

## FINAL PAPER

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“Democracy and Development: Challenges for the Islamic World”

“Back to Basics? Reading, Writing, and Religious  
Extremism in the Lives of Egyptian Women”

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We are all familiar with the five pillars of Islam. These are: the *shahada* (or profession of faith, namely, “There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger”), *salat* (prayer), *siyam* (fasting) in Ramadan, *hajj* (pilgrimage to Makka at least once), and *zakat* (the giving of charity). Strange to say, if you spend time listening to media reports from the West, you get the impression that those five pillars are only for men. For Muslim women, who often are out of range of the cameras and the reporters, there seems to be an elusive, sixth pillar just for them. Yes, for women there is the same *shahada*, the same *salat*, the same *siyam*, the same *hajj*, and the same *zakat*, but additionally, there is the *hijab*.<sup>1</sup> And the especially pious woman covers her entire body including her face. Really? of course not! but try telling the media when they have a story with legs.

I don’t want to paraphrase professors Khan and Kantarci’s remarks, since I could not probe the *hijab*’s impact on modern women and its symbolic value in the modern world as well as these two scholars have done today. One thing is worth noting, however: The frequent media focus on the *hijab* and other external markers as traits of Muslim “fundamentalists” actually tends to divert attention from the real fundamentals – the Qur’an and the hadith.

So let’s get back to basics. Ironically, the most “basic” principles of Islam – the five pillars I just mentioned – are not so succinctly enumerated in the Qur’an. They are all, however, easy to apprehend from any basic reading of it. For example, nearly every page of the Qur’an asserts the *tawhid*, or oneness of Allah – the essence of the *shahada*. Even when there is no explicit reference to Allah’s oneness, it is in the subtext, easy to sense. Likewise, on every page any reader can detect the “*rasul-hood*” of Muhammad. Prayer is also a common theme and frequently mentioned in nearly formulaic language. Charity, the backbone of good deeds, appears in most every surah. The *hajj* and the fasting of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example *Huquq al-mar’ah al-muslimah fi al-Qur’an wa-al-sunnah*, by Muhammad Farijah (Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Islami, 1996), p. 79, where *salat* and *hijab* are considered of equal importance for women.

Ramadan have significantly detailed passages that describe both well enough that their rites could be performed probably even in the absence of any traditions. So all five of the pillars are prominent in the Qur'an. But the *hijab* per se, as an article of clothing, is not mentioned in the Qur'an; rather the word refers to a partition or separation, most often one between belief and nonbelief.<sup>2</sup>

As part of a modern Muslim woman's dress, the *hijab* in fact separates her from others when she enters the public sphere. So do women belong outside the house, with or without a *hijab*? First, there is nothing in the Qur'an that prohibits a woman from leaving her home, nor is there any specific bar on her engaging in work. Passages from the Qur'an cited to limit a women's ability to work outside the home include the oft-discussed *darajah* (literally, "rank" or "degree") passage and another relating to the *qiwamah* ("protection") of women. The first, from Surat al-Baqarah (2:228), has been widely discussed by many scholars; in my opinion, one of its most competent analyses in English is in "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, a book by the moderator of this panel, Asma Barlas,<sup>3</sup> so I will merely touch on this passage briefly.<sup>4</sup> It states that women are due the same honorable treatment from the men as they owe to them, but that men have a *darajah*, that is, a degree of advantage (or possibly, responsibility<sup>5</sup>), over them. Not to belabor the

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<sup>2</sup> See 7:46; 17: 45; 41:5; 83:15 (the separation between believers and nonbelievers and between nonbelievers and the light of truth); 38:32 (the separation between daylight and darkness); 33:53 (partition for nonfamily addressing the wives of the Prophet); 42:51 (partition for Allah addressing any lowly human including the Prophet). The most unusual usage is in Maryam (83:15), where *hijab* seems to mean a partition by which Maryam separated herself from the rest of her family.

<sup>3</sup> Asma Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. University of Texas Press, 2002, pp. 192-197.

<sup>4</sup> Please note that the meaning of *Qur'anic verses* is in the original Arabic only, and that translation is merely a tool to understanding. I translate the complete *ayah* as follows: "And divorced women will wait for three monthly periods to pass them by, and not is it lawful for them to conceal what Allah has created in their wombs if they believe in Allah and in the last day. And their husbands are more worthy in (requesting) their (wives') return in that case, if they want reconciliation/righteousness. But they (the women) are due in terms of *ma'ruf* (what is honorable) the same as that which they owe (to their husbands), but to the men is a *darajah* (degree/advantage/responsibility? [see next note]) over them (the women)" (2:228).

<sup>5</sup> My take on the word *darajah* is that it means more than just "degree, rank, or step." Its usage in several passages in the Qur'an suggests that its connotation may include an idea of the person deserving the *darajah* for doing something that is above and beyond what is natural and easy, or what is absolutely required. The word frequently contrasts people who strive in the way of Allah against those who merely sit around doing little or doing evil (4:95; in plural: 3:163; 4:96; 20:75; 46:19; 58:11; cf. 17:21) or it highlights the degree of effort required for a higher rank (57:10; in plural: 2:253; 6:83, 132, 165). The point is that higher *darajat* are for those who *actively* strive for Allah's sake (9:20; cf. 8:4). The only time it comes without an active concomitant acceptance of a greater degree of responsibility is in 43:32 (in plural): Allah gives some people great wealth while others are compelled to work without pay, yet notably, the wealth of the former will not help them! Assuming the word may have the connotation of a greater responsibility, what might this imply for husbands of couples contemplating divorce? Because men have accepted marriage with no guarantee of children, they are thereby striving in the path of Allah to do something above and beyond nature; from the woman's side, she is guaranteed that if she is pregnant, the man must provide for her until the child is two years old—clearly an added responsibility on his side. In the world at large, among the human species, male abandonment of the female is common and rarely condemned. A woman,

point, this passage is not discussing the general state of affairs between men and women, nor is Allah granting a privilege to men over women. Rather, to understand this excerpt, one needs to read the entire *ayah*, or verse, and the context in which the *ayah* appears – and doing so demonstrates that men’s *darajah* has to do with their obligations within a divorce and their right to push for reconciliation.

I am reminded that the practice of reading partial verses without taking account of their context is not confined to individuals who would restrict women’s rights. I ran across a partial citation that charmingly was used in support of a woman’s right to work; as in the case of the *darajah* passage, the author focused on only one word, namely *‘amaluu*, the command that means literally “Work!” from Surat al-Tawbah (9:105).<sup>6</sup> But at least this commentator took note of the context—that believers must work good deeds for entry into heaven—and I believe she alluded to this passage to set the stage for her discussion on how work should not conflict with the principles of Islam.<sup>7</sup> I would add that perhaps the most important Quranic passage in support of women’s working similarly refers to good deeds, but most exegetes will allow as to how it embraces all the work that one does in life, including trade and business:

“So their Lord answered them **“Indeed I will not neglect the deed of any doer (or work of any worker) male or female among you; you are from each other.”** So those who emigrated (from Makka) and left their home and were injured in My cause and fought and were killed, truly I will indeed expiate from them their bad deeds, and indeed I will cause them to enter gardens, beneath which flow rivers, as a reward from Allah, and Allah has the best of rewards.” [3:195]

Turning now to the second passage that is often cited to restrict a woman’s right to work [4]:

**“Men are protectors over women because Allah has favored the one over the other, and because they spend from their wealth.** So righteous women are devout (obedient to Allah) who guard what Allah would guard. And the woman whose conduct you fear, then warn them and

by contrast, who abandons her children is almost universally considered a monster, an unnatural creature. So it would seem that he should get a slight advantage since he has taken on an added responsibility of doing the right (not easy or natural) thing.

<sup>6</sup> The entire *ayah* means: “And say ‘Work/do! [in the cause of Allah]’ so Allah and his *rasul* and the believers will see your works/deeds. And you will be returned to the Knower of the unseen and the manifest, so He will inform you concerning what you have done/worked.”

<sup>7</sup> Huda Hilmi, *Al-Mar’ah baina ta’alim al-din al-islami wa-wad’iha al-rahaman fi Misr*. Cairo: Dar al-Qalam, p. 443.

<sup>8</sup> That is, men and women are born of parents of opposite sex and all created of the same *nafs* (4:1). This interpretation, which recognizes the equality of the sexes, at least on some level, is found in a multitude of *tafasir* from every period, including Ibn Kathir and Mawardi among early commentators, as well as more modern scholars, such as the nineteenth-century Iraqi savant Alusi al-Kabir in his *Ruh al-ma’ani fi tafsir al-Qur’an al-‘azim*, and even Sayyid Qutb in his monumental *Fi zilal al-Qur’an*, where he comments that “all of them are equal in (their) humanity... and all of them are equal in justice.”

leave them alone in (their) sleeping quarters and strike them. But if they obey you, then do not act unjustly toward them (using this) as a cause (of reproach). Indeed Allah is greatly high.”[4:34]

As Muhammad al-Ghazzali, an imam who in my opinion embodies an entire school of thought, said matter-of-factly (in regard to the highlighted portion of this *ayah*), “al-qiwwamah laa ta’nii al-qahr!”<sup>9</sup> that is, “*Qiwamah* (protection/maintenance) is not subjugation!” He drew a link between the *qiwwamah* passage and another (42:38) that refers to the conduct of believers who spend out of what Allah has given to them: they must make regular prayers and conduct their affairs by *shura* (“mutual consultation”). He noted that this verse was revealed at Makka, before there was any military or constitution for the Muslim *ummah*, and he said that *shura* is thus recommended for the family.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly, the *qiwwamah* passage is primarily about monetary affairs and business; there is no specifier of how Allah has favored men, but given the context it appears that they have the benefit—the special blessing, as it were—of being required to give a *mahr* (premarital gift) and regular maintenance,<sup>11</sup> especially useful before and for a couple years after the birth of any children. In other words, the woman is denied the right to give a *mahr*. Additionally, the word *qanitat* (“devoutly obedient”), which is one of the words here used to support the right to subjugate women, is never used in the Qur’an to mean obedient to another human, but rather only to Allah.<sup>12</sup>

Both the *darajah* passage and the *qiwwamah* passage are frequently cited by extremists to keep women out of the workplace, at least without their husbands’ permission. Since a man is expected to take care of his wife, they reason that to respect his need to fulfill his Islamic duty of providing for her, she should be content staying at home and accepting what he is able to provide.<sup>13</sup>

As background for a popular article I was writing on youth in Egypt, I asked a large number of young women and girls in Cairo their opinions on working; most of this material never made its way into the finished article, because the editors decided to focus on unemployment and the lack of technical training in Egypt.<sup>14</sup> My informants were of different backgrounds, some well-to-do, most of modest means; some with some college education, some who had not

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<sup>9</sup> Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Qadaya al-mar’ah baina al-taqalid al-rakidah wa-al-wafidah*. Cairo: Dar al-shuruq (1990), p. 154.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>11</sup> *Tafsir al-Tabari*. 212 (Dimasq: Dar al-Qalam, 1997-).

<sup>12</sup> See: 2:116; 2:238; 3:18; 3:43; 16:120; 30:26; 33:31; 33:35; 39:9; 66:5; and 66:12. If one insists on reading *qanitat* in the context of husbands and wives as “obedient,” then the spouses must be obedient to each other, based on 33:35, where the masculine plural (*qanitun*) is used alongside the feminine plural (*qanitat*).

<sup>13</sup> The usual explanation for maintenance is housing, feeding, and clothing the woman, and not abandoning her in the streets; see, e.g., *Kitab al-sunan: Sunan Abu Dawud, (Kitab al-Nikah)*, 2135-2137. (Jiddah: Dar al-Qiblah li-l-thaqafah al-Islamiyah, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Mary Knight, “Egypt’s Young and Restless.” In *Natural History*, vol. 113, no. 4, May 2004; pp. 34-39.

finished secondary school. Many of the people of more modest means mentioned the *darajah* and the *qiwamah* passages. A few of them also advised me that there is another verse that related to work, one that recommended that women stay at home:

“Remain♥ quiet in your♥ homes and do not deck yourselves♥ out with the ornaments of the former period of the *Jahiliya* [“Ignorance”]. But establish♥ [regular] prayer (*salat*) and give♥ charity [*zakat*] and obey♥ Allah and his *rasul*” [33:33, partial].<sup>15</sup>

They left out the last part of the verse, which makes it clear that staying in the house does not apply to all women, but only to those members of the Prophet’s family whose behavior might more readily be targeted negatively :

“Allah wants only to take away from you♦ (the suspicion of) uncleanness, oh people of the house, and to purify you♦ thoroughly” [33:33, remainder].

The emphatic vocative<sup>16</sup> (“oh! ahl al-bait!”) strongly underscores that this restriction on movement is not meant to apply to women other than members of the family of the Prophet.

Just as one can excerpt only a favorite bit or take another passage out of context, historically narrow circumstances can often be inappropriately broadened; this happens especially with the hadith. One that I have heard in support of women remaining at home, reported by Muslim, is:

“The inviolability for the wives of the *mujahidin* [men going to war to defend Muslims] by the men remaining behind is like the inviolability of their mothers....”<sup>17</sup>

The *mujahid* and his wife had to rely on the decency of the men who stayed behind, mostly elderly men, but there were also cowards, who might readily have broken their oaths. Not surprisingly, this hadith appeals to the most extreme Muslims, who contend that a woman is too vulnerable to go out without her husband at her side and she needs to remain in the house as *rabbat al-bait* (“lady of the house”). Over years in Cairo, I have encountered perhaps only a half a dozen women who are so strictly secluded that, even though they wear the *niqab* face covering and gloves, they do not descend to the street; I have had to visit them in their homes or phone them. The most surprising feature of these

<sup>15</sup> ♥ indicates a feminine plural form; ♦ indicates an inclusive plural form that embraces both masculine and feminine.

<sup>16</sup> That is, without any *harf al-munadah*, or introductory interjection.

<sup>17</sup> The remainder of the matn is: “Not does any man among those remaining behind break his agreement with any man of the *mujahidin* in terms of (looking after or caring for) his [the *mujahid*’s] family—thereby betraying him—without his being stopped [literally, made to stand] on the Day of Judgment so that he [the *mujahid*] might take from his (good) work whatever he wishes. And what is your opinion?! [that is, what do you think he’ll take? everything, of course!].” *Sahih Muslim (Kitab al-’Imarah)* [12/39] 1/139; 4885. *Bi-sharh Muhyi al-Din al-Nawawi*. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’arif, 1994); see also *Sunan Abu-Da’ud (Kitab al-Jihad)* 2488 ; and *Sunan al-Nasa’i (Kitab al-Jihad, 47)*, 3129 (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’arif, 1991).

women, given that they have so much time on their hands, is that they are not better able to read and understand the Qur'an. The Qur'an and the sound hadith present women in positive ways within society, not just in the house, yet these women ignore the fact that the first convert to Islam, Khadija, was not just a woman but a very active businesswoman—and she was the wife of the greatest *mujahid* ever, Muhammad.

Extremist interpretations may have affected the ways in which Egyptian women perceive themselves and their roles in society, but their inability to apprehend the basic texts of Islam is an even more fundamental problem. Arabic language education tends to be poor, particularly for girls. Apart from the fact that more women and girls are illiterate, functional illiteracy<sup>18</sup> (that is, one can read but not understand) is also significantly higher among females, including many women of the upper classes. A girl who cannot properly understand a text cannot properly challenge it—nor can she read books and pamphlets that address controversies in interpretation. In discussing Quranic verses with women of all ages and classes, I have found that many of them are unable to grasp the meaning because of their difficulty with *i'rab*, or case endings (nominative, genitive, accusative), that are characteristic of Quranic nouns, pronouns, and adjectives. Many eyes here have already glazed over; grammar tends to do this to people. And many people insist that Quranic Arabic is intrinsically difficult.

I must politely disagree. You can easily learn to read the Quran with understanding, if you can recognize the problem in the following sentence:

“My am giving a talk now.”

You may be thinking, “My *what* is giving a talk?” But there’s no *what* here. I said,

“My am giving a talk now,”

and that’s what I meant. Of course, it’s wrong, grammatically, and every single person here knows it. Or I could have said,

“Me talk now,”

and you’d think I was pretending to be Tarzan. The point is that no one even remotely familiar with English makes the mistake of using the wrong case.

These differences in case (*I*, *my*, *me*, respectively nominative, genitive, and accusative) are at the heart of reading the Quran. Yet a number of women have told me it’s nearly impossible. They don’t grasp that a word’s function in the sentence is encoded in the word itself, just like in English *I*, *my*, *me*. According to my informants, the reason they often don’t understand is that their teachers give graduate-level lectures on grammar and *tashkil* (voweling) to beginning students—rarely is it made as simple as *I*, *my*, *me*.

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<sup>18</sup> In English-speaking communities, it is more common to hear of functional literacy—the ability to “get by” with extremely limited literacy. I use the term functional illiteracy because the contrast between ‘*ammiya* (the spoken popular dialect) and *fusha* (standard, mostly written Arabic) creates a possibility for people to be able to read with little or no comprehension.

Of course, the problem of *i'rab* is in fact a small one, but it speaks to the larger situation, when we consider that girls and women need to be able to read modern standard Arabic in order to succeed at work. Given their poor training, it is not surprising they don't enjoy reading. Most Arabic speakers agree: Although the Arab region accounts for about 5% of the world's total population, it produces only a little over 1% of the world's books.<sup>19</sup> The "crisis" of functional illiteracy in the Arab world poses a significant barrier to development, according to the 2003 Arab Human Development Report, because the assimilation of knowledge requires understandable texts—a "prerequisite for developing the tools of thinking and the creative faculties of young minds."<sup>20</sup>

In Cairo most girls learn to read Arabic, but curiously, there is a gap between rich and poor—those of modest means often can read and write Arabic better than daughters of the wealthy, since the latter group normally attends foreign-language schools, which tend to place emphasis on the foreign language at the expense of Arabic. But of course, the better jobs tend to go to wealthier applicants. Often less privileged women need the jobs. It is estimated that at least 15% of Egyptian households are headed by women—the men may have left in search of opportunities abroad, or they may be unemployed, or they may simply have divorced or abandoned their wives.<sup>21</sup> Employers also frequently select men over women because the latter are required to manage the home and are thus seen as less reliable.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the law shields women from late-hour work (7 PM to 7 AM)<sup>23</sup>; many women have commented to me that their husbands forbid them from working even in the early evening hours (e.g., 5 PM).

In closing I would like to return to a topic introduced at the beginning of this talk, the spread of the *hijab* in Muslim societies. As a specialist on ancient Greece, I think it may be illuminating to note for you a trend that took place in the ancient world. Many of you may not know much about the original democracy of ancient Athens. Respectable female Athenian citizens remained cloistered at home, and some scholars have speculated that the "*harim*" on the second floor of the house was their entire world. Good women were expected not to be seen or heard; according to one Athenian saying, often loosely translated as the good woman is seen only twice: when she goes to her new husband's home at marriage, covered in a saffron veil, and when she goes to the

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<sup>19</sup> *The Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society*. New York: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> UNDP, p. 124.

<sup>21</sup> Laila al-Hamad, "Women's Organizations in the Arab World." In *Al-Raida*, vol. 19, nos. 97-98; spring/summer, 2002; p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> See Valentine Moghadam, "Enhancing Women's Economic Participation in the MENA Region," in *Employment Creation and Social Protection in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Heba Handoussa and Zafiris Tzannatos. Cairo: Economic Research Forum/AUC Press, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Current labor law (12-2003) on employment of women workers (article 89).

grave, covered in a white shroud.<sup>24</sup> She was expected to spend most of her time weaving, sewing, and doing other needlework. She could not read or write, nor could she conduct business transactions. If a woman needed to go out of the house, she had to be accompanied by her father or a brother or her husband, or at the very least, a male slave, but she normally had no place to go.

Beginning as early as the fourth century before Christ, we see new developments ironically coinciding with the decline of democracy. Some philosophers began to ask whether a woman has a soul. This is significant because, posed as a question, some people came to entertain the possibility that perhaps she did. And we see new market forces at play – the ancient equivalent of globalization. Most striking is that women begin to come out of the houses. They learn to read and write, they enter the marketplace, and even the halls of government. They attend the ancient equivalent of universities and become professors, doctors, and judges.

Images of women likewise changed: For the first time women are depicted with, for want of a better word, “heroic” nudity. And there is a concomitant proliferation of images of ordinary women, veiled and even with face coverings (*tegidia*).<sup>25</sup> I believe that this new imagery reflects the presence of women in an ever-widening public sphere, and that the veil provided women the freedom to do things publicly while retaining their respectability.

Looking back on this chapter in history, I see parallels in Egypt today, with young country women or women of relatively modest backgrounds going far from their homes, for example, to places where their mothers would not perhaps have felt comfortable.<sup>26</sup> They go in search of schooling and jobs, and like their hellenistic counterparts, they have adopted the veil. For them, the good works that they do – not the *hijab* – will be the real test of their Islam and, echoing what the Qur’an says, it will be their best clothing: “Children of Adam, indeed we sent down to you clothing to hide your secret parts and as an adornment, but the clothing of *taqwa* (reverence for Allah) is better....” [7:26, partial].

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<sup>24</sup> The version most known to Classicists, erroneously attributed to Hipponax, literally says “There are two days when a woman is a pleasure: the day one marries her and the day one buries her” (Berlin anthology, vol. 2:130).

<sup>25</sup> For more on this topic in general, see *Aphrodite’s Tortoise: The Veiled Women of Ancient Greece*. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones (Swansea UK: The Classical Press of Wales, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Even today veiling among young women typically correlates positively with lower socioeconomic class and with lower educational levels in the parents; cf. comments by Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 222f.