

Women's Rights—Why the West Shouldn't Abandon the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

A Reaction to Biden's trip to the Middle East through the lens of women's rights.

A month has passed since U.S. President Joe Biden made his first trip to the Middle East since taking office. The President's four-day visit to Israel, the West Bank, and Saudi Arabia resulted in a transnational uproar from some—not least from the left of the Democratic party, who slammed the trip as 'harmful to foreign policy' and an 'outrage'. These critics have regurgitated the same old narratives—another U.S. President prioritizing the retrieval of resources over the protection of human rights.

However, presenting the engagement in this manner is an over-simplified and frankly orientalist depiction of such a vast and dynamic region. Right now, modernizing change is underway in the Middle East, not least driven by the region's inspiring and enterprising women. Biden was right to visit the region—diplomatic engagement is key to further involvement in supporting these changes and encouraging others—and he must not back down. Western governments and peoples cannot turn their backs on the Middle East, especially for the sake of the region's women.

Western Perceptions

Political critiques of Biden's engagement with regional leadership reflect the ways in which public opinion in key western countries is out of touch with the contemporary Middle East. At the Tony Blair Institute, we have [polled \(https://institute.global/policy/think-again-inside-modernisation-new-middle-east\)](https://institute.global/policy/think-again-inside-modernisation-new-middle-east) both Western and Middle Eastern countries to explore this disconnect. This polling reveals that many in the United States, UK, France, and Germany still view the region as backward looking, conflict ridden, lacking in progress, and as a place more likely to be a source of problems than solutions. Symptomatic of the rise of far right and far left populism in Europe and the United States, Western publics are likewise increasingly supportive of regional isolationism, with many opposing increased engagement with the Middle East.

Nevertheless, from alternate angles, the far right and far left populist arguments that support disengaging with the region are based on preconceived and orientalist notions of Middle Eastern culture. While the former is rooted in anti-Muslim prejudice, the latter depends on a perverse understanding of anti-colonialism, where liberal values are considered exclusively Western and thus alien to the people of the region. These approaches are detrimental to both diplomatic relations and the ability of Western governments to encourage the reforms they seek to support, particularly when modernizing forces are looking towards the West to support their agenda against regressive regional forces. More specifically, Western nations should recognize and support regional efforts to advance women's rights and involvement in the public sphere.

Just as we are not blind to the problems of the Middle East, we should not be blind to those positive changes that are taking place. In reality, an approach eschewing active involvement and encouragement is tantamount to letting the regressive forces in the region eclipse the progressive. Only 12% of those western publics polled believe there has been any improvement in women's rights in the region. Yet in spite of many challenges, much of the Middle East's leadership and populations are becoming more future-oriented than ever before, prioritizing tech education, the creation of economic opportunities, and the improvement of women's rights.

Regional Realities

In many ways, these developments are interconnected: across the region, women are becoming increasingly prominent in education, entrepreneurship, and politics. Of course, the situation of women's rights does vary significantly depending on locale and personal circumstance. This is especially the case under the rule of Islamist extremists, where women's rights are anything but progressive.

July 12 marked the Islamic Republic of Iran's 'National Hijab and Chastity Day,' highlighting the clerical regime's regulation of Iranian women and their bodies. **[Iranian women \(https://institute.global/policy/why-west-and-its-feminists-need-support-iranian-women\)](https://institute.global/policy/why-west-and-its-feminists-need-support-iranian-women)** receive severe sentences of up to 15 years, lashings, or fines for publicly unveiling, yet a crackdown on hijab and promotion of 'chastity' has sparked nationwide dissent. In Gaza, there has likewise been an Islamist imposed rollback on women's rights. Last year, a Hamas-run court ruled that Palestinian women require the permission of a male guardian to travel. In Lebanon, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, has openly declared that women are 'unsuitable' for politics. One need only look to Afghanistan one year into the return of Taliban rule to see the devastating impact that Islamist extremism can have almost immediately on women's rights.

Yet dissent is flourishing even in these cases, and civil society movements have been pushing back against Islamists and their regressive policies. Iranian women have been particularly active, once again taking to the streets and publicly removing their hijabs under the recent campaign #No2Hijab. Women continue to play a major role in the protests condemning Islamists as they are often the main targets of their policies.

What is important for Western observers to understand is that the misogynist attitudes espoused by these Islamists do not reflect the majority opinion of key Middle Eastern publics. Nor is Islamism, itself, popular. In fact, polling has revealed that 75% of people in Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia believe that politicized religious movements—i.e. Islamists—have had a negative impact on the region.

Even within the past year, trend data from these countries indicates an uptick in those who support the separation of religion and politics, along with diminishing support of politicized religious movements. Most people in the Middle East do not align themselves with Islamist ideology and oppose regressive values such as the oppression of women. Instead, 70% of populations in the Middle East support the right of women to "apply for employment at all levels in government or business." This majority support is importantly consistent across all demographics—regardless of age, gender, wealth, or religiosity. Even the most pious of the region support the advancement of women's rights.

In fact, when asked to rank their three highest national priorities out of twelve options, ‘doing more to advance equal rights for women’ ranked in the top half of choices in all countries polled. Other factors indicating modernizing attitudes in the poll included the widespread support for regional liberalization programs, such as Saudi Vision 2030, and the prioritization of tech education so that young people can compete with the economy of the future.

Aside from popular support, female empowerment is also being actively achieved. The number of women in higher education is shooting upwards, and the percentage of female STEM graduates (<https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/there-are-fewer-female-male-stem-graduates-107-114-economies>) in Arab countries far outweighs those in Europe or the United States. Women are also significant (<https://www.economist.com/business/2013/07/13/untraditional-choice>) in driving innovation and entrepreneurial activity. Notably, Bahrain is home to one of the highest shares of female founders of tech startups in the world.

Female participation in politics is likewise on the rise, both through top-down reforms and bottom-up participation. The UAE, for example, has mandated that 50% of seats in Parliament must be held by women, and the majority of Arab countries require either legislated candidate quotas or reserve seats directly in parliament. This advancement of women’s political participation is driven by the dynamic and pioneering attitudes of women in the region, but also demonstrates the responsiveness of regional leaders who are willing to ensure institutions are more inclusive. Such progress is commendable, and future efforts should now not only work to increase numbers of female representation, but also ensure that those women in positions of greater authority are empowered to make change within the institutions they serve and in the societies in which they live.

How Western Countries Can Engage

Regional support for modernization at the popular level is overwhelming, and it is crucial for international understanding and cooperation that the West recognizes that. However, to make these values and public support a reality, there are many challenges to overcome. This is where Western diplomacy can have an impact. For instance, although increasing numbers of women have been entering the workforce, the Middle East still holds the lowest female participation rate in the world.

Upcoming polling from TBI demonstrates that publics see the main barrier to women’s employment in government and business as ‘inequities in family and home responsibilities’, over other obstacles such as ‘lack of education’ or ‘religious beliefs’. On top of other challenges women may face, they are having to contend with limited access to affordable and high-quality childcare services. It is notable that this concern is strikingly similar to the structural barriers faced by Western women such as inadequate childcare services.

This is an excellent example of where there is room for both internal reform and external support; regional governments should support women entering the workplace by making efforts to implement accessible childcare across the region. Western politicians and policymakers should likewise endorse such proposals—both in the region and beyond. When it comes to these types of reforms, Western governments should show their support for shifts in policies in opposition to the regressive Islamist forces operating in the region and recognize government efforts to modernize when they occur.

Ultimately, the disconnect between the Middle East and the Western understanding of the region’s approach to issues such as women’s rights is due, in part, to enduring stereotypes held by the West. Addressing these misplaced assumptions may be key to shifting Western approaches to reform. To help alleviate challenges and increase opportunities for women, the West must improve its engagement with the Middle East. At present, governments in the West appear to be doing the exact opposite. The overarching policy of Western disengagement from the region would be harmful for international cooperation but also for women’s rights.

This is also the case on a popular level, and such concerns must particularly be incumbent on liberals. Where women are fighting against similar barriers and conservative attitudes internationally, it seems even more imperative that we support each other's battles. Just as there rightfully was an international outcry after Roe vs Wade, liberals the world over should fight against such losses and support each other's triumphs.

Women's empowerment is a global issue, and must be treated as such. Regressive forces in the Middle East should be condemned and countered. But as part of this global fight, Western nations and publics alike share a responsibility to recognize and support the steps being made by women and regional leaderships endorsing what can only be described as revolutionary modernization. In short, now is not the time to turn our backs on the Middle East or its people.

Methodological note

The Zogby poll, commissioned by the Tony Blair Institute referenced in this article, used non-probability judgment sampling, where each sample set is representative by age, urban and rural, religious and ethnic group, and class (identified by take-home income). Overall, the samples obtained were nationally representative and comprised of adults (15+ yrs), male and female, with urban and rural distribution. In Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq where door-to-door sampling was possible, a multi-stage sampling method was used for selection of respondents. In Saudi Arabia, where door-to-door is not possible, a referral sampling was used ❖

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