

A Delicate Balancing Act

Women's Rights and US Military Intervention in the Arab World



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ABSTRACT Historically Arab regimes have played critical roles in securing women's rights in their societies. Yet regimes remain concerned about domestic, especially Islamist and traditionalist, reactions to women's rights. When regimes feel they can overcome this resistance they honor commitments to women's rights. When they fear more domestic opposition they renege. This article argues that Arab regimes are less likely to resist domestic opposition to women's rights when US military presence increases in the region. The authors test the argument using cross-national data including an original expert-coder scale of Islamist power, and estimate an instrumental variable model to allay concerns of endogeneity. A case study of Jordan explicates their causal argument. The results are robust to different measures of Islamist strength and to different estimation techniques. Understanding this unintended consequence of US military deployments to the Arab world is important for future analysis of female empowerment in the Arab world.

KEYWORDS women's rights, US militarism, Arab regimes, imperialism

The status of women in the Arab world lags behind that of their counterparts around the globe. Arab women's economic activity ratio as a proportion of men's employment remains drastically low. Fewer than 35 percent of women participate in economic activity in the region, against a global average of 56 percent. The percentage of women in government compared to other regions remains the lowest in the world. Several feminist scholars locate the problem in the personal status laws that regulate women's rights in many Muslim countries.

Yet notable variation exists across the Arab world when it comes to women's

pressure (Assaf and Nanes 2011; Bush 2011; Bush and Jamal 2015; Thompson 2000; Tripp and Kang 2008; Welchman 2004; Zuhur 2001). Mounira Charrad (2011), in her comprehensive review on the role of the state in expanding women's rights, points out that many Arab states granted women their rights in the absence of organized women's movements.

Arab states have also shown the ability to curtail or deny Arab women's rights while the focus remained on state development that emphasized nationalist, economic, and political goals. Several authors, like Sondra Hale (1997) writing on Sudan; Laurie Brand (1998) writing on Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia; Madwawi al-Rasheed (2013) writing on Saudi Arabia; and Suad Joseph (1999) writing on Lebanon, have illustrated how states have compromised on women's issues to bolster their own standing vis-à-vis their own domestic coalitions. Yet even these exceptional writings about the role of the state in either bolstering or denying women's rights cannot explain why we see fluctuations within countries across time. Under what conditions can states press forward on women's rights? And under what conditions do they capitulate to conservative pressures?

This article joins these arguments by maintaining that regime commitment to women's rights must be understood within the larger political context that structures state-opposition relations in the Arab region more broadly. Specifically, regimes are concerned about Islamist¹ and traditionalist reactions to women's rights (Charrad 2001; Hasso 2014; Moghadam 2004; Sonbol 2002). When regimes feel that they can overcome domestic opposition, they will be more ready to honor a commitment to women's rights and challenge Islamist and traditional opposition to women's rights. When they believe that they cannot overcome opposition, they are less likely to stand behind women's rights. In this article we argue that regimes in the Arab world face stronger domestic opposition from Islamist forces when US intervention in the region increases. Here we examine one visible dimension of such intervention — the deployment of US military troops to the region especially *preceding wars* — as a factor that weakens regimes vis-à-vis Islamist opposition to US military intervention, and thus by implication also has the unintended consequence of harming the status of women in the Arab world.²

Several scope conditions structure our argument. First, the Arab world lacks free and fair democratic institutions. Thus the ability of women and supporters of women's rights to gain more equitable treatment through a competitive, deliberative legislative process remains questionable at best, thereby increasing their dependence on a supportive executive. Second, Arab executive branches have shown a willingness to override legislative processes that they do not support. For example, regimes are much more likely to ensure that legislative branches have little say on foreign policy, while allowing them greater leeway on domestic issues, especially as they pertain to women. Third, Islamist and conservative forces in many Arab states resist the

legislation to alter personal status clauses. In fact, they may even reduce women's rights to buttress popular support. When regimes are not pressured by domestic opponents, they prove more willing to challenge Islamists to improve the standing of women (see Charrad 2001).³ Thus regimes are more likely to allow Islamists leeway on matters relating to domestic social issues—like gender rights—so long as Islamists do not jeopardize regime ties to the United States. In periods of increased US intervention, therefore, Arab women's rights suffer more drastically.

Since the inception of the Muslim Brotherhood by Hasan al-Banna in 1928, Islamist movements, like other Arab pan-nationalist movements, have directly challenged Western dominance in the Arab world (Haddad 2007). The Brotherhood saw in itself the indigenous and authentic response to the social, economic, and political ills plaguing Arab society. Its desire to control the destiny of the Arab world found popular support across the region. "Their goal," writes Yvonne Haddad (2007), "was to initiate involvement in the unfolding history of the world, taking control of the lives of their constituency and participating in shaping the future." At their core, Islamist movements aimed to redignify the Arab world because of what they saw as the embarrassing trampling by the West.

Islamist movements have little faith or trust in the West, especially the United States. Islamists believe that "Arab nations and peoples have continued to be subservient to foreign domination, which Islamists describe as a continuing predatory relationship" (Haddad 2007: 507). Hence one of the most basic popular Islamist stances in most countries in the Arab world is the skepticism about regime ties to the United States. Islamists continue to reject "perceived US schemes to bring the Muslim world under its cultural hegemony and to empower Israel over the Arabs and Muslims" (525). This is the most popular position of Islamist movements. The continued Israeli occupation of Palestine and the US incursion into Iraq remain points that galvanize much anger among the Arab masses and play into Islamist mobilization strategies. According to Graham Fuller (2004), because the Arab world is operating in a negative international environment, these factors continue to bolster support for Islamism across the region. American military presence thus fuels Islamist sensibilities and galvanizes their opposition to regimes. Thus, in periods of increased US intervention, in countries where Islamist opposition is strong, Arab women's rights suffer. Figure 2 diagrams a stylized version of our argument to aid exposition.

Research Design: Hypotheses, Data, and Methods

Our argument stipulates that when the United States intervenes militarily it emboldens the domestic opposition to governing regimes in the Arab world. Where regimes face greater pressure, women's rights also suffer because regimes are more likely to acquiesce to Islamists (and other conservative forces) by renegeing on prior

year and use it as our primary independent variable. Our source for the US troop data is Lake (2009).⁶ US troops increase dramatically before each of the two Gulf wars, in 1991 and 2003. Our measure of US troop deployments to the region captures the buildups preceding these wars.

Measuring Islamist strength within a given country is challenging. We use two separate measurement strategies to bolster confidence in our results. Our primary strategy is to use data on the electoral participation and performance of Islamist parties. As Kurzman and Naqvi (2010) point out, while most Arab countries have Islamist parties that compete in elections, such parties rarely perform well at the polls, earning on average about 7 percent of the ballots cast. But in some cases and at some points, such parties do better. The more difficult question is how to interpret the lackluster performance of an Islamist party that has done much better in previous years (e.g., in 1991 the three Islamist parties in Algeria won over 50 percent of the votes cast, but following restrictions placed on their ability to compete, they never experienced similar success again). Given the troubled nature of electoral democracy in these countries, simply counting ballots is likely to mislead and underestimate the influence and threat posed by Islamist parties, especially if stronger latent threats engender more repressive responses by ruling parties. Simply coding countries as facing strong Islamist power on the basis of our intuition, however, seems unsatisfactory as well and potentially leads to tautology. Therefore we establish the following coding rule: where Kurzman and Naqvi record an Islamist party as winning more than a fifth of the ballots cast, we code that country as facing a strong threat. Countries in which such parties compete but gain fewer votes are coded as middling threats. Those in which there are no Islamist parties competing or where such parties garner only negligible electoral support are coded as facing no threat.⁷

The measure of Islamist strength described above is not perfect, but none better exists. The problems include the ambiguity of our measure about the fact that many Islamists contest elections as “independents,” that many states prohibit religious parties, and of course that many of these states do not hold meaningful elections — or any at all, though the number of non-election-holding countries grows smaller each year. For all these reasons, our coding might still understate the true strength of Islamists in various countries, but we submit that it has two significant virtues that warrant its use nonetheless: first, the coding is based on publicly available data and uses transparent decision rules, which enhances replication; second, given that possible criticisms of the measure are that it understates the true strength of Islamists in many of the countries in our sample, the statistical tests below are arguably more stringent, and finding significant effects should be harder.

To bolster confidence in our findings, we also created an original measure of Islamist power using an expert survey. We solicited responses from leading experts

crisis (as in the late 1980s). However, the point of the graph is to illustrate that when there are spikes in US troops (especially as preparation for military intervention) antigovernment protests increase as well.

Such protests weaken regimes, limiting their ability to influence legislative processes. When regimes face nationalist opposition, especially from Islamist groups, they are more likely to concede to these Islamist and traditional forces on issues pertaining to women's rights. Where these conservative forces are stronger, governments are more at risk of experiencing protests, which, per our argument, should lead them to abandon their commitment to women's rights if threatened. We present our evidence for this claim next.

We estimate an ordinary least squares (OLS) model with panel-corrected standard errors to predict the country's level of women's political rights as a function of the independent and control variables discussed above. Given that most countries do not alter their level of political rights for women frequently, we have also estimated this model in an error-correction modeling (ECM) framework, and our results hold. The results also hold if we lag troop deployments as an independent variable.¹³ In table 1 we also describe results from an instrumental variable analysis that yields the same conclusions.

Model 2, reported in table 1, performs quite well. Of particular relevance given our hypothesis is the interaction of the total US troop deployments in the

Table 1. Women's political rights and US troop deployments

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
US regional troop deployments (log)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.36*** (0.13)
Islamist (three-category)	-0.24 (0.18)	0.99 (0.61)
Troops × Islamist interaction		-0.14*** (0.05)
GDP per capita (log)	-0.19 (0.24)	-0.27 (0.18)
GDP per capita growth rate	-0.001 (0.01)	-0.004 (0.004)
Urban population	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
Democracy (polity)	0.04** (0.02)	0.04** (0.02)
Trade openness (% GDP)	0.003 (0.003)	0.002 (0.002)
Oil rents (% GDP)	-0.004 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.004)
Aid per capita (in thousand \$)	0.01 (0.47)	-0.04 (0.50)
Year time trend	0.03* (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
Constant	-47.20* (0.09)	-47.05* (25.52)
No. of observations	282	282
No. of countries	15	15
<i>R</i> ²	0.49	0.55

Note. Standard errors are corrected for clustering by country. Iraq, Somalia, and Syria are excluded owing to missing data.
p* < 0.10. *p* < 0.05. ****p* < 0.01.



region in a given year and the level of Islamist threat in a given country in that year. The interaction is statistically significant and negatively signed — as predicted by our argument — even after controlling for a host of plausible alternative explanations. The only substantive control variable that is statistically significant is democracy, which has a positive effect on women's political rights in the region. This perhaps indicates that countries that allow for civil society mobilization on women's rights also fare better on these rights (Schwedler and Clark 2003). Another encouraging result is that the time trend is positively signed and statistically significant, indicating that progress, even if slow and halting, continues to be made on enhancing women's rights in the region.¹⁴

Returning to the main variables of interest, the interaction between Islamist strength and regional US troop deployments is statistically significant and negatively signed as hypothesized. We calculate the marginal effects for each variable in the interaction separately. The troop variable is not statistically significant by itself regardless of the strength of Islamism in a country. We confirm this in Model 1 in table 1, in which the interaction term is excluded and the troop variable remains statistically insignificant. This is as we should expect, since there is no reason that troops in the region should have a *direct* effect on women's political rights in individual countries. Rather, our argument is that Arab regimes are weakened vis-à-vis Islamists when US troop deployments to the region increase and women's political rights are compromised in a bargain to keep the domestic peace. Our expectation therefore is that Islamist strength should exercise a downward pressure on women's political rights and that this pressure should grow as US troop deployments grow.¹⁵ Calculating the marginal effect of Islamism on women's political rights at different levels of troop deployments reveals just this pattern (see fig. 4).

Islamism's effect on women's political rights is increasingly negative as troop levels increase. The effect is statistically significant once the troop levels pass a critical threshold (about eight thousand, by our estimates). When troop levels rise significantly, as they did surrounding both Gulf wars, the effect of Islamist strength grows much more negative. Moving from about six thousand to sixty thousand US troops in the region results in a half-point decrease in women's political rights on average. Given that most of these regimes are stuck at the lowest end of the four-point scale of women's political rights, and that most never exceed a score of 2, this is a large substantive effect.

One might ask whether all "Western" troop deployments would elicit similar Islamist reactions. Our intuition is that any Western, especially military, interference would unleash similar dynamics, though the global position and outsized influence of the United States arguably makes it an especially visible target for Islamist vitriol. Unfortunately, we cannot test the broader proposition of how non-US Western troop deployments might affect women's rights in the region during this period, since they are dwarfed by the US troop presence. Non-US Western troop

West (Jamal 2012). Arguably, there are many factors that can weaken or empower regimes. Certainly economic crises, reduction of subsidies, and disease outbreaks are just a few examples that weaken regimes. We argue though that these regime-weakening events have little bearing on Islamist demands to reduce women's rights. There is no reason to believe, for example, that economic crisis disproportionately aggravates Islamists. Rather, and because women's rights are often seen as part of a "Western agenda" of democracy promotion and Islamists are more likely opposed to both US intervention and women's rights, US troop deployments enable Islamists to secure the mobilizational force to counter US demands (with regime support) to improve the status of women in these Arab countries. US military presence thereby has the unintended consequence of hurting rather than empowering the status of women in Arab states.

Considering Alternative Causal Mechanisms

Thus far our argument maintains that US military intervention, measured by troop deployments, hurts the status of women in the Arab world because it harms the ability of regimes to pass legislation beneficial to women. Yet there is a body of literature arguing that military intervention hurts the status of women through mechanisms that differ from the mechanism we propose here.

There are three alternative mechanisms linked to troop deployments worth considering. The first is that US troop deployments lead to increases in levels of conflict and war. War in and of itself is not good for women. As Bop (2002: 19) states, it is "widely accepted that women lose in wars." Indeed, while men often are more likely to be killed in combat, women's suffering is also widespread; as Rehn and Sirleaf (2003: 1) clarify: "Women often experience violence, forced pregnancy, abduction, and sexual abuse and slavery." The second mechanism closely linked to conflict and war holds that military intervention heightens levels of societal insecurity that in return negatively impact women. Caprioli and Douglass (2008) have linked the breakdown of society caused by war with the overall reduction of security, which, as noted, is especially problematic for women: not only does violence against women increase, but "broader cultural norms permissive of gendered violence" increase during war and/or conflict as well (49).

The above two mechanisms appear plausible, but the cases under analysis here are not cases characterized by war or conflict caused by US military intervention. In fact, the US military deploys in remote areas in Arab states, quite distant from civilian concentrations. For example, the United States deployed troops in Jordan at the eve of the 2003 Iraq War. No conflict occurred in Jordan. However, we demonstrate in the case study below that these military deployments led to significant opposition to the Jordanian regime, which adversely affected women.

The third and final mechanism would hold that US military intervention might be linked to a loss of trade and/or foreign aid resulting in a reduction of GDP

We would argue that this objection is not credible, but given the theoretical, policy, and normative importance of our argument and findings, we think it important to address these possible endogeneity concerns forthrightly. To do so, we use instrumental variable techniques, which require identifying an instrument that predicts well the level of US troop deployments in the Middle East region while being exogenous to the level of women's rights in the region's countries. We use *Hispanic turnout* in US elections as our instrument, and find that our results hold in the instrumental variables analysis. A theoretical and empirical justification of the instrument and the results of the instrumental-variable model are provided in table A6 in the online appendix.

Case Study: Jordan

The Jordanian regime played a key role in aiding the US war on Iraq in 2003. Although the monarchy tried to keep its support of the Americans a secret, satellite coverage along with leaks in the daily newspapers made it clear that the Americans were using Jordan's eastern border to launch the 2003 war into Iraq. Abul Ragheb, prime minister at the time, denied this but did acknowledge the presence of "hundreds" of troops, though other estimates put the number in the thousands (Bookmiller 2003: 183). Jordanian leaders maintained that the Americans were there to train Jordanians in operating Patriot missile batteries. In reality, however, US troops used the eastern border with Iraq to station Patriot missile batteries to protect both Jordan and Israel, provide access routes into Iraq for American forces, and train Iraqi security forces (183). According to Bookmiller, "By lending support, both as an Arab and a Muslim voice, to American efforts in the war on terrorism [and Iraq], Jordan gained financial rewards and cemented a closer relationship with the Bush Administration" (191). Yet this strong relationship with the Americans came at a domestic price—an increase in domestic protests and the loss of regime political capital—which resulted in the inability of the king to push legislation through parliament that would have benefited women.

According to Al-Atiyat and Barari (2011), there are three major areas of contention between the Islamists and women's rights movements: laws relating to women and men as encompassed in the personal status regime, the establishment of quotas, and the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). While Islamists have shown some accommodation of women's rights, allowing women to participate more actively in leadership roles in the movement and not opposing quotas for women, their stance on other issues, especially personal status, remains oppositional.

Throughout the early 2000s King Abdallah was keen on passing legislation that would improve the status of women—especially on issues pertaining to honor crimes. He sent legislation to parliament in 2003 that would establish more severe

intervention, served as reasons for the regime not to push forward on women's rights: "Sacrificing women's rights has always been an element of negotiation to achieve greater leverage [by the Jordanian regime]." Laurie Brand also echoes these findings. Analyzing the parliamentary debates surrounding the personal status law proposals in the early 1990s — and the lack of regime commitment to these reforms, Brand (1998: 111) notes, "By this time it appeared to some observers that the government had been making concessions to Islamists on social issues as a way of softening their [Islamist] opposition to the peace process."¹⁸ Because the regime loses political capital when US military intervention increases, it has no choice but to allow Islamists the upper hand in parliament with regard to cultural and social matters. Thus, in the cases both of "honor crimes" law and *Khul'a* divorce in the 2000s, the Jordanian regime supported more egalitarian laws but could not pass them in the face of determined lower-house opposition.

These debates surrounding regime-Islamist negotiations on the status of women illustrate the underlying mechanisms of the argument we advance in this article. When the regime faced less opposition, the king felt authorized to support reforms that did not share popular support among Islamists and tribal leaders in parliament. When the monarchy was weakened — due to US military intervention in the region — with US troops on the ground in nearby Iraq and Kuwait, the king was less able to advance women-friendly reforms through parliament. Thus we maintain in the case of Jordan that the willingness of the monarchy to push for gender reforms through parliament was contingent on the regime's overall popular standing, which was directly linked to US intervention in the region.

These patterns in Jordan — where women are sidelined when US intervention increases — are evident in other cases as well. For example, debates to improve the status of Palestinian women in the late 1990s through the model parliament were stalled when Islamist forces used anti-Western rhetoric against the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The PNA had become increasingly vulnerable to attacks of Western complicity — because it was receiving not only financial aid from the United States but direct US security training as well (Johnson 2004). Further, the Islamist attack included circulating a pamphlet labeling "the women's movement as an arm of the American and European conspiracy to destroy Islamic civilization" (152). Thus the Islamists could combat the women's movement by linking it to claims that the United States sought to establish its hegemony over the region (Schwedler 2005).

The situation of women in Iraq tells a similar story. When it became clear that the Americans had little credibility in Iraq after the 2003 war, the United States began working with sectarian leaders to secure peace and cooperation. To win compliance from traditional, conservative, and religious sectarian loyalties, the United States compromised on women's rights. Ali and Pratt (2010: 207) write:

Implications and Conclusion

This article has sought to explain why women in some Arab countries have made less progress in political rights than their counterparts elsewhere in the world. Existing explanations emphasize cultural factors such as religious doctrine and practice; institutional factors such as the lack of democracy; and economic factors such as dependence on oil exports. We do not disagree with the causal logics implicit in these existing explanations, but we do contend that the extant literature has ignored an important consideration: the role of international politics.

One of the most powerful countries in the system, the United States, has unprecedented economic, political, and military power and reach. In particular, American troops are now located in over 130 countries around the world as the United States maintains a vast network of military bases that allow it to project power worldwide (Cooley 2009). The presence of these troops is often cause for controversy (Lutz 2009); even Japan, a steadfast ally of the United States, has witnessed protests against US bases there (Yeo 2011). But perhaps nowhere are such foreign troops more controversial than in the Middle East, where the United States has been directly involved in wars.

Applied to the status of women in this part of the world, our logic suggests a depressing conclusion: women's rights have been negotiated away to appease Islamists and other traditional forces upset with US military presence in the region. Our argument, which is robustly supported by cross-national statistical data as well as by supporting evidence from the case of Jordan and other countries, has important implications for the comparative study of gender politics and also of minority politics generally. Scholars interested in the rights of minority groups should consider the degree to which they are directly linked to regime negotiations and coalitions to maintain power. In particular, understanding external involvements that limit government responses and embolden opposition tactics or vice versa might shed new light on our understanding of how marginalized groups, including women, are treated. Similarly, scholars who argue for the positive domestic implications of trade, globalization, and foreign aid must account for competing and contradictory impulses stemming from security considerations. Even when the United States emphasizes its commitment to women's rights, its mode of involvement may trigger unintended consequences in the opposite direction.

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10. The correlation between Islamist Strength and whether Islamists pose a threat to the regime is $r = 0.22$. We estimate each of the models with each dimension of Islamist Power, and our findings remain robust.
11. A strand of the modernization literature examines the role of education and urbanization. As societies become more educated and more urban, their worldviews should become more cosmopolitan and universal. As such, their attitudes toward gender equality should improve, especially since higher levels of education and urbanization are seen as ways of shedding traditional norms and opinions in favor of more egalitarian concepts (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Jennings 2006; Norrander and Wilcox 2009). Economic development is also deemed extremely useful for improving attitudinal predispositions toward women. Economic development first allows women to enter the labor market. They then prove that they are capable of performing many of the same tasks as men, therefore signifying that they are equal to men in the workforce (Cunningham 2008). The importance of economic development for women is also underscored by other studies. Iversen and Rosenbluth (2008) find that low levels of female labor force participation contribute to female underrepresentation in democratic polities both by reinforcing traditional voter attitudes toward women and by constraining the supply of women who have professional experience and resources and therefore are capable of mounting credible electoral campaigns.
12. Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson (2007) find that higher levels of foreign aid are linked to higher levels of democracy, but Knack (2004) reports no effect. Other authors discuss the interaction between domestic and international actors as a means of advancing the status of women. For example, Bush (2011) finds that countries do adopt gender quotas to signal their commitment to democracy, and Keck and Sikkink (1998) argue that a boomerang effect between local actor and transnational groups helps women. Ross (2008) argues that oil production has reduced the number of women in the labor force, which in turn reduces their political influence. The relationship between trade openness and democracy in the international political economy literature yields contradictory results. Some scholars argue that trade and globalization enhance democracy in the developing world (Lipset 1959; López-Córdova and Meissner 2005). Others show that economic globalization can yield human rights benefits in some places and times (Hafner-Burton 2005; Richards, Gelleny, and Sacko 2001).
13. Our results also hold if we estimate an ordered probit model instead; we prefer the OLS regression for its expositional simplicity but report the ordered probit estimates in table A3 in the online appendix. The results also hold if we use the expert-coding-based measure of Islamist Power (see table A5 in the online appendix).
14. The Obama administration's decision to renew aid to Egypt following the 2013 coup illustrates this well. See, e.g., Ackerman 2015.
15. In Model 1 the coefficient on Islamist Strength is negative but does not reach statistical significance on its own. In our model based on the expert surveys (giving us more variation on Islamist Strength; see columns 1 and 3 in table A5 in the online appendix), the strength of Islamists is negative on women's rights in both models.
16. See Model 2 in table A4 in the online appendix.
17. If we drop the interaction, the Islamist variable is statistically significant and negatively signed (see Model 1 in table A4 in the online appendix). But the interpretation here differs from our argument, since the repression indicated by these lower physical integrity scores is directed by the regime against the Islamists themselves.
18. Brand (1998: 150) also argues that the regime did not push the reforms seriously after 1992: "A deal of sorts may have been struck between the government on the one hand and the religious authorities and Islamists on the other to the effect that reforms may be proposed on the margins . . . but . . . no move would be made by the state to force changes in the Personal Status Law."

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