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Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East

The Egyptian Women's Movement

A considerable literature has been devoted to the study of activism amongst Islamist groups. By contrast, Nadje Al-Ali's book explores the anthropological and political significance of secular-oriented women's activism by focusing on the women's movement in modern Egypt. In so doing it challenges stereotypical images of Arab women as passive victims and demonstrates how they fight for their rights and confront conservative forces. The argument is constructed around interviews with some eighty women activists, who offer fascinating insights into the history of the women's movement in Egypt, the goals and priorities of different groups and individual activists, and how the Egyptian state and Islamist constituencies have impacted on women's activism generally. In this way, the author defines one of the central themes of the book, the reconceptualization of secularism in the Middle East and Muslim world. Another significant contribution of this book is its challenge of prevailing dichotomous constructions of 'the West' versus 'the East'. Here the author proposes to transcend notions of cultures being bounded entities and to acknowledge the entanglements and creative encounters between and within cultures. Throughout the book, the balance between the empirical and conceptual material is adeptly handled. The author frames her work in the context of current theoretical debates in Middle Eastern and post-colonial scholarship and, while some of the ideas are complex, her lucid and engaging style means they are always comprehensible. The book will therefore appeal to students, as well as to scholars in the field.

Nadje Al-Ali is a lecturer in social anthropology at the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter.

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For my parents, Dagmar and Sadig Al-Ali

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Note on transliteration

Transliteration of Arabic words and phrases generally follows the system adopted by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. I have omitted diacritics except for the *hamza* and the *ʿayn*. In order to preserve the Egyptian pronunciation of Arabic and to follow colloquial language, I have replaced the classical *j* sound with *g*.

All Arabic words, except for proper names and standard English forms, are italicized.

Groups, networks and organizations

Independent women's organizations

- Markaz Dirasat Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida (New Woman's Research Centre)
- Rabtat Al-Mar'a Al-'Arabiyya (Alliance of Arab Women)
- Markaz Dirasat Al-Mar'a: Ma'an (Women's Study Centre: Together)
- Gam'at Bint Al-Ard (Daughter of the Land Group in Mansoura)

Development-oriented organizations

- Gama'at Nuhud wa Tanmeyyat Al-Mar'a (Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW))
- Markaz Wasa'il Al-Ittissal Al-Mula'ama min agl Al-Tanmeyya (Appropriate Communications Techniques (ACT))

Professional organizations

- Lagnat Al-Mar'a fi Ittihad Al-Mohameen Al-'Arab (Women's Committee of the Arab Lawyers' Union)
- Gama'iyat Al-Katibat Al-Masriyat (Egyptian Women Writers Association)
- Dar Al-Mar'a Al-'Arabiyya Nour (Arab Women Publishing House Nour)
- Gama'iyat Al-Cinema'iyat (Egyptian Women in Film Society)

Human rights organizations

- Markaz Al-Mussa'ada Al-Qanuniyya li Huquq Al-Insan (Centre for Human Rights and Legal Aid (CHRLA))
- Markaz Al-Qahira li Dirasat Huquq Al-Insan (Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS))
- Markaz Al-Dirasat wa Al-Ma'lumat Al-Qanuniyya li Huquq Al-Insan (Legal Rights and Research Centre (LRRC))

The names provided here do not present a comprehensive list of women's groups and organizations in Egypt. They refer to those groups that were part of the research on which this book is based.

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xiv Groups, networks and organizations

Women's committees affiliated to political parties

- Ittihad Al-Nissa'i Al-Taquadummi (Union for Progressive Women (linked with socialist Tagammu party))
- Lagnat Al-Mar'a fil Hizb Al-Nasseri (Women's Secretariat of the Arab Democratic Nasserist party)

Networks based on specific issues

- FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) Task Force
- Women's Media Watch
- Women and Violence Network

Abbreviations

ACT	Appropriate Communications Techniques
ADEW	Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women
AUC	American University in Cairo
AWSA	Arab Women's Solidarity Association
CAPMAS	Central Agency for Population, Mobilization and Statistics
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
CHRLA	Centre for Human Rights and Legal Aid
CIAD	Canadian International Arab Development
CIHRS	Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
EFU	Egyptian Feminist Movement
FGM	female genital mutilation
GTZ	Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LCDA	local community development association
LRRC	Legal Rights and Research Centre
MERC	Middle East Research Centre
<i>MERIP</i>	<i>Middle East Report</i>
NCPD	National NGO Committee for Population and Development
NGO	non-governmental organization
NPT	nuclear non-proliferation treaty
PVO	private voluntary organization
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies
UNICEF	United Nations (International) Children's (Emergency) Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WAF	Women against Fundamentalism