

## **Arab Internationalism and Gender: Perspectives from the Third Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, 1949**

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Historians of the Middle East have used gender to explore a range of topics, from how crises around gendered practices have contributed to the construction of national identities to women's roles in nationalist movements.<sup>1</sup> Whereas early gender histories focused on single nation-states,<sup>2</sup> recent scholarship has turned to regional and transnational connections.<sup>3</sup> Yet the international sphere, the domain of nation-states and nongovernmental organizations in relation to each other, has yet to be examined through the lens of gender. In this essay, I argue that doing so yields new insights into the relationship between the national and the international in the Middle East, and into the process of rights claiming in postcolonial nation-states. I make this argument through a discussion of the third session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW).

In 1949, three years after Lebanon became independent from French Mandate rule, the UNCSW hosted its third session in Beirut. This location made it possible for the Women's Committee of Lebanon (WCL), an umbrella organization encompassing several secular and religious women's organizations, to address simultaneously the international community and the Lebanese state.<sup>4</sup> At the session, the WCL's president, Ibtihaj Qaddura (1893–1967), presented a petition to representatives of the Lebanese government and the international women's rights community in attempt to achieve the organization's two interlocking aims: increased women's rights from the Lebanese state and a more representative definition of women's rights from the UN.<sup>5</sup> The WCL saw achieving the latter as essential to gaining the former.

A close reading of the WCL campaign reveals how citizens who tried to challenge Lebanon to become more inclusive and representative imagined the international sphere and leveraged it toward a range of ends. While the primary target of the campaign was the Lebanese state, whose constitution promised equality but did not provide women equal franchise, the language of the WCL petition exposed the limitations of the UNCSW women's rights system. The WCL urged the UNCSW to adopt a definition of women's rights that bridged "East" and "West." Representatives of the Lebanese state also used the session to broadcast its support for women's rights to the international community.

The campaigns staged by Lebanese women's rights activists and the Lebanese state fit into the broad phenomenon of what I term "Arab internationalism"—Arab engagement with the international sphere. Arab internationalism has been studied from the perspective of nation-states, national coalitions, and individual male actors (e.g., Sultan al-Atrash), but less so in terms of debates not directly centered on national independence—including women's rights.<sup>6</sup> Examining Arab internationalism through the lens of gender forces us to consider the nuances of vocabulary used by different actors, which convey how these actors conceived of the international system differently. Whereas for WCL members this system was a potential resource in the attempt to win women's rights

protections, for the Lebanese state it was a sphere wherein to prove itself. The elite Lebanese women from a range of sectarian backgrounds who formed the WCL's core membership thought that a truly international standard of women's rights would aid their rights campaigns at home. Though these seasoned activists knew the limitations of the international women's rights system, they chose to work within it. A strong international standard of women's rights, even if flawed, would aid their attempt to obtain more rights from, or to enforce those already promised by, the Lebanese state.

The 1949 WCL campaign was an outgrowth of Lebanese women's long-standing relationship with the international women's movement and its previous lobbying activities at the League of Nations. With roots in the 1890s, international women's rights organizations, such as the International Alliance of Women and the International Council of Women, were among the first organizations to transcend nation-state boundaries in Europe. They brought women together around an emergent awareness that women throughout Europe lacked citizenship and voting rights. The idea of pooling resources to advocate for women's rights quickly spread globally. By the end of World War I, a vibrant Lebanese women's movement had taken shape that, due to its strong diasporic ties especially in the Americas, was transnational in nature.<sup>7</sup>

While women activists in colonized regions initially sought assistance in resisting colonialism from international women's organizations based in the metropolises, they did not find easy allies. A cleavage quickly emerged between the two.<sup>8</sup> It should come as no surprise that activists in international women's organizations enjoyed a level of access to the League of Nations unavailable to Lebanese activists living under the League-sanctioned French Mandate for Syria, for the League essentially buttressed the colonial world system. Speaking for women everywhere, many of whom they did not represent, international women's organizations in Europe, which maintained some token membership from the colonial world, shaped how the League, and later the UN, defined women's rights.

In response to their sidelined position in the international women's movement, elite Arab women convened eleven "Arab" and "Eastern" women's conferences between 1928 and 1944.<sup>9</sup> These conferences, hosted in regional capitals such as Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, and Tehran, provided a venue for Arab, Persian, and other women in Asia to gather and express their grievances with the region's colonial powers—the British and the French. The conferences were also a space for discussing and defining Arab and Eastern womanhood, categories shaped by the convergence of anticolonialism and the primacy of the West in the international women's movement. Women from "the East," which was understood to stretch from Istanbul to Tokyo, were seen as sharing a common spirit, the experience of colonialism, and an emphasis on family.

Through these conferences, women articulated an Eastern conception of women's rights centered not on the individual woman, as in Europe and the United States, but rather on the family.<sup>10</sup> This conception made it possible for women activists in the region to claim women's rights without fear of having to abandon their cultural heritage through the adoption of foreign conceptions of rights and all that was associated with them. Thus, women's rights activists had appropriated and resignified the category "Eastern," which was originally constructed by European colonial powers, and used it for their own ends, especially in forging an alternate international definition of women's rights.<sup>11</sup> However, it is important to note that the Eastern notion of family referenced by activists and

positioned as their antidote to Western notions of women's rights was itself a new social construct.<sup>12</sup>

In 1937, after decades of advocacy by women's organizations to create a body dedicated to forwarding women's causes at the League, the League's Assembly established the Committee of Experts on the Legal Status of Women, through which women's issues were first integrated into international governance. This committee represented the fusion of two spheres that both marginalized Arab and Eastern women: international women's organizations and international governance. In 1938, the committee initiated a global survey on the legal status of women in attempt to formulate an international legal standard. As this survey was carried out, a small coalition of Syrian and Lebanese women actively lobbied the League's Secretariat to expand the survey's scope and to ensure that the committee included representatives from the East.<sup>13</sup> They wanted to make sure that the "international" standard established by the League did not exclusively represent Western norms and practices. Their advocacy for the inclusion of Eastern conceptions and voices was not envisioned as an explicit rejection of Western women's rights. Instead, it was an attempt to forge a definition of women's rights that encompassed the full range of women's rights practices. Such a definition would have served as an international standard for Lebanese women in their campaigns for rights at home. However, before this standard could even emerge, the activities of the committee were disrupted by the start of World War II.

After its establishment in 1946, the UNCSW picked up where the League's Committee of Experts on the Legal Status of Women left off. The definition of women's rights that it articulated, however, did not move beyond the League-era definition, sparking Lebanese activists to call for an Eastern alternative at the UNCSW conference in Beirut. The petition that the WCL circulated began by affirming the women's rights guaranteed by the Lebanese state through the constitution, such as the right to education. The petition then issued light suggestions for how these rights could be improved or actuated. Thus, the WCL harnessed the attention of the international women's rights community as part of a strategy to pressure the Lebanese government to enforce women's rights.

While the WCL sought to secure more rights at home and saw drawing comparisons between the Lebanese state and the international community as a means of doing so, its leadership was not convinced that the Lebanese state would respond to its efforts, particularly given the UN definition of women's rights. Hence, the second angle of the WCL's petition campaign: to advocate broadening the UN definition of women's rights to include Eastern women's rights practices. Despite the UNCSW session's international audience, the WCL felt that its most fruitful avenue of activism was domestic; they had calibrated their expectations in regard to the success of their UN campaign.

Whereas the UNCSW was seen as positioning individuals as the foundation of society, the WCL "consider[ed] the family the basic unit of society."<sup>14</sup> Members of the organization expressed their belief that the rapid industrialization of the global system had led to the two world wars, which destroyed the social fabric of societies and the families that constituted them, and in turn undermined women's access to rights.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, the activists did not explain how grounding women's rights in the family would work in practice; their arguments served more as a critique of the existing international women's rights system than as the basis of an alternative.

The WCL was not alone in trying to benefit from the UNCSW session's international audience. Wanting to position Lebanon among the world's nations, the Lebanese government used the session to publicly emphasize its support for women's rights. Meanwhile, the Lebanese foreign minister, Hamid Franjiyya, hosted a series of events in conjunction with the UNCSW where he noted that the Lebanese government "ardently desired that Lebanese women obtain their complete rights." He observed that the government held this position not "because we consider equality an end in itself, but because we know and feel deep within ourselves that no progress and no national social, cultural, or spiritual recovery can be realized, whatever the means used to accomplish it, without giving women the opportunity to participate and develop in the same conditions as men."<sup>16</sup> One could not be faulted for thinking on the basis of Franjiyya's speeches that women had been fully emancipated in Lebanon. But the WCL's members did not find the status quo of women's rights in Lebanon to be sufficient. They wanted more than Franjiyya's eloquent proclamations of support and unenforced constitutional provisions. Aware of the Lebanese state's desire to be seen as progressive with regard to women's rights, the WCL petition very subtly worked to shame the Lebanese state into compliance on the women's rights it had promised.

Even as women's rights were internationalized, states controlled women's access to rights. Lebanese women's organizations played Eastern and Western rights off one another in domestic and international forums in an attempt to secure the maximum rights protections. By linking women's rights to the family and the nation, they eventually won the support of the Lebanese state: in 1952, Lebanon enforced Article 7 of the Constitution allowing women to vote and run for office. Rather than viewing this as a final victory, women's organizations in Lebanon used the franchise to press for increased women's rights protections at home, in the Arab world, and globally. Qaddura was among the first three women elected to Beirut's city council.

This gender analysis of Lebanon's postindependence international relations reveals that women pushed the boundaries of the state through the international framework. The UNCSW, as a supranational sphere, provided a space for discussing women's rights that was unavailable on the domestic level. In that context, women's rights claims could not be easily dismissed or ignored. In addition to highlighting Lebanese women's creativity in the international sphere, however, I have tried to show that this type of analysis can have implications inside and outside Middle East studies. Further work on "Arab internationalism" and its effects on domestic politics, gender relations, and the international community will forward existing efforts to understand the Middle East not as always acted upon by outside forces, but rather as positioned at the center of global processes such as the development of international women's rights norms. The study of Arab internationalism can also help to fit the Middle East into histories of international governance, which, as Liat Kozma discusses more thoroughly in her contribution to this roundtable, are predominantly written from a Euro-American perspective. Although attempts to construct and disseminate an Eastern vision for women's rights were ultimately unsuccessful on the international level, they provide a window into the multiple conceptualizations of international women's rights that circulated in the first half of the 20th century—an observation that has significance in the wider field of women's history.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I thank the other roundtable participants, Hazel Hahn, Onur Bakiner, Molly Giblin, Natalie Cisneros, and Ali Mian for their feedback on this essay.

<sup>2</sup>Studies of gender in Egypt served as the cradle for the subfield of Middle East gender history. See, for example, Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society and the Press* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997); and Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995). Recent scholarship on Egyptian history has opened new layers of gender analysis: Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011); and Hanan Kholoussy, *For Better, for Worse: The Marriage Crisis that Made Modern Egypt* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010). On Palestine, see Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its "New" Women: The Palestinian Women's Movement, 1920–1948* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003). On Iraq, see Noga Efrati, *Women in Iraq: Past Meets Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). For literature on Greater Syria, see n. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Camila Pastor de Maria Campos, "The Mashriq Unbound: Arab Nationalism, *Criollo* Nationalism and the Discovery of America by the Turks," *Mashriq & Mahjar* 2 (2014), 28–54; Liat Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports: Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup>This organization appears to have been established on the eve of the session and continued to operate with slight tweaks to its name into the late 1970s. It was formed perhaps in an effort to unify the women's movement around the cause of securing women's rights protections from the Lebanese state.

<sup>5</sup>For more on Qaddura's activism at the end of the Ottoman period, see Fruma Zachs and Yuval Ben-Bassat, "Women's Visibility in Petitions from Greater Syria during the Late Ottoman Period," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47 (2015): 765–81.

<sup>6</sup>On Arab Internationalism at the League of Nations, see Marie-Renée Mouton, "Le congrès syriopalestinien de Genève," *Relations Internationales* 19 (1979): 313–28; Philip S. Khoury, "Factionalism among Syrian Nationalists during the French Mandate," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13 (1981): 441–69; James L. Gelvin, "Demonstrating Communities in Post-Ottoman Syria," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 25 (1994): 23–44; Gelvin, "The League of Nations and the Question of National Identity in the Fertile Crescent," *World Affairs* 158 (1995): 35–43; and C. Ernest Dawn, "The Formation of Pan-Arab Ideology in the Interwar Years," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20 (1988): 67–91. On Arab internationalism more broadly, see Reem Bailony, "Transnationalism and the Syrian Migrant Public: The Case of the 1925 Syrian Revolt," *Mashriq & Mahjar* 1 (2013): 30–54.

<sup>7</sup>On the history of the women's movement in Greater Syria, see Malek Abisaab, *Militant Women of a Fragile Nation* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2010); Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege and Gender in French Syria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); and Leyla Dakhli, "Beyrouth-Damas, 1928: voile et dévoilement," *Le Mouvement social* 231 (2010): 123–40. On the international links of the Lebanese women's movement, see Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001); and Linda K. Jacobs, "Gendering Birth and Death in the Nineteenth-Century Syrian Colony of New York City," *Mashriq & Mahjar* 3 (2015): 65–78.

<sup>8</sup>Charlotte Weber, "Between Nationalism and Feminism: The Eastern Women's Congresses of 1930 and 1932," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4 (2008): 83–106.

<sup>9</sup>At least eleven conferences were hosted, a comprehensive study of which has not yet been completed.

<sup>10</sup>In reality, women in Europe and the United States in the 1930s and 1940s did not universally accept the notion of women's rights as individual rights. For a comprehensive history of debates on feminism and women's rights, including in relation to the family, see Karen M. Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000). On the role of the family in European women's activism, see Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>11</sup>On Arab women and Eastern identity, see Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt*, 105–9; and Laura Bier, "Modernity and the Other Woman: Gender and National Identity in the Egyptian Women's Press: 1952–1967," *Gender & History* 16 (2004): 99–112.

<sup>12</sup>On the changing nature of the family in the Middle East, see Beshara Doumani, ed., *Family History in the Middle East: Household, Property, and Gender* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2012); and Valentine M. Moghadam, "Patriarchy in Transition: Women and the Changing Family in the Middle East," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 35 (2004): 137–62.

<sup>13</sup>See my chapter "Lobbying the League for Arab Independence and Women's Rights, 1936–1938," in Nova Robinson, "'Sisters of Men': Syrian and Lebanese Women's Transnational Campaigns for Arab Independence and Women's Rights, 1910–1949" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2015).

<sup>14</sup>UN 175/02 Part B. Commission on the Status of Women, Third Session. Resolutions adopted by the Women's Committee of Lebanon addressed to the Commission on the Status of Women, 31 March 1939. The word "consider[ed]" is underlined in the original.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>"Au Palais de l'UNESCO, Congrès des organisations féminines, Séance publique," Beirut, 5 April 1949.