

Introduction

EMBODYING GEOPOLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Somehow when you get involved, [. . .] [there's] this sense of obligation that grows with you, and it always makes you feel like "I can't go, I can't leave." [. . .] And it's weird that you have that sense, because a lot of people who were also involved didn't have; they left and they emigrated, so I have always been thinking, why do some of us have that sense? And it's a false sense because life does go on without you, so why one has that sense that it's important to be in the middle of these things, I have no idea, I am trying to make sense, but I have no idea why.

HALA SHUKRALLAH

former student activist in the 1970s, development consultant, women's rights activist, former president of the Dastour Party, 2014–2015, Cairo, Egypt

Since we were [. . .] children, my father used to tell us [. . .], "It's a duty in Islam to give away some of what you have, as much as you can."

NUHA NUWAYRI SALT I

physician and founder of an outreach clinic in Shatila refugee camp, Beirut, Lebanon

Mainly because I was attached to politics from a young age, I am so much attached to progress and I'm dedicated [. . .] [to] support women [. . .] and sometimes I feel that I'm doing it for myself and for my family and for my grandchildren—I have four granddaughters—so they can live in a better society in this part of the world; so, I feel it is personal and I feel it is a continuation of the life I have chosen also.

LEILA NAFFA HAMARNEH

women's rights activist, member of Jordanian Communist Party, Amman

My father wasn't educated but he believed that education makes people rise in status. Therefore, he made sure to give us an education. [. . .] So, there was this idea, and there was the idea of work and the idea of the value you have in the society you work in. [. . .] And then I started looking around me, thinking how I could do something good for the community.

FATMA RAMADAN
trade unionist, Cairo, Egypt

Because that's that's what I am all about. [. . .]. It's part of my constitution. Yeah, that's my meaning in life.

LEILA ZAKHARIA
*development consultant, advocate for
Palestinian rights, Beirut, Lebanon*

I told you that I was born and raised in this house where there was interest in politics. There was a reason I grew to be who I am; this is how I was raised. You see? I feel that "it's not my own choice," I was born with it; it was "built in" rather than something I chose at some point in my life.

MANAR HUSSEIN ABDEL SATTAR
Revolutionary Socialist, Cairo, Egypt

When I was very young, I used to feel guilty about every single poor person [. . .] that I met. Finally, I resolved this dilemma by thinking [. . .], if you are privileged, if you do not want to be actually sucking poor people's blood, you have to give back. It's the only justification for accepting privilege in a sense.

LAILA SOUEIF
university professor and activist, Cairo, Egypt

BETWEEN 2013 AND 2014, I COLLECTED personal narratives of more than one hundred women activists of different generations residing in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. Their stories form the basis of this book. The above quotes represent a sample of the responses that I received when I posed the question, "Why are you active in public life?" When I began to plan this book, the popular uprisings and mass protests that erupted across the Arab world, beginning in Tunisia in December 2010 often referred to as the "Arab Spring" in Western commentaries—were still ongoing. I was motivated to

write against a prevalent discourse at the time—promoted by Western media, policy makers, NGOs, and think tanks, among others—that viewed women’s participation in protests as new and exceptional. Such attitudes reflected an Orientalist epistemology, denying the possibility of women’s agency within “Arab-Muslim culture,” and viewing it, instead, as an expression of “Western” values of freedom and autonomy. The above quotes by women activists highlight that their public engagement long precede the Arab uprisings. Moreover, rather than viewing themselves as outside of “Arab-Muslim culture,” these women emphasized their relationships to family, home, community, and nation. They narrated a situated and embodied geography, a geopolitics of intimacy and community, revealing the mutually constitutive relationships between women’s activism, identities, subjectivities, and social relations, as well as place and space.

In this book, I argue that women’s activism should be viewed as an embodied geopolitics. While the term *geopolitics* has predominantly been associated with the rationalization of dominant power and the efforts of powerful nations to control the globe, here, I build on work by scholars in the fields of critical geopolitics, postcolonial studies, feminist geopolitics, and feminist international relations (IR) that problematizes rather than normalizes oppression and inequalities of power across multiple scales and that is attentive to the spatialized dimensions of power and the role of power in constructing space, as well as the implications of this for ordinary women and men. A feminist geopolitics is concerned with the embodied dimensions of geopolitical processes, writing the experiences and agency of ordinary women (and men) into international politics. It reconceptualizes international politics to include the personal and the everyday as important sites in the exercise of and resistance to geopolitical power (Dowler and Sharp 2001: 169; Enloe 2014; Hyndman 2004; Pettman 1997; Sharp 2000; Tickner 1992). As Edward Said wrote, “Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings” (1993: 7).

This book treats women’s narratives of their activism as forms of situated and embodied knowledge (Haraway 1988, Hyndman 2004) about the “struggle for geography” in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Viewing Middle East politics and international relations from the embodied perspectives of women activists reveals the particularly gendered ideas, forms, images, and imaginings that have informed and underpinned critical

junctures in the region's contemporary history, from decolonization to the Arab uprisings. It demonstrates the crucial ways in which particular ideas of gender have underpinned the creation of regional order and the stability of postindependence regimes. It highlights the ways in which women's bodies have been the sites of geopolitical contestations, with devastating consequences for their security and bodily integrity. However, it also emphasizes the ways in which women activists have been active participants in the struggle for geography, contributing to the disruption of dominant geopolitical power as well as its reproduction. In addition, given that many of the assumptions underpinning the fields of feminist IR and feminist geopolitics continue to be based on experiences of state formation, militarization, and foreign policy making in the Global North, this book contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize the field by highlighting the particular experiences of citizens of states in the MENA region and, specifically, the legacies of colonialism and the ongoing relevancy of neocolonialism and imperialism in shaping the embodied geopolitics of women's activism, as well as the politics of gender and sexuality more broadly. The remainder of this introduction theorizes women's activism as embodied geopolitics, contextualizes women's geopolitical agency in relation to the historical experiences of state building in the Middle East and North Africa, discusses this book's methodological approach to narratives, elaborates upon the choice of the country cases, and, finally, provides an outline of the book.

WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AS EMBODIED GEOPOLITICS

As Cynthia Enloe has famously argued, "the international is personal" and "the personal is international" (Enloe 2014: 351). Although feminist approaches have highlighted the gendered and embodied dimensions of geopolitics and international relations, the ways in which geopolitics shapes women's activism and what these reveal about international politics remain relatively understudied. Meanwhile, a substantial literature has documented women's organizations and movements in the Middle East and North Africa, their goals, strategies, philosophies/ideologies, and activities, but has tended to neglect the geopolitical consequences of women's activism. Moreover, there has been a tendency to view women's activism in terms of its *resistance* or *opposition* to dominant power at different scales and the forms of violence with which it is associated. I argue that women activists are illuminating

subjects of research because their experiences necessarily straddle the private and the public; the personal and the political; and the local, the national, and even the international. This is particularly the case for many of the women whom I interviewed for this book. They have participated in struggles against colonialism, imperialism, war, and dictatorship; dealt with the aftermath of violence, conflict, and displacement; and simultaneously negotiated the politics of gender and sexuality in their homes, workplaces, communities, and beyond. Therefore, I argue that their embodied experiences and agency provide a window into the ways in which power relations at multiple scales intersect and play out, illuminating the complex and often contradictory ways in which gender is entangled in the construction and normalization of different geopolitical scales and wider relations of power. However, I do not conceptualize women's activism as necessarily resistance to or separate from geopolitical power; rather, I understand it as a crucial part of the circuits of gendered power that circulate at multiple scales, from the personal to the international—that is, as a form of embodied geopolitics.

This section theorizes women's activism as embodied geopolitics by elaborating how geopolitics shapes women's activism and how women's activism shapes geopolitics. In this regard, I emphasize the multiscalar and gendered nature of geopolitics and, hence, the geopolitical implications of activism that transforms or seeks to transform gender relations and norms. Here, I understand gender as discursively constructed and as embodied by living beings. In addition, I underline the need to dismantle the binary of resistance/compliance in understanding the relationship between women's activism and dominant geopolitical structures.

How does geopolitics shape women's activism? Women's activism occurs within geopolitical spaces and structures that provide opportunities, challenges, and limitations for women activists. For the most part, women's activism is located within the political boundaries of the state and is shaped by the respective state's policies and laws as well as significant national events, such as, wars, disasters, and economic crises. Women's activism may also be targeted at entities other than the nation state, such as the United Nations or the European Union. Rather than viewing the nation-state and other geographic scales as pregiven, feminist scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which these geopolitical constructs are dependent upon the production of gendered boundaries that distinguish the domestic from the foreign, the inside from the outside, order from chaos, us from them, and public from private (Dowler & Sharp 2001; Enloe 2014; Grewal and Kaplan 1994;

Peterson 1992b; Pettman 1996; Tickner 1992; Youngs 1996; Yuval-Davis 1997). These gendered boundaries are reproduced through a variety of state policies and laws, not only foreign policies but also laws governing marriage, divorce, and nationality, with differential implications for women's mobility (Yuval-Davis 1997). Moreover, such laws and policies serve to shape particular norms of femininity and masculinity that are essential to the reproduction of states and nations as well as practices of militarization and diplomacy (Enloe 2014, 1993, 2000, 2007; Parpart and Zalewski 2008; Peterson and Runyan 2010; Rai 2002). These gender norms, in turn, regulate women's behavior, including their activism.

Given the significance of gender to the operation of geopolitical power and the construction of dominant geopolitical categories, it follows that embodied geopolitics not only includes those activities targeting conventional sites of geopolitics, such as governments and international organizations, or "big geopolitical" themes, such as war, foreign policy, or revolution, but also activism that transforms or seeks to transform gender norms and gender relations, including state laws and policies that regulate them. In this respect, the book documents activists' efforts to reform legislation and policies that enshrine gender discrimination as well as considering how their advocacy is "framed" (Benford and Snow 2000) in relation to dominant geopolitical constructs and power. This assessment is dependent upon an understanding of the specific geopolitical context of the MENA, as will be discussed in the next section.

The book also understands activism that targets conventional sites of geopolitics as also potentially transformative of gender relations and norms, even if this is not its stated aim. Activism entails embodied performances of gender norms that have implications for the organization and normalization of geopolitical power. As already noted, dominant geopolitical structures and processes depend upon the successful production of particular notions of femininities and masculinities. Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of the performativity of gender (1999: xxiv), gender is conceptualized as "always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler 1999: 33). Just as ordinary men and women are constituted through hegemonic discourses of gender, so is hegemonic gender reproduced by ordinary women and men repeatedly performing the "correct" gender—through "the stylization of the body [. . .] bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds" (Butler 1999: 179). By contrast, refusal by women and men to enact hegemonic gender exposes gender as "a politically tenuous construc-

tion” (Butler 1999: 179), which, in turn, threatens the successful reproduction of the geopolitical order that is dependent upon it. Hence, women’s activism that “interrupts normative orders and activates competing ones through imagination, symbolism, and enactment” (Hasso and Salime 2016b: 4) should be considered in terms of a “corporeality of dissent” (Hafez 2019: 134).

In conceptualizing the relationship between women’s activism and geopolitics, it is essential that women’s activism should not be reduced to acts of resistance and transgression. Kimberly Hutchings (2013) warns against efforts to insist upon the existence of a “revolutionary subject” as a prerequisite for a feminist politics, arguing instead for a feminism that accepts pluralism. Meanwhile, women may also reinscribe power relations and uphold hegemonic gender norms (Abu-Lughod 1990; Kandiyoti 1988; Mahmood 2005). Moreover, given that women’s activism may have effects at multiple geopolitical scales, from the personal to the international, it is impossible to understand it through a binary prism of resistance or compliance. Women’s activism may resist *and* comply with dominant power structures at different geopolitical scales simultaneously. For example, women’s use of motherhood and maternal politics to protest human rights abuses (among others, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina) and militarism (among others, the Greenham Common base women) constitute the performance of their gender identity in accord with dominant notions of femininity. Yet, simultaneously, these women subvert this gender identity by transposing it from the private sphere to an overtly political space that challenges the legitimacy of the state’s monopoly on violence.¹ This resignification may further expand the space for women’s activism, creating incremental changes in gender norms rather than radical ruptures. Similarly, as this book reveals, much women’s activism has taken the form of welfare and charitable work, which has been performative of dominant gender norms of female respectability as well as class privilege. Yet, in particular historical and geopolitical contexts, such as during the period of colonial rule and the geopolitical upheavals following the 1967 war, this work was resignified as part of political movements challenging the geopolitical order. While women’s participation in such activities might be viewed as reproducing a gendered and classed public sphere, the resignification of their social activism as political/nationalist may simultaneously function to reconceptualize the political (Richter-Devroe 2012), with implications for geopolitical order.

This book demonstrates the need to go beyond conceptualizing women’s activism as *either* resistance to *or* reproduction of the dominant geopolitical

order, including the gender norms and gendered hierarchies that underpin it. It is necessary to be attentive to time and space at multiple scales in order to understand the geopolitical effects of women's agency. Women's activism may at once disrupt *and* reproduce the dominant (gendered) geopolitical order through their embodied performances of gender as well as the modes and discursive framing of the objectives of their activism. However, in order to assess the disruptive and reproductive effects of women's activism, it is necessary to understand the relationship between geopolitics and gender in the specific context of the MENA region, as the next section examines further.

CONTEXTUALIZING WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA:
THE LEGACIES OF COLONIALISM

In this section, I historicize the production of gender in the Middle East and North Africa in relation to experiences of colonialism, in order to understand the particular ways in which geopolitics is gendered, which, in turn, has implications for how we understand the geopolitical effects of women's activism. Feminist scholars of IR and critical geopolitics have shed light on the mutually constitutive relationship between, on the one hand, sovereignty and related concepts of state and nation and, on the other hand, gender relations, identities, and norms. However, they have tended to assume a Westphalian model of state sovereignty that corresponds with Western experiences of state formation. I draw on work from the field of postcolonial studies and Middle East studies, including Middle East gender studies, to discuss the specific experiences of state formation and its implications for gender. In the Middle East, like other parts of the world that were colonized, ideas of sovereignty and nationalism emerged in a context of European domination, while the state system was imposed by European colonial rule. Even the concept of the "Middle East" was a product of European imperialism. What, therefore, are the legacies of this for the production of gender in the Middle East and North Africa? As Maria Lugones argues, it is essential to historicize gender formation in relation to colonialism and the colonality of power to understand the ways in which gender intersects with race, class, and sexuality and, thereby, to decenter patriarchy as a "binary, hierarchical, oppressive gender formation that rests on male supremacy" (2007: 187).

State formation under colonial rule differed significantly from European experiences of state formation, with important implications for the politics of gender. While European state building was predicated on the subordination of a private sphere—associated with women and femininity—to a public sphere—associated with men and masculinity (Pateman 1988; Peterson 1992b; True 2018), state formation under colonial rule was predicated on the construction of a racial hierarchy of colonizer-colonized—or what Partha Chatterjee calls the “rule of colonial difference” (1993: 10)—on the basis of which citizenship was denied to indigenous people of all genders. Yet gender—and sexuality—was integral to the construction of this racial difference and of the hierarchy of the colonizer over the colonized. European discourse portrayed the “Oriental woman” as wretched and oppressed, pointing to women’s veiling and segregation not only as markers of women’s sexual oppression but, simultaneously, of the “backwardness” and “barbarity” of “Oriental” society (Ahmed 1992: 144–68; Liddle and Rai 1998; Yegenoglu 1998), justifying colonial domination and violence in the name of what Gayatri Spivak has famously termed “white men saving brown women from brown men” (1988: 92). Hence, the “public sphere” under colonial rule was not a realm of citizenship but of racial subordination, discursively rationalized with reference to gender.

In light of the importance of gender to “the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise” (McClintock 1995: 6–7), women’s bodies became an important terrain upon which anticolonial nationalist elites staked claims to sovereignty in resistance to European colonial rule (Bier 2011: 28; Kandiyoti 1991a, 1991b; Najmabadi 1991; Thompson 2000). In their struggle for national independence, modernizing nationalist elites opposed the racist “rule of colonial difference” by proclaiming the “universality of the modern regime of power” (Chatterjee 1993: 26) and sought to adopt European practices in the spheres of law, administration, economy, and society (Beinin 2001: 9; Watenpaugh 2006). As part of these efforts, polygamy, early and arranged marriages, gender segregation, and veiling became symbols of backwardness that had to be eliminated. Women’s “liberation” was advocated as a prerequisite for building a modern society that, in turn, would be the basis for a modern sovereign state.² In response to the European construction of the “Oriental woman,” they promoted a “new woman,” who was educated and publicly visible, while also a good wife and mother practicing “modern” methods of child rearing and domesticity (Abu-Lughod 1998a; Badran 1995; Baron 2005; Joshi 2001; Kandiyoti 1991a, 1991b; Najmabadi 1991; Pollard

2005; Shakry 1998). Hence, the “new woman” was the symbol as well as the object of nationalist modernization efforts and struggles for self-rule.

While the right to self-rule over a modern sovereign state was based upon a demonstration of being “like Europe,” simultaneously, the ability to claim such rights was predicated on the identification of a political community or “nation” that was different from Europe (Chatterjee 1993: 26; see also, Chakrabarty 1997; Rai 2002: 27–33). Toward this end, anticolonial nationalists constructed a boundary between an outer, material domain, in which the nationalists fought the colonizers, and an inner, spiritual domain of sovereignty, which included “language or religion or aspects of personal and family life,” from which the colonizers were excluded (Chatterjee 1993: 26). In other words, the construction of a spatial division between an outer and inner sphere was performative of national sovereignty in a context of colonial domination. As Partha Chatterjee notes, “The more nationalism engaged in its contest with the colonial power in the outer domain of politics, the more it insisted on displaying the marks of ‘essential’ cultural difference so as to keep out the colonizer from that inner domain of national life and to proclaim its sovereignty over it” (Chatterjee 1993: 26).

A key site for the construction of cultural difference and, hence, the construction of national sovereignty, was (and remains) the female body. Within nationalist discourse, women were expected to be the bearers of cultural authenticity, representing the “essence” of the nation through their modest behavior and dress (Chatterjee 1989; Enloe 2014; Kandiyoti 1991a, 1991b; Najmabadi 1991; Yuval-Davis 1997; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). Modesty was (and continues to be) a fluid and contingent notion, defined in opposition to what it is not—usually associated with the behavior of the culturally constructed “other.” In the context of colonial domination, modest behavior was defined in opposition to what was perceived as the sartorial and behavioral choices of European women but also in opposition to the indigenous “other,” such as religious and ethnic minorities (Kandiyoti 1991a, 1991b).³ At its essence, modesty refers to a woman’s sexual purity but also implies obedience to male authority (Najmabadi 1991; Parla 2001). “Immodest” behavior for women has often included activities that would oblige them to mix with unrelated men, such as political activism and actions that openly challenge male authority. Hence, while nationalist elites encouraged women to enter the public sphere, norms of modesty limited the types of public work and activism in which women could acceptably engage. As Afsaneh Najmabadi neatly summarizes, in discussing the case of Iran, women were expected to be “modern-yet-modest” (1991: 49).

The struggle for sovereignty did not end with formal decolonization but rather has continued throughout the postcolonial era. In the material domain of foreign policy, military affairs, the economy, and statecraft, countries of the MENA, and the Global South more broadly, continue to be dominated by the West. Western governments and international organizations limit the sovereignty of governments in the Global South, for example, through conditioning loans and aid on the basis of good governance, fiscal discipline, and human rights as well as through other types of liberal and coercive interventions (Doty 1996b; Duffield and Hewitt 2013; Jabri 2012).

State actors in the MENA continue to display what Chatterjee calls “the marks of ‘essential’ culture difference” in order to exclude the Global North “from that inner domain of national life and to proclaim its sovereignty over it” (1993: 26). For example, as Nadjie Al-Ali observes in the context of postcolonial Egypt, “Nationalist elites and reformers adhere to notions of western modernity in the context of economic, political and social concerns all related to the ‘outer’ sphere. [. . .] Within the so-called ‘inner’ sphere of society, such norms and values related to women’s ‘proper’ roles and behaviour, their duties and rights within the home and family and their relationship to men, an essential difference from Western culture was and continues to be upheld” (Al-Ali 2000: 225).

The postcolonial discourse of cultural difference and the ongoing construction of an inner and outer sphere produces what Roxanne Doty calls a “sovereignty effect” (Doty 1996a: 124), in a context of ongoing material violations of sovereignty. As Cynthia Weber argues, “Sovereignty should be understood as the discursive/cultural means by which a ‘natural state’ is produced and established as prediscursive” (Weber 1998: 92). The successful production of a “natural state,” in turn, is essential to constructing the legitimacy of the state and the authority of respective ruling regimes. Yet, in the MENA, regimes face not insignificant challenges to construct the state as a “natural state” (Weber 1998: 92) due to the legacies of state formation under colonial domination. For the most part, state boundaries and institutions were largely imposed on the region by European powers, often against the wishes of indigenous actors (Owen 1991).⁴ Consequently, state boundaries have been contested by non-state actors (Kurds, Palestinians) as well as supra-state actors (such as, pan-Arab nationalists), alongside irredentist claims by other states (Hinnebusch 2003: 64–86). Regimes have had to work hard to legitimize and normalize their authority as a requirement for successful state building (Hinnebusch 2003; Hudson 1977; Ayubi 1995; Owen 2000). Hence,

given its significance to the construction of a “natural state,” the delineation of an “inner sphere” over which the postcolonial state may exercise authority has been a highly (geo)politicized process. This, in turn, has implications for the production of gender norms as well as state laws and policies affecting gender relations in postindependence states, as the following section explores. Understanding the geopolitical logics underpinning the production of gender norms and relations is crucial to understanding women’s activism as an embodied geopolitics.

*The Geopolitics of Gender Norms and Women’s
Rights in Postindependence MENA States*

The Middle East is generally regarded as one of the regions in the world with the greatest gender inequalities. This has served to justify various neocolonial interventions by Western governments to “save Muslim women” (Abu-Lughod 2013; Al-Ali and Pratt 2009b; Hunt and Rygiel 2006). Meanwhile, international agencies lay the blame for gender inequalities with “cultural attitudes” in the Arab world and charge the state with bringing about the necessary transformations through the education system and legal reforms (Hasso 2009). I argue that rather than viewing gender inequality as a stubborn residue of culture, it should be seen as performative of a cultural difference that serves to produce a “sovereignty effect” (Doty 1996a: 124), which, in turn, has played a crucial role in postindependence state building in the MENA region.

Women’s bodies constitute the “finest scale of geopolitical space” (Giles and Hyndman 2004: 310), over which is waged “the struggle over geography” (Said 1993: 7). State laws and policies that control women’s bodies and behavior construct gender hierarchies and fashion specific gender norms, which, in turn, serve to reproduce and naturalize the boundaries between “modernity” and “modesty,” between the “inner” and “outer” domains, and between “us” and “them,” in the service of state building and regime consolidation. In this section, I draw on scholarship from Middle East gender studies to discuss the various laws enacted by MENA states to control women’s bodies, constructing “heteropatriarchy” and “heteropaternalism” (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill 2013; also, Lugones 2007, 2010) as the hegemonic cultural matrix (Butler 1999: 23–24) within which legitimate gender identities are produced, with various implications for women’s activism. As discussed throughout this book, these laws have often been a major object of women’s activism; however, they have also constructed norms of femininity in contra-