps forbearance, but no-real respect; and*

*how sublime and sultan-like a sense of superiority he feels, above all, over the woman whom he honours by admitting her to a partnership of his life. Is it imagined that all this does not pervert the whole manner of existence of the man, both as an individual and as a social being?*<sup>26</sup>

What of the woman? Imagine if I, as a woman, cannot regard myself as a citizen of my society, let alone an equal partner in my family. My son gazes up at me and I see the face of his father, the man who beats and rapes me. Or I see the face of my father who beat my mother. Can I feel pure maternal warmth for this babe in my arms? And when he grows older and is revered for his manhood, while I remain invisible at best, or even reviled for my womanhood, how will I feel about him? And my daughter; what of her? When she sees me drudging, cursed at by my husband, her father, with no redress, what will she think? "She is a woman, my mother, and little better than a field animal. What does that make me?" Imagine the spreading stain of pollution now, amplified by scores of millions of families and multiplied by scores of generations.

In an important new book on terrorism, "The Age of Sacred Terror,"<sup>27</sup> written by two top Clinton administration counterterrorism experts at the National Security Council, we learn a tremendous amount about the religious tracts and political movements that predate and underlie the present Islamist "jihad" against the West and, not incidentally, against the *jahiliyya* political leaders and societies in the Islamic world. (This term, *jahiliyya*, ... *in the jargon of Islamic reformers ... refers to individuals, or entire societies, that have fallen into a pre-Islamic state of barbarity, especially those where Muslims have forsaken God's law in favor of man-made laws.*)<sup>28</sup> However, even though the authors attempt to delve deeply into the minds of these "raiders on the path of God," it is clear that they have neglected to take the proper measure of the

psychopathology that is formed in so severely sexist a society as the one from which the terrorists come.

Some day soon we and our brothers and sisters in the Arab world had better learn a new way. The Arab societies need democratic institutions founded on the rule of law, including equal rights for all citizens. Even though this is a threat to the Fundamentalist Islam that continues on the rise in the Arab world, and to the monarchs and other dictators that rule throughout, there must be reforms. The alternative to the inculcation of democratic values into the Arab world is a continuation of the terrible repressions that so retard the growth of the Arabs, both as individuals and in their societies, and, increasingly, threaten the existing democracies in the West and elsewhere. The outcome of that could only be enormous and terrible conflict, worse than we've already seen.

### Endnotes

1. "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2001" (U.S. Department of State -Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 3/4/2002)
2. "Background Notes" on countries (U.S. Dept. of State, all entries 2002)
3. Arab Human Development Report 2002, p. 3
4. Ibid, p. 27
5. Ibid, p. 27
6. Ibid, p. 27
7. Ibid, p. 28
8. Ibid, p. 51
9. Rina Amiri, "Muslim Women as Symbols - and Pawns" (NY Times, op-ed, 11/27/01)
10. Fatima Mernissi, "Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory" (Zed Books, London & New Jersey, 1996)
11. Ibid., p. vii
12. Ibid., p. 13
13. Ibid, p. xi
14. Jan Goodwin, "The Price of Honor" (Little, Brown & Co., Boston et al, 1994)
15. Ibid, p. 271
16. Mernissi, p. 38
17. Ibid, p. 10
18. Alice Miller, "For Your Own Good - Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence" (Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1984)
19. Ibid, p. viii

20. Jane Kramer to William F. Hewitt, private correspondence, 5/28/99
21. Lloyd de Mause, "The Emotional Life of Nations," pp. 154-55 (Karnac, New York and London, 2002)
22. Ibid, p. 39
23. Ibid, p. 45
24. Ibid, p. 42
25. Mona AlMunajjed, "Women in Saudi Arabia Today," p. 45 (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1997)
26. John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women," 1869
27. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, "The Age of Sacred Terror" (Random House, New York, 2002)
28. Ibid, p. 448.