MAKING COMMON CAUSE?: WESTERN AND MIDDLE EASTERN FEMINISTS
IN THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S MOVEMENT, 1911-1948

DISSERTATION

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This dissertation exposes important junctures between feminism, imperialism, and orientalism by investigating the encounter between Western and Middle Eastern feminists in the first-wave international women’s movement. I focus primarily on the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, and to a lesser extent, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. By examining the interaction and exchanges among Western and Middle Eastern women (at conferences and through international visits, newsletters and other correspondence), as well as their representations of “East” and “West,” this study reveals the conditions of and constraints on the potential for feminist solidarity across national, cultural, and religious boundaries. In addition to challenging the notion that feminism in the Middle East was “imposed” from outside, it also complicates conventional wisdom about the failure of the first-wave international women’s movement to accommodate difference.

Influenced by growing ethos of cultural internationalism during the interwar period, Western feminist attitudes toward Middle Eastern women were characterized less by overt racism and hostility to Islam than by a belief in the universal applicability of Western standards of progress. Some of the assumptions on which the discourse of feminist orientalism was based were shared by Middle Eastern feminists, who appropriated liberal ideals of national sovereignty and linear progress to articulate an autonomous vision of feminism that both challenged and affirmed loyalty to male
nationalists. The common aspiration of modernity provided a fragile basis for solidarity between Western and Middle Eastern feminists, for whom the notion of sisterhood retained real meaning. But they understood its obligations differently. While Western feminists frequently invoked their responsibility to "lead" their less fortunate sisters, their Middle Eastern counterparts sought sisterly help from Western women in combating colonialism. The question of Palestine finally exposed the cracks in the foundation on which their unity had been built. It was around this issue that Western feminist orientalism collided most forcefully with Middle Eastern feminist nationalism.
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INTRODUCTION

ISTANBUL, April 18 (U.P.)--Women of thirty-five nations met today in the old Yildiz Palace, once the world's greatest harem, to work for emancipation of women.¹

For eight days in April 1935, the residence of former Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II served as the site of a widely publicized international feminist conference. Nearly three hundred women from around the world convened in Istanbul for the twelfth congress of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW), where they affirmed their commitment to equal rights and peace. According to the organization's American press secretary Louisa Fast, what gave the congress "publicity value" was the sheer incongruity of its locale: the very rooms where, as one reporter put it, the Sultan's "numerous wives...trod on slippered feet twenty-seven years ago."²

The contrast was all the more striking in light of the recent political gains made by Turkish women. As part of the dramatic reform program initiated by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Turkish Republic, Turkish women were enfranchised at the local level in 1930 and at the national level in 1934. The parliamentary elections held in March, 1935 returned 18 women (4.5%) to the Assembly, the highest number of female

¹ Press clipping from the New York Sun, 1935, box 8, Josephine Schain Papers, Sophia Smith Collection (SSC).

deputies in Europe at the time.³ In an interview she granted a few months before the April congress, the venerable American suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt, founder and retired president of the IAW, pointed out the symbolic importance of the congress' intended setting: "The fact that the Congress is to assemble in Turkey is of great significance and is a commentary on the advance that women have made. There has never before been an international women's meeting in a Mohammedan country. Not only that--the government has joined in the invitation and provided the place of meeting, a thing that has not happened in a Christian country." ⁴

Whatever resonance these news accounts may have carried for Western readers clearly derived from juxtaposition: "harem" versus "emancipation for women;" "Turkey" versus "the advance that women have made;" "Mohammedan" versus "Christian." Such binary constructions serve as the modus operandi of orientalism--Edward Said's term for the West's representations and domination of the East--and were employed quite self-consciously in the IAW's own notices about the congress.⁵ Still, the event marked a


⁴ Interview with Annabel Parker McCann for the Associated Press, January, 1935, box 1, IAW Papers, SSC.

watershed in the history of the international women's movement. If, as Catt had emphasized, it was the first international feminist gathering to take place in a predominantly Muslim country, there was novelty, too, in the very decision by the Alliance to hold a congress outside what was conventionally understood as "the West." Contestation of the organization's institutionalized Eurocentrism had been growing steadily since World War I and by the 1930s its leadership had begun to respond.⁶ Accepting an invitation from its Turkish affiliate to host the organization's triennial congress, the IAW hoped the Istanbul location would attract large delegations from the Arab East. With the help of Egyptian feminist Huda Sha`rawi, whose Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), had been affiliated with the Alliance since 1923, the Alliance arranged a pre-congress publicity tour of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine and successfully recruited women in those countries to the fold.

Convened during the interwar period of geopolitical reorganization--a time of waning empire and waxing nationalism--the 1935 IAW congress constituted a signal moment in the construction of feminist transnationalism.⁷ On what grounds did Western and Middle Eastern women come together and proclaim common cause? How seriously should we take their fervent tributes to "sisterhood," that concept much (and justly)

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⁷ The editors of Women Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation, and Race (London: Routledge, 2000) offer a useful distinction between "internationalism" and "transnationalism." Where the former "suggests a system of sovereign nation-states that enjoy formal relations among themselves, and the political and organizational ties that can develop between women on that basis," the latter implies "a broader field of interactions between peoples and movements, and seems particularly applicable to a world system of imperial 'nation-states' and 'subject races' that denies or defers the right of self-determination for all." See Ian Christopher Fletcher, Laura E. Nym Mayhall, and Philippa Levine, "Introduction," xviii.
maligned in feminist scholarship for positing a false universality among women? These questions form the heart of this study, which examines the encounter between Western and Middle Eastern feminists in the international women's movement during the first half of the twentieth century.

Such a project requires some definition of terms. Mindful of their inadequacies, I retain the monolithic and homogenizing terms "Western" and "Middle Eastern" for lack of better alternatives. I use the former to refer to Britain, the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand; and the latter to denote the geographic region that includes the present political states of Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon, Syria, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Turkey, and Iran. While the cultural influence of Islam and Arab civilization extends throughout the region, the category "Middle Eastern" includes a multiplicity of religions and ethnicities. Although most of the material in this dissertation concerns Arab (both Muslim and Christian) women specifically, there is also some pertaining to Turkish, Iranian, and Palestinian Jewish women. Thus, when used in a general sense, "Middle Eastern" is more appropriate than either "Muslim" or "Arab."

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8 Just as the first historians of women dethroned “universal man” as the embodiment of all human experience, so too have scholars recognized the chimera of “universal woman.” Attention to the issue of difference among women has come largely from two sources: the writings of Third World women and women of color (and, I would add, socialist-feminist historians); and poststructuralist theory. The former have critiqued the ways that notions of “shared womanhood” have erased differences based on race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., while the latter seeks to show how women’s experiences are constructed through discourse. Poststructuralism calls into question the existence of an autonomous, enlightened subject acting on behalf of his or her own interests, thus destabilizing notions commonly accepted by historians such as agency and power. For an overview of these historiographical trends, see Sonya Rose et al., “Dialogue: Women’s History/Gender History: Is Feminist History Losing Its Critical Edge?” *Journal of Women's History* 5.1 (1993): 89-128.
The issue of feminism is complicated by the considerable (and at times acrimonious) historiographical and political debates surrounding the term itself. Karen Offen was among the first historians to underscore the need to consider feminist movements within their specific cultural and historical contexts. Arguing that an understanding of feminism as a movement for women’s political equality with men is based too narrowly on the Anglo-American tradition of liberal individualism, and cannot account for other, perhaps more common, expressions of female protest at gender hierarchy, she offered a more capacious conceptualization that distinguishes between what she perceives to be the two most prevalent forms such protest has historically taken. Individualist feminism—which derives from Anglo-American natural rights philosophy—posits the individual as the basic unit of society and seeks personal autonomy as its highest goal. Individualist feminists typically recognize gender roles as socially constructed and emphasize women’s liberation from their subordination within the family. Conversely, relational feminism gives primacy to human relationships, positing the man/woman couple (or mother/child) as the basic social unit. Relational feminists accept (indeed, often celebrate) gender difference but reject arbitrary male domination. They envision an egalitarian social order in which women and men might perform different roles but command equal authority.

Offen suggested that relational feminism more accurately describes women’s movements outside Great Britain and the United States. Although her focus was

continental Europe, her model was useful early on to historians of “Third World” women in explaining the political activism of their subjects under the impact of colonialism and in cultural contexts that often stress communal relationships over the individual.

Offen’s work helped pave the way for more recent approaches that seek to redefine feminism “in a way that divests it of its Western particularity and instead constructs new meanings incorporating both its universal aspects and its ‘historically specific and dynamic’ forms in the Third World.”10 With respect to the Middle East (as with other parts of the postcolonial world), the issue of feminism has been further vexed by an enduring tendency to identify it with Western imperialism, a tendency from which even scholars are not immune.11 Leila Ahmed, for example, clings to a bifurcated framework that posits a polar opposition between "Western" and "indigenous" expressions of feminism. She identifies two strands that appeared over the course of the twentieth century in the Arab Middle East. The dominant one, appearing first in Egypt and associated primarily with the Egyptian Feminist Union, "affiliated itself, albeit generally discreetly, with the westernizing, secularizing tendencies of society, predominantly the tendencies of the upper, upper-middle, and middle-middle classes" and "assumed the desirability of progress toward Western-type societies." The second, "wary of and eventually even opposed to Western ways, searched a way to articulate female


subjectivity and affirmation within a native, vernacular, Islamic discourse -- typically in terms of a general social, cultural, and religious renovation." Ahmed suggests that the former's "Westernizing" outlook has helped to discredit feminism in general in Middle Eastern societies.

The problem with such dichotomous analyses is that they deny the process of "hybridization" through which cultural forms are necessarily constructed. A more fruitful approach is to study the "processes of entanglement" that characterized the development of colonized societies. As Lila Abu-Lughod perceptively writes, "condemning 'feminism' as an inauthentic Western import is just as inaccurate as celebrating it as a local or indigenous project. The first position assumes such a thing as cultural purity; the second underestimates the formative power of colonialism in the development of the region."

Recognizing that they may not have embraced the term themselves, I nonetheless refer to the women who populate this dissertation as feminists, working from Nancy Cott’s broad definition of feminism as “an integral tradition of protest against arbitrary


13 On the notion of hybridity in the development of cultural formations, see Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).


male dominion.” This definition has the advantage of being capacious enough to include the myriad forms such protest has taken across time and space.

Finally, while some scholars use “imperialism” and “orientalism” interchangeably, I view the latter as a corollary of the former. I use “imperialism” to refer to the structural (i.e., political and economic) components of one country’s hegemony over another, and “orientalism” to describe the cultural representations produced by the dominant nation that sustain the unequal relationship.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Emergence of the International Women's Movement

The international women's movement developed from the growing network of communication among women in Europe and North America that began in the early nineteenth century. Fostered by rapid improvements in communications technology, increased travel opportunities, and higher literacy rates, women's international contacts and relationships multiplied in the decades after Lucretia Mott's famous trip to the 1840 World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London and led first to a shared feminist consciousness and, later, an autonomous women's movement. By century's end, the "complex lines of international contact, association, friendship, argument, and correspondence" had given rise to "a fully mature international women's consciousness and organizational articulation.” Indeed, the 1888 founding of the International Council

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16 See Cott, “What’s in a Name: The Limits of Social Feminism”; or, Expanding the Vocabulary of Women’s History,” The Journal of American History, 76.3 (December, 1989): 809.
17 Margaret H. McFadden, Golden Cables of Sympathy: The Transatlantic Sources of Nineteenth-Century Feminism (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 172. See also Bonnie S. Anderson,
of Women—the first secular international women's organization—represented the culmination of a much older tradition of transatlantic female connection and support.

The first self-consciously feminist organization that attempted to mobilize women internationally was the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA). In contrast to other international women's organizations, the Alliance claimed women’s rights as its primary goal, espousing a liberal feminism that sought legal and political equality with men. Founded during the 1904 Berlin congress of the International Council of Women, the IWSA grew out of the frustration of some ICW members with that organization’s refusal to take a stance on the issue of women’s suffrage. Its membership originally included ten national suffrage associations; by 1914, that number had grown to twenty-five. The IWSA was primarily concerned with winning the franchise, although by 1920 its agenda had expanded to include a host of other women’s rights issues. Dedicated to “the civil, moral, and economic enfranchisement of women,” the Alliance addressed questions of women’s status ranging from prostitution and slavery to equal pay and married women’s nationality rights. In 1926, after women in many countries finally obtained the vote, the group changed its name to the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW), to reflect its broadened focus.

In 1915, as war threatened to sunder the transatlantic ties of the Alliance, some of its members convened an International Congress of Women at the Hague. That meeting gave birth to another major women's organization—the Women's International League for

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While WILPF shared the IAW’s commitment to sexual equality (and much of its membership), it worked above all for an end to war. The organization’s support for women’s rights was embedded in a broader vision that advocated equality in all human relationships. Its overriding concern was to eliminate the conditions of inequality that ultimately resulted in violence. Founded and led by European and North American women, both the IAW and WILPF believed that women around the world had much in common. For the former, women’s seemingly universal disadvantage relative to men was most salient; for the latter, it was their pacifistic instincts as mothers and nurturers.

The changed international order that arose after the First World War gave new momentum and direction to the international women's movement, as myriad organizations sought to influence the infant League of Nations to develop international standards on issues affecting women's status and well-being, such as labor, citizenship, and armed conflict. Whatever the limits of each group’s analysis and proposed remedies for gender oppression and war, their members shared the fundamental feminist conviction that women worldwide lacked sufficient power to determine their own fates—a conviction that contained the potential for women’s solidarity across boundaries of nationality, religion, and culture. This dissertation examines the encounter between Western and Middle Eastern activists to reveal both the conditions of and constraints on such potential.

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The interrogation of white, middle-class, Western feminisms initiated by black American and Third World scholars has yielded what is by now a substantial literature on the imperial context of those feminisms. But most of this scholarship has been devoted to imperialism's heyday in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scant historical attention has been paid to so-called imperialist feminisms during the interwar period, a time when the assumptions underlying imperial rule came under attack both by assertive nationalist movements and by the ethos of cultural internationalism embraced by many Western progressives. This dissertation will be among the first to fill this lacunae in the scholarship.

Feminism in the Middle East

Contrary to popular perception in the West, "consciousness of gender and arguments about the roles of men and women were not brought to the Arab world by

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21 See Akira Irye, Cultural Internationalism and World Order (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) for non-governmental efforts to foster international cooperation after World War I.
Western feminists, like serpents in the Garden of Eden.\textsuperscript{22} As Fedwa Malti-Douglas has illustrated, such issues have constituted a theme in Arabo-Islamic literature since the ninth century. It was not until the nineteenth century, however, that the "woman question" became the subject of intense debate. Regional transformations (including urbanization, shifts in political power, and the integration of local economies into the world market) gave rise to secular and Islamic reform movements that sought to redress perceived deficiencies in Middle Eastern societies. Wrought in part by the "encroachment of Western institutions [perhaps most significantly, Western education]and structures of domination,"\textsuperscript{23} these changes prompted intellectuals to consider how best to achieve modernity, "understood to encompass 'technological progress, secularism, the rule of law, women' emancipation, and a monogamous family system."\textsuperscript{24} Muhammad `Abduh (who became Grand Mufti of Egypt) and Rashid Rida were influential figures in the nineteenth-century \textit{salafiya} movement that tried to reconcile modernization with Islamic precepts. One of their followers, Qasim Amin, caused a stir that reverberated throughout the region when he published (in Cairo) \textit{The Liberation of Women} in 1899, a work that called for, among other things, girls' education and an end to veiling and seclusion.

Amin's status as the "father of Arab feminism" has slipped as scholars have pointed out his Western, bourgeois orientation and analyzed women's own writings in the nineteenth-


\textsuperscript{23} Fleischmann, "The Other 'Awakening,'" 99.

and early-twentieth-century women's press. Nevertheless, his work profoundly influenced the terms of debate over women's status, which many took to be a primary index of modernity.

The emergence of organized women's movements in the Middle East was, as Ellen Fleischmann observes, "not an isolated occurrence but was part of a broader global phenomenon in almost all parts of the world." The particular direction they took, however, was conditioned by the experience of colonialism. The connection between feminist and nationalist movements in colonized countries has been well established by historians. Women's participation in nationalist struggles has frequently constituted an unprecedented form of public activism, and has served as an important impetus to organized feminism. Moreover, as Partha Chatterjee has shown, male nationalist leaders often promoted an ideal of the "new woman" whose emancipation from traditional forms of patriarchy signified the successful transition to modernity. However, this figure was

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26 Fleischmann, "The Other 'Awakening,'" 97.

27 See especially Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986). Margot Badran’s article “Dual Liberation: Feminism and Nationalism in Egypt, 1870’s-1925,” *Feminist Issues* (Spring 1988) demonstrates the “dynamic interaction” between women’s feminism and nationalism in Egypt and points to the folly of viewing these two strands of women’s activism separately. She argues “that these women generated a construct of nationalism in which women’s liberation was embedded and fought concurrently as feminists and nationalists” (16). See her book *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) for a comprehensive study of Egyptian women’s feminism.

at best an ambiguous symbol of women's liberation. As guardians of the home and thus
the "spiritual quality of the national culture," women were subject to a new patriarchy


In the Middle East, the first independent feminist movement appeared in Egypt, in
the wake of women's participation in the 1919 revolution against the British Protectorate
imposed in 1889. Women "notables" such as Huda Sha`rawi and Esther Fahmy Wissa
formed a female counterpart to the male Wafd, the nationalist movement named for the
Egyptian delegation whose request to attend the Paris peace conference in 1918 was
denied by the British. After Egypt gained nominal independence from Britain in 1922,
nationalist women found their expectations for a political voice dashed by an election law
that restricted suffrage to men. Feeling betrayed by their male Wafdist colleagues, they
would continue their quest for national liberation--as well as for women’s political,
social, economic rights--within the framework of the independent Egyptian Feminist
Union, founded in 1923.\textsuperscript{31} That year Huda Sha’rawi, Nabawiya Musa, and Saiza Nabarawi attended the IAW congress in Rome, beginning a long-lasting association with the international body. As has been characteristic of feminist movements in the Middle East throughout the twentieth century, the EFU's primary goal was to reform the personal status laws that governed marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody, etc.—issues that impinged directly on women's status in the family.\textsuperscript{32}

Elsewhere in the Arab world, where the impact of colonialism was more severe, women's movements were closely associated with male nationalist movements. In Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, literary and philanthropic "ladies' societies" developed a political character as their activities increasingly served the nationalist struggle.\textsuperscript{33} In Turkey and Iran, which remained free of direct European rule, the modernizing regimes of


\textsuperscript{32} Suad Joseph suggests that because "patriarchy has been and largely remains nested in kinship" in Middle Eastern societies, Middle Eastern states have constructed the legal subject-citizen differently from the imagined individual legal subject of Western liberalism. Where men "have been constituted as citizen through their roles as heads of patriarchal families," women have been located "within patriarchal structures as subordinate mothers, wives, children, siblings." Joseph, "Gendering Citizenship in the Middle East," in \textit{Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East}, ed. Suad Joseph (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 3-30; quotations on 16-17. By anchoring personal status codes in religious rather than civil law, Middle Eastern states have effectively "privileged the family unit over the individual as the basic unit of the political community." Ibid, 19. It is not surprising that the reform of family law has always topped feminist agendas in the Middle East.

Mustafa Kemal "Ataturk" and Reza Shah Pahlavi took it upon themselves to transform "backward" women; coopting existing women's organizations, their coercive "state feminism" left no room for independent feminist activity.\(^{34}\)

As in the West, women's movements in the Middle East were dominated by the elite. Their leaders came from the middle and upper classes and their agendas reflected their class interests. The masses of rural and peasant women remained unrepresented. As we will see, their privileged backgrounds served as a point of common ground between Western and Middle Eastern feminists.

**DESCRIPTION OF STUDY**

In 1911, IAW President Carrie Chapman Catt and Dutch feminist Aletta Jacobs embarked on a world tour to recruit new membership for the organization. This trip represented the group's first effort to expand its base outside of Europe and North America and marks the beginning of my study of the international women's movement's encounter with women in the Middle East. In order to understand how that encounter was shaped by the geopolitical realignments that occurred after both world wars, the study extends until 1948. The course of these years saw the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, its replacement in much of the Middle East with the Mandate system, the emergence of Arab nationalism, and the creation of the State of Israel--profound transformations that formed the context in which the relationships between Western and Middle Eastern women

My primary focus is on the IAW both because of its self-consciously feminist orientation and because it had the most sustained contact with women in the Middle East. However, I also take note of WILPF, and of the writings of one prominent member of the international women's movement, the American Ruth Woodsmall, who headed the World Young Women's Christian Association and who published several works on Muslim women. By focusing on the interaction and exchanges among Western and Middle Eastern women (at conferences and through international visits, newsletters and other correspondence), this dissertation exposes important junctures between feminism, imperialism, and orientalism.

Said presented orientalism as a male preserve, a discourse articulated exclusively by men that “feminized” the East by attributing to it qualities typically associated with Woman herself -- irrationality, licentiousness, exoticism. Recently, feminist scholars such as Billie Melman and Reina Lewis have augmented his work by examining the extent to which Western women participated in the construction of that discourse. Their attention to the ways in which gender and class mediated European representations of the

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35 Intended to prepare the peoples living in the Fertile Crescent for eventual independence, the Mandatory project, which was initiated under the auspices of the League of Nations, placed Great Britain in charge of Iraq, Palestine, and Transjordan, while France received control of Syria and Lebanon.

Middle East during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has considerably enhanced our understanding of orientalism’s complexity. Whereas Said described a unified, monolithic discourse created by imperialist men, Melman and Lewis have shown orientalism to be “multivocal and heterogeneous,” open to inconsistency and rupture.\(^{37}\) As the inferior “Other within” Western societies, European women artists and travelers to the Middle East offered visions of the “Other without” that differed from hegemonic notions of the Orient, but that still affirmed the basic separation between West and East. During the Victorian era, for example, middle-class English women visitors “domesticated” the harem -- that archetypal symbol of unrestrained Eastern sexuality--by comparing it to an idealized, bourgeois home, a kind of female sanctuary.\(^{38}\) Such visions demonstrate, in Lewis’ words, that “there is room within the discourse for a feminine, and perhaps less virulently xenophobic, version of Orientalism that adapts and amends but does not remove the imperial imperative.”\(^{39}\)

Given its origins in the tradition of the European Enlightenment, modern liberal feminism (of which suffragism was perhaps the paradigmatic expression) has hardly escaped orientalist influence. Indeed, with few exceptions, first-wave Western feminists of all stripes readily accepted a key element of the West’s orientalist legacy--namely, the unquestioned belief in the superiority of “Western” ways. Manifested by representations of the harem and the veil as inherently more oppressive institutions than monogamy and Western dress (representations that ignore the historical specificity of those institutions as

\(^{37}\) Lewis, 4.

\(^{38}\) Melman, chap. 5.

\(^{39}\) Lewis, 171.
well as their contested political meaning), this belief lies at the heart of what Joyce Zonana calls “feminist orientalism.” Her analysis of *Jane Eyre* suggests that the use of orientalist imagery by British feminist writers to describe women’s oppression blunted the radical edge of their feminism by implying that patriarchy was an “Eastern” element to be purged from the West. In Zonana’s formulation, feminist orientalism was not merely a set of stereotypes about Muslim women, but a threat wielded against Western men: they risked appearing “backward” if they behaved in “Eastern” ways.

My analysis of feminist orientalism, the subject of the first two chapters, centers on the discourse surrounding Middle Eastern women that evolved among Western members of the international women's movement. Chapter One examines this discourse as it was manifested in the IAW journal *Jus Suffragii* and suggests a complexity hitherto obscured by the phrase "feminist orientalism." Whereas Zonana used it to denote a particular form of orientalism deployed in a particular strategic manner, I argue that there is tension between its two constituent elements—a global-spirited feminism that fingered male authority as the common denominator in women's shared oppression, and a lingering conviction in the backwardness of Arab/Muslim women. The second chapter, an analysis of Ruth Woodsmall's 1935 book *Moslem Women Enter a New World*, builds on this finding and suggest that Western feminist attitudes toward Middle Eastern women reflected less a conventional racism than a liberal belief in the universal applicability of Western standards of modernity.

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Yet Western feminist representations of the Middle East reveal only one side of the cross-cultural encounter embodied by the international women's movement. Analyses of orientalist discourse have been criticized both for exaggerating the extent to which it exerted control over colonized peoples and for re-inscribing the West as the focus of history. As one author writes, "Studies of power and knowledge in imperial contexts need to pay greater attention to the basic process of subaltern reception and conversion of European discourses."41 My second objective is to investigate how Middle Eastern women who had connections to the international women's movement perceived and represented the West. In particular, I seek to show how they reconciled the demands of feminist internationalism with those of anti-colonial nationalism.

While nationalist feminists also valorized certain elements of the "new woman" ideal, the particular elements of Western culture (and indeed, what they defined as such) they rejected as threatening to their own warrants investigation. How to explain the construction of feminism by women who professed sympathy for a movement based on the notion (however problematic) of universal female subordination, and who nevertheless retained a well-developed sense of national identity? To what degree did such women's endorsement of the movement's goals imply "Westernization" and the

abandonment of native culture? In what ways (if any) did they contest or modify the nationalist image of woman as the repository of cultural authenticity? Or, as Marilyn Booth has asked with reference to Egypt, "To what extent were . . . feminist formulations indebted to assumptions of European political philosophy and liberal nationalist practice?"42 Chapters three and four consider these questions with respect to the Eastern Women's Conferences of the early 1930s, and the 1935 IAW congress in Istanbul, respectively. They illuminate how Middle Eastern feminists appropriated liberal ideals of modernity and national sovereignty in articulating a nevertheless autonomous vision of international feminism that both challenged and affirmed loyalty to male nationalists.

Finally, this study examines the extent to which the clash between nationalism and imperialism (often rooted in preconceived notions of “West” and “East”) plagued relations between Western and Middle Eastern activists. In chapter five I focus specifically on the responses of both the IAW and WILPF to the turmoil in Palestine during the interwar period. As Palestine became a crucible of competing nationalisms during the interwar period, both organizations hoped to preserve peace and sought cooperation between Arab and Jewish women -- efforts that met with varied success. During the 1920s and 1930s, Arab women (both Christian and Muslim) throughout the Middle East began to rally around the Palestinian nationalist cause. Their activism constituted a key element in the emergence of organized Arab feminism, a point which

42 Booth, May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, xxvii.)
Western feminists were often slow to grasp. More sympathetic in general to the rise of nationalist movements, WILPF developed a keener understanding of the Palestinian conflict than did the IAW, whose European and North American members tended to characterize Arab (but not Zionist) women as somehow “too” nationalist. Their initial support for Zionist settlement as a harbinger of “progress” in the region overlooked the reality of Arab/Jewish tension. Such support not only reflected orientalist assumptions about Western superiority, but ignored the nationalist ramifications of the Zionist project. A comparison of each organization’s approach to the conflict, which includes attention to the perspectives of Arab and Jewish members, demonstrates the dynamic interaction between different understandings of imperialism, nationalism, and feminism.

More than a study of the conflicts that divided Western and Middle Eastern feminists, this dissertation also explores the bonds that united them. By focusing on the dialogue between these women, my project incorporates the contributions of both to the construction of an international feminist identity. Thus, in addition to challenging the notion that feminism in the Middle East was “imposed” from outside, it also complicates conventional wisdom about the failure of the first-wave international women’s movement to accommodate difference.

43 See Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation, chap. 12, on the leadership role of Egyptian feminists in the pan-Arab feminist movement.
CHAPTER 1

DEFINING FEMINIST ORIENTALISM: AN ANALYSIS OF JUS SUFFRAGII

Introduction

In an article published in 1982, Leila Ahmed chastised Western feminists for their “docility toward the received ideas of their culture” regarding Muslim women in the Middle East. She pointed to their complicity in perpetuating an image of Islam as monolithic and unchanging, a powerful force that not only prevents Islamic societies from emulating the “progress” of the West, but that keeps women in a state of abject slavery. This chapter seeks historical context for her critique by examining how Western members of the International Alliance of Women represented Middle Eastern women. Between 1911 and 1948, approximately thirty articles concerning the Middle East (all in English) appeared in the IAW newsjournal Jus Suffragii. As the organization’s most important forum for the exchange of ideas and information, the journal became the site of an evolving discourse surrounding Middle Eastern women. My analysis of that discourse asks a number of related questions: How did European/North American feminists understand and represent the institutions of the harem and the veil? Did those representations change over time? To what extent was Islam blamed for Muslim


45 The IAW’s journal appeared mainly in English, with occasional pieces written in French or German.
women’s “oppression?” Did the encounter between Western and Middle Eastern women prompt a reevaluation of Western women’s oppression within their own societies?

I argue that Western feminist attitudes toward Middle Eastern women were more complex than the concept “feminist orientalism” suggests. What emerges from the pages of *Jus Suffragii* is a complicated discourse in which feminist ideas sometimes subvert traditional hallmarks of orientalism. Beginning with Carrie Chapman Catt’s impressions of Egypt and Palestine in 1911, Western members of the IAW expressed perceptions of Middle Eastern women that both challenged and sustained popular stereotypes. Their recognition that women around the world shared patriarchal oppression enabled them, in some instances, to transcend the orientalist distinction between “West” and “East.” European and North American women could, and indeed did, identify with Middle Eastern counterparts based on their common experiences as *women*. Moreover, their feminism allowed them to distinguish between myth and reality: in a departure from conventional Western wisdom concerning Islam, they did not attribute women’s condition to religious prescription. Indeed, Western feminists sometimes sought to rebut common misperceptions of Islam, pointing to the gap between its true principles and actual practice.

But those insights notwithstanding, Western members of the IAW stopped short of acknowledging Islam’s potential as a basis for feminist activism. Nor did their exposure to Middle Eastern societies prompt them to reevaluate the relative merits of their own. Their faith in “global sisterhood” ultimately reflected an unquestioned conviction that Muslim women’s path to liberation would follow their own.
Making Contact: A Visit to Egypt and Palestine

In July 1911, International Woman Suffrage Alliance President Carrie Chapman Catt and Dutch feminist Aletta Jacobs embarked on a trip around the globe to bring more women into the IWSA fold. From its inception the group had been dominated by women from the United States and northern and western Europe. Nevertheless, its members held high hopes that women from around the world could be brought together to protest their universal status as second-class citizens. Differences of race, religion, and culture would be overcome by commitment to a common cause. Finnish suffragist Annie Furuhjelm, reflecting on the heady days of the first IWSA conference in 1904, recalled the organization’s founding ethos:

First and foremost we get to know the ideals of womanhood, and we find that our ideals as women citizens are strangely alike. In spite of differences of tradition and climate, of race, religion, and language, we feel we all have something in common. We perceive that the motor force of the whole movement is the intuitive comprehension of women that they have to go out of their individual homes in order to make the big world more of a home, through all we feel the warm beating of a woman’s heart, and her wonderful optimism in regard to the problems of our day.46

If her words suggest the spirit of internationalism that IWSA members hoped their organization embodied, they also reveal a vision of feminism as one predicated on women’s entry into the public sphere. Uniquely qualified as caretakers, women needed to bring their special abilities to bear on national and world affairs. Only by coming out of their “individual homes” could they hope to gain equality with men.

Such rhetoric, based on prevailing notions of male/female difference, was commonly used by Anglo-American suffragists to persuade their opponents that the
franchise would not threaten women’s traditional role. Yet the emphasis on extending women’s work outside the home not only assumed a universal division between public and private spheres, but also that the female/private sphere was, in Sheila Webster’s words, “somehow peripheral to ‘society’.”47 The feminist agenda set by the Euro/American leaders of the IWSA, which focused on the attainment of formal equality, put forth women’s participation in public life as the touchstone of their emancipation. Accordingly, their assessment of women’s status in non-Western countries would be colored by the supposition that the degree of women’s oppression and powerlessness mirrored the degree of their seclusion from public visibility.

That belief formed part of the ideological prism through which Carrie Chapman Catt and Aletta Jacobs viewed Middle Eastern societies during their fifteen-month trip to Africa and Asia in 1911-1912. Their itinerary included South Africa, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Ceylon, India, Burma, the East Indies, the Philippines, China, Korea, and Japan. The two women set off on their journey as ambassadors of women’s liberation, intending to spread word of the suffrage cause and to expand the Alliance’s membership outside of Europe, Australia, and North America. Their mission was also in part a fact-finding one, to collect information and report back on the varying conditions of women around the globe. Catt’s personal diaries of the trip, along with the articles she wrote for Jus Suffragii, reflect her impressions and interpretations of the many foreign cultures she

46 Annie Furuhjelm, “Our Alliance,” Jus Suffragii 8.9 (May 1914). This issue was devoted to the IWSA’s tenth anniversary.

encountered. They offer a revealing glimpse into the broadening of her own intellectual horizons. Catt was undeniably ethnocentric but she also made discoveries that challenged her cultural smugness. A self-professed American chauvinist before she left, she returned from her trip somewhat chastened: “Once I was a regular jingo but that was before I had visited other countries. I had thought America had a monopoly on all that stands for progress, but I had a sad awakening.”

Despite Catt’s acknowledgment of her former hubris, however, she remained assured that Western women would lead the international feminist movement: they had, after all, “left the seeds of revolution behind” them. That conviction underpinned the discourse of feminist orientalism that would evolve in the pages of *Jus Suffragii*. Beginning with Catt’s reports from Palestine and Egypt, the journal’s commentators displayed a growing preoccupation with the system of strict sexual segregation in Islamic societies, which they perceived as unrelievedly oppressive to women.

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48 Although she did not submit any to *Jus Suffragii*, Aletta Jacobs regularly wrote articles for Dutch newspapers which were later reissued in a two-volume collection entitled *Reisbrieven uit Afrika en Azie* (Travel Letters from Africa and Asia). Harriet Feinberg has analyzed Jacobs’ letters from Egypt; see her article “A Pioneering Dutch Feminist Views Egypt: Aletta Jacobs’ Travel Letters” in *Feminist Issues* (Fall 1990). In an argument similar to my own, she distinguishes between two sorts of discourse that Jacobs used in her writing about the Middle East, which she labels “encouraging our peers” and “uplifting our native sisters.” Feinberg concludes that Jacobs’ feminism helped to pull her discourse more in the direction of the former, in which “some basic equality across cultural, national, and religious boundaries” is assumed (66). For a more recent analysis of Jacob's travel letters, see Mineke Bosch, “Colonial Dimensions of Dutch Women's Suffrage: Aletta Jacob's Travel Letters from Africa and Asia, 1911-1912,” *Journal of Women's History* 11.2 (1999): 8-44.

49 Catt speech at the New Jersey State Suffrage Convention, Newark, November 13, 1913, reported in *Woman’s Journal*, 22 November 1913, 371; quoted in Van Voris, 105.

50 The harem system in Muslim societies is designed to preserve social distance between the sexes in both the public and private spheres (Webster, “Harim and Hijab”). It is marked physically by architectural features within family dwellings (the word harem -- a derivation of an Arabic word meaning “forbidden” or “holy” -- refers both to the portion of a house occupied by female family members and to the women themselves), and socially by the custom of veiling (through which women maintained their seclusion in public). The seclusion of women was common in Mediterranean societies before the rise of Islam, and
particular would assume prominence as the quintessential symbol of women’s subordinate status. Because Western feminists assessed women’s power and authority on the basis of their access to the public sphere, they were often blind to the degree of social influence Muslim women actually possessed and rarely considered how Muslim women interpreted their own status and needs. Nevertheless, it would be too simplistic to write off Western feminists’ perceptions of Islamic cultures as standard orientalist fare. Their expectation of female solidarity across racial, cultural, and religious lines, while admittedly naive, was not completely chimerical. As Catt’s own records and subsequent pieces in *Jus Suffragii* reveal, Western members of the IAW could relate to Muon a shared consciousness of gender oppression. Moreover, they frequently recognized and sought to correct popular misconceptions about Islam in the West. Ultimately, the construction of “Muslim woman” by the IAW was marked by the tension between

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varies in degree and in kind throughout the Middle East. Historically, veiling and the rigid seclusion of women was a sign of wealth, an indication that a man had sufficient “economic resources to safeguard the honor of his family by having servants to perform the jobs delegated to women in poorer households” (253). Although elite and poorer women in urban areas wore the veil when venturing out in public, peasant and nomadic women could not afford to have their movements so encumbered. For more on the harem system, see Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*; and Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*, rev.ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). The latter provides an explanation of the gender ideology common to most Muslim societies, in which women’s sexuality is perceived to be a powerful, potentially chaotic force which must be restrained by strict sexual segregation.

51 Leslie Peirce’s study of the Ottoman imperial harem from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries is only one of many that exposes that inadequacy of the public/private dichotomy. In the Ottoman context, political power derived from proximity to the person of the sultan, who was himself secluded within the imperial palace. At different times, wives and concubines of the sultan (typically passive and oppressed figures in western imagination) wielded enormous influence over dynastic politics and affairs of state. See Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Other scholars of Middle Eastern history, particularly from the fourteenth through eighteenth centuries, have shown that “women’s physical restrictions to domestic space were only partial, and such restrictions did not foreclose activity beyond the home, through servants, intermediaries, and feminine social networks. Elite urban women remained active in business and charities, while their poorer female neighbors routinely worked at home in cottage industries or outside as peddlers, bathhouse
orientalism and feminism. The result was a hybrid discourse that simultaneously veiled and unveiled its subject.

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We did not expect to carry the woman suffrage movement to Jerusalem. It is a poor, sorrowful appendage of Turkey, without a government of its own, with no daily newspaper and not one public telephone. Its people are poor, illiterate filthy. Those familiar with this country say the people today stand exactly where they did two thousand years ago. They are doing the same things and in the same old way. The only thing which has changed is religion. Mohammed has arisen since the days of Christ and counts millions among his followers. This is now a Mohammedan land, and the customs common in lands of that faith prevail there. But these customs, generally speaking were usual to this part of the world in Christ’s day, so after all, even the changes brought by religion have not been very important.  

Such was Carrie Chapman Catt’s less than charitable opinion of life in Palestine, which in 1911 was under Ottoman rule. She went on to wonder what would have become of its people had it not been for the missionaries and their schools, noting the many “self-sacrificing, consecrated men and women “ who were “doing their utmost to leaven this lump of fossilized humanity.”  

A striking example of orientalism, the passage presents Palestinian society as timeless and unchanging, a living relic from biblical days.

Indeed, Catt was initially charmed by this image: she thought every Christian clergyman and Jewish rabbi would do well to visit the Holy Land in order to understand attendants, servants, and so on.” Elizabeth Thompson, “Public and Private in Middle Eastern Women’s History,” Journal of Women’s History 15.1 (2003): 52-59; quotation on 56.


Ibid.
the Bible more clearly.\textsuperscript{54} By the end of her stay, however, she had grown disillusioned by what she perceived to be rampant religious hypocrisy among all three of the monotheistic faiths. She decided that Palestine was \textit{too} religious, its inhabitants excessively naive and credulous.\textsuperscript{55}

Of interest here is Catt’s attitude toward Islam. Skeptical of \textit{all} religions, she was not inclined to consider Islam any more -- or less -- “backward” than any other. Moreover, she recognized the difference between custom and religious prescription, noting the endurance of the former in spite of changes in the latter. If Palestine was hopelessly behind the times, it was due less to the rise of Islam than to the dominating influence on the region of all \textit{three} major religions: Palestine would not progress until the time came when “the Jews will cease from their laments, when the priests will turn aside from the sacred spots they are guarding and the Moslems will cease praying long enough to give a day’s serious consideration to the needs of present-day humans.”\textsuperscript{56}

How, then, did Catt view the condition of women? For starters, she linked the level of their feminist consciousness to the relative “worldliness” of men: “Where men in the masses are illiterate, unambitious, superstitious, creed-bound, we can expect little better of women.”\textsuperscript{57} She referred here specifically to Arab Muslim women. During her stay Catt observed and met with European Christian and Jewish women, but she reserved

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\textsuperscript{54} Catt diary, 6, reel 1, Catt Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 45-46.

\textsuperscript{56} Catt, "The Holy Land."

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
most of her written commentary for the “mysterious women behind the veil.” The article submitted to *Jus Suffragii* is revealing. Despite Catt’s cynicism toward all religious creeds, she assumed that European Christians and Jews would be the agents of progress in Palestine. Just as the Zionist colonies “appeared like bits of the new world transplanted into the old,” she concluded that Christian missionaries represented the best hope for Palestinian women. Noting that churches were more easily converted to the belief in sexual equality in countries where women had the vote, she closed her piece with the following exhortation: “Suffragists of the world, if you want to uplift the women of Palestine and Syria get the women of your own country enfranchised!” Palestinian and Syrian women clearly needed help from their more “advanced” Western sisters.

Her relative equanimity toward Islam notwithstanding, Catt never questioned the presumed superiority of the “West” over the “East.” But her conviction that women’s oppression was universal prompted a sincere eagerness to meet Muslim women and find out about their lives. Appointments with women from four different Muslim households had been arranged through the Jerusalem mission where Catt and Aletta Jacobs were staying. Of the four families, two were prominent and well-to-do; the other two were from the middle class. Catt’s accounts of these visits reflected her natural curiosity about different cultures, as well as her assumptions about the state of Muslim women’s feminist “awareness.”

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid. Catt’s diary recounts in detail her visits with the female members of four Muslim families, but says little about her interaction with Christian or Jewish women.

60 Ibid.
Invariably, Catt questioned her hosts about the veil. She wanted to know whether there was a movement for its removal, and if they would ever consider unveiling in public. Reaction to her query varied: some women expressed shock at the thought of showing their faces to men; others said they expected the custom eventually to die out. During one such conversation, Catt learned -- to her surprise -- that veiling was not prescribed by the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{62} Impressed by her young informant, Catt wrote of her, “She was intelligent and certainly a woman’s woman in sympathy and understanding of the movement, of which she had never heard until that day.”\textsuperscript{63}

What are we to make of these encounters? Catt’s interest in the veil clearly suggests that she took it to be a symbol of women’s subordinate status -- and would have considered a movement for its abolition a positive step in the feminist direction. Consistent with the long history of Western fascination with veiling, such a view did not necessarily reflect what the veil meant to the women who wore it. Catt’s diary does not indicate whether she asked her hosts if they considered the veil to be a mark of inferiority, nor if she sought their views on women’s general condition. If she had, she might have discovered that Islamic law granted women full property rights -- a gain Western women did not achieve until well into the nineteenth century. The lack of such information suggests that the dialogue between Catt and her new acquaintances was less than an equal exchange.

\textsuperscript{61} Catt diary, 21-26.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, 26.
Nevertheless, Catt did not think that feminist consciousness was limited to the “Western” mind. She recognized a kindred spirit in the young woman described above, and informed the readers of *Jus Suffragii* of her “important discovery that the seeds of rebellion have already been planted” in the hearts of Muslim women.  

Moreover, she expressed a genuine sense of communion with them, generated by her belief that the root cause of women’s oppression everywhere was the same. Catt’s diary recounts a story she heard about a Syrian man who, having been to America, decided he wanted a “progressive” marriage and chose his own wife. When he brought her home to meet his mother, the “shy girl” was too embarrassed to eat, so he slapped her, telling her she now “belonged to him” and threatening to hit her again if she did not eat. Catt’s comment: “This beautiful story illustrates how readily men will grasp a new liberty for themselves, but how utterly they fail to comprehend that women have a human liking for liberty too!” She blamed male presumption rather than Islamic culture for the young wife’s misfortune.

By the time Catt filed her report on Egypt, her capacity for rising above orientalist assumptions had evidently grown. Struck by the difference in the degree of veiling there compared to Palestine (where women’s faces were completely covered by a thick black veil, and their hands and arms concealed as well), she offered the following observations:

To the newcomer the unveiling of the Moslem woman seems the obvious first step towards an improvement of their position, but further acquaintance leads me to think that the veil is only an unimportant symptom of a condition. The seclusion of women and the wearing of the veil is not in response to commands of the Koran, but are customs which

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64 Catt, "The Holy Land."
65 Catt diary, 52.
are supposed to have grown out of the long religious wars when no woman’s life or virtue was held sacred. Christian women were as carefully secluded and throughout this Eastern country women wore the veil . . . It is evident that the veil will soon take its departure, but it is not so easy a thing to unveil as it appears to the outsider . . . Women who can afford a carriage will not walk on the streets on account of the insults certain to be aimed at them. The better educated women do not approve of the veil and are much dissatisfied with the conditions which compel them to wear it. For the present, however, it is a protection which will doubtless continue, until the men of the land have been taught to respect women more than they do now.66

Here Catt demonstrated a sympathetic understanding of the present advantages that veiling afforded women. More significantly, however, she decided that the veil was merely an “unimportant symptom” of women’s general condition. That perception not only constituted a departure from popular Western opinion on the subject but represented an evolution in her own thinking as well. Indeed, the passage as a whole seems to reflect what she may have learned through conversations with Egyptian women -- an indication that she was receptive to their own analyses of their position.

Thus Catt established the beginning of the IAW’s discourse surrounding Muslim women. Her impressions of the Middle East were at once patronizing and deeply sympathetic. To be sure, she did not consider Palestine and Egypt to be as “advanced” as Europe or the United States, nor did she think Islamic culture had anything to offer women in the West. Where exposure to Muslim societies had prompted some earlier European women travelers to the Middle East to become more critical of their own, nothing in Catt’s writing indicates she did the same.67 Her empathy for the hassles

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unveiled Egyptian women faced from men, for instance, did not inspire a corresponding analysis of Victorian dress and the dictates of modesty in Western societies (other than a recognition of the absurdity of Parisian high fashion). Still, Catt’s feminism did allow her to feel moments of real solidarity with Muslim women and, in some cases, deeper insights into their lives than the long history of Western orientalism might suggest. The discourse she initiated would continue in the same complicated, and at times contradictory, vein.

**Representing Muslim Women**

The success of the Catt-Jacobs world trip in establishing new contacts outside the West was reflected in an announcement for the IWSA’s seventh conference, to be held in Budapest on June 15, 1913:

> Especially invited Delegates are expected from Egypt, India, Burmah, China, Japan and the Philippines. For the first time in the woman movement, it is expected that Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Mohammedan, Jewish and Christian women will sit together in a Congress uniting their voices in a common plea for the liberation of their sex from those artificial discriminations which every political and religious system has directed against them.\(^{68}\)

Although not all of the expected delegates actually attended, the Budapest conference signified the IWSA’s efforts to become truly international. Yet that goal proved elusive: despite the gradual addition of member sections from Asia, Africa, and South America,

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\(^{67}\) See Melman, *Women’s Orients*. Her conclusion states: “Observation of women’s life in another culture brought on a re-evaluation, by the Western women, of their own position as individuals and as a marginalised group in a patriarchal culture” (308).

\(^{68}\) “Call to the Seventh Conference of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance,” *Jus Suffragii* 7.5 (15 January 1913).
the IWSA remained a Western-dominated movement.\textsuperscript{69} And, as has been well documented by historians Leila Rupp and Margot Badran, membership patterns within the organization ultimately reproduced the global relations of dominance between imperialist and colonized countries.\textsuperscript{70} Until the 1935 Congress in Istanbul, all of its conferences and board meetings were held in Western Europe, and \textit{Jus Suffragii} continued to be published primarily in English (with some articles appearing in French or German.)\textsuperscript{71} Moreover, European and American women filled most of the organization’s leadership positions: in 1932, for example, its Board membership included only two representatives from non-Western countries.\textsuperscript{72}

Such imbalance in representation stemmed from the IAW leadership’s tacit belief that Western women had originated feminism. Given their identification of feminism almost exclusively with movements for female suffrage, that belief was not unreasonable: notwithstanding their acknowledgment of the commonality of discrimination against women in “every religious and political system,” Western feminists who had won the vote considered themselves to be less oppressed than their disfranchised Eastern sisters. But their focus on the attainment of political rights necessarily limited their diagnosis of women’s oppression in other spheres. Satisfied that the issue of women’s equality would

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{69} The first women’s organization from a Middle East country to affiliate with the IAW was the Egyptian Feminist Union (founded and led by Huda Sha’rawi), which sent delegates to the 1923 Rome Congress. A Turkish affiliate was admitted in 1926 and a Syrian one in 1929. Rupp, \textit{Worlds of Women}, 18.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{70} Rupp, “Challenging Imperialism,” 8; see also Badran, \textit{Feminists, Islam, and Nation}, chap. 5.}

be resolved once women enjoyed the same civic opportunities as men, Western feminists avoided other, potentially more troubling, questions of gender relations. Moreover, measuring women’s status solely in terms of their involvement in public life led them to conclude that Western societies were more progressive than non-Western societies in all aspects of civilization. That assumption—implicit in Carrie Chapman Catt’s early reports from Egypt and Palestine—became more pronounced in subsequent representations of Middle Eastern women.

Between 1912 and 1950, twenty-eight pieces that made more than passing reference to the Middle East appeared in the pages of Jus Suffragii. With twelve issues published per year (a typical issue contained several feature-length articles plus many short news items), this is indeed a small amount. Most were submitted by European or American visitors to the region, although reports authored by Arab contacts became more frequent in later years. Compared to its coverage of feminist movements in the West, the IAW paid only sporadic attention to Middle East women, yet a particular mode of discourse clearly emerges. Its chief hallmark is the juxtaposition of global-spirited feminism and Western ethnocentrism that characterized the IAW’s vision of international sisterhood. For example, a 1915 report on women’s progress in Egypt (then under a British protectorate) described the country as one where “religion teaches that women have no souls” and offered this bit of wisdom on the increasing support for women’s education: “Apparently it is dawning on the younger men of Mohammedan countries that an educated wife and helpmate is more interesting than a woman whose most startling

72 They were Egypt’s Huda Sha’rawi and Uruguay’s Paulina Luisi. Its nine officers, including Catt’s successor Margery Corbett Ashby, were British and European. The remaining eleven Board members hailed from Great Britain, Europe and the United States.
capacity is like that of 'Sal,' famous in Western song and story as a 'blame good sitter.'” This piece, full of orientalist clichés about the laziness and ignorance of harem women, was followed in 1923 by an article on Turkish women that sought to dispel Western misconceptions about Muslim societies. Its author, Secretary of the Anglo-Turkish Society Arthur Field, felt compelled to “protest emphatically against the still widely current belief that woman in Turkey has been a slave, as compared with woman in Christendom, as a whole.” Not coincidentally, 1923 was the year that Turkey--under the westernizing leadership of Mustafa Kemal “Ataturk”--declared itself a republic.

The seemingly paradoxical nature of these reports must be understood within the context of the major geopolitical realignments that occurred after World War I. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the Mandate system, while not explicitly recounted in the pages of Jus Suffragii, nevertheless influenced the tone of its coverage of the Middle East. In its twentieth-century incarnation, Western imperialism assumed a tutelary capacity: its benevolent mission was to teach formerly subject peoples the Western art of self-government. The rise of nationalist movements in the Middle East—and the repression with which they were frequently met—indicated the hollowness of this rationale, yet European diplomats and writers continued to invoke its lofty terms. Words like “training” and “uplift” remained staples of imperialist rhetoric, which found expression even in the IAW journal. As the above example demonstrates, the tension

73 “Women’s Progress in Egypt,” Jus Suffragii 9.8 (1 May 1915). The quote referred to the life of an uneducated harem woman.

between feminism and orientalism tended to resolve in favor of the former in cases where “progress” (i.e., westernization) was evident.

Nevertheless, the journal’s discourse surrounding Islam and Middle Eastern women remained inconsistent as Western contributors continued both to indulge in and rebut common stereotypes. Overtly racist characterizations (such as one that called Syrian Arabs “incurably lazy”) became less frequent as commentators increasingly focused on the “responsibilities” of Western feminists toward their “less advanced” sisters. Reflecting the ideology of the Mandate era, a 1929 piece on women in Syria and Palestine spoke of the need for education, since “ignorance and the stifling influence of long tradition can only be overcome by training and example.” Its author encouraged American and European teachers to find work there, as “the women, bound by Moslem tradition, need encouragement from the West to strengthen them to help themselves.” And yet a few months later a Western (most likely British) observer of the women’s movement in Iraq ended her report by concurring with a noted Iraqi poet who argued that “Islam was intended to bring woman her charter of freedom, not her sentence of perpetual confinement, and that seclusion is not of Arab, but of foreign origin.”

Hostility to Islam thus did not always figure in Western feminist reportage on the Middle East. Moreover, emphasis on the East’s need of guidance from the West was occasionally offset by a growing awareness among some IAW members that feminist


concerns were not the same for all women. In 1935, responding to pressure from various women’s organizations, the League of Nations called for a worldwide study on the status of women. In turn, the Alliance Board asked its affiliates in nations with colonial possessions to submit information that would form the basis of a study of the position of “native” women. *Jus Suffragii* then ran a condensed version of a report submitted by Glenore Fiske Horne of the United States, who expressed strong reservations about the undertaking. She cautioned against employing Western standards to assess the welfare of non-Western women and rejected the presumptuousness implicit in the IAW’s proposal. “Instead of stating the problem as…’Let us secure freedom for enslaved women,’” she suggested that a more appropriate formulation would be “‘Let us try to learn how to retain to native peoples their own cultural heritages as they come in contact with Western culture.’” As if to underscore the point, Horne then concluded that a study of “women of native groups under the jurisdiction of the United States” would be fruitless since they lived in “entirely different cultural eras” and had “entirely different life-problems.” [Her emphasis.]

Horne’s report, as well as the editorial comment that introduced it (“The following extracts seem calculated to help clear our minds on the question of how we can set about giving useful consideration to a question which is a vital one”), signified an effort to confront—if not necessarily to resolve—the contradictions posed by a Western-led movement for international female solidarity. For at least some Western feminists,

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79 “Position of Women of Native Races,” *Jus Suffragii* 29.10 (July 1935).
the conviction that all women experience oppression based on their sex mattered more than the particular forms that oppression might take. In fact, a resolution proposed at the Alliance’s 1935 Congress in Istanbul had seemingly confirmed this principle by pledging support for Western women “who are in danger of losing” their recently-won rights and Eastern women who fought “for the eradication of their special legal, social, and economic disabilities.”

Although the specifics of women’s struggle against patriarchy differed according to local conditions, in a larger and more abstract sense the struggle was everywhere the same. The universalist ethos of IAW feminism posited that women around the world could indeed unite in common cause, and the very fact that non-Western women eagerly embraced the organization testified to its strong appeal.

Still, the mitigating effects of feminism on orientalist thinking must not be overstated. Despite its occasional acknowledgment of the inapplicability of “Western” solutions to “Eastern” problems, the IAW continued to uphold the example of Western feminist movements as the archetypal expression of feminism. Indeed, the growing regularity with which Muslim women were described as “ignorant” or “tradition-bound” suggests that as Western women attained more of their own feminist objectives (beginning with suffrage), the East came to appear increasingly backward. While they did not necessarily blame Islam for that state of affairs, they nevertheless seemed to expect that Muslim women’s liberation could be achieved only by abandoning indigenous ways. In other words, Western feminists in the IAW never considered that feminism in the Middle East might take an alternate route, using Islam as its guide.

80 “Resolutions to be Presented in the Name of the Alliance Board,” Jus Suffragii 29.5 (April, 1935).
perhaps recognized that Islam had been misinterpreted by male authorities, that recognition did not extend to accepting a reinterpretation of Islam as a legitimate framework for feminist movements.

Accordingly, Western feminists attached ever-greater significance to the veil as a symbol of “tradition” holding Muslim women back. Whereas Carrie Chapman Catt dismissed the veil in 1912 as an “unimportant symptom” of Muslim women’s general condition, her successors gave its abolition primary emphasis. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, *Jus Suffragii’s* reports from IAW trips to the Middle East, as well as its coverage of Arab feminist conferences, were filled with references to veiling.82 Avra Theodoropolous, a Greek feminist who represented the Alliance at the 1930 Eastern Women's Congress in Damascus, asserted that the veil "that hides the Moslem woman's face throws its dark shadow over all social life in the Orient. It creates a special frame of mind, and denies any feeling whatever of independence, self-respect, or pride."83 The British suffragist Margery Corbett Ashby, who succeeded Catt as Alliance president in 1923, noted in a 1935 visit to the Near East that women in Lebanon were “still handicapped by the custom of going veiled and in that respect are behind the moslem ladies we had met in Egypt and India, where the drive of the nationalist movement has

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81 See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* for a discussion of the expectation by Western feminists that Muslim women’s “advancement” must be based on the adoption of Western culture. She also analyzes the appositional tendencies inherent in Islam which have allowed Muslim feminists to articulate a feminism compatible with Islamic precepts.


educated the men folk into greater common sense.” In 1947, IAW President Hanna Rydh would take an even more adamant stance. After meeting with members of the Iraqi Women’s Union, she was convinced that a movement for women’s civil and political rights would soon flower. Unveiling, however, constituted a necessary first step: “But first and foremost they must help their sisters out of the veil. It can never be repeated too often that the veil is no mere fashion, it is a wall which materially and spiritually is debarring its bearer from the developing intercourse and opportunity to co-operation with the men in a world crying for co-operation.”

Paradoxically, Western observers’ growing preoccupation with the veil occurred simultaneously with their growing sensitivity to charges of ethnocentrism. Hanna Rydh in fact felt compelled to defend the Alliance for assuming that European women had the right to advise “the women of the Orient.” She did so on the grounds that industrialization and its social concomitants were coming inexorably to the East: Since “the peoples of the Orient are feeling inclined to take part in the advantages of the industrialism…we women of the West cannot say we should not interfere in the way of life of our Eastern sisters, because we know how industrialisation is changing the lives of women.” For Rydh, then, the veil represented less a mark of degradation imposed by a repressive religion than a practical impediment to modernization (which she equated implicitly with progress). She saw its abolition as a prerequisite to Muslim women’s participation in the public world of waged labor and politics.

By commenting on the veil in their meetings with Muslim women, and writing about it in a journal that Muslim feminists read, Western feminists interposed themselves in a debate that had been raging in Middle Eastern countries since the appearance of Qasim Amin's *The Liberation of Women* at the turn of the century. As numerous scholars have shown, veiling has long been a contentious topic in Islamic societies and its political meaning has varied over time. To early reformers like Amin who advocated its abolition, the veil signified women’s relegation to the private sphere and their exclusion from public life. To others, it represented the preservation of female modesty and was seen to afford women some protection from male lechery. More recently, veiling has come to symbolize resistance to Western imperialism—and as such, has been advocated both by religious fundamentalists and some Muslim feminists alike.  

Muslim feminists, however, have never spoken with one voice on the subject, nor have they necessarily even made an issue of it. In Egypt, for example, although the EFU worked for an end to the harem system and women’s exclusion from the public sphere (the dramatic gesture by Huda Sha’rawi and Saïza Nabarawi of removing their veils at the Cairo train station upon their return from the IAW’s Rome Congress was seen as a public articulation of that goal, and likely contributed to Western obsession with the...

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86 Hanna Rydh, “Flight of the President,” Ibid.

issue), the organization never advocated unveiling as part of its formal agenda.\textsuperscript{88}

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as Egyptian feminists sought greater social, political, and economic opportunities, they decided individually whether or not to unveil. (In Turkey and Iran, on the other hand, this question was decided by the state, which encouraged and imposed, respectively, unveiling as part of each country’s modernization program.)\textsuperscript{89} Indeed, it is telling that four out of five articles submitted to \textit{Jus Suffragii} by Arab women on the status of women in their own countries included no reference to the veil.\textsuperscript{90} Instead, these writers commented on issues that concerned them most, such as women’s access to education, changes in personal status law, and social welfare. But for Western feminists who equated women’s status with their public visibility, the veil remained a troubling indicator of social inequality. And by establishing its abolition as an essential condition for women’s emancipation, they tapped into the enduring legacy of colonialism. As Leila Ahmed has demonstrated, the present discourse surrounding the veil has its origins in the British colonial narrative of the late nineteenth century, which pointed to veiling as the preeminent symbol of the inferiority of Islamic culture. In proclaiming Islam to be monstrously oppressive of women--as evidenced by the veil--colonialist men used the language of feminism to justify their imperialism.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{88} Badran, \textit{Feminists, Islam, and Nation}, 23.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{90} Massara Kelani, “Extract from a Report on Syria Presented to the Mediterranean Women’s Conference,” \textit{Jus Suffragii} 26.9 (June 1932); Mme. El Khoury, “A Greeting From the Arab Women,” Ibid, 40.6 (March 1946); Huda Ghanma, “Report from Transjordan,” Ibid, 43.7 (June 1949); Dr. Hanha Amin Zaki, “Status of Women in Iraq,” Ibid. The fifth, a report on Egypt submitted by Eva el Masri, indicated that unveiling had been a step forward for Egyptian women. It appeared in \textit{Jus Suffragii} 32.1,2 (August-Sept., 1938).
As a result, the veil took on new significance for Muslim men and women as well, leading them to defend or oppose the practice in terms that suggested that the debate was really about the preservation of Islam itself. That veiling became freighted with so much symbolic meaning had unfortunate consequences for the cause of international feminist solidarity. Because imperialists used feminist rhetoric to undermine indigenous traditions, feminism itself became suspect in the eyes of many Muslims.\textsuperscript{92} The stance of IAW feminists did little to counteract that suspicion: although they were careful not to disparage Islam, their insistence that Muslim women needed to “be freed from” their veils reproduced the colonialist rationale.

Conclusion

As this examination of \textit{Jus Suffragii} has shown, Western feminists were not free from ethnocentric assumptions of their own cultural superiority, but neither were they as hostile to Islam as some critics of orientalism might suppose. Indeed, their feminism enabled Western women to challenge some fundamental tenets of orientalism in important ways. Perhaps most significantly, it led them to recognize that \textit{male authority} was the common denominator in women’s oppression across the globe. That insight allowed them, in some instances, to distinguish between actual Islamic prescription and mere custom—a distinction that was (remains) notoriously lacking in popular Western

\textsuperscript{91} Without disputing Western imperialist obsession with veiling, Beth Baron suggests that the debates over the "woman question" in Egypt must be seen in the wider context of Ottoman history and the indigenous transformations of Egyptian society, "in particular the unravelling of elite Ottoman-Egyptian households" and the abolition of harem slavery. Baron, "The Making of the Egyptian Nation," in \textit{Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century}, ed. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann, and Catherine Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 137-58; quotation on 148.
images of Islam. Although most European and North American members of the IAW stopped short of recognizing feminist potential within Islam, their assumption that women around the world were united by patriarchal oppression permitted them a certain measure of identification with Muslim women that transcended the orientalist distinction between West and East.

Despite their sympathy for and occasional identification with their Middle Eastern sisters, however, Western feminists never regarded them as equals. The “East” remained, in their view, less modern, less rational, and less civilized than the “West.” Accordingly, the European and North American leaders of the IAW envisioned only one model for feminist movements, and they saw themselves as its natural vanguard, bringing aid and enlightenment to their more “oppressed” sisters. Certain of their own comparative freedom, they neglected the opportunity to reevaluate their own oppression that actual exposure to Islamic societies had afforded an earlier generation of female travelers to the Middle East.

The discourse of feminist orientalism that evolved in the pages of *Jus Suffragii* was thus marked by tension between its constituent elements. As I explore further in the next chapter, it was characteristic of the way that Western feminists in the international women’s movement represented Middle Eastern women, and ultimately reflected a conception of modernity based on Western experience.

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92 Ibid.
CHAPTER 2

RUTH WOODSMALL AND MOSLEM WOMEN ENTER A NEW WORLD

Introduction

In the spring of 1933, the American YWCA official and author Ruth Frances Woodsmall received a solicitation from Henry Goddard Leach, editor of the monthly magazine, The Forum: "I have been reading with pleasure your charming little book, Eastern Women Today and Tomorrow," it began. "I wonder if, in your mind or your portfolio you may not have an article for The Forum. I have been imagining an article based on the experience of one woman coming out of purdah--a condensed study of one personality and one triumph. Of course, thousands of our readers will be thinking that she had better remain behind the veil in her concentrated life of religion and sex rather than emerge in to the glaring open of contemporary civilization."\(^9\)

Woodsmall, who was working on a comprehensive study of women in Islamic countries, had been thinking of publishing some of her material in magazine form and was happy to comply. She submitted a piece that surveyed the forces increasingly pushing Muslim women into public life. The essay, entitled "From Purdah to Politics," was politely turned down. "Your article . . . fails to register," Leach wrote. "What I had in mind and, in fact, suggested to you . . . was a condensed study of one personality and one triumph, whereas

\(^9\) Leach to Woodsmall, 24 May 1933, box 17, folder 22, Ruth Woodsmall Papers, SSC.
the present exhibit is a more or less general statement of social conditions among Eastern women today and would not, I fear, sustain the jaded interest of the average American reader.”

Leach may be forgiven for deeming Woodsmall's article not quite titillating enough for publication. Her work on Muslim women, after all, was ill-equipped to satisfy the "jaded interest," or prurient curiosity, of the American reading public. In 1928, after serving nine years as executive secretary of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in the Near East, Woodsmall received a traveling fellowship from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller foundation to fund a serious critical study of Muslim women's changing status in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq, Iran, and India. The resulting book, *Moslem Women Enter a New World*, explores how "the rapidly extending network of communications, the spread of Western material goods and modern forms of amusement, the expansion of world knowledge through the Press, the growth of nationalism and repudiation of old religious formula, and the humanizing benefits of modern education" had transformed women's position in parts of the Muslim world. Released in 1936 by the Round Table Press in conjunction with the American University of Beirut (it was issued as part of its Social Science Series), the work was praised by the *New York Times* in a full-page review as a "searching and thought-

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94 Leach to Woodsmall, 31 October 1933, ibid.

95 *Eastern Women Today and Tomorrow*, the earlier book to which Leach referred, focused on women in Burma, India, China, and Japan.

96 Woodsmall, *Moslem Women Enter a New World* (New York: Round Table Press, 1936), 35.
provoking book on the awakening of millions of followers of Islam."97 The noted historian Mary Ritter Beard found it "very rewarding" and Halidé Edib--prominent feminist and perhaps Turkey's most famous personality after Kemal Atatürk--hoped it would inspire other Western scholars to treat the subject "as honestly and as accurately as Miss Woodsmall has done."98 The book continues to serve as a valuable resource for scholars examining different facets of women's lives in the Middle East and India during the interwar period.

Although not the work of a trained academic, Moslem Women Enter a New World bears some of the chief hallmarks of rigorous scholarship: broad and deep coverage, studied objectivity, and shrewd analysis. Woodsmall was a gifted writer who approached her subject with intelligence and sympathy as well as a keen sensitivity to the politics of representation: "No outsider, however sympathetic, can penetrate the inner secrets of another life and culture foreign to his own," she wrote in the book's preface. "Moreover, observation, however unerring it may be, cannot be divorced from the eyes of the observer. . . . Therefore this book can only give the observation of one who has seen the East frankly and sympathetically though the eyes of the West. A Moslem woman would write very differently of her changing world."99 Notwithstanding its indictment by Meyda Yegenoglu as a "profoundly phallocentric gesture" that reproduces the masculinist, colonialist logic of binary opposites by positing a fundamental and radical difference


between the East and West. Woodsmall's study stands apart from an earlier tradition of American missionary writing about Muslim women that portrayed them as victims of an undifferentiated "Islam" that had remained stagnant for centuries. Rarely did such accounts take note of the larger economic, social, and political forces that affected women's lives and status. Woodsmall, in contrast, paid these close attention: as its very title suggests, *Moslem Women Enter a New World* was an attempt to delineate how the forces of modernity were challenging different Islamic societies to confront the "woman question." Although Woodsmall uncritically accepted, as Yegenoglu has observed, the West as the author of modernity and its standards as the benchmark of progress, she scrupulously avoided the moralizing (and condemning) tone characteristic of much missionary writing about indigenous cultures. She also sought specifically to register the voices and views of Muslim women themselves, yielding along the way some valuable sources for the recovery of "indigenous women's version of the encounter" between Western and Middle Eastern women. And where postcolonial writers might profitably critique, as Yegenoglu has done, Woodsmall's work for what it reveals about Western feminists' efforts to secure, in psychoanalytic terms, "sovereign subject status," I am more interested in approaching it as the product of a dialogue--however unequal--between author and subject.


102 Ibid, 308.
Moslem Women Enter a New World unquestionably carries the stamp of Woodsmall's own positionality as American, Christian feminist, but because its methodology relied predominantly on personal interviews, it also captures a range of indigenous opinion on the fraught topic of women's status in new and aspiring nation-states. If the book reflects an orientalist preoccupation with the issues of veiling, seclusion, and polygyny, these issues were nevertheless subject to heated internal debates in Muslim societies. In this chapter I examine Woodsmall's book as indicative of an emergent feminist discourse within the international women's movement that does not fit easily under the rubric "imperial feminism," not least because its construction was one in which Muslim women themselves participated. In reinforcing some but challenging other assumptions on which the colonial enterprise rested, Moslem Women Enter a New World presents a compelling illustration of feminist orientalism as described in the last chapter.

Ruth Woodsmall and “Missionary Feminism”

Ruth Frances Woodsmall was born in 1883 in Atlanta but spent much of her youth in Indianapolis. Her father worked for the Baptist Home Missionary Society, a vocation that influenced her own path in life. Both parents in fact were deeply imbued with the evangelical spirit: they had founded a Baptist college for black students in Alabama and, in Indiana, frequently hosted visiting missionaries. After earning her BA from the University of Nebraska and an MA in German from Wellesley College,

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Woodsmall spent several years teaching in Colorado and Nevada. A year of travel in India and the Far East in 1916 awakened a passion for international work; upon her return stateside, Woodsmall joined the National Board of the U.S. YWCA and was assigned to the War Work Council, directing Hostess Houses for military women in the U.S. and France. She later went to Germany and spent two years conducting field surveys in Eastern Europe to help the YWCA initiate activities there. From 1920 to 1928 Woodsmall served as Executive Secretary of the YWCA in the Near East (Turkey and Syria) and in 1935 was appointed General Secretary of the World YWCA, a position she held until 1947.

The YWCA's emergence as a major player in the international women's movement was a consequence of both the evolution of nineteenth-century Protestantism and its own unique status as a Christian organization controlled by and for women. The YWCA officially originated in 1885 in Britain with the merging of two Christian women's movements that had sought since mid-century to shepherd young, single women though the chaos of industrialization. Propelled by the dual engines of evangelism and social reform, the Association, like its male counterpart the YMCA, emphasized spiritual renewal as central to the remedy of the myriad social ills that accompanied the rise of factory work and the growth of cities. Women flocking unchaperoned to great urban centers in search of employment faced new opportunities as well as perils, which local YWCAs helped them navigate by offering Bible study and prayer meetings, hostels and employment agencies, programs for social and physical recreation, and classes in various

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aspects of public health. The Association movement, which developed more or less simultaneously in the United States and some European countries, soon became global: in 1894, the World YWCA was founded to coordinate the federation, development, and extension of the YWCA throughout the world.\footnote{On the YWCA's origins in Britain, Europe and the United States, see Rice, \textit{A History of the World's YWCA}, 7-47; and Nancy Boyd, \textit{Emissaries: The Overseas Work of the American YWCA, 1895-1970} (New York: The Woman's Press, 1986), 10-15.} As Nancy Boyd has noted, the YWCA differed from the women's missionary societies that proliferated during the nineteenth century in a crucial respect. Whereas the latter were tied to male-dominated church boards that often dictated the placement of women workers, "the YWCA, responsible only to its own membership was free to set its own policies and carry them out in its own way apart from male opinion and male control."\footnote{Boyd, \textit{Emissaries}, 6.}

Although the YWCA remained a distinctly Christian organization, its evangelism receded over time as service to women rather than conversion came to define its mission. The 1898 Constitution of the World YWCA stipulated devotion to Christ and the "extension of the Kingdom of God" as part of its basis but local Associations were free to amend it as they saw fit.\footnote{Constitution of the World's Young Women's Christian Association, 1898, \textit{Rice, A History}, Appendix 1, 271.} Stressing individual conscience over sectarian loyalty in its membership requirements and eventually opening participation to women of all faiths, the YWCA embraced a vision of Christianity that was broadly ecumenical: an amendment adopted in 1922 defined a "Christian social order" as one in which "the principles of justice, love, and the equal value of every human life shall apply to national
and international as well as to personal relations. Indeed, what many YWCA workers referred to as the "Christian way of life" seems largely indistinguishable from liberal individualism tempered by a strong sense of civic responsibility and commitment to social justice. In the United States, what Joanne Meyerowitz has called the "secularization of the YWCA" was accompanied by its emergence as a force for progressive social change, particularly in the area of race relations.

Ruth Woodsmall's tenure with the YWCA coincided with the organization's increasing orientation toward internationalist work. The trauma of World War I convinced many members that they needed to augment the scope of their activities. Signaling its new commitment to the amelioration of conditions that led to international strife, the World YWCA added a paragraph to its constitution in 1922 that directed national associations to encourage "the development of a right public conscience such as shall strengthen all those forces which are working for the promotion of peace and better understanding between classes, nations and races." In 1930, the World body moved its headquarters from London to Geneva where it cooperated actively with other international organizations on pressing social issues that were global in scope, such as peace, labor, and women's status. The YWCA became a member of the League of Nation's Liaison Committee of Women's International Organizations, which sought to

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augment women's influence in international affairs; advised the International Labor Office; and worked closely with the Women's Committee on Peace and Disarmament.

Such affiliations marked the YWCA as an active member of the international women's movement, to which, as one in-house historian wrote in 1932, it had always borne "a certain sense of relationship and responsibility."111 (Beginning in 1924, the organization contributed a monthly supplement to International Women's' News in order to spread news of its aims and activities.)112 Woodsmall herself maintained close contacts with the IAW, and was part of the American delegation to the 1935 congress in Istanbul. She wrote to a friend about the upcoming event, "It represents, as Mrs. Catt interprets it, the culmination of a long period of working toward the fundamental principle of the equality of men and women. I have never been an ardent suffragist in the usual sense of the term, but I appreciate the value of this movement which brings into contact different types of people from the type which we meet in YWCA circles. Also, I have great admiration for the international president, Mrs. Corbitt-Ashby [sic], who is not at all the aggressive feminist type, but who has [a] very fine appreciation of spiritual values."113

Animated by religious faith, Woodsmall's feminism (like that of many YWCA workers) was outwardly manifest in her chosen role as an unmarried, professional woman who devoted her life to other women around the world. It was a model that had

111 Ibid, 33.
113 Woodsmall to Adelaide Dwight, 8 January 1935, folder 2, box 40, Woodsmall Papers.
antecedents in the nineteenth-century Protestant mission movement that sent hundreds of European women overseas to "civilize" colonized peoples. Scholarship devoted to the complex relation between gender and empire has focused on the roles of women missionaries in both resisting patriarchy and reinforcing the race and class hierarchies that structured what historian Eric Hobsbawm has called "The Age of Empire" (1875-1914).\textsuperscript{114} As one scholar has written, "The entire edifice of missionary "feminism"--the employment opportunities, the valorization of (British) women's skills and virtues, the institutional and social space for self-assertion, collective action, and aggressive challenging of male prerogatives--rested on the faith in existence of a degraded female Other in the colonies and at home. The missionary rationale for women's escape from the separate sphere, in other words, actively depended on the subordination of their heathen sisters."\textsuperscript{115} How closely the twentieth-century YWCA has conformed to this model is a question that historians have yet to answer; it is clear, however, that Woodsmall believed that Muslim women would benefit from the "steady interpenetration of Christian ideals into the East."\textsuperscript{116}


\textsuperscript{115} Susan Thorne, "Missionary-Imperial Feminism," in \textit{Gendered Missions}, 39-66; quotation on 60.

The YWCA had established a presence in the Middle East as early as the late nineteenth century. The first recorded YWCA in Egypt opened in 1876 in Alexandria; in Turkey and Syria, the organization was known in the form of student groups at mission schools. At the time of Woodsmall's appointment as Executive Secretary of the YWCA in the Near East in 1921, Association centers had been organized by the Overseas Committee of the American YWCA in Constantinople, Adana, Smyrna, and Beirut. They served primarily Greek, Armenian, and Syrian Christians although they were open to participation by women of any religion. (The centers in Adana and Smyrna were discontinued in 1922 as a consequence of the war between Greece and Turkey.) In 1924, the World YWCA approved the formation of the YWCA Eastern Mediterranean Federation which was intended to foster closer communication between Associations in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey; Woodsmall also served as Federation secretary.117

Though institutionally independent from them, the YWCA centers maintained close relationships with the missions that, as Woodsmall noted in a 1921 report, had paved the way for their "entree and acceptance by the country."118 Directed largely toward the provision of social welfare services, the broader program of the centers expressed "perhaps more of the social message of Christianity" than missions had been able to offer.119 The informal educational and recreational activities that centers typically offered were seen as supplementing the curricula of mission schools, which, as scholars

117 Ibid, 42-43.

118 Woodsmall, "Report on Visit to Near East Centers," April 1921, 10, folder 3, box 23, Woodsmall Papers. Nancy Boyd notes that American YWCA secretaries were only sent overseas at the request of missionaries, although they were not responsible to them. Boyd, Emissaries, 128.

119 Woodsmall, ibid.
have pointed out, were often designed to inculcate the cultural norms associated with Western bourgeois domesticity. Courses in English language, business, typing, personal health and hygiene, and organized physical and mental recreation such as volleyball, lectures, and concerts—all standard offerings at Association centers—were meant "to lead girls and women toward a fuller integration of their personalities, toward larger and more effective living as members of a community, and toward that ideal which we all cherish as the life abundant." Woodsmall urged a concerted effort "indigenize" YWCA centers by recruiting and training local young women to be leaders.

The reports that Woodsmall prepared during her years as Executive Secretary of the Near East YWCA yield glimpses into the cast of mind behind *Moslem Women Enter a New World*. Her politics, like her feminism, were moderate: an anti-imperialist in principle, she wrote sympathetically in 1928 about Syrian resentment of the French mandate but concluded that "the most serious and careful Syrian opinion would not advocate the withdrawal of the French and the substitution of a nationalist regime as Syria is not prepared for or capable of self-rule, because of the tragic religious antagonisms and divisions among Syrians which prevent national unity."

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120 See, for example, Patricia Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Women's Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation*, 1870-1920 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985). In Arab countries, YWCA centers were often viewed with suspicion. Woodsmall noted in 1921 that the center in Beirut "has not met as eager and spontaneous a welcome" as those in Smyrna, Adana, and Constantinople, since "Syrians are much less likely to respond to foreign influence. Syria has remained more distinct and individualistic, very proud of their nationality and of the fact that they represent the original Christians, also acutely sensitive to the invasion of new ideas if in anyway this casts an aspersion on their own independent development." Woodsmall, "Report on Visit to Near East Centers," 8.


122 Ibid, 41-42.

to note that foreigners in Syria "were united in wanting the mandate regime to be successful and just, since it represents a new type of contact between West and East and the Western motives in the East are on trial.") Clichéd references to "lethargy" and "fatalism" of the East appear occasionally throughout but more characteristic are expressions of Woodsmall's faith in cross-cultural understanding. The following sentiment is typical:

A great deal is written and said about the psychology of the East and West. Emphasis is always given to the fundamental differences. As a matter of fact, although there are undoubtedly certain variations, the result of a different historical background and a different environment, there are equally without doubt certain human principles which hold true alike in East and West. A recognition of these fundamental likenesses is in no small measure a condition of success of Western effort in the East. ... We need to simplify our thinking and constantly apply the idea of parallels. Our mental approach should be the question "What would our own reaction be if the situation were exactly reversed " and "If the East were in the West as strongly entrenched and as powerful as the West in the East what would the Western attitude be."\(^{124}\)

Among the attributes she considered essential for foreign YWCA workers in the Near East were the willingness to learn the host country's language and adapt to a new environment and a "determination to be free from a superiority complex and to maintain an attitude of being able not only to give but to receive."\(^{125}\)

Woodsmall's solicitude toward Turkish and Arab opinion and the importance she attached to mutuality between East and West were symptomatic of the internationalist ethos embraced by the YWCA after World War I, aptly summarized in Anna Rice's description of the World YWCA in 1920: "The Anglo-Saxon, Protestant tradition might still seem to be dominant in its thinking, its administration and its methods, but the Orient

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\(^{125}\) Ibid, 46.
and the countries of Roman Catholic and of Greek Orthodox culture had become a part of the World's Association, not as 'receiving' countries only but as contributors to the world mind in the making. Nineteenth-century Protestantism's "civilizing mission" had given way to a softer evangelism that stressed humility and collaboration. Its crusading spirit still intact, empowerment replaced rescue as the new goal of the missionary enterprise. A passionate exposition of its precepts appeared in a 1920 *Atlantic Monthly* article by Howard Bliss, who served as president of the Syrian Protestant College (renamed the American University of Beirut in 1920) from 1902 to 1920. The modern missionary, Bliss suggested, discovers "that, with very much to give, he has not a little to receive from men of other faiths . . . He is not content to combat the error which looms so large in the creeds of other men. He is anxious to find the kernel of truth of which so often that error is but a distorted expression. He comes to supplement, not solely to create. He prays for all men with a new sympathy--for all mosques and temples and synagogues as well as for all churches. . . . He speaks the truth, but he prunes his vocabulary of harsh phrases. He realizes that such words as 'heathen,' 'infidel,' 'heretic,' 'pervert,' are not brotherly words." Bliss oversaw a period of liberalization at the College during which mandatory attendance at Bible or Chapel class ended and its

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general atmosphere became more openly respectful of the religious beliefs of its increasingly diverse student body.\textsuperscript{128}

The liberalization of Christian institutions such as the YWCA and the Syrian Protestant College reflected the post-war evolution of Protestant missionary thought away from saving "heathen" souls. By the early 1920s, missionaries had begun to grapple with the issue of cultural imperialism; many "questioned the right to impose one's own cultural forms . . . and doubted the complementary 'right' to suppress or seek to displace another culture, however benighted."\textsuperscript{129} The shift from conversion to service was in part practical, as missionary attempts to proselytize encountered indifference or outright resistance from targeted populations, but it also recalled the Social Gospel movement of the late-nineteenth-century United States, which sought to humanize the new social order created by the Industrial Revolution. The way Woodsmall saw it, the same forces that had transformed women's lives in the West were coming inevitably to "the East." The YWCA aimed to help women adapt to the demands of modernity; she herself wanted to document their adjustment.

"Adventures In Interviewing"


Woodsmall spent 14 months--from September 1928 to November 1929--travelling through the Middle East and India conducting field research on Muslim women's changing status. The sheer size of the resulting book indicates something of the task she set for herself. More than 400 pages long, *Moslem Women Enter a New World* includes twenty-seven chapters grouped under six separate headings: "Frontiers of Social Change"; "Education--The Key to Progress"; "The New Economic Role of Moslem Women"; "Health Standards Old and New"; "The Widening Sphere of Moslem Women's Interests"; and "The Pressure of Change on Islam Today." Although Woodsmall did not intend a quantitative analysis of her subject (one reason being that "the East has not yet registered its life in statistical form"), the book includes a wealth of data, particularly concerning health and education, that continues to make it a well-mined source for information about women in the Middle East and India between the wars.130

As Woodsmall explained to her sponsors, her primary intent was to determine "whether there really is a change in the position of Moslem women and if so along what lines,"131 using popular attitudes to gauge currents of social change. Newspapers and magazines constituted one source for public opinion but Woodsmall relied more extensively on personal interviews with as wide a variety of people as possible, including government officials, health workers, educators, students, and women of all social classes. To ensure a broadly representative sample, her tour in each country included capitals and other large cities as well as smaller towns where outward signs of change


were less visible. The British Foreign Office and India Office provided Woodsmall with official letters of introduction in Iraq, India, Egypt, and Palestine, which explained the purpose of her visit and gained her entree to various facilities. She had also met with Persian and Indian delegates to the League of Nations in Geneva, who served as advance contacts for those countries, and received valuable help from Bayard Dodge, president of the American University of Beirut, in connecting with leaders throughout the Arabic-speaking world. Her most important contacts, however, proved to be American missionaries, many of whom she had met at the International Missionary Conference in Jerusalem in March 1928. With their numerous local connections through mission schools and "constant harem visiting," missionaries enabled Woodsmall to meet with a cross-section of Muslim women.\footnote{Ibid, vi.}

She was frequently accompanied on interviews by a missionary or mission school graduate who acted as an interpreter. (Woodsmall conducted interviews with government officials, nationalist leaders and other elites in English or French, but she needed an interpreter when meeting with people from lower classes who spoke only Arabic. She undoubtedly knew some Turkish, having lived in Constantinople for nine years, but evidently not fluently.\footnote{In a 1929 letter to friends, she wrote about attending an opening session of the Turkish parliament in Ankara: "A press ticket gave me a very good seat next to a nice young editor who gave me a resume in German of the Gazi's speech in advance and also kept me informed as to what was being done." Woodsmall to multiple addressees, 20 November 1929, folder 23, box 17, Woodsmall Papers.}

Upon arrival in each country, Woodsmall met first with the American consul and some other "key person"--usually an American missionary--for advice and help in arranging interviews. Her schedule then proceeded, as she indicated in her report to the
Rockefeller Foundation, as follows: interviews with foreign and national government
officials; general interviews with men and women leaders; visits to women's clubs,
schools, hospitals, child welfare clinics; visits in lower-class harems (accompanied by a
midwife or missionary); social calls and attendance at "interesting gatherings," weddings,
theaters and cinema; and discussions with young men and women students. For a
naturally outgoing and gregarious personality, the experience proved pleasurable as well
as educational. She wrote to friends:

A fitting title for my year's experiences would be: 'Adventures in
Interviewing' . . . I have tried to get in touch with people of all sorts, ages
and varying social conditions, and scarcely a day save those on route has
been without some interesting conversation which has thrown new light
on my subject. Among others I have interviewed four queens and a
guarded king, (the four queens being the queens of Iraq, of Egypt, of
Transjordan and of Bhopal, the King --the suave and clever King Feisal),
two Prime Ministers, two Governors, the Viceroy of India, Gandhi,
Tagore, various ministers, turbaned Sheikhs, dyed in the wool
conservatism, wild modernists, radicals and ardent nationalists, business
men, health visitors, writers, foreign educational leaders, foreign and
national missionaries of the old school and modernists, women leaders of
all sorts, teachers, doctors, nurses, students, simple people of the poorer
class, peasants, poets and just plain folks who defy classification but
represent in every country a point of view worth knowing. ... To have
known and talked personally with so many different types of people in so
many different countries has been a rare treat for one who enjoys people.
The circle of my friends has been greatly enlarged and incidentally the
length of my Christmas list.\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.

Woodsmall usually began an interview by carefully explaining her purpose and subject, a
task that required some diplomacy. She carried a small notebook concealed in an
embroidered bag and wrote notes only after the visit had concluded, since "the East as a
whole does not understand the survey idea, is suspicious of fact-gathering, cannot quite
grasp the aim of social research unless for some ulterior purpose. Hence a disarming, informal natural approach is necessary.”¹³⁵ Such circumspection was largely in reaction to the still-raging firestorm ignited by Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, published the previous year. Ostensibly about women's status in India, *Mother India* was in fact a calculated attack against "the political and cultural project of Indian nationalism.”¹³⁶ Mayo, who like Woodsmall was an American, wrote the book in collusion with British officials in an effort to undermine Indian demands for self-rule. Her "exposé" of the barbarity of Hindu culture--with its lurid depictions of the consequences of child marriage and early sexuality--aroused intense controversy in Britain, India, and the United States (where, it is worth noting, feminists, especially those with ties to the Indian's women's movement, such as Carrie Chapman Catt, tended to distance themselves from Mayo).¹³⁷ Because she meant to make the case that Indian society as a whole was morally unfit for independence, Mayo had little interest in how Indian women themselves were mobilizing for the reform of oppressive practices. As Mrinalini Sinha demonstrates, the rhetorical success of her book as a piece of imperialist propaganda depended on the depiction of Indian women as completely helpless, whose only hope for emancipation rested with the continuation of British rule (and, incidentally, the aid of British women's groups).


¹³⁷ Ibid, 28.
Woodsmall, whose own project bore a surface resemblance to Mayo's and who therefore had to contend with heightened wariness on the part of her Indian interlocutees, sought to disassociate herself from the book as much as possible:

I was very careful not to become involved in discussions as to Mother India and was not interested either in refuting or proving the case for Mother India, but was eager to gain a fair idea of what women were doing and thinking. Whether right or wrong Mother India has left an open wound which only time can heal. Miss Mayo has set the clock back in friendly relations and has created a defense attitude of Indians against Americans. ... Regardless of her facts and methods I deplore the fact that Miss Mayo did not give credit to the socially minded Indians, pathetically small as their number may be, who are trying to start reform movements in India. In all of this Eastern world the thinking minority, however insignificant it may be numerically, should be encouraged since its importance in a period of change is out of all proportion to its numbers.\footnote{Woodsmall, letter to multiple addressees, 20 November 1929.}

Her equivocations--"whether right or wrong," "regardless of her facts and methods"--were characteristic. Woodsmall stressed both to the Rockefeller Foundation and later, the American University of Beirut, which co-published her book, her intent to present an unbiased, objective account of social change. On a purely political level, she succeeded: unlike Mayo's, her book cannot be accused of advancing an imperialist agenda. In fact, while it adopts a decidedly neutral stance toward the British and French mandatory regimes (offering at most only mild criticism of specific policies), \textit{Moslem Women Enter a New World} carries an underlying current of sympathy for the nationalist aspirations of Eastern countries. Like \textit{Mother India}, it condemns certain social practices widely perceived in the West as inimical to women but not as justification for the continuation of Western control. And unlike Mayo, Woodsmall made a concerted effort to find out
"what women were doing and thinking." In both its sentiments and its methodology, her book stands in stark contrast to Mayo's notorious precedent.

**Listening to Women**

Throughout the course of her two-year tour, Woodsmall met with a wide variety of women and sought their views on issues currently under debate throughout the Middle East and India, such as veiling, women's education, women's suffrage, and legal reform with respect to marriage and divorce. Meetings with prominent women leaders were secured with the help of internationally-connected figures such as Margery Corbett Ashby and Bayard Dodge, but Woodsmall relied on local contacts for access to other women. Bedea Afnan Bey, for example, a former Turkish student at Constantinople College whom Woodsmall had known during her years in Constantinople, had since married the Master of Ceremony for Iraq's King Faysal and occupied an important position in Baghdadi society. Through her Woodsmall gained entrance to homes that otherwise would have remained closed to her, including that of Queen Ali, the wife of Faysal's brother.\(^{139}\) Another valuable contact (and friend) was Alice Kandeleft, the Syrian principal of the Baghdad Central College for Women.\(^{140}\) She took Woodsmall to visit Faysal's wife on her weekly "receiving day," a formal, ceremonial occasion during

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\(^{139}\) Letter from Woodsmall, no addressee, October 1929, folder 3, box 24, Woodsmall Papers.

which callers paid their respects to the queen. Woodsmall's description of the visit indicates the delicate and vital role Kandeleft played in smoothing the way for the interview:

After a time the ceremonial air wore down a little, one or two people withdrew, and there seemed to be a proper opening, so I hurled Alice into the breach with an expression of my exceeding great interest in meeting Her Majesty and my special appreciation etc., etc. because of my interest in Baghdad women--again etc. She did it very well judging by the length of her elaboration--so well that the Queen invited me to come over and sit by her daughter who is studying English and though a bit shy was glad to try it out. \[141\]

The account goes on to give Woodsmall's impressions of the queen:

This gave us just what I had hoped we might somehow manage--a chance to have some real conversation with the Queen, impossible before in such a solid circle of an obsequious audience--no criticism on them as they could scarcely be as independent in their approach as a foreigner. More of the audience had departed by the time we shifted seats and we had a delightful, simple, straightforward conversation. The Queen will never be an agitator for more freedom for women. Her own life in its limited circle, but perfect ease and luxury, quite satisfies her. She has never known anything else and there has been nothing to create the urge for greater self expression--such as education. She is mildly interested but not alertly eager about the outside world as is the daughter, for whom education is beginning to produce, I believe, a sense of something worthwhile outside the sheltered palace existence of a King's daughter. We withdrew at the psychological moment, and with due respect and ceremony to Her Majesty and a delightful plus impression of the Queen as a woman which we had gained by the last half hour.

Written in a personal letter to friends, Woodsmall's description of the encounter bears little trace of the condescension that one might expect from an educated, professional women toward an illiterate, sheltered queen. It also conveys her conviction that education was the key to women's progress, to awakening a sense of enlarged possibility.

\[141\] Ibid.
It is not surprising, then, that Woodsmall showed particular interest in students. One of her sources for ascertaining women's views were questionnaires administered to students at the American universities of Beirut, Cairo, and Tehran as well as some of the mission schools.\textsuperscript{142} Her personal papers contain nineteen essays written by students at the American Junior College for Girls in Beirut, which prepared girls for entry at AUB as college juniors.\textsuperscript{143} The school, which opened in 1925, offered the highest level of education for girls in the Middle East outside of Egypt and attracted students from Iraq and Palestine as well as Syria and Lebanon. Originally part of the American Girls' School run by the Presbyterian Mission Board, its curriculum stressed "home-making, health, recreation and community service" in addition to academic courses.\textsuperscript{144} Written sometime between 1928 and 1935\textsuperscript{145}, the essays address such topics as the preservation of Syrian customs (four), special reforms that ought to be introduced to the Near East (one), and women's freedom (fourteen). They provide a rare glimpse into the minds of young Middle Eastern women being educated at a foreign school.

Aside from their names and sectarian affiliation, we know next to nothing about the students who wrote these compositions. (Eight were Muslim, one was Druze, six were Christians, and four were Jewish. In 1934, the Junior College had an enrollment of

\textsuperscript{142} Woodsmall, \textit{Report to the Rockefeller Foundation}, i.

\textsuperscript{143} AUB did not admit women as first-year students until 1952. Bayard Dodge, \textit{The American University of Beirut: A Brief History of the University and the Lands which It Serves} (Beirut: Khayat's, 1958), 99.

\textsuperscript{144} Woodsmall, \textit{Moslem Women Enter a New World}, 214.

\textsuperscript{145} Since the essays are undated, it is impossible to tell whether they were collected during Woodsmall's initial tour or as part of her subsequent research. In preparation for her book, she asked many of her contacts at mission schools for updates since her visit and had them administer surveys and writing assignments to their students.
ninety students, including thirteen Muslims.)\textsuperscript{146} We can surmise, however, that their families valued education for girls at a time when, despite growing interest, it was hardly widespread. In 1930, girls comprised 33 percent of all students in Syria and Lebanon, although the proportion differed by region.\textsuperscript{147} French policy in the Levant favored public education for boys but not for girls, with the result that girls were more dependent on private (often Christian) schools.\textsuperscript{148} Although popular demand for girls' education steadily increased during the 1920s, official neglect and continuing social conservatism, particularly among Muslims, meant that girls' enrollments trailed far behind boys'. Students at the Junior College were among the narrow segment of Middle Eastern women who would join the ranks of the educated elite, a status of which they were not unmindful. "We . . . do feel the privilege that is given to us by our parents to follow any line of study we desire," wrote one, "and realize how great a responsibility is laid on us, for our behaviour in society later, the fruits of our education, will determine the progress of society and open the way for other girls to follow."\textsuperscript{149}

As one who had devoted her professional life to the moral and social development of young women, Woodsmall must have been intrigued by these essays, which reveal something of the peculiar quandary their authors faced as beneficiaries of foreign largesse during a period of intense nationalism and cultural defensiveness throughout the Middle East. (One student described the formation of Syrian girls' identity in terms of

\textsuperscript{146} Woodsmall, \textit{Moslem Women Enter a New World}, 213.

\textsuperscript{147} Thompson, \textit{Colonial Citizens}, 88.

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid, 87-89.
the national traits of the schools they attended: "Most of the girls considered well educated are either in American, English, German, or French schools, and each girl develops herself according to her education. It can be known at once what kind of education a girl has had, for every nation has its own characteristics to contribute."

Of course, the young women who attended the Junior College (or any other school, for that matter) were not formless lumps of clay to be molded by their teachers. Multiple influences guided their intellectual development; how they mediated the various, often conflicting, discourses on women's proper role to which they were exposed--in school, at home, and through the press--is a question to which their essays provide tantalizing clues.

Most of the students wrote on the topic of women's freedom. It is dangerous to generalize on the basis of such a small sample, but some clear differences among the essays are worth pointing out. Those by Jewish students uniformly present a classic liberal understanding of emancipation. All four define freedom in terms of legal and political equality (two refer explicitly to suffrage) and suggest that women have been held down by men in the past. (Two refer to women as "slaves" to men; another posits that women will not be free until they no longer symbolize "weakness, darkness, cold . . . all the negative things.") It is not possible to determine the religious background (that is, the level of orthodoxy) of the students, but their names--Esther Fried, Aviva Lerner, Geula Saffran, and Rachel Svatisky--indicate European heritage, which may explain the recognizably Western orientation of their essays.

149 Margaret Abushdid, box 24, folder 6, Woodsmall Papers. All of the essays quoted are in the same location.

150 Elizabeth Nasir, ibid.
Those by Arab students, regardless of religion, offer a stark contrast. Most of their essays lack any imagery of women as debased, and many suggest a conception of freedom as an organic condition rather than a legal one. For example, Zahia Maksad (a Druze whose essay is the most conservative), wrote:

Does freedom consist in having the right to vote? In having the permission to spend the night in ball rooms and other public places? In taking the veil of the faces? Never! Never! . . . Freedom, as I think, has no connection whatsoever with such physical matters, for it is the freedom of the intellect that counts. It is this freedom which takes away the rust from our minds that we need. We do not need any other foster freedom which makes us its slaves and leads us directly to destruction. A free woman, therefore, is the one who has an open mind and a polished intellect; who plays well the role assigned to her, who keeps in contact with everything going around her avoiding interference with the things that do not concern her; who does not go about wasting her time in gossip and asking for her rights and freedom, for such tales help to make tighter the chains that tie her besides, they do not fit her gentle feminine nature.

Her classmate, Suad Khatib, opined:

Freedom is a sun that should shine into everybody's soul and lead him; for without it he is less than the playthings of children that move in an artificial tone. Freedom is the only way thru [sic] which we can acquire and find the real happiness and joy of life; for then a person can live free thru his body, mind, conscience, and aim, with no oppressor to oppress him or judge him but self-education and self-respect....We nowadays ask for freedom and long to have it but in truth nobody knows the right way to walk and be led to it. Let our women be highly educated for education is the only way to freedom. ... It is not a matter of religions, hats, or veils. When our women have got the right amount in their heads enough to uncover and efface the ignorance stored in their ideas then these outer things will not matter. Let us shine through our inner knowledge rather than thru our outward appearance,

and Kawkab Mashnuk suggested, "A free woman is that one that is mentally and physically able to stand straight in her actions."
The striking feature of these essays is the extent to which they echo the debates over the "woman question" that had pervaded the Middle Eastern press since the late nineteenth century. In linking freedom to a cultivated intellect, they convey support for girls' education—a goal that was common among secular reformers as well as Islamic modernists. Writers in Arabic women's magazines frequently promoted education as the key to liberating women from the "shackles" of ignorance and its correlates, decadence and idleness. In linking freedom, as many did, to virtue and moral rectitude, the essays also recall a discursive context in which, as Marilyn Booth writes with reference to Egypt, "the 'problem' of leisure was yoked early on to education, articulated repeatedly in a context of voiced anxiety over the state of the world, especially observations on 'the West' as representative of a moral breakdown that observers saw repeated locally and most often located in female behavior—and desire." Thus Veronica Bakamjian (a Christian), for example, was careful in her essay to distinguish between freedom and license.

Noticeably absent from almost of the essays by Arab girls is any discussion of women's legal or political equality; of the three that explicitly mention suffrage, one

151 For example, Julia Tu`ma Dimashqiya, "Tahrir al-mar'a al-suriya [The Liberation of the Syrian Woman]," *Al-Mar'a al-jadida* 2, (August 1922), 180-81. Dimashqiya, founder and editor of *The New Woman* magazine in Beirut, became a leading figure in the Syrian women's movement. Her emphasis on thrift, industry, modesty, and simplicity as cardinal virtues were likely influenced by her Protestant background. See Hala Ramez Dimechkie, "Julia Tu`mi Dimashqiyyi and *Al-Mar’a al-jadida*, 1883-1954," (M.A. thesis, American University of Beirut, 1998), 102-10. For more on Arab women writers on education, see Baron, *The Women's Awakening* and Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied*.

152 Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied*, 145. In Nazira Zayn al-Din's polemic against the veil—which conservative opinion linked to the preservation of female modesty, virtue and family honor—she argued that these ideals were internal: "We must understand as everyone else does that honour is rooted in the heart and chastity comes from within and not from a piece of transparent material lowered over the face." Al-Din, *Unveiling and Veiling: on the Liberation of the Woman and Social Renewal in the Islamic World*; quoted in Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, 273.
(Zahia Maksad) rejects it out of hand and two (Margaret Abushdid and Wadia Qaddura) support it only after women have become sufficiently educated. In this, they mirror the general conservatism of the Syrian women's movement between 1928-1936, a period during which feminist leaders adopted a more cautious agenda after the defeat of woman suffrage and the publication of Nazira Zayn al-Din's explosive treatise, Veiling and Unveiling.\textsuperscript{153} Facing often vitriolic criticism from conservatives who viewed all changes in gender roles as evidence of creeping (and corrupting) Westernization, they were forced to "define goals that appeared homegrown, not inspired by Western models."\textsuperscript{154}

What emerges most clearly from these student essays is the sense of struggle that such a project engendered. A common theme is the need to choose selectively from Western civilization. Nabiha Tabet wrote:

> From the East the oriental woman peeped at her sister in the West, and she wished to follow at her heels. But before such an attempt could be undertaken, she must study and see what things have helped the Western woman to become what she is today. ... She should not adopt blindly all that her Western sister is taking without regard to whether they fit her, and suit the place she lives in. You, woman of the East, lay your foundation on the many precious strings you ancestors have handed you, and then select the best of those in the West, and make a perfect woman of yourself.

Fedwa Abdelwahab criticized the "fashionable class, those who have copied the civilization of the west blindly, the foreign influence is revealed in their sleeveless low necked dresses. Their faces are well painted so they think they look pretty under their false disguise. They are the leaders of society, and their communication is in the French language, so that the ancestor's language has disappeared." She continued:

\textsuperscript{153} Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 141-46.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid, 140.
What is the freedom which the Eastern woman ought to strive for, after the barrier of religion has disappeared? Is she going to leave behind her ancestor's tradition of modesty, of respect to her old parents? I hope not. Does freedom mean walking on the streets unchaperoned, and spending all the hours of the night dancing? ... The Eastern woman ought to choose wisely, before rising to demand her rights. Her freedom depends upon the education of the majority. Let the Moslem woman be unveiled but not too suddenly, slowly yet surely she shall gain her end.

Elizabeth Nasir offered perhaps the most poignant expression of an embattled identity:

What has the Oriental woman been asking for so many years? Freedom she wanted, liberty she demanded: she wanted to be independent of man's authority like her sister in Europe and America. She observed everything in the Orient debasing, and corrupt, and observed everything foreign elevating and virtuous, as she blinded herself to many of the vices in the above mentioned countries. The Orient is still in its renaissance; it cannot break immediately from her ancestors bringing up, owing to the number of religions, and nationalities, and launch out without consideration into the unprepared country with her Western ideas. East and West will never meet; therefore can their ideas, interests, and character suit each other? It is not by becoming masculine in our actions, by trying to be Europeans in our manners, by abolishing all our good qualities, by drinking, smoking or dancing that we gained our freedom, for these are petty matters. Are our minds developed enough to be free of man's help? Have we the power of discrimination? Is everything contributed to us fit for our environment? Cannot we develop our own interests, our own requirements without imitating others? Have we not many things we could contribute instead of their being abolished? The Oriental girl requires a strong foundation to support her future daughters and grasp the real idea of freedom. ... Can we not through our contact with the more advanced nations produce a rich blend of East and West more beautiful that either alone? Let us choose the best in each and preserve it.

What could it mean for Arab students in a foreign institution to convey such ambivalence over Western influence? That their essays so closely replicate the terms of indigenous debates over the woman question suggests that missionary teachers were perhaps less intent on imposing their own cultural ideals than they had been in an earlier generation, or that their messages had limited influence. Although we cannot ascertain
the precise relationship between what was taught and how it was received, what does come across is how acutely--often uncomfortably--alert Arab girls were to the difficulty of making the woman question their own. Their writings document their awareness of both the issue's embeddedness in colonialist discourse (recall Elizabeth Nasir's point about "Oriental" women viewing everything foreign as "elevating and virtuous," or Fedwa Abdelwahab's mockery of Westernized elites) and their own potential dual role as women leaders and custodians of Eastern values. The essays speak eloquently to the ambiguous legacy of foreign (particularly American) missionary education in the Middle East. Arab writers have acknowledged its influence in the Arabic linguistic and cultural revival (nahda) that contributed to the rise of Arab nationalism; they have also pointed out its significant psychic cost. Woodsmall herself was not insensitive to the latter, but she had faith in the capacity of educated women to imagine (and shape) a modern future that synthesized West and East:

In the past the voice of women was too little heard but the future direction of life in the East, will in no small measure depend on Eastern women. . . . The large majority of women in the East, as in the West, is unconscious of the full meaning of freedom. For many Eastern women, as for many Western women, equality of opportunity is interpreted primarily in terms of personal privilege. But a small minority, in the East as in the West, has accepted the full responsibility as well as the full privileges of the new day. This small group of educated leaders in the East is seeking to find the answer to the problems inherent in their changing world. Their solution, one can safely assert, will not be to repudiate progress and retire within the harem as the easier way of life, but rather to try to reconcile the old with the new way of life. Theirs is the task of fusing the priceless

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156 Said, Orientalism.
values of their old heritage with the rich possibilities of the new freedom.\textsuperscript{157}

\textit{Moslem Women Enter a New World}

Woodsmall turned in her report to the Rockefeller Foundation in 1930 and spent the next few years preparing the study for publication. The American University of Beirut had provided a small publication grant and planned to issue it under its Social Science Series, which, given the controversial subject matter, entailed some risk to the university's reputation in the Arab world. Fearing it might alienate Muslim conservatives ("the very persons whom we are trying to make more liberal"), Bayard Dodge suggested that Woodsmall make some changes to the manuscript: "So as to make the book a description, rather than anything that might suggest an enthusiastic plea for a progressive reform, I think that it will clear the atmosphere, if words like 'progress,' 'advance,'
'enlightenment,' etc., become words like 'change,' 'transition,' 'transformation,' etc."\textsuperscript{158} Woodsmall complied throughout except, as she explained to Dodge, "where it [the word 'advance'] seemed so obvious that it could scarcely invite criticism; for example, in mentioning certain social reforms in India--child marriage, purdah, etc., which are quite generally accepted as indicating an advance."\textsuperscript{159}

As these exchanges make clear, \textit{Moslem Women Enter a New World} is not entirely disinterested. Where the book reproduces the colonialist rationale is not in its

\textsuperscript{157} Woodsmall, \textit{Moslem Women Enter a New World}, 412.

\textsuperscript{158} Dodge to Woodsmall, 6 February 1936, folder 3, box 40, Woodsmall Papers.

\textsuperscript{159} Woodsmall to Dodge, 4 March 1936, ibid.
politics but in its tendency to portray Western influence as the engine of change and mostly salutary in its effects. Woodsmall cited World War I as the catalyst for the sweeping transformation of the East, noting that in its absence "Asia might have gone along another fifty years without any radical movements of change."160 The introduction of Western technologies (air travel, automobiles, radio, and cinema) and systems of education and public health had generated "an increasing realization that society in the East must be a unit as in the West; and that it is impossible to promote successfully twentieth-century politics and economic progress and at the same time maintain a medieval status of women."161 Woodsmall particularly lauded the work of Christian institutions that facilitated the "peaceful penetration of Western ideas" so that "without any feeling of competition or self-defence, he [the Eastern student] might receive the best that Western culture has to offer."162 At times, her book exhibits a facile identification of Western cultural norms with neutral indicators of modern progress. Consider her observations on "Eastern" attitudes toward child care, for example:

Another current practice in child care which runs counter to modern ideas is the constant nursing of a baby whenever it cries. Regular feeding and letting the baby cry is an unheard-of cruelty. A long period of nursing, two years for a girl and longer for a boy, seems to be a prevalent custom among the lower class. The general lack of discipline with older children is in keeping with the idea of 'never letting the baby cry.' ... This attitude explains the prevalent lack of regularity in food and hours of sleeping with the inevitable deleterious effects on childhood.163

160 Woodsmall, Moslem Women Enter a New World, 32,

161 Ibid, 36.

162 Ibid, 35.

163 Woodsmall, Moslem Women Enter a New World, 282.
One need only consider the wildly fluctuating history of expert advice on child rearing in the United States to realize how culture-bound and transient "modern ideas" often are. By the end of the twentieth century, child care professionals would extol the virtues of breastfeeding on demand, parental responsiveness, and swaddling—all practices that Woodsmall criticized.¹⁶⁴

The most direct expression of Woodsmall's own sentiments appears in the book's concluding chapter (entitled "East and West"), where she offers this response to the potential query of Western readers—imbued with romantic notions of harem life as a "veiled retreat"—as to whether the "Western design for living" is really better for Muslim women:

Without denying the fact that change does not necessarily mean progress, and new freedom on some Western models may not be a net gain but a loss, one may perhaps remind these Western observers that not all Moslem women have lived in delightful gardens enjoying the cushioned leisure of the highly protected upper class. I have caught too many glimpses of the purdah-bound lives of less fortunate Moslem women and have too often sensed the repression of personality and the restriction of such a limited segregated life, not to realize the fallacy of weaving too much romance about the charmed seclusion of the life behind the veil.¹⁶⁵

Woodsmall was unapologetic in her conviction that the system of sexual segregation observed to varying degree in Muslim societies harmed women physically and mentally. Having visited countless harems representing different economic and social strata, she

¹⁶⁴ Halidé Edib's otherwise positive review of Woodsmall's book faulted its tendency to attribute social change to external causes: "Nor are they due so much as she implies to external influences as the cinema, the radio, Western educational penetration, or travel. Still less are they to be measured, as the foreigner is inclined to measure them, in terms of mere social custom, such as the veiling or unveiling of the face. These changes are, in truth, part and parcel of a vast internal revolution and are but one aspect of it. This revolution is shaking the East to its foundations, and in it fear of Western encroachment and exploitation is a stronger force than the effect of Western importations." Edib, "Changes in the Islamic World."

¹⁶⁵ Woodsmall, Moslem Women Enter a New World, 409.
was not incognizant of some of the advantages of homosocial life but she welcomed signs of its erosion as clear indications of progress. When Dodge objected to Woodsmall's constant reference to "Moslem women" and "Islam" (he suggested substituting "Eastern" and "religion")\(^\text{167}\), she defended her refusal to make the edits:

"Certain problems are distinctive to Islam and, I feel, that this must be clear. Generalised statements concerning religion would, I feel sure, evoke an unfavourable reaction on the part of the Christians of the East. Moreover, I am particularly eager to be clear in the use of terms relative to religion because I feel that with my present position this is a very necessary point to safeguard."\(^\text{168}\)

AUB's nervousness over the book and Woodsmall's defense of her terminology showed just how sensitive the topic of Muslim women's status had become, for Muslims certainly but also for non-Muslims (especially Western) who presumed to write about it. Both Dodge and Woodsmall understood how deeply entwined the issue was with Western imperialism; it was precisely that recognition that prompted Dodge's concern about the book's reception among Muslim Arabs and Woodsmall's desire that it be a "contribution in the West to a better understanding of the Moslem world."\(^\text{169}\) Woodsmall believed her book presented a "distinctly sympathetic interpretation of Islam," that it was "objective and based on 'scientifically minded observation of what it taking place' and in

\(^{166}\) Ibid, 106.

\(^{167}\) Dodge to Woodsmall, 6 February 1936.

\(^{168}\) Woodsmall to Dodge, 4 March 1936.

\(^{169}\) Ibid.
fact runs the risk of being almost dull in its objectivity and lack of enthusiasm over the remarkable change in the East.”170

In fact, Woodsmall's representation of Islam veers between oversimplification and nuance. At times she makes sweeping generalizations, positing for example that the Islamic social system (by which she meant the "separation of the sexes and the seclusion of women") had not changed since the seventh century.171 Ambora al-Khalidi, who with her husband Ahmed Sami al-Khalidi, principal of the Government Arab College in Jerusalem served as AUB's chief Muslim referees for the manuscript, cited that assumption as the primary reason why the university should not take responsibility for publishing the book (aside from its "highly controversial" subject matter.) In what was (and remains) a standard defense of women's status under Islam, they pointed to women's "prominent role in literature, jurisprudence and social life" in the early days of the religion and blamed the decline in their status on Turkish rule.172 Elsewhere Woodsmall writes, "The keynote of the Moslem woman's religion is complete acquiescence to fate; to protest against a lack of privileges is quite foreign to her nature."173

Such statements of course mark Woodsmall as an easy target for critics of orientalism. But they are not typical of her general approach; it is precisely their coexistence with more measured analysis that makes her work difficult to dismiss as standard orientalist fare. In portraying Islam as the primary (though not sole)
determinant of women's status, Woodsmall refers clearly to the authority of clerical or canonical Islam—that is, to male interpretation—rather than the religion per se. Her book covers reformist currents in Islam at some length, noting that "the reinterpretation of religion seeks to harmonize the emancipation of women with the spirit of the Koran."174 Given her own religious conviction, Woodsmall did not advocate secularism so much as women's participation in that endeavor. In a section devoted to "The Voice of Women in Modern Islam," she predicts the emergence of so-called Islamic feminism:

However, a number of thoughtful Turkish leaders, both men and women, but perhaps especially women, are beginning to realize the need of a new relationship between religion and life. It is, I believe, not too much to expect that Turkish women, who have gained so much from the social and religious reforms in Turkey, may now make some special contribution to the rethinking of religious values. Their voice, and the voice of Moslem women in other countries, which have been so little heard in shaping religious thought in the past, may help to answer the crucial question in the East today, as to whether the present spirit of religious liberalism in the Moslem world will mean the disintegration of Islam or the beginning of a new era of more vital faith.175

The book's abiding concern with the opinions and attitudes of women themselves distinguishes it from more conventional Western depictions of Muslim women as helpless and inarticulate. Their voices inform Woodsmall's own feminism, that is, her sympathy for "movements which are enabling Moslem women to enter new spheres of activity."176 They inform, too, her focus on the veil as the barometer of progress (the

175 Woodsmall, Moslem Women Enter a New World, 408.
176 Bayard Dodge, "Preface," Moslem Women Enter a New World, 9. The wording was Woodsmall's, suggested as a revision to an earlier draft of Dodge's preface: "I do not believe the significant thing is that I welcome the fact that Moslem women are beginning to understand Western ideas." Woodsmall to Dodge, 21 March 1936, folder 3, box 40, Woodsmall Papers.

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subject, predictably, of the book's first chapter). Like so many commentators--Muslim and non-Muslim alike--Woodsmall read the veil as the primary signifier of sexual segregation: "Where the veil persists without variation, the life of the Moslem woman is like the blank walled streets of Bhopal, India, which afford no outlook form within and no contact from without."\(^{177}\) She describes regional variations in type and prevalence, linking those factors to the relative degree of Muslim women's emancipation. On the one hand, Woodsmall's attention to veiling reflects the long history of Western preoccupation with the issue, critiqued so effectively as a dominant feature of orientalist discourse. On the other hand, however, it suggests that for feminist analysis, there is no escaping its heavy symbolic freight. Woodsmall quotes an Egyptian woman who had recently unveiled:

> A veil, however high or low, thick or thin, remains a veil, with its full meaning until it disappears. It is never just a piece of black or white chiffon, or merely a special type of garment. It is never casually assumed or laid aside without reflection. It presents strange paradoxes. It is a restrictive emphasis on sex relationship, and also on moral protection; a sign of utter dependence and also of freedom from responsibility; a handicap to real progress and a symbol of special privilege. In a word the veil represents an entirely different social system. Discarding it, therefore, involves a whole change of psychology. As long as any vestige of the veil remains, the system has not changed. I suppose it is impossible for a Western woman to understand the meaning of the veil. It is so entirely foreign to you and so much a part of us.\(^{178}\)

Although some contemporaneous Muslim women (Halidé Edib, and the student Suad Khatib, for example) dismissed the veil as an unimportant social custom, others gave it enormous significance (the Druze writer Nazira Zayn al-Din, for instance). Whether one

\(^{177}\) Woodsmall, *Moslem Women Enter a New World*, 40.

\(^{178}\) Ibid, 64.
accepts or refutes the idea that veiling is inherently oppressive to women, the issue's very contestedness and durability as a symbol--of oppression, cultural authenticity, or religious piety--has ensured its status as a topic of feminist debate. Woodsmall clearly advocated unveiling but she also understood the reasons why many women did not. Her sensitivity to the complex cultural and psychological implications of the issue temper what otherwise might come across as stereotypical Western feminist obsession with it.

Conclusion

To suggest how feminist historians might assess Woodsmall's work, it is perhaps fitting to consider the words of Mary Ritter Beard, who did not need a postcolonial lexicon to make a postcolonial point:

The reviewer finds it very rewarding; she is perhaps most impressed however by the light assumption to the effect that a vast spiritual and mental and moral gulf still separates the Near East and the West... Miss Woodsmall speaks "as one accustomed to freedom." But when we westerners, even we Americans, remember how close we are at home to the furore over divorced women, to the dominance of the Bible as supreme authority when questions of women's rights are on the carpet or before the pulpit, to the condemnation of coeducation, to child marriages and child labor, to the exclusion of married women from property rights and the professions, to polygamy and other practices still so striking in the Near East, instead of being surprised at their prevalence, we should feel domiciled at once amid them, it seems to me. Divergence is a matter of degree more than of kind and of historical moments rather than distinctions of faith and race. One is mindful of the old borrowing in the East by the West at the period of the Crusades which did so much to "civilize" occidentals by refining their tastes and enlarging their wants. Cross currents of internationalism or interracialism have rolled both ways and left their marks on all peoples.179

Beard’s criticism of rigid, binary thinking predated Said’s Orientalism by almost fifty years! In this, she was ahead of most of her contemporaries. A product of its time,
*Moslem Women Enter a New World* stands as testament to a particular moment in the evolution of liberalism feminism, which, while no longer anchored to the political project of Western imperialism, remained wedded to Enlightenment notions of individualism and universal progress. The book reflects an increasingly common understanding among Western feminists that it was no longer okay to "speak for" colonized women, even as it suggests that their path to liberation will follow Western models. These seeming contradictions mark it as an archetypal expression of feminist orientalism during the interwar period. In the next two chapters, I show how Middle Eastern feminists themselves shared many of the assumptions about the nature of modernity that undergirded the discourse.

179 Beard, "Mirroring Muslim Women."
CHAPTER 3
BETWEEN NATIONALISM AND FEMINISM: THE EASTERN WOMEN'S
CONFERENCES OF 1930 AND 1932

Introduction

Writing in the Egyptian newsjournal, *L'Egyptienne*, in 1929, Saiza Nabarawi recalled the pervasive ignorance about her country that she and her colleagues had encountered among the other delegates to the 1923 IAW congress in Rome. "Why aren't you darker?" they were asked. "Are you authentic Egyptians?" "Do you have trains and automobiles in your country?" "How many wives does each man have?" For Egypt, "whose brilliant civilization long preceded that of Rome" to be placed on the "same level as the savage peoples of Central Africa," had been particularly mortifying. It was, she contended, to combat the romantic stereotypes of the "odalisque and désechantée" in the West--which bore no resemblance to the contemporary Muslim women--that the EFU decided to publish its newsjournal in French instead of Arabic. Although the women's movement was widely covered in the Arabic press, no publication existed to represent Egypt to the West. *L'Egyptienne* was founded, Nabarawi declared, "to be the messenger before the entire world and those who are ignorant of the aspirations of modern Egypt and the evolution of its women."¹⁸⁰

Taking a similar tack, the Lebanese Christian Fareedah el Akle (remembered in some circles for having taught Arabic to T. E. Lawrence)\textsuperscript{181}, sought to rehabilitate Syria's image at the 1926 IAW congress in Paris:

Syria has played an important part in the religious and intellectual history of the world. The Christian principles which sprang up in Syria reformed the whole world and uplifted humanity and gave the present civilisation its real value. In learning, the Syrian contribution to the world was not less valuable. Phoenicians, long before Christ, developed a high civilisation of their own, they were the inventors of the phonetic alphabet. Had it not been for Arab scholars, largely helped by the Nestorian Christians of Northern Syria, Greek philosophy and culture might have been lost to the world. The object of stating these facts is to make clear the fact that its present inhabitants are more or less the descendants of the people who rendered such valuable services to humanity.

Unlike Nabarawi, however, El Akle excluded Muslim women from the ranks of "civilized" women:

Islamic influence in general has been to put women into an inferior place, it has not done much to elevate the women of the East. The man is all in all. . . .The average Muslim woman is not educated and her ignorance is pitiable. The only vocation that is open before them is that of a child-bearer and child suckler, the absolute possession of her husband. . . . But the Christian women stand on a higher level, they have more privileges, they enjoy a freer life and they occupy a different place in social life, the home and the family, for nothing but Christianity has ever succeeded in giving women their rightful place in the home, state and the world.\textsuperscript{182}

If these examples belie the apparent unity of the construct, "Arab women," they also confirm one scholar's recent observation that, "in an age of Western-dominated


modernity, every nation creates its own Orient."183 In rejecting Western representations of a backward East, Nabarawi and El Akle (both of whom were Western-educated) nevertheless accepted the "hierarchy of modernity" on which orientalism is premised. Nabarawi contrasted a progressive Egypt against "savage" Africa184; El Akle, Christian Syria against its Muslim majority. Such moves show how non-Western forms of orientalism "coexist with yet resist, validate yet challenge, the original discourse itself."185

This chapter examines how Middle Eastern feminists attempted to stake their own claim to modernity within the established terms of international feminist and nationalist discourses. After attending the 1929 IAW congress in Berlin, Nabarawi called for Eastern women to follow the example of women in Asia and the Americas who had begun to form regional associations to advance their common interests.186 Such groups,

183 Ussama Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (June 2002): 768-96; quotation on 768.

184 Beth Baron points to the "central paradox" of Egyptian nationalists fighting "European imperialism at the same time that they sought to regain control of their own empire in the Sudan." Baron, "The Making of the Egyptian Nation," in *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann, and Catherine Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 137-58; quotation on 144. Indeed, the issue that precipitated Huda Sha`rawi's break with the Wafd was the conciliatory stance it took toward Britain's 1924 ultimatum that called for Egypt's removal from the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, which had controlled the Sudan since 1899. In Egypt, the colonized were also colonizers, and created their own orientalist discourse toward Africa. As Baron writes, "The Sudanese that most elite Egyptians had known best were female domestic slaves, and the Sudan in post-war cartoons often appeared as a highly sexualized, nearly naked black woman with exaggerated features. Egypt, on the other hand, appeared as a light-skinned, modestly dressed and veiled upper-class woman (no doubt of Ottoman-Egyptian descent." Ibid. See also Baron, "Nationalist Iconography: Egypt as a Woman," in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, ed. J. Jankowski and I. Gershoni (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 105-24.

185 Ibid, 795.

186 The first Pan-Pacific Women's Conference had taken place in 1928 and drew women from Australia, China, Japan, the Philippines, and elsewhere. The Inter-American Commission of Women was also established in 1928.
she wrote, could only augment the strength of the Alliance and "hasten the triumph of feminist principles." The first concrete steps to unite Eastern women, however, were taken not by Egyptian feminists but by their Syrian counterparts. Two Eastern Women's Conferences--the first in Damascus in 1930 and the second in Tehran two years later--were organized by the General Union of Syrian Women. Presided over by Nur Hamada, a Druze leader of several women's organizations, they attracted delegates from mostly Arab or Muslim countries. Scattered references to these conferences exist in the secondary literature, but these provide little analysis. Primary source material is also fragmentary, consisting mostly of newspaper reports, although most of the proceedings of the Tehran conference were published in the French journal *Revues des études Islamiques* and then released as a separate publication. Although the overall impact of the conferences was limited--they did not generate a permanent regional women's movement nor did they induce local governments to implement desired reforms--they are suggestive of how Eastern women, in trying to define feminism in their own terms, simultaneously drew inspiration and sought autonomy from Western models. In so doing, they also challenged the presumption of male reformers who tried to arrogate to themselves the task of modernizing Eastern womanhood.

**The Women's Movement in Syria and Lebanon**


Like so many others, the Syrian women's movement had roots in the charitable and philanthropic ladies' associations initiated by bourgeois women in the late nineteenth century. During World War I their activities were supported by the Ottoman government in what was partially an effort to quell anti-Ottoman sentiment—for example, Jamal Pasha, commander of the Ottoman Fourth Army at Damascus, funded an orphanage run by Salma Sayigh, and the governor of Beirut helped `Adila Bayhum, `Anbara Salam, and Ibtihaj Qaddura found the Muslim Girls' Club. Sayigh, Bayhum, Salam, and Qaddura became key figures in the women's movement during the mandate period. Others included Julia Tu`mah Dimashqiya, a Christian writer and teacher who founded the Ladies' Society and *The New Woman* magazine; Nazik `Abid, founder of the Red Star society and the Light of Damascus society, which promoted Arabism; and Mary `Ajamy, a Christian teacher and publisher of a women's magazine (*The Bride*) who founded the Christian Women's Club in 1920. The French occupation and especially the Syrian Revolt gave new impetus to the women's movement, which assumed a strong nationalist character. Women leaders promoted nationalist curricula in schools, ran literary salons to foster patriotism, and "increasingly addressed the state on the social issues that concerned them," such as public health and women's labor (the threat posed to women's traditional handicrafts by imports was a particular concern). In 1924, Salma Sayigh and Labiba Thabit founded the Women's Union in Syria and Lebanon, a federation of women's groups representing both Christian and Muslim women. The union, which was staunchy Arab nationalist, campaigned for women's rights in the areas of health, education, labor, and the reform of religious laws governing marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance.

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189 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 97.
It held its first conference in Beirut in 1928. By the early 1930s, the women's movement in Lebanon and Syria included about forty organizations (mostly in Beirut and Damascus) with five hundred to a thousand active members.\(^{190}\)

The movement's agenda reflected the concerns of its middle- and upper-class base. As Thompson writes, "Women's leaders came from a privileged elite that had espoused ideals of social progress before the war, and that took a liberal view toward customary and religious restrictions on women's behavior."\(^{191}\) Many of them had family ties to prominent male politicians (Nazik `Abid was related to Syria's first elected president; Julia Dimashqiya's husband served as the mayor of Beirut\(^{192}\)) and had been educated at foreign schools. As members of wealthy families that did not enforce strict seclusion of women, they were accustomed to many of the same conventions of bourgeois social and associational life that defined \textit{fin-de-siecle} Western societies.\(^{193}\) Dimashqiya's literary salon in Beirut, for example, drew members of both sexes who conversed in English, Arabic, and French.\(^{194}\) Such cosmopolitanism, which seriously limited the movement's ability to draw a mass following at home, would facilitate its contacts with international women's groups.


\(^{191}\) Ibid, 99.

\(^{192}\) He was also a Muslim. Their interreligious marriage (Dimashqiya was Protestant) was initially considered scandalous in Beirut. Dimeschkie, "Julia Tu` mi," 58.


\(^{194}\) Dimechkie, "Julia Tu` mi," 66. The salon lasted from about 1915 until the early 1930s.
Fareedah el Akle, who had been educated at a Quaker school in Brumana and later taught in American and British schools in the region, was among the first Syrian women to establish connection with women's international feminist organizations. One of her friends was Emily Rieder, an American member of the IAW who spent much of her life studying the Middle East; it was likely through Rieder that El Akle became acquainted with the Alliance. She represented Syria at the 1926 IAW congress in Paris and was instrumental in starting a Syrian corresponding section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in the early 1920s. In a 1921 letter to WILPF international secretary Emily Greene Balch, she supplied the names and addresses of prominent women (predominantly Christian) in Syria and Lebanon whom she thought would be interested in promoting the League; among them were Julia Dimashqiya, Mary 'Ajamy, Alice Kandeleft, and Amina Khuri—all of whom would later establish contacts with the International Alliance of Women.195

This small nucleus of women never became a full-fledged national section of WILPF196 but they published its literature and followed its activities in their magazines

195 She included the name "E. Kahddoura" and marked that she was a Muslim. This was undoubtedly a reference to Ibtihaj Qaddura, who headed the Syrian and Lebanese Women's Union when it affiliated with the International Alliance of Women in 1935. El Akle to Balch, 26 April 1921, reel 89, WILPF Papers.

196 In 1930, the secretary of the Syrian and Lebanese Women's Union wrote to WILPF headquarters seeking to affiliate: "Although we took and are still taking a great interest in all your work and have propagated your principles and ideas in many of our private and public meetings, yet we have not yet had the opportunity of applying for membership in your International League, due to the fact that we have represented in the past only a small number of women's societies in Syria. Now, when the thirty most important societies that have among their members the best and most highly educated women of Syria, have associated with us, we feel that the time has come for applying for membership." T. S. David to Mary Sheepshanks, n.d. (1930), reel 70, WILPF Papers. Because national sections were to be composed of individuals rather than organizations, WILPF responded that it could not accept the Women's Union's application. The women were advised to form a "corresponding group" to promote the League's ideals until a national section could be formally admitted at the 1932 congress. Sheepshanks to David, 5 May 1930 ibid. The organization's correspondence with Syrian women stops around this point.
Amina Khuri, Dimashqiya's friend and colleague in the Ladies' Society, conveyed the admiration she and her compatriots shared for WILPF's lofty ideals:

We all liked your aims. "Peace and freedom" sound so sweetly to us after what we suffered during time of war, injustice, poverty, starvation, death. . . We the Christians used to look to England and France as our helpers, our rescuers but now we know our mistake. It seems that policy has no principles or honor. It seems that the principles of Christ are only for poor people and not for the great and noted men who are leading the world. Our beloved Syria is sacrificed on the altar of their ambitions and interest. I write to explain some of our feelings and need to see [sic] that we are eager to have your ideas which lead to peace and freedom.\(^{198}\)

The desire to "explain our feelings" would become characteristic of Syrian women's sporadic contacts with the international women's movement. Khuri, Dimashqiya, and El Akle all confessed to feeling far away and isolated from their Western counterparts; as one of the Syrian delegates to the twelfth IAW congress in Istanbul in 1935, Dimashqiya remarked that "Western women began to build their creed of human service at a time when our very existence was totally unknown to her [sic]."\(^{199}\) Although they would never develop as strong a link to international women's organizations as did the Egyptian Feminist Union, Syrian women were alert to and inspired by their work. As Khuri's letters indicate (and as we will see in the next chapter), their aggrieved sense of national honor conditioned the terms on which they would seek to connect with the broader movement of women.

\(^{197}\) Julia Dimashqiya to Emily Balch, 21 May 1921, reel 89, WILPF Papers; Fareedah el Akle to Balch, 26 April 1921 and 30 March 1922, ibid.

\(^{198}\) Amina Khuri to Emily Balch, n.d., reel 89, WILPF Papers; and 20 March 1922, ibid.

\(^{199}\) Dimashqiya, speech entitled, "Delegates and Friends," box 1, folder 8, IAW Papers, SSC.
The Eastern Women's Conferences of 1930 and 1932

Elizabeth Thompson has described the period between 1928 and 1936 as one of retrenchment for the Levantine women's movement, during which feminist leaders adopted a more cautious agenda after the defeat of woman suffrage and the publication of Nazira Zayn al-Din's explosive treatise, *Unveiling and Veiling*. In the early 1920s many women had entertained hopes that their wartime service would be rewarded with full citizenship rights. Nazik ʿAbid, Mary ʿAjamy, and Julia Dimashqiya supported woman suffrage in their magazines as the issue was being debated in the Syrian Congress in 1920 and the Lebanese Representative Council in 1924. Drawing on ideas of the Islamic modernists and the legacy of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arab heroines, they argued that women's present exclusion from civic affairs violated the true spirit of Islam. Advocates of women's political rights faced staunch opposition, however, from Muslim conservatives and populists who feared that women's voting rights would undermine male authority in the family. (More muted resistance came from the French government, which had refused to grant French women suffrage in 1922). When the Syrian and Lebanese constitutions were drafted in 1926 and 1930, respectively, they included no provision for female suffrage.

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200 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 141-46.


Hostility to women's rights intensified after Nazira Zayn al-Din, the daughter of a Lebanese Druze judge, published a book that dared question the legal interpretations of some of Sunni Islam's leading religious authorities.\textsuperscript{203} *Unveiling and Veiling* was a work of independent scholarship (al-Din had been educated by her father, an appeals court judge in Beirut) that exposed the hypocrisy of men who invoked religion to justify their domination of women. Arguing that Islam's true principles supported equality between the sexes, she followed Qasim Amin in condemning the veil as a tool of male oppression. She claimed the right of individuals to interpret Qur'anic verses for themselves (*ijtihad*), and, in a move that would antagonize many, including some members of the women's movement, appealed to the French colonial authorities to limit the influence of religious clerics in civic life. Although some prominent male nationalists initially praised the work, their voices were soon drowned out by the vitriolic condemnation of religious conservatives. (Her loudest critic, Shaykh Mustafa Ghalayini, a professor at the Islamic College of Beirut, accused al-Din of being the dupe of missionaries and suggested that she had not even written the book.) Physical attacks on unveiled women or those attired in European fashions in the streets of Beirut and Damascus were a violent manifestation of the issue's embeddedness in the "rising nationalist fervor and class tension" that permeated 1930s Syria.\textsuperscript{204} Those tensions gave rise to a new discourse that polarized East and West, pitting Islamic populists against the secular nationalists whom they regarded as a privileged, francophile elite. In this highly charged context, veiling assumed its symbolic burden as a primary signifier of Islamic cultural authenticity.

\textsuperscript{203} What follows is taken from Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, chap. 7.

\textsuperscript{204} Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 137.
The controversy over Zayn al-Din's book had a chilling effect on the Syrian women's movement. Facing entrenched and sometimes violent opposition, women retreated from their earlier agenda that had prioritized political rights and embraced a politics of patriotic motherhood, framing their demands for women's education in terms of mothers' responsibility for raising good citizens.\textsuperscript{205} Thompson speculates that the shift may have been calculated to attract a larger following; the movement had after all failed to recruit many adherents outside the very narrow strata of elite women. It may also have been influenced by the course of events in other countries--the emergence of maternalist ideologies in Egypt, India, and parts of Europe, for example, as well as the defeat of woman suffrage in France in 1922. There were also domestic political considerations at work. The 1930s saw the rise of nationalist political parties, the Constitutional Bloc in Lebanon and the Nationalist Bloc in Syria, which competed against the French and their collaborators for the loyalty of urban masses. Cultivating popular support required nationalists to avoid alienating religious opinion too far. Since another goal of the women's movement was likely "to help install the nationalist parties in government so that they might use state powers to redraw the gendered legal boundaries of the civic order," the shift to the politics of patriotic motherhood may have represented a pragmatic accommodation to the emergent political order.\textsuperscript{206}

\textsuperscript{205} This seems to be a pattern of nation-building across time and space. Linda Kerber was one of the first to analyze how motherhood becomes endowed with new political significance at moments of national independence. See Kerber, \textit{Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

\textsuperscript{206} Thompson, \textit{Colonial Citizens}, 142.
Regardless of the cause, the new direction was evident when women from across the Mediterranean convened in Damascus in July 1930 for the first Eastern Women's Conference. The primary figure behind the event was Nur Hamada, who hailed from a prominent Druze family and had been educated at an English school in Beirut. Hamada was extraordinarily active in the women's movement, presiding over three separate organizations. One of these, the Women's Arabic and Cultural Assembly, a cross-sectarian organization whose membership was limited to women who had at least a secondary education, apparently affiliated with the IAW in 1929.

Early in 1930, Hamada sent invitations to feminist leaders in Afghanistan, Australia, China, Egypt, the Hijaz, India, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Java, Lebanon, Syria, Tunis, and Turkey. According to Ellen Fleischmann, a planning session by an "Eastern Arab Women's Assembly" had taken place in Beirut in March, to which the Arab Women's Executive Committee in Jerusalem sent a delegation (there were no Palestinian representatives at the Damascus conference). She also notes that an earlier session of the congress had convened in April in Beirut, headed by Labiba Thabit in place of Huda Sha'rawi, who was too ill to attend.

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207 "Discours de Mme Nour Hamadé," *Le Deuxième Congrès musulman*, 54.


The opening meeting was held in the Great Hall of the Syrian University before an audience composed primarily of men. Smaller sessions convened over the next four days and were attended by approximately 100 women. At the request of the Syrian women, the International Alliance of Women sent a representative (Avra Theodoropoulos of Greece) to observe the proceedings and talk about the organization's goals. She described the generally hostile atmosphere surrounding the conference:

It is easy to imagine the difficulties the organizers of the conference had to fight against. ... The conservative men were against it, because they feared it meant the revolt of Moslem women against tradition. The Government looked upon it with suspicion, as they feared it would turn out to be a nationalist demonstration. Even the nationalists refused to support it unless they included propaganda for the Arab language and national industries in their agenda. The attitude of the Government towards these women gave the Congress even more impetus than it might have had otherwise. They would not grant permission to hold the Congress in the University till the very last moment; there were notices in the Press saying that the Congress would not take place. All this, to discourage the women from attending it. They would not allow journalists to be present at the sessions after the opening meeting, thus obliging the Congress to leave the University and continue its work in a private school. The police, I was told, paid spies to give them information of what was going on at the Congress. It was only natural that these measures exasperated the women and the result was that the leading feature of the Congress was the craving for liberation.²¹¹

Such a climate was hardly hospitable to radical demands. The women did not call for political rights, although they urged greater equality between men and women in the areas of education, marriage, and labor. In addition to these issues, the delegates discussed cultural and nationalist subjects such as social hygiene, temperance, the promotion of the Arabic language and literature and the protection of national industries.

According to Hamada's report to the Alliance, the conference adopted the following resolutions: That polygamy be abolished in all its forms; that a woman have the same rights as a man to divorce and under the same conditions; that the minimum marriage age be set at 16 for girls and 18 for boys; that women receive equal pay for equal work and that all avenues of employment and advancement be equally open to women as to men; that compulsory elementary education be established and applied equally to women as to men; and that the employment of children under the age of 14 be prohibited.\textsuperscript{212} A Supreme Council of Eastern Women was charged with organizing subsequent conferences every two years.

Theodoropolous suggested that the conference organizers had deliberately tailored their demands to the tenor of the times: "The impression left by the Congress on the more progressive among its members was that the resolutions were too meek and mild, somewhat timorous indeed. There was no resolution for abolishing the veil, and, as for the vote, it is out of the question in a country under a foreign mandate. It was nevertheless explained to me that this was the wisest way to get on; the fact that women from all Oriental countries had met together to express their feelings and speak their minds was in itself a great event, and sufficient for a first step."\textsuperscript{213} Her account implies that the conference was an initial step toward a Western-style suffrage movement, attributing the "meekness" of its resolutions to simple expedience. How accurately had she read the aspirations of the women who convened and attended the conference?

\textsuperscript{212} Nur Hamada, "The Oriental Women's Congress in Damascus, Part I: The President's Report," ibid, 189.

\textsuperscript{213} Theodoropoulos, "The Oriental Women's Congress," ibid, 190.
Hamada's own comments appear to be somewhat contradictory. In a letter to the Alliance announcing the conference, she listed woman suffrage first among the issues on its agenda. Yet in recounting its aims in a speech at the second Eastern Women's Congress in Tehran two years later, she made no mention of political rights. Instead, she exhorted women to work for chastity, purity, piety, honor, and above all, education:

"Nothing more than ignorance impedes the progress and happiness of man and woman. When woman knows how to raise her children, she can demand her rights from men and take them in hand." The intimation that women needed to "prepare themselves" for citizenship was a common feature of feminist rhetoric in the Middle East, which often exhibited "a gradualism that could take on conservative tones." Hamada's articulation of the conference's goals varied according to her audience, leaving the question of what the delegates hoped to achieve through regional cooperation somewhat ambiguous.

What is clear is that they were following a larger trend. As Saiza Nabarawi had observed, women from Asia and the Americas had already formed their own regional associations. In the summer of 1930 a group of prominent activists in India, including Sarujini Naidu, Shareefah Hamid Ali, Mrs. Rameswari Nehru, and Margaret Cousins


215 "Discours de Mme Nour Hamadé," Le Deuxième Congrès musulman, 57.

216 Booth, May Her Likes Be Multiplied, 160. Here Booth concurs with Beth Baron's assessment of early Egyptian feminist writers in The Women's Awakening. In 1923, Julia Dimashqiya wrote to her readers, "I don't mean to demand all women's rights, for they are not ready for them yet . . . I would like honest cooperation with the men of my country who want to improve us and prepare us for a position of equality." Al-Mar'a al-jadida (June 1923), 186 and (July 1923), 225; quoted in Dimechkie, "Julia Tu`mi," 118. Dimashqiya was apparently chastened by the refusal of the Lebanese Council to support women's suffrage in 1923 when the issue came up for debate.
announced plans for an All Asia Women's Conference to take place in January 1931.

The invitation read in part:

> Each continent has its own distinctive characteristics, which should be fostered for the enrichment of human unity. Behind the vast and varying divergences of life in Asia there is a fundamental cultural unity. In the extremes of honor and of servitude accorded to its womanhood Asia is one... In our opinion it is fully time that we Oriental women should make a determined effort to understand one another and develop among ourselves a spirit of Asian sisterhood, with the object of preserving all that is valuable in our age-long national and social cultures and of discriminating what is best for us to assimilate from outside Asia.\(^{217}\)

A more compelling articulation of the "double bind" that has shaped non-Western feminisms is hard to imagine. Despite the heterogeneity of societies subsumed under the rubric "Asia," the sense that Asian women faced similar problems in their effort to challenge partriarchal constraints at home without becoming overly "Westernized" was widespread enough to unite delegates from countries as different as India and Japan. Whatever their unique political circumstances vis-a-vis Europe (direct colonial rule or full independence), for most Asian countries the West stood as the dominant referent against which to imagine and define a modern future. For Asian women, the conference represented an attempt to carve out autonomous space--independent of Eastern men and Western women--from which to launch that effort.

The conference organizers stipulated that each of the thirty-three countries of Asia could send ten delegates; women of non-Asian birth were welcome as visitors but would not be permitted to speak or vote. English would be the chief language, supplemented by Arabic, Urdu, and French.\(^{218}\) Nazik ’Abid of Syria was invited to

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\(^{217}\) "Three Events of Importance," *Pax International* 5, no. 8 (June 1930), 6.

\(^{218}\) "All Asian Women's Conference," *Pax International* 6.2 (December 1930), 2.
stand for election as the president of the conference; Nur Hamada and Masturah Afshar, leader of the Iranian Patriotic Women's League, also received invitations. When the conference finally convened, however, turn-out was lower than had been hoped: aside from India, the only countries that actually sent delegates were Java, Japan, Burma, Afghanistan, Ceylon, and Iran. The eleven resolutions adopted resembled those of the first Eastern Women's Conference, embedding feminist demands within a nationalist framework. The women called for women's equality (to be defined by the abolition of polygamy, equal custody and property rights, equal rights to divorce, equal nationality rights, and equal suffrage); free and compulsory education for girls and boys; children's rights; the inclusion of world religions in school and college curricula; modern health care systems; the prohibition of drugs and alcohol; an equal moral standard; support for peace and the League of Nations; and the regulation and improvement of women's labor conditions. Another resolution emphasized the necessity "of retaining the high spiritual consciousness which has been the fundamental characteristic of the people of Asia throughout the centuries and desires that the women of Asia maintain that high standard, uninfluenced by the materialistic modern trend." The conference also demanded the right of every individual and nation to self-expression, and therefore "full responsible self-government" for each country.


220 Events of the Month," *Jus Suffragii* 25.4 (January 1931), 53-54.

221 *Pax International* 6. 5 (April 1931), 5; and "All-Asian Women's Conference," *Jus Suffragii* 25.7 (April 1931); 101.
Nur Hamada was prevented at the last moment from attending the conference, although she sent a message of good will. In a reciprocal gesture, the All-Asian Conference sent Margaret Cousins as its representative to the second (and last) Eastern Women's Conference, which took place in Tehran in December of 1932 following brief sessions in Damascus and Baghdad in October. The organizing committee included Hamada as president, Mastureh Afshar as vice president, and two secretaries: veteran Iranian feminist Sadiqeh Dowlatabadi, who had founded Zaban-e Zana (Women's Voice) around the turn of the century, and Madeleine Jamil of Lebanon. Fatima Murad, one of the first women to earn a law degree in Syria represented that country, and Hanifa Khuri represented Egypt. Other countries represented included Afghanistan, China, the Hijaz, India, Iraq, Turkey, Japan, Australia, and Java. Emily Rieder had been asked by Margery Corbett Ashby to represent the Alliance (she attended the sessions in Damascus and Baghdad but not Tehran).

The Tehran conference endorsed the program adopted two years earlier in Damascus and added some new resolutions, including suffrage for women in those countries where a majority of women were educated. The women also called for the protection of national industries and, in cases of defensive war, for women to join men on the battlefield. According to Palestinian press coverage of the Damascus and Baghdad

222 Jus Suffragii 25.6 (March 1931).

223 "Women's Conferences at Damascus and Baghdad," Jus Suffragii 27.3 (December 1932), 18. It is unclear whether Cousins continued on to Tehran. She is not mentioned in Deuxième Congrès musulman.
sessions, they agreed to leave the question of the veil to the passage of time, "because going into it now would only muddle things and electrify the atmosphere."  

The resolutions convey the powerful anticolonial context in which the conference took place. Writing about them in 1936, Palestinian women's leader Matiel Mughannam noted that they referred to "matters of a purely public character which in many independent countries are undertaken by the state."  

Hamada asserted that Tehran had been selected as the host city because unlike other countries in the region, Iran possessed "complete independence and there was no foreign influence of any sort there."  

Suggestive of state efforts both to "embrace and contain" the emergent women's movement, strong government interest in the conference was shown in all three cities. The Syrian Prime Minister gave a welcoming address in Damascus; delegates in Baghdad met with King Faysal and Ali Nuri Pasha; and in Tehran, a parliamentary deputy, Zahir al-Elsam Owrang, served as a translator from Arabic to Persian as well as a representative of the Pahlavi regime. The presence of government officials symbolized state commitment to "modernizing" women, a project enmeshed in the ongoing struggle of Middle Eastern countries against Western domination.

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225 Mughannam, The Arab Woman and the Palestine Question, 65.


227 Amin, ibid, 190.

228 "Women's Conferences at Damascus and Baghdad," Jus Suffragii 27.3 (December 1932), 17-18; Amin, The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman, 194.
Government support proved both a boon and burden to the women, conferring legitimacy and respect but also signifying supervision and control. We have seen already how cautiously Syrian women had to proceed in 1930. Parvin Paidar has written that the 1932 conference in Tehran was "the last semi-independent activity undertaken by women" in Iran before Reza Shah Pahlavi (reigned 1925-41) co-opted the women's movement by creating the Ladies' Centre (variously translated as the Women's Society) under the honorary presidency of his daughter, Princess Shams Pahlavi, in 1935. The primary goal of the Ladies' Centre was to promote public unveiling. Like Turkey's secularizing ruler Ataturk, whose reforms he admired, Reza Shah attempted to remake Iranian womanhood through state policy and propaganda. In a project known as the Women's Awakening that lasted from 1936 until 1941, his regime advocated and enforced a vision of the modern Iranian woman as an unveiled, educated participant in society. The regime made unveiling compulsory for women in exchange for providing them new opportunities in education and employment. (Unlike in Turkey, these were not accompanied by suffrage rights.) The new Civil Code of 1931 secularized most areas of social life but preserved patriarchal control in the family by simply codifying sharia precepts and prevalent practices. It preserved, for example, men's unilateral right to divorce and custody of children. In effect, the state's policies on the family amounted to "a modernization of patriarchy rather than its fundamental revision."

The Iranian government's sponsorship of the conference elicited varied responses from the delegates. Virtually all the speakers offered obligatory words of gratitude and praise, which in the speeches of some, was more than perfunctory: Mastureh Afshar, for example, described Persian womanhood "before the arrival of the brilliant Pahlavi era" as an object of debasement and pity. By way of illustrating the difference that separated Iranian women from those of most Eastern countries, she hailed the passage of a new marriage law mandating medical exams before marriage and urged other states to follow Iran's example.230

Others were less willing to serve as mouthpieces for the regime. Mrs. Iran Arani declared that women had to take charge of their own emancipation: "I want to say that if we women would also like to progress, humility and submission to men, as well as fraility and flattery in demanding our rights, will furnish no result. . . . Put another way, I want to point out that the liberty of woman must be obtained by woman herself."231 A socialist, Arani called for women's participation in production as the key to their liberation but also asserted that women needed to attain equal rights before joining with men to "move society forward." As Paidar observes, her independent stance conflicted both with the official aims of the Communist Party, which prioritized class struggle over women's equality, and the Pahlavi regime, which tolerated no independent feminist activity.232

230 "Discours de Mme Mastouré Afchar, vice-présidente du Congrès," Deuxième Congrès musulman, 60-62.

231 "Allocation de Mme Iran Erani," ibid, 91.

232 Paidar, Women and the Political Process, 103.
Arani's was not the only voice to contradict the conceit that Iranian women's liberation was already at hand. On at least three occasions, conference president Nur Hamada challenged the presumption of the Pahlavi regime. When Iranian MP Owrang cautioned at a pre-conference organizational meeting that women should not make unveiling a priority, Hamada responded:

The veil and face veil will not slow progress or impede its development [for women]. We have inserted broader principles in our platform because we wish to say to Western women that Eastern women do not [merely] have limited goals. We are also trying to bring ourselves to their level. Just as the women of Turkey have the highest degree [of progress] among [our] Eastern sisters, and after them the women of Egypt and the daughters of the land of the Pharaohs, and then Syria proper followed by Greater Syria. The women of Iraq have a new awakening, and most of the [progressive] women of the Hijaz are women from Syria and Greater Syria who have Hijazi husbands. And now that I have come to Iran and gathered with learned men and women, I am endlessly pleased that I am among them. I am also eminently satisfied that in Tehran, the imperial capital of Iran, with a great king such as the Pahlavi emperor, I see this awakening in [my] Iranian sisters. I can say that among the women of the countries I have listed, we can place them [the Iranians] in the middle--we should not exaggerate and say that they are in the highest level [of progress] nor be unfair and say they are in last place.  

Here Hamada "disabused Owrang, and through him the Iranian government, of the notion that Iran's progress was exemplary in the Eastern world." (Later, she compared the countries of Asia to a chain, with Turkey and Japan representing its ends. Noting that each movement along the chain was felt throughout, she claimed that Turkish and Japanese women, who had attained the highest degree of progress, were near the point of


234 Amin, ibid.
winning the right to stand for parliamentary elections and expressed the hope that "this movement of the two ends . . . will communicate itself to us."\(^{235}\)

At another session, Hamada introduced a resolution for women to join men on the battlefield in the case of defensive war as a "response to the man who said that women cannot be equal to men in all points because they cannot make war (I have in view Mr. Owrang.)"\(^{236}\) But the most dramatic rebuke came after Owrang delivered a patronizing speech chiding women to give up their attachment to luxury and imported fashions. He was speaking after the women had passed their resolutions, and chose to focus on the one that urged women to protect and encourage national industries by wearing clothes made from indigenous textiles. The issue was a serious one--the collapse of Lebanon's silk industry was due in part to competition from Asian imports--and Hamada had introduced it by saying that women, as mistresses of the household, were in a primary position to influence domestic economy by consuming national products.\(^{237}\)

What must have infuriated some of the delegates was the fact that Owrang completely ignored the other resolutions and suggested that their addiction to luxury was the "root cause" of their grievances. "If you . . . rid yourselves and your husbands of this burden, you will have diminished 97 percent of your worries, your misfortunes, your miseries and your troubles. The 3 percent that remain, I know them well, but I leave them for another time."\(^{238}\)

\(^{235}\) "Débats et résolutions," Deuxième Congrès musulman, 93.

\(^{236}\) Ibid, 99.

\(^{237}\) Ibid, 96-97.

\(^{238}\) "Discours de M. Aureng," ibid, 107.
Hamada thanked Owrang for his comments and repeated his call for women to eschew imported fashion in favor of national textiles. But while Owrang had framed the resolution as a moral corrective to women's supposedly natural penchant for luxury, Hamada restored its nationalist context, declaring that the principal cause of "our ignorance, our lassitude, and our indolence" was the West's gratuitous stealing of Eastern treasures. She cited the example of Gandhi and his female followers as a model for other Eastern women, and then reminded Orwrang that he served as the intermediary between the delegates and the male public, for whom she had a sharp message: "Men! The hearts of your sisters of the East are inflamed with love and the desire for success and independence. But the egoism, the vanity, and arrogance of certain men who don't permit their sisters to take their place among the ranks of militants and to make efforts toward the progress and success of their country (that is to say the East), are a mortal poison poured on the wish for progress and success."  

If the agenda of the 1930 conference in Damascus had been determined largely in concession to male leaders, Hamada now forcefully rejected the notion that they could be custodians of women's interests. The point was echoed publicly when one Iranian woman aired her complaints about the conference in a newspaper. This time, however, Hamada and her colleagues also came in for criticism:

In the first place I am greatly overjoyed to have our honorable guests here for the uniting of Oriental women. . . . I have always longed for a time when the women may have such an organization which could help them in their problems. But unfortunately it is true that if they go on as they have done these first few days, there is no hope of getting any benefit from this Congress. Everything they have said and done during these days has been

239 "Discours de Mme Nour Hamadé," ibid, 110.
useless and we have not taken even one step toward the improvement of our conditions. First, let me ask the hosts this question: Are your honorable guests the representatives of women and men of the Orient or of women? If they represent the Oriental women, why are the meetings full of men? What do these men want at such meetings? . . . If they want to hear their speeches why don't they refer to the newspapers? And if they are only as spectators, it is better to bar them just as they prohibit us from entering their meetings such as "Parliament." . . . My second question is about the President and other representatives and even the Perisan ladies who are giving fine speeches. What do they mean? Have they thought of any plan for freeing us from all the miseries or are they after an unknown aim? If they have any plans, then why have they not expounded on them?240

In the view of this disgruntled author, entrusting women's emancipation to men was folly; their presence at the conference--and perhaps the frequent tributes to Reza Shah--led her to conclude that the conference would yield no concrete gains.

The Tehran conference demonstrated the ambiguous positioning of Eastern women in relation to the modernizing discourses of nationalism and international feminism. The challenge facing Hamada and her colleagues was to articulate feminist demands in an "Eastern" idiom, defined against the overarching construct, "Western civilization." Like the All-Asian conference, the Tehran conference was marked by an emphasis on the preservation of Eastern "culture," however ill-defined. Here Islam served as a unifying symbol, despite Hamada's emphasis on the cross-sectarian composition of the delegates. She herself had declared it a "subject of pride that the sovereign of Persia should be of the pure Persian race, and profess the Muslim religion: the religious bond is that which most solidly unites the Eastern nations."241 References to Islam abounded in

240 Shafagh Sorkh, 15 November 1932, Press Translation Service, 2 December 1932, 2, box 40, folder 1, Ruth Woodsmall Papers.

the speeches of the other delegates; some hewed to the conservative religious line that Islamic law had already provided women with all that was necessary for her happiness, without mentioning any need for change. In a more subversive mode, Hamada declared that men, in their ignorance, had flouted religion and its provisions for women's rights:

> For example, by commandment of our Holy Book, polygamy is impossible; yet men take four wives with extreme boldness. According to religious law, repudiation [of wives] is very difficult; yet these men divorce with the same ease with which water flows. Our saintly law contains prescriptions for inheritance; yet men make their wills and deny the rightful shares to their daughters, wives, and sisters, giving all to their sons. This is why we have decided, at our first congress, that this sort of will should be annulled. Likewise, we have decided that woman can, according to law, equally demand divorce.

Noting that its opening and closing days had coincided with Muslim holidays (signs that woman is "truly angelic"), she ended the conference on a defiant note: "Long live woman! Death to the man who oppresses her! But a long life the man who aids her!"

And yet if Islam provided the delegates with a "specifically Eastern basis" from which to claim their rights, the West still loomed as the source of modernity, a condition to which they aspired and which they identified with women's emancipation. But they wanted to achieve modernity on their own terms. "The West" was therefore a topic that produced deep ambivalence, and figured in their rhetoric as both beacon and menace.

Speakers openly expressed their admiration for the gains that European and American

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242 "Discours de Mme Manzar Tabatabai," Deuxième Congrès musulman, 85; and "Discours de Mme Akhtar Esfendiyari," ibid, 88-90.

243 Hamada, "Débats et résolutions," ibid, 98.

244 "Discours de clôture de la Présidente du Congrès," ibid, 123.
women had achieved in the face of male opposition, and even suggested that Eastern women wanted to attain their level (Hamada, for example, in her reply to Owrang's caution against unveiling, and Mastureh Afshar when she suggested that women writers in Iran had prepared the way for Iranian women to initiate a movement for equal rights, "just as their sisters in Europe and America."). That they requested a representative from the IAW to attend the proceedings indicated a show of solidarity with the cause of liberal feminism and an understanding that women's struggles everywhere were linked.

But if the West proved inspirational in some respects it also threatened to corrupt Eastern values. Invoking a trope of reformist discourse that had origins in the Ottoman confrontation with Europe, delegates represented the West as a potential agent of moral degeneration and resolved to "choose among the morals and customs of the West that are good and laudable and reject those that are founded on passions." In a pointed reference to the dark side of modernity, Mme Talaat Tabatabai of Iran took stock of Eastern and Western civilization: "Chastity, innocence, generosity, valiance, loyalty, clemency, kindness, nobility of the soul, friendliness towards neighbors, philanthropy, appreciation of merit, in short all that is necessary to the tranquility and happiness of a collectivity, these are the customs of the East. But ships, railroads, submarines, airplanes, canons, rifles, . . . these are the properties of the West. And now we must judge which of these diverse elements are most necessary for the well-being of society."

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245 The phrase comes from Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 139.

246 "Discours de Mme Mastouré Afchar," *Deuxième Congrès musulman*, 62.

247 "Débats et résolutions," ibid, 96.

248 "Discours de Mme Talaat Tabatabai," ibid, 83.
And Hanifa Khuri, in recounting the work of the Egyptian Feminist Union, asserted that Huda Sha’rawi had always urged the adoption of European customs "that are convenient to Muslims" and the rejection of its "reprehensible" ones.249

Yet what, precisely, were "Eastern" virtues, and how were Eastern women to reconcile their admiration of Western women's achievements with their wariness of "blind imitation"? Hamada suggested the solution: "In the West it is the higher-class women, gifted with moral values, that we should take for imitation, and not those who dance and wear the latest fashions, not the courtisans and actresses. . . . You know well that in the West, dancing, frivolous entertainments, loafing, gambling, drinking parties, . . . and enslavement to fashion are particular to women of the lower class; higher-class women and those who progress are not preoccupied by these puérilités and advance without ceasing in the way of perfection."250

On one level, of course, Hamada's statement demonstrates the class bias that did so much to consolidate international feminism. Her condemnation of frivolity and leisure, explicitly associated with lower-class women, may be traced to the "hegemonizing ascendancy of bourgeois culture" and the new domestic ethos that radiated outward from nineteenth-century Europe to many parts of the colonized world.251 The ideals of companionate marriage, the nuclear family, the division of

249 "Discours de la déléguée de l'Égypte," ibid, 70.

250 "Débats et résolutions," ibid, 96.

domestic and public space, and education for women that had accompanied the reorganization of economic and social life in industrializing societies had been present in the Middle East since at least the early 1900s. In women's magazines in Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere repeated the advice found in the conduct literature of eighteenth-century England and the nineteenth-century United States, counseling industry, discipline, and thrift--virtues that had "unmistakable links to a modern capitalist order." In contrasting bourgeois women's probity against the moral laxity of working-class women, Hamada spoke a language that would have been familiar to many members of the international women's movement. The overwhelmingly middle- and upper-class composition of international women's organizations was critical to the ideological construction of sisterhood and the perception that otherwise diverse women shared common interests.

But, coming as it did from the most energetic Syrian supporter of affiliation with an international organization dedicated to women's political equality, Hamada's comment meant something more in a Middle Eastern context, where (at least in Egypt and Syria) women's greater visibility and participation in public life met intense backlash. Even if she muted her advocacy before domestic (and male) audiences, she clearly endorsed the


252 See Baron, Women's Awakening and the collected essays in Abu-Lughod, ed., Remaking Women, especially those by Afsaneh Najmabadi, Ommia Shakry, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Deniz Kandiyoti.

principle of women's suffrage. Sensitive to anticolonialist discourses that polarized East and West and positioned women as the custodians of Eastern culture--discourses in which the figure of the "emancipated woman" often carried profoundly disturbing connotations of sexual independence--Hamada suggested that women applying themselves seriously to the pursuit of feminist goals was compatible with Eastern feminine virtue. Drawing a sharp boundary between moral and immoral Western women was a way of "domesticating" liberal feminism in Middle Eastern societies that had already begun to accept many of the ideals of bourgeois domesticity.

As we know from the subsequent history of feminism in the region, her effort was doomed to fail. In Lebanon and Syria, women's aspirations for citizenship would be blocked by the alliance between nationalists and religious elites in their struggle against the French. When the particular configuration of colonial politics prevented changes in personal status law, more radical demands like suffrage were unthinkable. As Thompson writes with reference to Levant, although the point applies elsewhere in the Middle East (with the exception of Turkey), "Women's appeals to universalist principles of equality and rights were undercut . . . [by] the rise of religion-based discourses of


255 As Thompson puts it," To foster an alliance with religious elites, nationalists would abet patriarchs' efforts to increase the scope of their religious authority. And because personal status laws were precisely the power base from which religious patriarchs sought to extend their power, the contest would necessarily be played out on legal issues of central concern to the women's movement, Women's personal status would be sacrificed to the politics of cooperation between Lebanese and Syrian politicians and religious patriarchs." Colonial Citizens, 150.
cultural particularity.\textsuperscript{256} That legacy, combined with the disillusionment with liberalism that began in the 1930s but grew increasingly widespread after World War II, left little fertile ground for equal rights feminism to take root.

**Conclusion**

The 1932 Tehran conference proved to be the last of the Eastern Women's Conferences. Hamada, who was the driving force behind them, seems to have become less active in the Syrian women's movement by the mid-1930s (she is not mentioned at all, for example, in Ruth Woodsmall's 1936 study of women's movements in the Middle East and India). She disappears from IAW sources after 1932; the committee for the admission of new societies reported in 1935 that the Syrian affiliate had been replaced by a larger group--listed later as the Arab Feminist Union (the Women's Union of Lebanon and Syria), under the leadership of Ibtihaj Qaddura.\textsuperscript{257} In the late 1930s, Middle Eastern women's regional cooperation would take a new direction as pan-Arab solidarity around the issue of Palestine developed. In October 1938, Huda Sha’rawi and the EFU sponsored the Eastern Women’s Conference for the Defense of Palestine in Cairo. Whereas the earlier conferences were conceived as a broad movement of Asian women, the 1938 conference drew only Arab delegates (with the exception of one from Iran), and

\textsuperscript{256} Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 290. Making essentially the same point with respect to the backlash against feminism in Egypt in the 1930s, Marilyn Booth nevertheless puts it more carefully: "Rather than seeing groups such as the Young Men's Muslim Association and the Muslim Brotherhood as opposed to women's rights because of their Islamic orientations, it seems more productive to see an Islamically couched rhetoric of opposition to women's public professional and political presence as serving the interests of groups that felt their socioeconomic position threatened." Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied*, 43.

nationalist demands assumed priority over concerns unique to women.\textsuperscript{258} Although Sha`rawi had invoked cooperation with Western women in her announcement of the conference, there were no Western women present, unlike at the 1930 and 1932 conferences.\textsuperscript{259} Indeed, the Palestine issue was destined to become the most divisive among Arab and Western women in the international women's movement.

Aside from giving host states an opportunity to signal their modernizing credentials, the Eastern Women's Conferences did not result in any actual reform along the lines called for in their resolutions. But before we dismiss them as insignificant for that reason, it is worth recalling that one of the mandates of women's history is to restore agency to those most ignored by the historical record (and this has been particularly so in colonized countries). I would suggest that the conferences constituted a momentary intervention in both the nationalist and international feminist discourses toward Eastern women that often positioned them as powerless to reform themselves. Here was an answer that they could be "agents in their own progress."\textsuperscript{260} In organizing across national boundaries, in seeking recognition from the Alliance, and above all in articulating a uniquely "Eastern" framework in which to ground women's rights, the delegates tried to


\textsuperscript{259} The announcement of the conference positioned it as a fulfillment of "the promise that we, the women of the East, have made to each other and to our Western sisters at various international congresses to cooperate" in the promotion of peace. "Premier Congrès au Caire des Femmes d'Orient en faveur de la Palestine," L'Egyptienne (July 1938), 3; quoted in Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation, 228.

\textsuperscript{260} Fiona Paisley, "Cultivating Modernity: Culture and Internationalism in Australian Feminism's Pacific Age," \textit{The Journal of Women's History} 14.3 (Autumn 2002): 105-32; quotation on 115.
create an autonomous women's movement that was allied with but independent from both Eastern men and Western women.

In 1934, *Jus Suffragii* ran a report submitted by Nazira Zayn al-Din, then secretary of the Arab Feminist Union, about one of the organization's recent congresses. "Although we have not yet attained the level of the Alliance, we are carrying our march forward toward success," al-Din wrote. *Jus* responded: "We heartily applaud the energy with which the Arab feminist movement is defending itself in a country where the situation of women is so precarious." It was an exchange that perfectly captures the mode of interchange between Western and Middle Eastern feminists before World War II. At a time when liberal ideals were still ascendant, the latter often readily acquiesced in orientalist depictions of Eastern women as less "modern" than their American and European sisters, although they challenged the notion that Eastern culture was wholly at fault. Like their Western counterparts, the most outspoken of them, such as Hamada and Nazira Zayn al-Din, blamed male presumption and hypocrisy instead. But, as we will see in the next chapter, it was the liberal promise that modernity could be achieved through sovereignty--individual as well as national--that provided colonized women with their strongest defense of Eastern culture.

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CHAPTER 4
THE 12th IAW CONGRESS IN ISTANBUL, 1935

In 1934, after receiving an offer from its Turkish affiliate to host the IAW's twelfth triennial congress in Istanbul, the Alliance board acknowledged "the importance of arranging a Congress which shall be especially convenient for the countries of the Near East" and sent four representatives to the region that winter to publicize the congress and strengthen the organization's ties with Arab women.\(^{262}\) The trip, which had been coordinated with the help of Egyptian feminist and board member Huda Sha’rawi, proved successful: the congress drew two of its largest delegations from Egypt and Syria, and admitted an affiliate representing Arab women in Palestine for the first time.

This chapter examines the 1935 IAW congress as one of the "conjunctures between the projects of Europeans and Middle Easterners."\(^{263}\) As Leila J. Rupp has observed, the process of creating a collective feminist identity among women from different countries was "dynamic and contentious."\(^{264}\) The congress in Istanbul was no exception; attending to the varied perspectives of its participants illustrates the truth of this observation. Taking place at a moment when "in much of the world, nationalism

\(^{262}\) "Meeting of the Board at Luxembourg," *Jus Suffragii* 28.7 (April 1934), 1.


became a narrative of progress, a distinctly modern claim about how citizenship and political representation might work for the future," the congress also suggests the different investments of its participants in the project of liberal feminism.\textsuperscript{265}

The 1935 meeting reveals both the powerful appeal and inherent limits of liberal feminism as a basis for international solidarity among women. Inasmuch as it linked women's emancipation—understood as their participation in the public realm of citizenship—to modernity, the IAW's agenda inspired consensus among the delegates. Both Western and Middle Eastern speakers characterized women's emancipation as a hallmark of modern civilization, to be guaranteed by the state through the equalization of rights and opportunities. With its appeals to nation, progress, and even domesticity, the rhetoric of modern womanhood proved especially useful to Arab delegates, who risked criticism from both conservative and nationalist quarters at home for participating in a conference dominated by European women, because it enabled them to represent feminism as an aspect of modernity rather than a product of Western civilization. Their professed admiration for Western women's achievements, coupled as it was with pointed references to their own, suggested a view of feminism as a trajectory common to all nations. If Western women had made greater strides in their quest for equal rights, the reason was not to be found in the supposed superiority of their culture but in the security of their national identities.

Therein lay the paradox of liberal feminism as the grounds for building an international women's movement. Western feminists were slow to recognize the contradiction that the "woman citizen" ideal, based as it was on individual rights

\textsuperscript{265} Fletcher, Mayhall, and Levine, Introduction, \textit{Women Suffrage in the British Empire}, xvii.
safeguarded by the nation-state, posed for women living under foreign rule—a fact resented by their Arab counterparts. Despite the tension that frayed at the new ties between Western and Arab women, however, the notion of sisterhood retained real meaning for them, beyond mere sentimentality or naive idealism. But they understood its terms and obligations differently. While Western feminists frequently invoked their responsibility to "lead" their less fortunate sisters, Arab feminists saw the conference as an opportunity to air their grievances before an international audience, and solicit sisterly help from Western women in combating colonialism.

PART ONE: THE TRIP TO THE NEAR EAST

The global economic crisis of the early 1930s forced the Alliance to postpone its twelfth triennial congress, which it had planned to convene in Athens in 1932. Meeting in Marseilles in the spring of 1933 to determine how best to continue the organization's work in the face of straitened finances, the executive board and presidents of twenty-four affiliated societies reaffirmed the principles of universal woman suffrage, an equal moral standard, civil and economic equality between women and men, and peace. Together with promises of financial backing from the auxiliaries, this confirmation of the Alliance agenda prompted the board to begin planning the twelfth congress. In June 1934, *Jus Suffragii* officially announced Istanbul as the chosen site, expressing the hope "that it will prove a convenient centre for the women of those countries lying around the

Mediterranean and beyond who for the most part have not won full suffrage and who in many cases are just in the early stages of an organised women's movement.\textsuperscript{267}

In January 1934, the Alliance sent three members of the Committee for Peace and the League of Nations (Rosa Manus of Holland, Germaine Malaterre-Sellier of France, and Christine Bakker van Bosse, also Dutch) as well as British president Margery Corbett Ashby to the Middle East to generate interest in the upcoming congress and the organization's peace work.\textsuperscript{268} Their reports of the trip, which included visits to Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, constitute the major source of information about it, although scattered references in the Arabic press (mostly Palestinian) also exist. Together, they permit a partial reconstruction of an encounter between European and Arab feminists—long forgotten by the history of the international women's movement—that yielded moments of profound tension as well as genuine solidarity. The inherent conflict between imperialism and nationalism impinged inevitably on the meetings between these representatives of the colonizer and colonized; at times, it threatened to preclude the possibility of collaboration altogether. But in the end the Alliance achieved its objective, securing the attendance of large delegations from the region to the Istanbul congress.

Egypt was the first stop on the group's itinerary. After spending a week in Cairo as Sha’rawi's guests, the four women split into pairs and traveled separately to Syria and Palestine. Ashby and Manus stopped briefly in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Beirut on their way


\textsuperscript{268}The trip was evidently planned in response to a request from Huda Sha’rawi. Rosa Manus reported to Josephine Schain, chair of the peace committee, that the Alliance had received a "very pressing long letter from Egypt from Mme. Charaoui who very much wants us to organize a peace meeting there . . . Then Charaoui would so much like to go with some of us to Syria." Rosa Manus to Josephine Schain, 28
to Istanbul to make final arrangements for the congress, while Malaterre-Sellier and Bakker van Bosse followed with lengthier stays in Syria and Palestine. In Beirut, the Alliance women were hosted by the Arab Women's Union, represented by Fatma Beyun, Heneine Tarcha, Salma Sayigh, Nazira Zayn al-Din, Fareedah al-Akle (who had attended the Paris congress in 1926), Eveline Bustros, and Julia Tu’mah Dimashqiya.269 (Malaterre-Sellier and Bakker van Bosse also spent a day in Damascus, where they met with, among others, Mary ‘Ajami and Hayat al-Mu‘ayyad al-Barazi.270) In Palestine, they met separately with Arab and Jewish women. Members of the Arab Women’s Associations in Jerusalem and Haifa, including Matiel Mughannam, Shahinda Duzdar, Zlikha al-Shihabi, and Sadhij Nassar, served as their Arab contacts; representing Jewish women were Anna Brachyahu and Sarah Azaryahu of the Palestine Jewish Women's Equal Rights Association (ERA), affiliated with the Alliance since 1923.271

In each country, local women's groups organized public--though not necessarily mixed gender--meetings, receptions, and tours of points of interest. (In Cairo and Beirut, these included Mansour Fahmy's girls' school and the Junior College of American University, where the Alliance visitors were duly impressed by the enthusiasm of the

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270 Germaine Malaterre-Sellier, "Rapport de notre voyage en Proche-Orient (Egypte, Syrie, Palestine, du 10 janvier-18 février 1935)," 3-4, box 4, Schain Papers, SSC; and Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 139.

younger generation.) In addition to recruiting Arab women to the upcoming congress, the Alliance hoped specifically to interest them in its peace work, which at this time consisted largely of generating support for the World Disarmament Conference sponsored by the League of Nations.\textsuperscript{272} Speeches by the organization's representatives, if we may regard as typical a few that were recounted in the Palestinian press, touched on its history, recent successes, and staunch commitment to world peace.\textsuperscript{273}

The Alliance women found a receptive public in each country. Newspapers announced their arrival and covered their meetings with local women; in Cairo, the press dubbed their seven-day stay "the week of the women."\textsuperscript{274} In Beirut, a public meeting drew an audience of almost one thousand "leading men, poets, professors, journalists, politicians and young students from the University and girls' school,"\textsuperscript{275} while in Beisan, a Palestinian village near the border of Transjordan, a crowd of "several thousands" assembled to greet Malaterre-Sellier and Bakker van Bosse and their escorts from the Haifa Arab Women’s Association. ("Not even for the Emir of Transjordan, we were assured," reported Malaterre-Sellier, "did they do as much for."\textsuperscript{276})

\textsuperscript{272}As part of that effort, the Alliance Peace Committee collected nearly 2.5 million signatures from 17 countries supporting petitions for world disarmament. Rosa Manus, "Report of the Committee for Peace and the League of Nations, 1935," box 2, IAW Papers, SSC.


\textsuperscript{274} Letter from Christine Bakker van Bosse to Josephine Schain, January 16, 1935, box 4, Schain Papers; Badran, \textit{Feminists, Islam, and Nation}, 212.

\textsuperscript{275} Ashby, "An International Pilgrimage."

\textsuperscript{276} Malaterre-Sellier, "\textit{Rapport de notre voyage}," 6a.
Indeed, the treatment accorded the European visitors resembled that reserved for foreign dignitaries, with important figures from local elite society and government attending the many receptions held in their honor. In Cairo, the guests at an evening soiree hosted by Sha`rawi included "about twenty ministers" as well as the head of the Wafd party, Mustafa Nahhas; in Jerusalem, an affair at the King David Hotel attracted "250 Muslim and Christian ladies," many of them married or otherwise related to prominent nationalist men. And in Beirut, Malaterre-Sellier--herself a government official as French delegate to the League of Nations--and Bakker van Bosse were feted by none other than the French High Commissioner, who also lent them a car for the duration of their journey—a gesture that symbolized in an especially concrete way the ties between Alliance leaders and the colonial project. (For her part, Ashby expressed indignation that in Cairo the French ambassador paid Malaterre-Sellier "all possible attention while . . . naturally the British ambassador went off for the weekend paying no attention to a Britisher who was president of a large international body."

To be sure, such fanfare owed in no small part to the social and political prominence of the Arab women who hosted the Alliance representatives. Sha`rawi was already one of Egypt's wealthiest and most well-known women; Eveline Bustros, Mary `Ajami, Nazira Zayn al-Din and Julia Dimashqiya were noted writers in Syria (Dimashqiya was also married to the mayor of Beirut); Matiel Mughannam, Shahinda

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279 Malaterre-Sellier, Rapport du notre voyage, 3.

Duzdar, and Zlikha al-Shihabi were all members of the Arab Women’s Executive Committee and appeared regularly in the Palestinian press.\textsuperscript{281} In short, the social and professional pedigrees of these women ensured public interest in their activities, while their considerable means enabled them to accommodate their guests in style.\textsuperscript{282}

Social status, then, proved a significant—if unacknowledged—point of common ground between the Arab and European women. Accustomed to being in the public eye, they also, in many cases, shared a certain cosmopolitanism borne of privilege that facilitated communication. Many of the Arab women, for instance, spoke fluent English or French;\textsuperscript{283} some of them, such as Matiel Mughannam, identified more readily with European culture than with their own. (Born in Lebanon but raised in New York, she once commented to the press, "All English women think Arab women are uncultured. They believe they speak only Arabic, that they all wear veils and rush away at the sight of a man. How I wish I could take English women around to see my cultured Arab friends. How surprised they would be--European clothes, silk stockings, highheeled shoes, permanently waved hair, manicured hands.")\textsuperscript{284} Underscoring the elite composition of their audiences, Malaterre-Sellier concluded that French "remains the

\textsuperscript{281} Fleischmann, "The Nation and Its 'New Women.'"

\textsuperscript{282} Ashby wrote to her husband from Egypt, "... the poverty and beggars on the one side form an awful contrast to the lovely palaces in which we lived or were entertained." Ashby to Brian Ashby, 23 January 1935, box 484, Ashby Papers.

\textsuperscript{283} French was more common, although the Palestinian Matiel Mughannam and the Syrian Julia Dimashqiya spoke English.

\textsuperscript{284} Palestine Post, 7 December 1936, quoted in Ellen Fleischmann, "Selective Memory, Gender, and Nationalism: Palestinian Women Leaders of the Mandate Period," History Workshop Journal 47 (1999): n. 31. Mughannam's comment is particularly interesting in that she made it a year after meeting Margery Corbett Ashby.
language that is preferable to use in public conferences. There are indeed in the Arab milieu some great affinities with the French culture and temperament.”285 In revealing contrast, Ashby complained to her husband that the meeting in Tel Aviv with the ERA was "the dullest we have had. Jews of lower middle class are uninspiring. Everything had to be translated into Hebrew.”286

Mutual understanding, however, was not always guaranteed. Malaterre-Sellier referred vaguely to a tense meeting in Damascus with some "truly very feminist and intelligent" women. "The difficulties resulted," she reported, "from the use of the English language and from a translation that we could not control."287 Yet an incident covered in the local French daily Les Echos de Syrie suggests that the "difficulties" involved more than a language barrier. Addressing an audience of 500 women at the Syrian University, Christine Bakker van Bosse lauded Huda Sha`rawi for rejecting the veil as a symbol of women's inferiority and subservience to men. The women were so angered by the comment that the interpreter revised her translation.288

The tension provoked by Bakker van Bosse's remark reveals something of the changed context in which interactions between European and Arab feminists--at least in Syria--now took place. As Elizabeth Thompson points out, in the early 1920s Syrian women could openly admire or imitate European ways without fear of criticism for betraying the nationalist cause. But in the wake of the violent controversy surrounding

285 Ashby to Brian Ashby, 29 January 1935, box 484, Ashby Papers.

286 Malaterre-Sellier, Rapport du notre voyage, 2.

287 "La Journee du feminisme syrien," Les Echos de Syrie, 9 February 1935. The meeting is also recounted in Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 139.
the 1928 publication of Nazira Zayn al-Din's book, *Veiling and Unveiling*, they had to tread carefully in contesting indigenous forms of patriarchal control to avoid charges of aping the colonizer. The veil had come to symbolize the preservation of Islamic culture against encroaching Westernization, and women faced strong social pressure to retain it.\(^{289}\)

That Bakker van Bosse could have so misjudged her audience in Damascus is unsurprising. Calls for unveiling, after all, were not issued exclusively by foreigners; moreover, Huda Sha'rawi and Nazira Zayn al-Din--both women with connections the Alliance--had offered dramatic indication of their stance on the subject. It is possible that the Dutch woman's appeal reflected little more than a failure to gauge local sensibilities regarding the veil.\(^{290}\) (*Les Echos* reported that she continued undeterred, remarking that it was up to Syrian women themselves to judge when circumstances were "propitious" for rejecting the veil.) But one suspects that her audience correctly perceived in it a thinly-disguised desire to see Arab women become less "Arab." Like many European (and American) progressives in the 1930s, Bakker van Bosse and her European companions retained an unconscious faith in the natural superiority of the West, a mindset conveyed by their casually disparaging comments about the places they visited. Ashby described Bethlehem as "wretched, tawdry," characterized by the "lowest level of superstition and

\(^{289}\) Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, chap. 7.

\(^{290}\) Thompson writes, "The trauma of the veil was felt far more deeply in Syria and Lebanon than in Turkey or Egypt, in part because foreign rule raised the stakes of the debate to an all-out confrontation between East and West." Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 139. The independent Turkish regime promoted unveiling as part of its modernizing agenda; in Egypt, by the time Huda Sha'rawi unveiled in 1923, the practice had long been underway in urban areas and had the sanction of nationalist leaders.
ignorance,\textsuperscript{291} and considered Egypt "a queer country" whose inhabitants seemed "much less attractive and alive" than those of India, where she had just attended the All-India Conference.\textsuperscript{292} Exemplifying the contradictory thinking characteristic of orientalism, Bakker van Bosse noted the extensive and favorable press coverage of their activities in Cairo but complained in the same breath, "With regard to feminism, the Egyptian cannot be said to have passed the emotional stage: we must appeal to his feelings, possibly his religion; never his intellect."\textsuperscript{293}

Such attitudes were depressingly familiar to Arab women. Speaking at the Damascus meeting, Mary `Ajami declared that "it is painful to the East to see itself misunderstood by the West, and to see itself described as stagnant and rebellious each time it tries to refute a new piece of propaganda introduced by [the West]."\textsuperscript{294} She echoed the refrain of the 1932 Eastern Women's Congress that some aspects of Western civilization were a threat to Eastern morals, and suggested that in its search to choose carefully among them, "the East which appears stagnant to your eyes seems wise and prudent to ours." Both `Ajami and Hayat al-Barazi, another prominent (Muslim) women's leader, defended Islam for guaranteeing women's equality (al-Barazi blamed Turkish rule for the decline of the Arab nation) and portrayed Syrian women as active agents in the regeneration of Arab civilization. Challenging Bakker van Bosse's interpretation of the

\textsuperscript{291} Ashby to Brian Ashby, 29 January 1935.

\textsuperscript{292} Ashby to Charles Corbett, 23 January 1935, box 484, Ashby Papers. In response to what must have been a similar comment, her father wrote, "I quite agree that it is more drab than India and the natives do not appeal to one as Indians do." Corbett to Ashby, 29 January 1935, ibid.

\textsuperscript{293} Bakker van Bosse to Josephine Schain, 16 January 1935, box 4, Schain Papers.

\textsuperscript{294} "La femme orientale et occidentale," \textit{Les Echos}, 8 February 1935.
veil's symbolism, Barazi dismissed it as a "fragile vestige of tradition" soon to disappear, and cautioned that simply because they were veiled did not mean that Syrian women had not evolved. Elizabeth Thompson notes that both women also presented "revisionist histories" of the Syrian women's movement, suggesting that suffrage had never been a priority and that "its discussion in 1920 had been premature." While such claims signaled Syrian feminists' pragmatic abandonment of their quest for political rights after it failed to attract widespread support, we may perhaps also read in them explicit resistance to the Alliance representatives' seeming desire to dictate an agenda to Syrian women. The tenseness of the Damascus meeting stands in contrast to the warm reception of the Alliance by the Egyptian Feminist Union, a function not only of the latter's longer and closer association with the international body but also of Egypt's nominal independence compared to Syria.

Despite their genteel ethnocentrism, the European women harbored no nostalgia for imperialism, at least in its nineteenth-century guise. After confronting strong anti-British sentiment in Egypt and Palestine, Ashby wrote to Josephine Schain that "the time has gone by when one country can hope to rule another for even if the alien government is fairly good, it is still bitterly resented." Nor were they unsympathetic to nationalism: to the contrary, they recognized its potentially liberating effects on women, taking the public interest and attention that greeted them as a sign of the enthusiasm among

295 "Discours de Mme Hayat el-Mouaiad al-Barazi sur l'évolution du féminisme syrien," Les Echos, 9 February 1935. Barazi herself had unveiled, although she once told a reporter she would never have done so without the support of her male relatives (she was married to the education minister). Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 139.

296 Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 144.
nationalist circles for reforming women's status. Ashby deemed Egypt's Wafd party "quite progressive as regards women's position"; Malterre-Sellier was impressed at "the interest shown by men, young for the most part, in the feminist cause." Their support for national self-determination, however, was not unqualified. In a statement that perfectly captures the ideology behind the Mandate system (under which European powers would "guide" their former colonies gradually to independence), Ashby assessed the progress of Lebanese Muslim women: "They are still handicapped by the custom of going veiled and in that respect are behind the moslem ladies we had met in Egypt and India, where the drive of the nationalist movement has educated the men folk into greater common sense. It is obvious that a community that cannot trust its women with personal and social freedom cannot logically expect political and social freedom for its men."  

Ashby's comment (and those of her colleagues) also indicates the extent to which they believed women's liberation to be a joint endeavor by both sexes. (In fact, they sometimes appeared to place more confidence in men than in women: Malaterre-Sellier and Bakker van Bosse, for instance, were disappointed to learn that a scheduled meeting in Damascus would take place before an all-female audience. Social progress and the concomitant elevation of women's status, they believed, could not be effected without male support--particularly in societies where women's "handicaps" seemed especially

297 Ashby to Schain, 5 February 1935, box 4, Schain Papers.  
298 Ibid; Malaterre-Sellier, Rapport du notre voyage, 3.  
299 Ashby, "An International Pilgrimage."  
300 Malaterre-Sellier, Rapport du notre voyage, 4.
pronounced. So if nationalism served to "educate" men into "greater common sense" with respect to women, that was clearly a good thing.

Its effect on women, however, was another matter. Indeed, while they considered nationalist men to be allies in their cause, the Alliance visitors were confounded by nationalist women, whose insistent anti-imperialism seemed, ironically, downright antithetical to feminism. Ashby portrayed the Arab women she met in Palestine as "nationalist to the exclusion of all other interest, violently anti-Jewish and anti-British," and Malaterre-Sellier reported that throughout their trip "we had to insist many times on the indispensable separation between feminist work and nationalist political work."

Such a distinction of course came more easily to women from countries with long-established national identities than it did those who lived under foreign rule. With no direct experience of nationalist struggle, the European women had scant frame of reference from which to identify with their Arab hosts, whose impassioned denunciations of imperialism must have been especially discomfiting to Ashby and Malaterre-Sellier. For many Alliance feminists, women's shared capacity for childbearing and subordination to men created an almost primordial bond among them that transcended national differences--a view reflected in Malaterre-Sellier's remark that a large public conference in Beirut "allowed us to situate well our feminist effort on real

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301 Ashby to Schain, 5 February 1935.
302 Malaterre-Sellier, Rapport du notre voyage, 1.
303 Rupp, Worlds of Women, 122.
ground, that is to say, beyond all national politics.\textsuperscript{304} It was not that they were blind to the very real problems of national conflict; the lesson they had drawn from World War I, however, was that divided national allegiances threatened international cooperation. But the organization's distrust of nationalism had been influenced by the outmoded model of Great Power rivalry, in which strong, sovereign states engaged in destructive competition in pursuit of national aggrandizement. The dynamics of anticolonial nationalism represented something relatively new. European women's impatience with its intensity was paradoxical. On the one hand, it reflected their own lack of experience of foreign domination and the powerful emotional opposition it engendered. On the other hand, one lesson they had learned from experience was that women's rights could only be secured through struggle. That colonized women did not seem willing to prioritize the feminist battle over the nationalist one struck them as naive and an impediment to international solidarity. Their own naivete, of course, was evident in the assumption that the two could be easily separated.

Given the paucity of sources, it is far more difficult to ascertain the perspectives of Arab women. But press accounts of a reception held in Jerusalem for the visiting Alliance delegation suggest how, among Palestinian women at least, a situation of acute national crisis conditioned a different understanding of feminism and international sisterhood.

Malaterre-Sellier and Bakker van Bosse arrived in Haifa on 8 February and spent two days with Arab women there and in Jerusalem. On 10 February the Arab Women’s Association of Jerusalem hosted a reception attended by 250 Muslim and Christian

\textsuperscript{304} Malaterre-Sellier, \textit{Rapport du notre voyage}, 2.
women from all over Palestine. After a word of welcome from Na`imiti `Alami al-Husayni, Malaterre-Sellier and Bakker van Bosse spoke about the goals of the Alliance and urged their audience to form an affiliate representing the Arab women of Palestine.\textsuperscript{305} Then came several speeches in Arabic (which were presumably translated into French and/or English) that addressed topics ranging from the "Golden Age" of Arab civilization to the current political crisis in Palestine.\textsuperscript{306} The meeting lasted three hours, and was followed by a dinner at the King David hotel where the women continued to converse in three languages.

The Arab speakers sought to dispel whatever preconceived notions their European guests may have harbored about the passivity and ignorance of Arab women. Asserting that "the Eastern woman lacks nothing in terms of innate character and intelligence in comparison to her Western sister," Samia `Abd al-Hadi located the inspiration for Arab women's advancement not in Western feminism but in their own glorious past, harking back to the medieval days of "al-Andalus" when Arab civilization was renowned for its cultural and artistic achievements. She conceded that the Eastern woman had "fallen behind her Western sisters in all domains," but pointedly attributed this disparity to the effects of colonialism: "[I]f I say that the Western woman is superior to the Eastern woman, this is . . . because the West lived under the sign of freedom and national sovereignty and the Arabs live under the sign of darkness and the protection of a foreign

\textsuperscript{305} Malaterre-Sellier spoke in French and Bakker van Bosse in English. Both speeches were translated into Arabic.

\textsuperscript{306} The newspaper \textit{Al-Difa} carried the text (in Arabic) of three speeches made by Arab women. \textit{Filastin} reported that the English and French speeches by Alliance representatives were translated into Arabic; I
system." Al-Hadi concluded her speech on a note of reconciliation, claiming that in their present pursuit of an "awakening," Arab women relied "on the one hand, on the traditions of [our] mothers and grandparents and [were] illuminated, on the other hand, by the lights that our Western sisters beam forth in the world."

In positing a premodern tradition of female achievement, al-Hadi hardly staked out new rhetorical ground. Nostalgic reference to a pristine (and supposedly superior) past was a common feature of nationalist discourses, and Arab feminists frequently drew upon examples from pre-Islamic and early Islamic history to legitimate (and motivate) women's activism. Given the audience before whom it was delivered, however, her speech assumes special significance because it suggests how Arab women attempted to claim discursive space in an international women's movement that was dominated by--and that reflected the agendas of--Western women. Caught between an indigenous conservative discourse that condemned calls for women's advancement as a betrayal of native culture and a foreign, feminist one that portrayed them as downtrodden and ignorant, Arab women who sought connection with the international women's movement faced a difficult task. Al-Hadi offered a rejoinder to critics from both quarters by alluding to the historical legacy of Arab women's achievements. Her contention that Western women's advances owed primarily to the national sovereignty they enjoyed was an explicit effort to unravel the threads of dominant discourses that tied women's status to

assume--although I cannot verify--that the Arab speakers addressed their primarily Arab audience in Arabic and that their speeches were translated for the European women.

culture. Implying that feminism evolved alongside the nation, she refused any suggestion that Arab women's "awakening" merely imitated Western women's movements. Al-Hadi endorsed the ideal of sisterhood by acknowledging the "light" of Western feminism as a source of inspiration, but emphasized that Arab women would follow their own path to liberation.

The speakers who followed al-Hadi echoed these themes, drawing attention both to Arab's women's activism in service of the nationalist cause and the hardships imposed by imperialism. Matiel Mughannam summarized the activities of the Arab Women's Executive Committee; `Amilah Badra Kan`an described the charitable and social work undertaken by the Arab Ladies' Society; Mrs. Subhi `Awidha "pointed to what Palestine has suffered of oppression and injustice due to the politics of colonialism"; and Sadhij Nassar gave a "fiery" speech about the political conditions in Palestine. Their European guests worried that such content reflected a rejection of the Alliance cause. "The audience, after hearing our expositions and some frankly nationalist speeches, seemed to want to refuse international cooperation," they reported back to the organization. Their concerns were not entirely unwarranted. Matiel Mughannam, whose speech was interrupted several times by "vehement" applause, sharply


310 Malterre-Sellier, Rapport du notre voyage, 2.

311 "Hafla jam`iya al-sayyidat al-`arabiyyat li wafd al-ittihad al-nisa`i al-dawli bil-Quds [Reception of the Arab Ladies’ Association for the International Women’s Union delegation in Jerusalem]," Filastin, 12 February 1935.
questioned the Alliance's commitment to its purported goals: "[W]e know that the [International Alliance of Women] aims at strengthening the support of peace in the world and securing women's rights, but we ask you, what is this peace that you seek in this country, while colonialism and Zionism sink their claws in the body of this nation? . . . Be assured, there will be no rights for us ladies to seek as long as we don't see for ourselves security for our future and the future of our children." She then asked the European women to take her message back to the Alliance and to convince the "colonial government, which is of you and for you, to turn away from its offense and restore justice to oppressed people." Only then, she concluded, would the organization truly be working toward its stated mission. 312

By dismissing such speeches as "frankly nationalist"--by which they seemed to imply not feminist--the Alliance women missed the point. Mughannam and her colleagues were not rejecting feminism and sisterhood, but contesting the definitions of those terms. In proudly emphasizing Palestinian women's active efforts to secure a peaceful future, they sought to inscribe their own history into the annals of the international women's movement and laid claim to the mantle of liberal feminism by suggesting that such efforts were a necessary precursor to a rights-based agenda. Here their analysis did not radically depart from that of many Western feminists: both understood the elevation of women’s status as an index of modernity, itself embodied by the sovereign nation. The difference was that where Western feminists frequently saw Western "tutelage" as necessary to the achievement of that status, Arab women viewed it

312 "Nahda al-mar’ā al-‘arabiyya al-siyasiyya {The political awakening of the Arab woman},” Al-Difa’, 12 February 1935.
as the primary impediment. This resulted in dramatically different understandings of the obligations of sisterhood. For the Alliance representatives, national issues represented a diversion that compromised women's natural allegiance to one another; sisterhood meant rising above "mere politics" to work in solidarity for women's rights. Arab women, however, recognized the contradiction embedded in that notion: as Mughannam wrote later, reforms in women's status "can only be introduced by National Governments, or by persons deriving their authority from the people." If Western feminists were truly interested in helping their "sisters," they would use their influence to undermine imperialism.

Malaterre-Sellier and van Bosse described the meeting in Jerusalem as the most difficult of their entire trip. They ultimately persuaded their hosts to affiliate with the Alliance and send a delegation to Istanbul, but only after a "tough battle" in which Malaterre-Sellier argued that Palestine had been represented solely by Jewish women for the past nine years. The success of their mission served, in the eyes of the European women, as a vindication of their ideals. Recounting another conference that took place in Beisan, they described Sadhij Nassar's interruption of a "troubling and frankly nationalist" speech: "She cut off abruptly the excited orator, and explained that we had not come for a political purpose, but to regain the ideas of peace and international collaboration, especially among women. Touching testimony that this woman, in whom

313 Mughannam, The Arab Woman and the Palestine Problem, 53. She noted as one of the "evils" of the mandate system the reluctance of British and French authorities to "deal with matters which may arouse any objection on the part of any religious authority" (54).

we see one of the leaders of the feminist movement, and who had in the beginning been rather hostile to us, has understood our message, and that we have succeeded in gaining in her an intelligent and devoted collaborator."³¹⁵

Whether Nassar would have concluded any differently remains impossible to say. There is little reason to think that Malaterre-Sellier and Bakker van Bosse had misread the situation: they had, after all, witnessed first-hand and acknowledged the "very difficult circumstances" that the Mandate system and Zionism posed for both Syrian and Palestinian women.³¹⁶ And they remained convinced that the Arab women had accepted that national turmoil "was to be resolved by the voice of peace."³¹⁷ But such was their faith that they seemed to forget just how contentious their meetings had been. Recounting her trip at a session devoted to peace at the Istanbul congress, Malaterre-Sellier claimed that despite suffering many crises, Arab women complained less than Europeans; that instead of making demands, they sought justice and peace. She then stated that in order to arrive at peace, the West needed to learn the "power of spiritual values" from the East--thus diluting to the point of meaninglessness Arab women's specific grievances against European imperialism.³¹⁸

Bakker van Bosse displayed an even more striking case of amnesia a few years later. After the world had plunged once again into war, she wrote a letter to Anne Morrow Lindbergh (which she apparently never sent) in which she attempted to explain

³¹⁵ Ibid, 6a.
³¹⁶ Ibid, 6.
³¹⁷ Ibid.
her deep conviction in women's capacity for peace. It is worth quoting at length because it suggests something of how a sincere sense of affinity with Arab women combined with orientalism to repress the very real tensions that had emerged:

Let me tell you of an experience I had while traveling in the Near East some years ago . . . . It was my first visit to these countries, and I often felt awkward and ill at ease in my ignorance and doubt as to the best way of using the short time available to get into touch with women whose race, upbringing, social position and political outlook were so different from my own. But I soon felt that there is an inner solidarity of women all the world over, and independent from all that tends to divide and separate; an inner certainty that, in some mysterious way, we all "speak the same language"; and however widely we may differ in our outlook upon the daily needs of life, there is a fundamental unity of conception and feeling the moment we get down to basic truths—to what is as essential to woman as to man, to the race and the whole of mankind: the sacred reality of the tie between mother and child; the meaning of family life as one of the strongest binding forces in the world; and the deeper truth of which these are but a symbol: the ultimate unity of mankind itself through the diversity and complexity of all its manifestations. But I also learnt that in our tired western brains these ideas have lost good deal of their intrinsic value; and I saw why magic words like "love" and "brotherhood" have ceased to be masterwords that open up the gates of the soul. There, among the women of the East, it was possible to speak of love, and be understood; of brotherhood, and not meet the icy indifference, or worse: derision which so often greets an appeal to man's true nature in our so-called civilised countries. I do not mean to imply that we are inferior to the Eastern woman; but I do believe that we might profit from a more intimate contact with races, who, perhaps because of less idle reading, speaking and thinking, have succeeded in keeping more intact the primitive force and meaning of words like these, that have been vainly used so often that our hearts are weary of rising to respond. And I claim that it is our business—yours the American, and mine the European woman's job—to bring back the old magic to these outworn ideas, and to use our greater technical knowledge, our command over the forces of nature, and our social and political experience in order to endow them with a new and a richer and deeper life.

Read today, Bakker van Bosse's theosophical celebration of Eastern spirituality comes across as mawkish at best and at worst, deeply orientalist. Yet considered in the war-torn
context of the early 1940s, the letter seems less sentimental than urgent and heartfelt. Its references to the "unity of mankind," to the fact that people across cultures love and draw meaning from their families, seem in fact to subvert the very foundation of orientalism. But Bakker van Bosse's emotional identification with Arab women masks the critical political differences that had strained the meetings. If she found Arab women to be more receptive to pacifism than Western women, this of course was not the result of “less idle reading, speaking and thinking” but of direct experience with the ongoing violence and humiliation of foreign rule. Bakker van Bosse omits any mention of the very explicit demands made by Palestinian women at least, for an end to colonialism. The sanitized versions of their Near Eastern trip that she and Malaterre-Sellier offered illustrate once again the peculiar tension in feminist orientalism and how it functioned in this instance to suppress conflict.

For the time being, however, there was reason for optimism. The Near East mission had established new ties between the Alliance and Arab women in spite of the difficulties. Matalterre-Sellier understood that concerted effort would be required to cement them: she cautioned that since "Eastern women are not yet accustomed to international work even when their culture is equivalent to that of Western women," her colleagues should expect to facilitate "fraternal initiation" when they welcomed Arab delegations to the upcoming congress in Istanbul.319

PART TWO: THE ISTANBUL CONGRESS

"The Future Shall Still be Ours"
The IAW's Twelfth Congress opened on April 18, 1935, with delegations from affiliated societies in twenty-seven countries in attendance. Four new societies—the Union Feministe Arabe of Syria, the Union Feministe Arabe Palestinenne, the All-India Women's Conference, and the Union of Patriotic Women of Persia—were approved for admission on site, attesting both to the success of the Alliance visit to India and the Near East and, as Huda Sha‘rawi remarked, to "the desire for cooperation between the East and the West." The Middle Eastern delegations were among the largest present: both Turkey and Syria sent twelve delegates and twelve alternates, the maximum permitted under the organization's by-laws. (Sources suggest that although the Palestinian group, which represented the Arab Women's Unions of Jerusalem, Jaffa, Nablus, and Haifa, was admitted, none of its members were actually present in Istanbul.)

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320 The countries represented were Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Egypt, France, Great Britain, Greece, Holland, Hungary, India, Jamaica, New Zealand, Norway, Palestine, Poland, Rumania, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, the United States, and Yugoslavia. "Delegates and Alternates of National Auxiliaries," IAWSEC *Report of the Twelfth Congress, Istanbul*, 1935, 203, box 2, IAW Papers, SSC.

321 Among the Syrian delegates were Hayat al-Barazi, Amina Khuri, Julia Dimashqiya, Suad and Farlan Mardam Bey, and Nimat al-`Azm. (Neither Nur Hamada nor Nazira Zein al-Din, both of whom had previous connections with the Alliance, were listed among the delgates and alternates.) Syrian feminists had evidently divided over the prospect of attending the congress at all. The Damascus daily *Les Echos* reported that the "ladies of Syrian feminism" held a "stormy session" at which they debated whether to send a delegation. They eventually reached a compromise wherein those who wanted to attend would do so as individuals and at their own expense, without official title." ("Les Féministes damascaines se rendraient Istanbul," *Les Echos* 13 April 1935). The article unfortunately offers little detail on the meeting, so that the nature of the dispute is left to conjecture. Elizabeth Thompson suggests that the women faced a financial dilemma after their request for state funding was denied by Sheikh Taj, the Prime Minister (Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 138). But the fact that the agreement stipulated that the women who chose to go would do so as individuals without official title raises the possibility that opposition to participation may have been ideological. Perhaps some Syrian women had been dissuaded by the contentiousness of the Damascus reception for Bakker van Bosse and Malaterre-Sellier.

322 Margot Badran reports, citing the Egyptian Feminist Union's journal *L'Egyptienne*, that it voted to send Sadhij Nassar from the Haifa Women's Union. *Badran, Feminists, Islam and Nation*, 225. The IAW list of delegates mentions only those from the Palestine Jewish Women's Equal Rights Association, affiliated since 1923. In her unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Ellen Fleischmann cites an article from the Palestinian
Margery Corbett Ashby once recalled in an interview that the Alliance "did not really exist" between congresses.\textsuperscript{323} It was at the triennial meetings that much of the organization's work took place--the discussion of relevant issues, the drafting of and debates over resolutions, the admission of new members, and the elections of officers. Congresses served both to reaffirm and develop the organization's identity and cohesiveness and, as Ashby noted, to boost morale. The latter was especially important in 1935, when women's movements in Europe were under siege from Nazism and Fascism and the prospect of a prosperous, peaceful, and humane world seemed ever more remote.

At the governor's banquet on the eve of the conference, the American Ruth Woodsmall set the tone that would dominate the week's proceedings: "Today the gifts of the East and the experience of the West must be fused to solve the problems of the modern world. . . . Only through such a fusion and cooperation of Orient and Occident can a true solidarity be achieved so that women may move forward conscious not merely of their rights and privileges but of their power and responsibility to aid in the building of

\textsuperscript{323} Interview with Brian Harrison, cassette no. 41, n.d. (1976), Ashby Papers.
a new world order." Over the next several days, the delegates settled into the standard work (the presentation of reports and the proposal of resolutions) of its six standing committees. The "problems of the modern world"—economic uncertainty, international strife, the rise of dictatorships—lent their project heightened urgency. Special sessions on women facing economic problems and women's status under different forms of government reflected the organization's concern over threats both to women's right to work and to democracy; a public meeting devoted to peace—which had been specifically requested by the Turkish women and which attracted a crowd of two thousand—reflected its growing orientation toward the League of Nations and disarmament. Conducted in English, French, and German (the three official languages), the sessions were not without conflict, but underlying the differences of opinion remained a strong unity of purpose that had guided the Alliance since its inception: a staunch commitment to women's empowerment. Grounded on the terrain of modernity, the common cause embraced by the delegates was women's elevation to civic competence and the consequent reshaping of the social order.

The twenty resolutions adopted by the congress presented a specific program for the achievement of that aim. In addition to reaffirming the organization's basic principles (women's full political, economic, legal rights, an equal moral standard, and peace) they called for an end to child marriage and slavery; continued investigations into women's status in mandated territories; practical means to address the world economic crisis; married women's nationality rights; and international agreements for the settlement,

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324 Ruth Woodsmall, "Message from the U. S. of America at the Vali's Banquet," 18 April 1935, box 1, IAW Papers, SSC.
employment and legal protection of refugees. In tribute to the spirit of internationalism that Alliance members hoped their organization embodied, a session devoted to cooperation between the East and West produced a resolution--proposed by the board and adopted unanimously--pledging support for "the women of the West who are in danger of losing those legal, political and economic rights which they have achieved; and the women of the East in their struggle for the eradication of their special legal, social and economic disabilities and for the recognition of their rights to equal citizenship in their respective national units." The activism of Eastern delegates ensured that some of their particular concerns made it onto the agenda. For the first time, the Alliance declared its opposition to polygamy after hearing from Begum Kamaluddin and Shareefah Hamid Ali, delegates from the All India Women's Conference. The Egyptians finally secured a resolution against the hated Capitulations regime--under which foreign residents of Egypt were not subject to Egyptian law--after explaining how the Alliance resolution against a woman's loss of nationality upon marriage to a foreigner would create in Egypt "new complications and foreign interventions" that nationalist sentiment could not but oppose. Saiza Nabarawi proudly noted that the Egyptian


326 Programme du Xlle Congress, 18 au 25 Avril, 1935, 9, box 1, IAW Papers, SSC.


328 Ibid, 24. The EFU had tried for years to educate the Alliance about the link between the Capitulations and prostitution in Egypt. As Saiza Nabarawi explained at the 1926 IAW congress in Paris, since foreign-owned houses of prostitution were not subject to Egyptian jurisdiction, "all measures taken by our government" to suppress traffic in women "are condemned to failure from the start." Quoted in Margot Badran, Feminists, Islam and Nation, 200. The 1929 congress passed a resolution calling for IAW affiliates from countries covered by Capitulations treaties to urge their governments to permit regulation by Egyptian authorities, but--to the frustration of Egyptian feminists--the organization ignored the issue at its 1933 meeting in Marseilles. Badran notes the "striking" fact that when the Alliance finally condemned the
delegates had seconded another resolution, introduced by Jamaica, denouncing race
discrimination wherever it existed and condemning in particular the practice of lynching
in the United States.\textsuperscript{329}

These resolutions were testament both to the increasingly diverse composition of the
Alliance and its new commitment to addressing the "special disabilities" of Eastern
women.

"A name to rouse in each of us childhood memories of Eastern legend and
romance"

As the official announcement of the congress suggested, Istanbul was an
especially appropriate setting for an international feminist conference. Not only was it
"an ideal meeting place for East and West in spirit and in fact," but its "guiding hand has
recognized the paramount importance of a free womanhood trained in citizenship and
given the opportunity to make its contribution to the nation's life."\textsuperscript{330} Bestowed by the
enlightened leader of the new republic, the civil and political rights they now enjoyed
signified that Turkish women had joined the ranks of their modern sisters. In her
welcoming address, Bayan Latife Bekir, the president of the Turkish Women's Union,

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\textsuperscript{329} Saiza Nabawari, "Le Congrès d'Istambul," 31.

\textsuperscript{330} "Call to the Twelfth Congress," undated, box 1, IAW Papers, SSC. Because of their potential to sway
public opinion in host countries, congresses were usually held in cities where women remained
unenfranchised. The official history of the Alliance goes so far as to credit a remark from Ashby to the
mayor of Istanbul with prompting Atatürk to enfranchise Turkish women: "'What a pity,' she said to him,
'that women will come from all over the world to modern Turkey, and find Turkish women still without the
vote.' Her comment was passed on to the President, Kemal Atatürk, and a few months later, when the
Congress assembled, equal suffrage had been granted and there were already seventeen women members

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emphasized the contrast between the lives of young Turkish women, who had every career open to them, and those of their elders, who had spent their "best years...shut off from the world by the grille and the veil,...dreaming of the deliverance that seemed so far away."\footnotemark[331]

As if to underscore Bekir's remark that Turkish women had gained complete equality "without struggle," the congress took place with prominent state support. The Turkish government loaned the use of Yildiz Kosk and issued a special series of commemorative stamps featuring the portraits of Carrie Chapman Catt and six women Nobel Prize winners.\footnotemark[332] On the opening day, the governor of Istanbul gave a welcoming address and hosted a dinner for the delegates, where several Turkish women members of Parliament were introduced and later gave speeches. Atatürk himself sent a message of encouragement and invited members of the Executive Committee and heads of delegations to a reception in Ankara at the end of the congress.\footnotemark[333] The diligent efforts of Alliance press secretary Louisa Fast and her assistant in Turkey, Nermin Muvaffak (whose father, happily, was the director of the Anatolian News Agency\footnotemark[334]) ensured that the week-long event was heavily publicized. According to the IAW's published congress report, Istanbul's twelve dailies carried full accounts of the sessions as well as interviews of Parliament.\" Adele Schreiber and Margaret Mathieson *Journey Towards Freedom: Written for the Golden Jubilee of the IAW*, (Denmark: International Alliance of Women, 1955), 44.

\footnotetext[331]{"Accueil de la Turquie: Une Message de Mme. Latife Bekir," *Jus Suffragii* 29. 7 (April 1935), 51. One of the founders of the *Kadın Birliği*, Bekir had also served as one of Turkey's first municipal councilors after women were granted local suffrage and eligibility in 1930. "Bayan Latife Bekir," ibid., 52.}

\footnotetext[332]{Proceeds from the sale of the stamps were to be split between the Turkish government and the Alliance.}

\footnotetext[333]{"Twelfth Congress: Istanbul," *Jus Suffragii* 29. 9 (June 1935).}

\footnotetext[334]{Letter from Nermin Muvaffak to Louisa Fast, October 2, 1935, box 1, IAW Papers, SSC.}
with various delegates.\textsuperscript{335} For at least one of them--the French-language \textit{La Republique}--the congress merited front-page coverage.\textsuperscript{336}

For participants and observers alike, the congress symbolized the link between women's rights and progress in the modern world of nation-states. Ataturk undoubtedly hoped his support of the meeting would enhance Turkey's reputation abroad, and foreign newspapers aided the cause with articles like the one entitled, "To Celebrate Advance of Turkish Women."\textsuperscript{337} (The Palestinian daily \textit{Filastin}, reversing the juxtaposition characteristic of Western news accounts, noted that "what catches the attention is that Turkish ladies . . . have attained [in name] what the women's union aspires to: the right to vote.")\textsuperscript{338} As so many journalists relished pointing out, the very site of the congress served to heighten awareness of Turkey's rapid progress. A pavilion on the grounds of the former Sultan's palace, Yildiz Kosk had been outfitted with modern amenities to accommodate large conferences. Ashby found it "perfectly equipped" to handle the proceedings, complete with a press office, post office, restaurant, assembly hall, and--as she delightedly informed her husband--"perfect sanitation and even bath rooms! Never in London, Paris, Berlin, Rome have we been half as well provided for."\textsuperscript{339}


\textsuperscript{336} Several press clippings from \textit{La Republique} are contained in box 8, Schain Papers, SSC.

\textsuperscript{337} Press clipping from the \textit{New York Sun}, 7 March 1935, ibid.

\textsuperscript{338} "Al mu'tamar al-nisa'i al-dawli fi istanbul [The International Women's Conference in Istanbul]," \textit{Filastin} 14 April 1935.

\textsuperscript{339} Ashby to Brian Ashby, 31 January 1935, box 476, Ashby Papers.
Such conveniences reinforced the image so assiduously cultivated by the Kemalist regime of Turkey as a modern, Western nation. The abolition of the sultanate and caliphate, the replacement of Arabic script with the Latin alphabet, official discouragement of Islamic dress (the fez and the veil), and other reforms were all part of an effort to purge Turkish culture of its overtly "oriental" elements and align the country more closely with its European neighbors. Women especially were targeted for reform: in 1926, the Grand National Assembly adopted a secularized version of civil law based on the Swiss Civil Code. Included was the new Family Law, which abolished polygamy and child marriage, made women legally equivalent to men in certain areas (property inheritance, for one), and granted them the right to initiate divorce. In 1930, women gained the right to vote and stand in municipal elections, and in 1934 they received national suffrage.

Feminists elsewhere in the Middle East registered Ataturk's reforms with interest during the 1920s and 1930s. In Syria, Julia Dimashqiya wrote about the forces that had "awakened the Turkish woman from her long and deep sleep" and hailed Ataturk for recognizing women's capabilities. The EFU, which worked to reform personal status laws by appealing directly to [the state], was particularly impressed by the abolition of polygamy and women's right to divorce enshrined in the Turkish Civil Code. (In keeping with its commitment to reform within the framework of shari`a law, however, it did not endorse the secular family code entirely.) For Arab women confronting both

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foreign rule and indigenous forms of patriarchy, the new republic offered a inspirational model of an independent, Muslim state that guaranteed women's equality.

For the Egyptians, whose delegation consisted of seven EFU members and five representatives of the Youth Committee, the opportunity to mingle with their Turkish counterparts and represent Egyptian feminism before the Turkish public proved a heady experience. Saiza Nabarawi paid tribute to the "current of sympathy between our Turkish sisters and ourselves" that grew stronger over the course of the congress, and Fatma Ni`mat Rashid noted the special interest expressed by Turkish journalists in the Egyptian delegation. (Curiously, *L'Egyptienne*’s coverage of the congress scarcely mentioned the sizable Syrian delegation, and failed to include Julia Dimashqiya in its listing of speakers at a special session entitled, "The East and West in Cooperation.") Sha`rawi recalled in her memoirs what she told Ataturk upon meeting him in Ankara at the end of the conference: "I said that it was highly exemplary for Muslim countries that their big sister had encouraged all the countries of the East to strive for liberation and advocate the rights of women. I told him, `If the Turks have called you Ataturk [father of the Turks], I say that is not enough; for us you are Atasharq [father of the East]."  

In reality, the Turkish Republic's state-sponsored feminism stemmed less from a genuine commitment to women's equality than from a desire to integrate Turkey more fully into the international community by "ascending . . . to the level of civilized

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Pursuing modernization along Western lines, Kemalists encouraged women's participation in the public sphere through education and employment as a visible symbol of Turkey's progress, but preserved male privilege in the family. (The new Family Law, for example, recognized the husband as the legal head of the household and required a wife to secure his permission before seeking outside employment.)

Moreover, because women's rights were "formulated in a corporatist-nationalist framework" rather than as "part of the problematic of civil liberties and individual rights," women's "liberation" in Turkey remained a means to an end (the good of the nation), instead of a worthy goal in and of itself. Kemalist feminism offered women new opportunities within carefully preserved boundaries. The model Turkish woman citizen was educated, professional, and possessed European style and sophistication, who simultaneously fulfilled her duties to family and nation by bearing and raising children and carefully preserving traditional norms of femininity and sexual modesty.

A special issue of the French-language journal *Les annales de Turquie* devoted to the congress illustrates something of the ambiguity of Kemalist feminism. It covered the proceedings in a tone of self-congratulation, including, with evident pride, excerpts from Western delegates' speeches that lauded Turkey's progress. The issue was clearly meant

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344 Arat, ibid, 24. Ayse Durakbasa points out that Kemalism "did not alter the patriarchal norms of morality" that attached family honor to the sexual behavior of its female members. Durakbasa, "Kemalism as Identity Politics in Turkey," in ibid., 140.

345 Durakbasa, ibid, 141.


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to convey an image of women's liberation as the *sine qua non* of advanced nations, but it also featured a faintly mocking caricature of Princess Alexandrine Cantacuzène of Romania, Nancy Astor of Great Britain and an Australian delegate, implying that women independently seeking equality were unfeminine.

The limits of Turkish women's emancipation were exposed just two weeks after the congress when Ataturk dissolved the Kadin Birligi on the grounds that Turkish women had already been granted equality and no longer needed an independent women's organization. The move, which apparently stunned its members, 347 prompted Ashby to lament, "To those of us who know how much work is still left to be done after women have become free and equal citizens, this decision cannot meet with agreement." 348 The Alliance would not have another affiliate in Turkey until 1949. 349

**The Rhetoric of Modern Womanhood**

The Turkish government and the press were not the only ones to make the connection between women's rights and national progress. Ashby remarked in her opening speech that women "shall bring to problems of citizenship and nation-building our special contribution and our special experience." 350 Newly-elected member of

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347 A YWCA official in Istanbul wrote to Ruth Woodsmall, "I had a long talk with Lamia Hanım about this when I went to see her . . . and she is perfectly willing for this society to be discontinued. She said when she heard the words of Ataturk, she felt too that there was no need of it trying to continue. I don't think she is feeling badly about it as she did before." Phoebe Clary to Woodsmall, 11 May 1935, box 40, folder 2, Woodsmall Papers.


349 Whittick, *Woman Into Citizen*, appendix 5, 300.

Parliament Turkan Basbug announced, "We, Turkish women, are proud and happy to be among the representatives of civilized nations,"\textsuperscript{351} and Iqbalunissa Hussain, a Muslim delegate from India, declared, "The destiny of a nation lies to a greater extent in the hands of the women."\textsuperscript{352} Such rhetoric concerning women's role in the nation was, by 1935, nothing new--in fact, it was a common feature of otherwise diverse nationalist discourses the world over, from Progressivism in the United States to Kemalism in Turkey. During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, preoccupation with the "woman question" seemed, indeed, almost a universal phenomenon. In the industrializing countries of the West, women's increasing presence in the labor force challenged conventional ideas about gender roles, prompting debate over everything from women's suffrage to fashion. At stake in these debates was nothing less than the successful transition to modernity, a condition implicitly premised, like its counterpart "civilization," on national sovereignty. That the nation served as a shared, if tacit, frame of reference for both supporters and detractors of women's growing independence was evident all around, from claims made by American suffragists that women's influence at the national level would both temper the harsh effects of industrialization and rid politics of corruption, to fears in postwar Europe that declining birth rates would lead to decline in national strength.\textsuperscript{353} It was not coincidental, moreover, that the "scientific racism"

\textsuperscript{351} "Le Discours de Miss Turkan Basbug," box 1, IAW Papers, SSC.

\textsuperscript{352} Speech by Iqbalunissa Hussein, "Women's Rights and Duties as a Citizen," ibid.

employed to justify American and European imperialism was based on a hierarchical conceptions of civilization in which "race" and "nation" were used interchangeably.\(^{354}\)

Of course, if women's changing roles produced anxiety in the independent, self-assured nations of the West, the issue was even more fraught in the colonized, quasi-colonized or simply less powerful countries of the East, where the encounter with Europe spurred efforts to become "modern" without compromising the essential elements of cultural identity. The strategy adopted by nationalist reformers, which permitted westernization in the masculine material realm but sought to preserve "authenticity" in the feminine spiritual realm, had contradictory implications for women: as Lila Abu-Lughod, referring to the Middle East context, writes, "What seems so confusing about the calls for remaking women . . . is that they included advocacy of both women's greater participation in the public world--through education, unveiling, and political participation--and women's enormous responsibility for the domestic sphere."\(^{355}\) Whether grounded in the Islamic modernist discourse associated with Muhammad `Abduh and Qasim Amin in Egypt, or in the valorization of a transhistorical, inherently feminist

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national essence articulated by Ziya Gokalp for Turkey, calls for women's emancipation in Muslim societies did not fundamentally challenge their roles as wives and mothers.\textsuperscript{356}

The repeated invocations of modern womanhood at Istanbul thus had precedent in older discourses of suffrage feminism, imperialism, and anticolonial nationalism. What I want to explore here is how they functioned to unite Western and Eastern women in common cause. The conference served as a site for the articulation of diverse strands of feminism that were nevertheless linked in a shared quest for modernity.

The source of such connections was to be found in the "simultaneous affirmation of women's human rights and women's unique needs and differences" that characterized the Alliance agenda.\textsuperscript{357} On the one hand, the program for women's emancipation endorsed by the congress enshrined the ideal of citizenship as a genderless proposition. It called for women's full legal, political, and economic equality with men--demands that, in 1935, were considered radical practically everywhere, but especially so in the newly represented countries of the Middle East. And yet a striking feature of "modern womanhood" promoted at the congress is its reliance on women's presumed difference

356 Although they frequently aimed at reinvention. Omnia Shakry and Afsaneh Najmabadi have shown how the discourses of domesticity (women as educated wives, mothers, and household managers) promoted by reformers in Egypt and Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--which drew on both European and Islamic discourses--created new models of womanhood that contained both "disciplinary and emancipatory" potential. See Najmabadi, "Crafting an Educated Housewife in Iran," in Abu-Lughod, ed., \textit{Remaking Women}, 91-115; quotation on 115; and Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt," ibid, 126-70.

357 Nancy Cott, \textit{The Grounding of Modern Feminism}, 49. Nitza Berkovitch has suggested that notions of women's difference and unique contributions dominated the discourse of feminist internationalism between the wars, and gave way to a more recognizably natural rights philosophy under the guise of "human rights" after World War II. See Berkovitch, \textit{From Motherhood to Citizenship} (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1999), chaps. 4 and 5. Marilyn Lake provides a more complicated picture, showing how efforts to promote an "equalitarian" view of women's rights were already well underway in the 1930s. See Lake, "From Self-Determination via Protection to Equality via Non-Discrimination: Defining Women's Rights at the League of Nations and the United Nations," in \textit{Women's Rights and Human Rights}, ed. Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes, and Marilyn Lake, 254-71.
from men. Both Western and Eastern delegates rationalized their demands for women's rights on the basis of women's contribution to nation; significantly, however, they often framed that contribution in terms of women's inherent nurturing capacity and domestic responsibilities. Stressing that women's equality "does not imply anarchic selfishness nor deny the doctrine that the family is the unit of the state," Ashby assured her audience that women would use their rights to protect the family and promote world peace.\(^{358}\) A manifesto issued by the Committee for Peace and the League of Nations (chaired by the American Josephine Schain) asserted, "Because the care of the spiritual and bodily health of the race in early childhood is the special duty and privilege of women we have the urgent task of training the next generation in mutual understanding and tolerance, in love of justice and order rather than acquiescence in violence and tyranny."\(^{359}\)

It was precisely this "characteristic doubleness"\(^{360}\) of Alliance feminism that made it "safe" for women from colonized countries. For Arab women, linking the "modern woman" to the nation (and national interest) provided a rationale for participating in the international women's conference. Members of the Syrian delegation sought government funding for the trip to Istanbul on the grounds that they served in an official capacity by representing Syria at an international conference.\(^{361}\) When an editorial in \textit{al-Difa'} criticized Palestinian women's plans to attend a congress where they

\(^{358}\) "President's Speech: Istanbul Congress," \textit{Jus Suffragii} 29. 8 (May 1935).

\(^{359}\) "Manifesto Issued by the Committee for Peace and the League of Nations," 1935, box 1, IAW Papers, SSC.

\(^{360}\) Cott, \textit{Grounding of Modern Feminism}, 49.

might "hear a Jewish member . . . offend the Arab issue or the Arab woman's reputation," the Arab Women's Union responded in *Filastin* that "we will not lack means for speaking and presenting our feelings and telling the assembly our grievance," suggesting that the congress represented an opportunity for Palestinian women to help their country's cause by defending it before an international forum.362

While linking their cause to that of nationalism provided ideological cover to Eastern delegates, so too did the discourse of domesticity that so often justified women's demands for equality. If Western women such as Ashby and Schain deployed it to disarm opposition to such demands, Eastern women--especially Muslims, whose presence in public affairs was less established and more contested--used it to legitimate women's activism in the first place. As Mervat Hatem has written with reference to the Egyptian Feminist Union, its "entry into the public arena was identified with a commitment to transform the modern cult of domesticity from a private ideal into a national and public one."363 Such a move carried transgressive potential, elevating "the private and socially familiar role of caretaker, accepted by men and women of different classes, to new political heights."364 It was also, in Egypt and Syria, a pragmatic effort to "prepare" women for political rights. In a forum that welcomed all expressions of feminist subversion, the note struck by India's Iqbalunnissa Hussain when she named as "the proper subject of my talk, woman as an obedient and accomplished wife," was not a


364 Ibid, 39.
discordant one of conservatism but a harmonious variation on the theme of women's familial role. After all, her emphasis on wives as intellectual companions to their husbands and teachers to their children was consonant with the allusions to motherhood cited above. And while Hussain's speech mimicked the valorization of motherhood in nationalist discourse, we should not forget that it was delivered before an audience committed to obtaining political rights still denied women in many countries. In fact, in order to affiliate with the Alliance, national organizations had to pledge commitment to its principal objectives, foremost of which was woman suffrage. Hussain opened her talk by congratulating Turkish women on their achievements, which she said were particularly inspiring to Muslim women in other parts of the world. Asserting that "the equal and just treatment of womanhood of this country can easily be taken as a model of future civilization by many countries," she clearly hoped to influence her own.

Mrinhalini Sinha has suggested that the middle-class Indian women's movement support of universal adult suffrage made a critical contribution to Indian nationalism by providing crucial ideological support for "the emergence of the ideal of the normative citizen-subject in India, as allegedly above all considerations of caste, class, gender, and religious community." Feminists in Arab countries would be less successful in securing that ideal, but their presence at the 1935 congress testified to their desire to appropriate feminist internationalism as an argument for advances back home. Invoking

365 "Women's Rights and Duties as a Citizen," box 1, IAW Papers, SSC.

the symbolism of the modern woman was one way to shame their own governments for their failure to implement certain desired reforms. Huda Sha’rawi sent a letter to Egyptian Prime Minister Tawfiq Nasim urging his government to adopt some of the resolutions voted on at the congress. Noting that the resolution endorsing the suppression of polygamy had been introduced by the Muslim women of India, she cautioned against Egypt, "justly considered the most evolved Muslim country," permitting itself to fall behind other nations.367 To further the point, she added, "In strongly supporting the principle of equality between the sexes--adopted today by all the nations concerned to see justice and social progress reign among them--we do not think to exceed our rights."

Such language was perceived to be effective (even if ultimately unsuccessful) because it presented women's rights as part of the condition of being modern, not necessarily Western. Esther Fahmi Wissa, another Egyptian delegate to the congress, was clear on this point when she proclaimed that "liberty and democracy are the heritage of humanity."368 Speaking of the resolution concerning women under different forms of government,369 she maintained that "it is not a simple desire for equality but a need for woman's direct cooperation in the State in order to elevate the moral and social level of humankind." Here was a rhetorical move that both echoed and challenged nationalist claims to modernity. As Sinha has argued for India, nationalists used the language of

367 "Lettre au president du conseil," reprinted under the title, _Apres le Congres d'Istanboul_ in _L'Egyptienne_, August/September, 1935.


369 The text of the resolution reads: "The Twelfth Congress of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship demands that States in adopting whatever form of government best suits them, shall maintain without any distinction based on sex the fundamental principle of the right of the human being to personal liberty, freedom of thought and some form of representation for all." _IAWSEC Report of the Twelfth Congress, Istanbul, 1933_.

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universal modernity to wrest responsibility for social progress away from European imperialism, which had claimed for itself the role of reforming indigenous partriarchy. Wissa's argument, and those of other Eastern delegates, shows how colonized (or in the case of Egypt, semi-colonized) women asserted "rhetorical agency" in the nationalist effort to secure a "sovereign and self-determining nationalist government which alone could undertake the responsibility of reforming the social and cultural practices of the people whom it represented." But there was more to it than that. While women such as Hussein, Sha`rawi, and Wissa--not to mention Ashby and Shain--were careful not to offend conservative sensibilities regarding women's responsibility for the home, they nevertheless insisted on a wider sphere for women than many nationalist men were prepared to support. Their very presence at the congress suggested an attempt at, to quote Sinha again, "the reconciliation of a liberal-feminist politics with the nationalist agenda." The rhetoric of modern womanhood helped the delegates present a united front to the outside world. Linking women's emancipation to modernity--a condition implicitly and sometimes explicitly premised on national sovereignty--was nothing new, but it supplied a basis for solidarity among diverse women with different priorities. Whether they were seeking full political and legal equality or pursuing more limited reforms in their respective home countries, delegates to the 1935 congress shared a common rationale for their demands and, it seems clear, saw themselves as engaged in the same

370 Sinha, "The Lineage of the 'Indian' Modern," 216.
371 Ibid, 217.
struggle. As we shall see, however, the foundation on which feminists sought to build unity was not impervious to fissure.

**The East and West in Cooperation**

It was at the special session entitled "The East and West in Cooperation" that the contradictions embedded within the Alliance ideal of modern womanhood became apparent. Chaired by Huda Sha’rawi and Iqbalunissa Hussain, the session included speeches by delegates from Algeria, Australia, India, Jamaica, Palestine, and Syria. IAW sources do not specify how the speakers were chosen, but an effort was obviously made to ensure a diverse panel. (The politics of representation evidently did not preoccupy congress organizers: the Algerian delegate was a French settler who spoke "on behalf of" Algeria's Muslim women and portrayed them as in dire need of assistance. Leaving the women in whose name she presumed to speak out of the equation entirely, she claimed that their deliverance would come at the hands of "Muslim men of good will, who with the collaboration of French women, will do for the Algerian Muslim woman what your great Ataturk has done for you.")

The theme of the session communicated the Alliance's growing recognition that women around the world faced different problems which were amenable to solution through collective effort. The rhetorical construction of sisterhood promoted the ideal of "unity in diversity"; Saiza Nabarawi wrote that the session was made most interesting

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372 Mme. Lafuente, *L'Orient et l'Occident coöperant*, box 1, IAW Papers, SSC.

by the "variety of opinions as well as the unity of aspirations."³⁷⁴ One after the other, speakers expressed confidence in the possibility of bridging differences across nationality, religion, and culture. Underlying their optimism was a view of modernity as the shared aspiration of Eastern and Western women, and a condition on which the West did not have a monopoly. Iqbalunissa Hussein of India noted the contributions of "every people" to the "patrimony of humanity," and suggested that modern civilization had been constructed through centuries of contact between East and West. A fusion of the best qualities of each culture would be required for the continued advance of human progress.³⁷⁵

Fiona Paisley has suggested that for both Western and Eastern feminists who embraced cultural internationalism in the 1930s, "the celebration of cultural difference also assumed its obverse: the cultural transcendence of Western modernity, with 'culture' signifying 'tradition' and the non-Western woman's primitive, Oriental, or, at best, not-yet-modern status."³⁷⁶ To the extent that they shared a liberal conception of women's emancipation as a key index of modernity, this was true of the delegates in Istanbul, and Eastern women readily acknowledged that Western women had made further advances along that route. But although organized feminism had emerged first in Europe and the United States, its Western provenance did not mean that women elsewhere lacked a feminist consciousness. Addressing the issue of cooperation between the East and West,

Huda Sha’rawi spoke both of the inspiration that Arab women drew from their Western sisters and the latter's obligations to them:

Fervent admirers of the movement of Western women for peace, and the equality of rights, for a long time these women of the East have wanted to join with you to put their good will in the service of this noble cause . . . My sisters of the West your mission is doubly sacred--because if you have been a little responsible before the universe for the faults committed by your governments, you still have an advantage viv-a-vis women who don't yet have the right to vote and to them you serve as an example.377

Speaking at the same session, Julia Dimashqiya offered the following commentary:

Dear friends, you did not know much about our existence but we have followed your footsteps, and we have worked in the guiding light of your noble spirit. The work of Josephine Butler has known no national or traditional boundaries, her light and her work have even reached the inter-walls of our Eastern homes, and she, together with our modern leaders, such as Lady Astor, Jane Addams, Madame Malaterre-Sellier, Mrs. Corbett Ashby, and many, many others have inspired us to strive for what was thought impossible but which we have now realized will be the salvation of our Eastern countries, the emancipation of the Eastern woman, and the establishment of a moral code which will put man and woman under the same obligation. We women in this part of the world used to applaud your deeds while working silently at our duties at home and for our country, and have always hoped that the day would come when we could lay before your leaders and sincere workers of the International Woman's Alliance, the results of our cooperation with the West. Though we were unprepared intellectually, we were strong in spirit and emotions, and ready to serve the cause of the highest and noblest human values, those which would unite the world in perfect understanding and peace.378

Striking for its idealism, the excerpt is also notable for the image it conveys of Syrian women, "working silently at out duties at home" while celebrating the advances of Western women. Like Sha’rawi, Dimashqiya suggested that Arab women were not only

377 Discours de Mme. Charaoui Pacha, 19 April 1935, box 1, IAW Papers, SSC.
378 Dimashqiya, "Delegates and Friends," box 1, IAW Papers, SSC.
aware of feminist movements in the West but supported them. One can perhaps detect here a subtle rejoinder to the orientalist stereotype of the "ignorant" Arab women confined to the harem. Indeed, while Dimashqiya stated frankly that "we were unprepared intellectually," she emphasized the strength of spirit and patriotism possessed by Syrian women and their readiness to serve the Alliance cause. The implication was that although Western women might have initiated the international movement for women's rights and peace, such goals were nevertheless the province of all humanity.

Conceding Western progress, however, did not necessarily amount to an endorsement of Western control. Eastern delegates also used the session to contest the imperial assumptions of Western women. Shareefah Hamid Ali, a Muslim delegate from India, remarked that Eastern women understood the need for solidarity with Western women, and, after acknowledging "our manifold weaknesses," asked: "May we hope to have you with us as friendly and not enforced guides--that we shall have from you cordiality and human fellowship, and not 'tutelage' and 'patronage'?" 379 Iqbalunissa Hussein insisted that it was incumbent upon the West to understand the history of the East and its present aspirations in order to eradicate the racial and cultural prejudice that justified imperialism. 380

The references to imperialism reveal the contradictions embedded in the IAW's ideal of modern womanhood. That ideal, invoked by Western and Eastern delegates alike, was grounded in the liberal tradition of individual rights conferred by the state. Feminists from dependent countries understood that their struggle had to be part of a larger struggle

379 "East and West in Cooperation," box 1, IAW Papers, SSC.

for national rights, as Dimashqiya plainly stated: "I cannot hide from you the present depressing state of economic and political affairs in our country, for they too have played a great part in bringing us to this congress. . . . The economic and political situation is so desperate that it is extremely difficult for us women to give our wholehearted energies to the cause of feminism alone." Shareefah Hamid Ali warned that "any assumption of superiority or of patronage on the part of Europe or America, any undue pressure of enforcement of religion or government or of trade or of economic 'spheres of influence' will alienate Asia and Africa and with it the womanhood of Asia and Africa." Both women had taken the opportunity to affirm their faith in "cooperation between East and West," yet they wanted assurances that their faith was not misplaced. As we will see in the next chapter, from the perspective of Arab women especially, such assurances would be a long time in coming.

Conclusion

What, in the end, are we to make of the 1935 congress in Istanbul? This chapter has argued that the idealized vision of "global sisterhood" so deeply cherished by the IAW was not completely chimerical. The rhetoric of modern womanhood promoted at the congress enabled a movement that had originated in the West to be appropriated as the property of all women. This discursive strategy was especially useful to women from colonized or semi-colonized countries, whose participation in the international women's movement left them vulnerable to charges of "aping" the West. The congress gave them

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381 Dimashqiya, "Delegates and Friends."
a platform from which to demonstrate their nationalist credentials to men back home and their feminist credentials to Euro/American women. It stands as an important moment in the construction of both nationalist and internationalist feminist discourses during the interwar period.

Paradoxically, though, the liberalism of IAW feminism also contained the seeds of disunity. Based as it was on individual rights protected by the state, the ideal of the "woman citizen" was problematic for women living under foreign rule. If Indian, Egyptian, and Syrian delegates to the 1935 congress were acutely aware of the contradiction embedded in the IAW's vision of "global sisterhood," their European and American counterparts were less so. That fact would seriously threaten the fragile relationship between Arab and Western women as the issue of Palestine came to the fore.

382 "East and West in Cooperation."
CHAPTER 5
THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE

Introduction

As it turned out, the 1935 congress represented the crest of international feminism's first wave. Writing in *L'Egyptienne* four years later, Saiza Nabarawi recalled the heady spirit of optimism and cooperation that had pervaded Yildiz Kösk: "In uniting the women of the East and West . . . the Istanbul congress has been a veritable apotheosis for the Alliance. In the unforgettable sessions, where there reigned a noble spirit of comprehension and solidarity, we applauded . . . the triumph of the principles of equality over the prejudices of class, race, and religion. A sincere desire for peace animated the hearts of all the delegates, bringing the possibility of an *entente* between the peoples." Such spirit was noticeably absent at the next Alliance meeting in Copenhagen, the event that occasioned her article. There, the ominous political developments of the intervening years cast a shadow over the conference proceedings, resulting in heated arguments over what should properly constitute the 35-year-old feminist organization's agenda in the face of new threats to world peace. Delegates to the 1939 Congress were made painfully aware that defining an international feminist politics was not as easy as it had seemed in
the past, when women's lack of civil and political rights had constituted an obvious common bond.

The rise of totalitarian regimes in Russia, Italy, and Germany led the Congress--over the protests of some that this constituted an intervention into politics--to adopt a resolution supporting democracy as the ideal form of government. But the bitterest conflict arose over the issue of immigration and pitted Jewish women from Palestine against the Egyptian Feminist Union, which (aside from the Palestinian women) was one of only two delegations representing the East (the other was from India). Huda Sha‘rawi nearly resigned her board membership in protest over what she perceived to be the insensitivity of the Congress to the concerns of Palestinian Arab women; Saiza Nabarawi concluded that the Alliance applied a double standard in its advocacy of democracy. For the EFU, the experience seemed to betray the promise of Istanbul: the Alliance had become less—not more--receptive to the concerns of Eastern women.

The story of the contentious 1939 Alliance congress has been told before. I revisit it here as a way to introduce the subject of this chapter, the response of the international women's movement to the conflict in Palestine during the Mandate period. What happened in Copenhagen portended the divisiveness of feminism's second wave, when Black and Third World feminists would develop devastating critiques of white, middle-class, EuroAmerican feminisms (often referred to by the unfortunate if convenient shorthand, "Western feminism") and their complicated relationship to

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imperialism. In the Middle East, that relationship has yielded particularly painful consequences for Arab feminists. The imbrication of feminism and nationalism—especially with respect to Palestine—is arguably the most salient feature of the discord between Western and Arab feminists that plagues the international women's movement today. In a world that has largely shown little sympathy for Palestinian nationalist aspirations, Arab feminists have had difficulty convincing Western colleagues of both their feminist credentials and the justness of the Palestinian cause. I examine here the antecedents to this more recent history.

As Palestine became a crucible of competing nationalisms during the interwar period, both the International Alliance of Women and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom hoped to preserve peace and sought cooperation between Arab and Jewish women. Their efforts met scant success. Each organization established strong ties with Jewish women but failed to cultivate lasting relationships with Arab women, whom they frequently deemed "too nationalist" for the demands of internationalism. The Alliance, in particular, drew a neat distinction between feminism and nationalism that was largely artificial in Palestine, expressing early support for Zionist women as a harbinger of progress in the region while overlooking the nationalist implications of their activities. As an organization more staunchly opposed to imperialism, WILPF developed a keener understanding of the conflict but ironically fared less well than the Alliance in attracting Arab women to its cause. At the heart of both group's failure to overcome Arab distrust was their professed commitment to a "neutrality" that was predicated on the existing terms of the Palestine Mandate, which
obligated the British to support a Jewish National Home in Palestine without the consent of the country's Arab population. From an Arab perspective, such a stance was not neutral at all but in fact complicit with the imperialist politics that had wrested control over Palestine's future away from its original inhabitants. This chapter shows how entrenched assumptions of Arab backwardness, along with widespread sympathy for European Jews and the belief that Palestine could be home to both peoples, combined to marginalize Arab women in the international women's movement.

PART ONE: RELATIONS WITH PALESTINIAN JEWISH WOMEN

In 1920, WILPF sent a message to the Palestine Jewish Women's Equal Rights Association (ERA), a Zionist group working to secure political, social, and economic equality for Jewish women in Palestine. Addressed to "Women of Palestine who love peace," it emphasized women's special responsibility for instilling pacifist values in children, and noted that Zionist women would have some "peculiarly difficult problems to work out with your Arab and Syrian neighbors."385 A year later, British suffrage leader and Alliance vice-president Millicent Garett Fawcett spoke before the same group and urged them to "enlarge your aims for gaining equality of opportunity for women so that they shall include those not of your own race."386 Thus marked the beginning of the international women's movement contact with organized women in Palestine.

The ERA had formed in 1919 to press for women's civil and political equality within the Yishuv, the Jewish community in pre-1948 Palestine. The immediate catalyst

386 Millicent Garett Fawcett, Six Weeks in Palestine (London: Women's Printing Society Ltd., 1921), 70.
was the decision of various Jewish settlements to form a central, elected political body. Prior to 1918, when Palestine was still under Ottoman rule, Jews rarely participated in local government; Jewish immigrants frequently remained citizens of their home countries and under the jurisdiction of their local consulates. After Britain's promise in 1917 to support a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine and the subsequent implementation of the League of Nations-sponsored mandate, Zionists were inspired to organize politically to exert influence on British policy. Their efforts ultimately resulted in the Representative Assembly, which, together with the executive body, the National Council, represented Jewish interests to the British government.

The ERA united in a single organization local women's groups that had worked to secure suffrage rights in local councils. Its members were primarily educated, middle-class European women who had ties both to Zionist and suffrage circles in the West, and who were particularly influenced by Anglo-American ideals of liberal democracy. The ERA embraced a broad agenda to improve Jewish women's status. In addition to the suffrage campaign, which lasted from 1918-1926, the organization fought for women's

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387 The mandate was officially approved by the League of Nations in 1922. Unlike the mandates for Syria and Iraq, the Palestine mandate, whose preamble incorporated the text of the Balfour Declaration, included no provisions for eventual independence and assigned full legislative and administrative power to the Mandatory. It was, as historian Paul L. Hanna has noted, a document "framed in the Jewish interest," pledging the British to secure a Jewish national home without prejudicing the rights of non-Jews (the word "Arab" does not appear in the entire document). Hanna, British Policy in Palestine (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1942), 67.


right to practice law and for civil control over personal status issues such as marriage and divorce. In her history of the group (written in 1948), vice-president Sara Azaryahu emphasized its vanguard nature:

At the time of the founding of the Union . . . almost all of the women's organizations around the world that fought for equal rights for women customarily called themselves suffrage organizations. But the achievement of 'suffrage' for women is only one of the means, or, more correctly, one of the stages that leads to the ultimate goal--the equality of women in the human community. The organizers of the Union, in opposition to custom, set for itself this ultimate goal in its totality immediately upon its founding. It was therefore called the Union of Women for Equal Rights.

Relations with the Alliance

The Alliance naturally welcomed the committed, self-consciously feminist group of Jewish activists to its ranks. It was through the ERA's first president, the Swiss-born Rosa Welt Straus, that the organization first established connection with the international body. Among the first women in Switzerland to earn a medical degree, Straus later moved to the United States, where she spent much of her adult life before settling in Tel Aviv in her 60s. She was active in the U.S. suffrage movement and may have been acquainted with Carrie Chapman Catt in the early 1900s. According to Azaryahu, Straus was present at the 1904 Berlin congress that marked the IWSA's founding, but

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391 Azaryahu, Union of Women, 11.

organizational sources do not confirm this claim. She represented the Palestinian group at the 1923 Rome Congress, where the ERA was formally approved for admission.

One powerful motivation behind the ERA's affiliation with the Alliance was to influence British policy in Palestine to women's advantage. Although Jewish women had secured the right to vote and stand for election to the National Assembly in 1925, they still had to struggle for suffrage rights in city and village councils. In 1926, the ERA objected to a new Municipal Election Law handed down by the Mandatory government that limited suffrage to men. (Azaryahu claimed that the ERA demanded voting rights for both Jewish and Arab women, but that their effort failed because Arab women did not support it.) In 1932, the government proposed legislation that would have further threatened women's rights by granting exclusive authority to the high commissioner to determine all local electoral laws. Rosa Welt Straus placed the issue before the International Alliance of Women at its interim congress in 1933 in Marseilles, whereupon the organization adopted a resolution supporting the "just demand of Hebrew women in Palestine" that their right to vote in communities where they had already exercised it be sustained. British MP and former Alliance board member Eleanor Rathbone brought the issue before the British Parliament and Minister of Justice. The proposed law was never passed.

More broadly, as Ruth Abrams has noted, the ERA's participation in the international women's suffrage movement reflected the larger Zionist effort to recast Jews

393 Ibid.
as members of a nation rather than a religion.\textsuperscript{396} Although it arose in response to European anti-Semitism, Zionism was also conditioned by 19th-century continental ideologies (primarily German Romanticism) that conceptualized "nation" as an organic entity. For Zionists of every persuasion--religious, secular, socialist--resettlement in Palestine represented the very essence of nation-building, even if the precise definition of the Jewish "national homeland" was never specified.\textsuperscript{397} Their efforts to create a self-sustaining, viable community entailed the establishment of autonomous economic, political, educational, and healthcare systems that laid the foundation for the future state of Israel.

For the Equal Rights Association, membership in the Alliance offered an important opportunity to promote Jewish nationalism in the international arena. Upon her return from the 1926 Congress, Welt Straus remarked, "our delegation was received and greeted extremely well. I can't imagine anything that would create better propaganda for our Palestine."\textsuperscript{398} And in what may perhaps be read as an early example of identity politics, Azaryahu stressed the point:

From the very beginnings of the world women's movement for equality and independence, Jewish women joined its ranks. . . . However, all these women were active and are still active today as emissaries of the nations in which they reside, totally alienated from their origins. In international forums, they appear as Frenchwomen, Dutchwomen, Danes, and others.

\textsuperscript{396} Abrams, "Pioneering Representatives of the Hebrew People," 123.

\textsuperscript{397} Official Zionist policy during most of the Mandate period was to avoid formal discussion of Palestine's political future, in part because Zionist intentions for the "national home" were not uniform.

\textsuperscript{398} Straus to Azaryahu, June 18, 1926, Central Zionist Archives J75/9, quoted in Abrams, "Pioneering Representatives of the Hebrew People," 132. She added, "Unfortunately these women have no idea what we would like to carry out in Palestine, and believe that we are conducting some kind of religious experiment."
And they try to make their ethnic origins as inconspicuous as possible. Only the representatives of the Hebrew who have returned to their homeland, appear at international conventions of the Alliance as daughters of the people of Israel. It is they who bring to this international forum the story of the revival of the Jewish people and its return to its homeland, and it is they who fly the flag of our people besides the flags of other nations whose delegates take part in these congresses.

Azaryahu's comments underscores an important features of Alliance feminism: its dependence on the elision of difference. Mineke Bosch and Annemarie Kloosterman have suggested that the Alliance sought to preserve unity at the cost of silencing debate; Carrie Chapman Catt in particular promoted a vision of universal sisterhood that suppressed instead of confronting women's differences along national, ethnic, religious, racial, and class lines. This model, Bosch and Kloosterman argue, prevented the Alliance from openly combating anti-Semitism, even when it threatened its own members. Many Alliance feminists, including Aletta Jacobs, Rosika Schwimmer, and Rosa Manus, were Jews; despite being, in many cases, thoroughly assimilated and avowedly secular, they were nevertheless acutely aware of the "Jewish question."

According to her friend Mia Boissevain, such consciousness partly explained Rosa Manus' avoidance of the spotlight within the Alliance: "One of the reasons she gave me was that being a Jewess she did not want to come too much to the front. "You have no idea how many people, even those of whom you would not expect it, are prejudiced against our race,' she would say."

Clearly, for Azaryahu and Straus, Zionism offered Jewish women the opportunity to proclaim their heritage openly and proudly.


400 Quoted in ibid, 219. A brief item in Jus Suffragii about Irene Harand, an Austrian Catholic crusader against anti-Semitism, inadvertently confirmed Manus' observation: "Most people with decent social ideals recoil from the cruelty and horror of the cruder manifestations of this sentiment; but Mme. Harand puts her
In its effort to take its place alongside other nations represented in the Alliance, the ERA aligned itself rhetorically with secular modernity, emphasizing its struggle as one against the traditionalism of both Orthodox Judaism and Arab culture. A 1920 letter from Welt Straus to Catt that was published in *Jus Suffragii* presented the organization as an agent of modernization in a backward country:

I speak here of the Jewish women, and the Jewish women only. The Moslem and Christian Arab women are politically unborn, and are, especially among the Moslem population, treated as slaves and beasts of burden. There are about 90 percent illiterates among their males, and nearly 100 percent among their females; whereas among the Jewish population the males are 100 percent literate and the women over 80 percent. I understand, however, that these poor Arab sisters of ours are taking courage from their Jewish compatriots, and I hear that many an Arab woman refuses to put up with the treatment handed down through countless generations to her husband, father and brothers, and looks to the Jewish women for inspiration.401

As a Zionist, of course, Straus had reason to portray Jewish women as an inspiration to Arab women. The theme of reclamation intrinsic to Zionist ideology led to a rhetoric that often depicted Palestine as a barren wilderness, awaiting fertilization at the hands of Jewish settlers who would "make the desert bloom." Colonization--and its concomitant displacement of Palestinian Arabs--was justified through a modernist discourse that either ignored or dismissed as primitive the people who had been living off the land for

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centuries. Jewish immigration would benefit the entire country by bringing European progress and civilization to a region that had stagnated under Ottoman rule.\textsuperscript{402}

The ERA found a receptive audience in the Alliance. \textit{Jus Suffragii} published Millicent Garett Fawcett's impressions of the women's movement in Palestine after her 1921 trip: “Great is the contrast between these progressive women and the unorganized, inarticulate, little-educated Moslem women of Palestine. Who is to lead these, who is to work for them and help them to work for themselves? Mrs. Fawcett feels that it is to the organized Jewish women that these others must look for their first help [sic] toward self-help.”\textsuperscript{403} The article concluded with a word of praise for the work of the ERA and an expression of hope that it “may help the whole country to a noble end.” Welt Straus and her colleagues could not have hoped for a more ringing endorsement. (Elsewhere, Fawcett praised the enlightened administration of Herbert Samuel, the British High Commissioner (and also a Zionist) and expressed confidence that the Balfour Declaration did not threaten the rights of Palestinian Arabs.)\textsuperscript{404}

Fawcett's portrayal of Zionist women as agents of progress in Palestine echoed Carrie Chapman Catt's description of Jewish settlements--offered ten years earlier--as

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\textsuperscript{402} For a particularly useful discussion of Zionist justification of colonization, see Sheila Katz, “Women and Gender in Jewish and Palestinian Nationalisms before 1950: Founding and Confounding the Boundaries,” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1993), 227-37. It is important to note, however, that Zionism did not unequivocally resolve the complex question of Jewish identity. Some Zionist leaders "chose to consider the Jews a nation which dissociated itself from the West . . . an Oriental people which, returning to its roots, also served as a link between the two worlds." Israel Kolatt, "The Zionist Movement and the Arabs," in \textit{Zionism and the Arabs}, ed. Shmuel Almog (Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel and the Zalman Shazar Center, 1983): 1-34; quotation on 8. Sephardic Jews shared more in common with Arab than European culture.

\textsuperscript{403} "A Glimpse of Egypt and a Journey through Palestine: An Interview with Mrs. Henry Fawcett, L.L. D.," \textit{Jus Suffragii} 15. 9 (June 1921), 129-31.

\textsuperscript{404} Fawcett, \textit{Six Weeks in Palestine}, 47-55.
"bits of the new world transplanted into the old." Indeed, the accounts of the three visits made by Catt, Fawcett, and Margery Corbett Ashby between 1911 and 1935 together form a narrative of neglect fully consonant with Zionist depictions of Palestine. Catt and Fawcett were struck by the region's seeming timelessness: Catt referred to its inhabitants generically as modern "Davids" and "Rebeccas"; Fawcett remarked, "Nothing had changed. We were back in the days of the Bible." Writing to her husband in 1935, Ashby confessed her disappointment upon touring Bethlehem, which she found to be "wretched, tawdry . . . Nowhere have I felt less inspiration or less Christianity, the lowest level of superstition and ignorance." All three women commented on the impressive achievements of Zionist settlers.

It is unsurprising, of course, that Catt, Fawcett, and Ashby—all of whom shared a bourgeois Protestant background—expressed the contrast between Jewish and Arab communities in Palestine as one of modern progress versus traditional backwardness. All three women found the transplanted culture of secular European Jews more familiar than that of Arabs, whether Christian or Muslim. Financed through foreign subsidies and self-taxation, Zionists created a "tightly organized society along Western lines" with their own schools, hospitals, and labor unions. They introduced new techniques of land cultivation and industry in a region dominated by subsistence agriculture, and developed

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405 Catt, "The Holy Land (Continuation)," *Jus Suffragii* 6.6 (15 February 1912), 55.
408 Margery Corbett Ashby to Brian Ashby, 29 January 1935, box 484, Ashby Papers.
leadership structures based on European political parties. Palestinian largely rural Arab population, on the other hand, was characterized by preindustrial patterns of social organization in which kinship and patron-client ties dominated, and depended more heavily than Jews on the meager expenditures of the colonial administration for its health and education needs.410

In portraying Zionist achievements as signs of progress in Palestine, however, the Alliance visitors overlooked the reality of Arab/Jewish tension as well as the nationalist implications of the Zionist project. Ashby lamented in 1935 that “the present political situation" precluded cooperation between Arab and Jewish women, adding that Arab women were “too absorbed in the nationalist movement to have time or energy to spare for their own rights or for social and educational improvements,” while the ERA “finds all of its demands for better social legislation and for such reforms as the abolition of child marriage set on one side on the plea that the Association only represents one section of the community.”411 Because their activities in the realm of social reform comported with her conception of feminist progress, she may well have found it easier than either Palestinian Arabs or British mandatory authorities to ignore the political ramifications of such efforts. The ERA’s “demands for better social legislation,” while seemingly neutral on their face, were deeply enmeshed in the political conflict between Arabs and Jews—a fact that belied the easy Alliance faith that feminism could transcend politics.

410 Because security constituted the main spending priority, the Departments of Health and Education (especially the latter) were chronically underfunded, never receiving more than 7% of the total annual budget. Ibid, 127.

Fawcett's early confidence in the prospects for a Jewish-led, interfaith feminist movement in Palestine, which reflected widespread assumptions among Western feminists that Eastern women needed their help in combating indigenous forms of patriarchy, would prove to be woefully misplaced. Arab women had already embarked on their own feminist trajectory, one that would develop in an atmosphere of (and in tandem with) fervent anti-Zionist nationalism. The Alliance remained largely uninformed about Palestinian Arab women, though, since the ERA served as the primary filter through which news about them reached the organization. Its reports to *Jus Suffragii* often featured an image of the downtrodden Muslim woman, debased by illiteracy, child marriage, and seclusion. Significantly, when Arab women began to organize in direct opposition to Zionism, the Association neglected to mention the reason for their activism. In a brief item on the 1929 convening of an Arab women's congress that brought Muslim and Christian women together, Straus commented that the congress "marks a decided improvement in the status of Arab women in this country, and especially of the Moslem women who have hitherto been rigorously confined to the harems," but included no reference to the very purpose of the meeting, which had been called to pass resolutions protesting Jewish immigration and British policies in Palestine.412

The 1929 congress was precipitated by the Wailing Wall incidents of that year, which tragically highlighted the improvidence of the British Mandate. The riots that broke out in August culminated a year of escalating religious/nationalist tensions over legal rights to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Sacred to Jews as the sole remnant of the ancient Temple of Herod, the Wall also forms part of the exterior of the Haram al-Sharif

(the complex containing the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque), Islam's third holiest shrine. A provocative demonstration by Jews at the site was followed by Arab massacres of Jews in Hebron and Safed and spontaneous acts of violence by both sides throughout the country, claiming the lives of 133 Jews and at least 116 Arabs. The scale of the violence caught the British unprepared; after forcibly suppressing the riots (most of the Arab casualties were killed by security forces attempting to reassert control), they arrested approximately 1300 people and sentenced 25 to death, although the sentences of only three men--all Arab--were ultimately carried out. The riots sparked international outrage and criticism of Britain's administration of the Mandate, prompting the government to appoint a commission of inquiry headed by Sir Walter Shaw to determine the immediate causes of the disturbance and recommend policy measures to prevent a recurrence. (To the disappointment of the Arabs, who believed themselves unfairly blamed for the violence, the commission's charge did not extend to a reconsideration of the Mandate itself.) The Shaw commission cited Arabs' fears for their political and economic future as the underlying cause of the riots and recommended, among other things, that Jewish immigration be curtailed. 413

The traumatic events of 1929, as well as the recent widening of the organization's agenda to include peace activism, impelled the Alliance to address openly, for the first time, the fact that Zionism was on a collision course with Arab nationalism. Throughout

the 1920s, the organization had struggled to define its feminist identity in a new era that had witnessed both the carnage of world war and women's enfranchisement in many countries. In 1926, at its triennial congress in Paris, the group voted to add a commission on peace and the League of Nations to its five permanent international standing committees. The move was not universally hailed: an impassioned debate over the relationship between feminism and pacifism took place in the pages of *Jus Suffragii* over several months in 1928, with some correspondents expressing the view that the organization's turn to peace work represented a departure from its commitment to women's rights.414 Responses from former president Carrie Chapman Catt and current leader Margery Corbett Ashby made the case that feminism encompassed pacifism, particularly since enfranchised women now shared equal responsibility with men for solving the "great problems of the world."415

It was in this context that *Jus Suffragii* published an analysis of the conflict in Palestine after the Wailing Wall incidents. Its British author, Lucy Mair, offered this assessment of the Arab case:

> Nevertheless, the Arab nationalists have a legitimate grievance; though, be it said, the grievance is not against the mandate as such, but against the Jewish National Home. They see their brothers in Iraq -- even in wild Transjordan -- making progress towards self-government under the tutelage of Great Britain, while the existence in their midst of a privileged non-Arab community seems to be a negation of any hopes of such an advance for them. This, of course, is an exaggerated view . . . Arab


415 Catt, “What is the Alliance?” *Jus Suffragii* 22.8 (May 1928).
nationalism in Palestine has throughout adopted a “won’t play” policy, resembling that of Wafdists in Egypt and Swarajists in India.416

A tincture of racism colors Mair’s otherwise sympathetic analysis: Transjordan is “wild;” Arabs require the “tutelage” of Great Britain; Palestinian nationalists are unreasonable. Her tone suggests something of the predicament of British imperialists who, despite sincere beliefs that they were providing useful “service” to Middle Eastern peoples, encountered growing hostility to their presence and influence in the region during the interwar period.417 Nowhere does she question the justness of the Mandate itself, which Palestinian Arabs had never accepted.418 Based on fears of economic and political domination by an alien population, their resistance to Zionist immigration and land purchases had begun in the early 1900s and would remain steadfast through the duration of British rule.419 Arab rejection of the Mandate was based on the premise that Britain had no legal or moral right to facilitate the establishment of a Jewish National Home on Arab land. Even official clarification of British policy in 1922 that Palestine was not to


417 See Elizabeth Monroe, Britain’s Moment in the Middle East, 1914-1971 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981) for an account of British policymaking in the Middle East during the twentieth century. The story presented here, which pays only cursory attention to indigenous perspectives, is one of a Great Power’s inevitable decline in the face of militant nationalism.

418 Almost as if in direct rebuttal to Mair, Matiel Mughannam wrote in 1937, “The Arabs think, and rightly so, that the dispute, if it can be so called, is directly between themselves and Great Britain and they refuse to consider the Jews except as a distant third party to the issue.” The Arab Woman and the Palestine Question, 311.

419 On Arab opposition to Zionism before World War I, see Porath, Emergence of the Palestinian -Arab National Movement, 20-30.
become a Jewish state failed to allay Arab suspicions that Zionists intended precisely such an outcome and were in a position to influence British policy in their favor.420

When Welt Straus objected to the publication of Mair's article on the grounds that it had "no specific relation to women's news," she received the answer that "now that women's citizenship is largely an actual fact and now that the Alliance has a section for Peace and the League of Nations, any question such as the Mandate is a matter on which our women ought to have some knowledge."421 But the question of what issues were appropriate for the Alliance to consider remained unresolved in the 1930s, due to its policy of strict neutrality adopted in 1908. Such a policy had seemed noble--and simple--enough at a time when the organization's reach was limited to Europe and the United States and its constituents shared the same status as unenfranchised citizens of independent nations. An unforeseen consequence of the policy, however, was the rigid distinction between "feminism" and "politics" that made little sense to colonized women, for whom gender was not the only, or necessarily the primary, site of oppression.

Moreover, with respect to Palestine, neutrality was a stance already compromised by the Alliance's long association with a group composed of Jewish women only, a fact that Germaine Malaterre-Sellier acknowledged when she implored Palestinian Arab women in 1935 to join. As we will see, both the longstanding affiliation of the ERA and the

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420 The latter suspicion was borne out by the publication of the MacDonald letter in February 1931, which effectively rescinded the Passfield White Paper of October 1930. Based on the findings of the Shaw commission, the Passfield Paper had granted important concessions to the Arabs by proposing a legislative council and restricting immigration and land sales.

421 Letter from Rosa Welt Straus published in *Jus Suffragii* 24.11 (August 1920), 175.
fiction that women's rights were separable from national rights set the Alliance up for the bitter confrontation of 1939.

**Relations with WILPF**

Palestinian Jewish women fared less well in their effort to affiliate with WILPF, which recognized far earlier than the Alliance that neutrality--especially with regard to Palestine--was exceedingly difficult in practice. ERA vice-president Sara Azaryahu wrote to veteran German feminist and WILPF co-founder Lida Gustava Heymann in 1929 indicating her desire to form a local WILPF branch, by which time the international organization was already turning attention to the brewing conflict between Arabs and Jews.\(^{422}\) In the wake of the Wailing Wall incidents in August of that year, several Jewish women had visited the League's Geneva headquarters to request that the organization send a delegation to Palestine.\(^{423}\) The organization’s British section also received a telegram from Arab nationalists asking that a committee with no connection to Arabs or Jews be sent to investigate the recent disturbances.\(^{424}\) The League’s international executive committee began to explore the possibilities for "reconciliation work" and ultimately decided to sponsor an official WILPF mission to Palestine, which took place in the winter of 1930-31.

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\(^{422}\) Azaryahu to Heymann, 24 November 1929, reel 78, WILPF Papers (in German).

\(^{423}\) Memo from Emily Greene Balch to members of the executive committee, 20 September 1929, reel 44, WILPF Papers.

\(^{424}\) "Copy of marconigram [sic]sent by Executive Committee of Nablus Conference, 31 August 1929," included in letter from Edith Pye to Emily Greene Balch, 11 October 1929, reel 45, WILPF Papers. Of the telegram, Pye wrote, "It is of course very violent . . . but it does seem to me interesting that they should turn to women for justice as they think, from both sides."
In sending delegations of women to the world's trouble spots, the League was putting into practice its commitment to arbitration as a means of conflict resolution. Such missions were intended to investigate conditions that led to tension and make recommendations that would influence policies undertaken by national governments or the League of Nations toward peaceful settlement. One of the most successful WILPF missions was the 1926 mission to Haiti to explore the effects of U.S. military occupation, in place since 1915. Its findings were published in an influential book, *Occupied Haiti* (edited by the American sociologist and first international secretary of the League Emily Greene Balch) that helped spur the U.S. government to conduct its own official investigation and end the occupation. Other missions had been sent to Schleswig-Holstein, the Ukraine, and China.

While the international executive committee debated whether to send a mission to Palestine, Sarah Azaryahu and several other Jewish women founded a local WILPF branch and sought admission as a national section. The issue came up at the committee's next meeting in April 1930, where Emily Balch--just back from a personal trip to Palestine--reported that she found the Jewish group "not quite as advanced in the WIL spirit as is necessary." The committee resolved that the group be admitted as a corresponding rather than a national section on the grounds that it represented only one section of the country. Upon receiving news of the decision from international secretary

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426 International Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, Geneva, 26 April 1930, reel 10, WILPF Papers.
Mary Sheepshanks (who gently suggested that the Jewish organization try to recruit some Arab members), Azaryahu pointedly reminded her of the membership clause of the League's own constitution, which stipulated that "any minority in a country which claims the status of a separate nationality may also form a National Section."  

The committee's reluctance to admit the Jewish women's group as a national section contrasts sharply with the Alliance's enthusiastic acceptance of the ERA in 1923. The difference is partially explained by history: the looming crisis in Palestine was far more evident in 1929 than it had been six years earlier. But it also reflects the organizations' distinct goals. Despite the widening of its agenda in the 1920s, the Alliance retained its primary commitment to advancing women's rights; any women's organization that had suffrage (or equal citizenship) as its principal objective was welcome to join. The League's broader agenda of ending social conflict entailed a different sort of internationalism—one that was no less idealistic but which squarely confronted the reality of global relations of inequality (in 1926, the organization adopted resolutions against colonial and economic imperialism, and expressed its opposition to the holding of mandates).  

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427 Azaryahu to Sheepshanks, 16 June 1930, reel 78, WILPF Papers (in English).  
428 Contrary to Margot Badran's assertion that each country could only be represented by one association (Badran, *Islam, Feminists, and Nation*, 233), the Alliance admitted up to three organizations from the same country as long the existing affiliate(s) had no valid objection. As early as 1923, the Alliance recognized the value of additional societies that brought in a "new element of the population" or that "appealed to a different type of woman." "Report of the Committee on Admissions," *Report of the Tenth Congress, Paris, 1926*, 58.  
429 "Resolutions of the Dublin Congress of the WILPF, July 9 to 15, 1926," reel 20, WILPF Papers. To be sure, WILPF members from imperialist nations were not all in agreement over the question of empire: the subject of "Colonial Imperialism" provoked particular controversy within the organization. The French and U.S. sections generally assumed a more radical stance than the British section. See Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 78.
feminism was anchored in a more encompassing vision for world peace based on social justice "within and between nations." In the Alliance, "global sisterhood" depended on the avoidance of national conflicts; in the League, it required the ability to face them head on. As Sheepshanks once explained, the League's pacifism demanded steadfast commitment from its members: "Our principal is that one must be prepared to make real sacrifices in the interests of peace, not merely personal sacrifices but national sacrifices. We do not accept a national type of patriotism."

Neutrality was essential to the League's credibility as an independent observer (and potential mediator) of inter- and intranational disputes. The executive committee's decision to reject Azaryahu's group as a national section was also motivated by the desire to avoid any appearance of bias before sending a delegation to Palestine. In deliberating the utility, timing, and staffing of the potential mission, its members recognized that they were hampered by their lack of contact with Arab opinion. Responding to a letter from Sheepshanks reporting on a meeting with Zionist representatives in London, the German Gertrude Baer voiced regret that she had heard little about the 1929 Arab Women's Congress and confided that she had always felt that, due to the propaganda conducted by the "other side," the League's information about the situation in Palestine was inevitably skewed. The Austrian Yella Hertzka insisted on the importance of hearing the Arab case since WILPF members in Central Europe "have a very good idea of the Jewish

430 Bussey and Tims, Pioneers for Peace.

431 Sheepshanks to T. S. David, 12 April 1930, reel 70, WILPF Papers.
On the other hand, British section member Edith Pye—in forwarding to Geneva some documents related to the Arabs' case that included a "fascinating photo" of veiled delegates from the Arab Women's Congress setting out to deliver its resolutions to the high commissioner—concluded that "it does not seem wise to give publicity to it at present, because if [sic] any appearance of taking sides."  

The League's British section had naturally taken special interest in the issue of Palestine. Better positioned than the international organization to influence British imperial policy, its members had defended self-determination for Ireland and would staunchly support Indian independence. The Palestine Mandate, however, constituted a special case. Its dual obligations to Arabs and Jews made the question of fairness more complicated, at least in the eyes of those who supported the Balfour Declaration. The British section communicated its stance in a 1930 circular: "We believe that real peace in Palestine depends upon Jews and Arabs working in harmony to build up not only a national home for the Jews, but also a state where the Arabs will find full scope for development along their own national lines." The section sought to remain impartial in studying the issue but had more contacts with Jewish women than Arab (the Women's

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432 "...weil ich immer das Gefühl habe, dass wir infolge der sehr tätigen Propaganda der anderen Seite über die dortigen Zustände etwas einseitig informiert werden." Gertrude Baer to Mary Sheepshanks, 2 November 1929, reel 44, WILPF Papers.

433 Hertzka's commented was reported to Balch in a letter from Sheepshanks, 7 March 1930, reel 45, WILPF Papers.

434 Edith Pye to Mary Sheepshanks, 12 December 1929, reel 45, WILPF Papers.

435 It also pressured the British government in 1926 to cooperate with the Permanent Mandates Commission's proposals to collect information—including personal petitions from mandated territories—on Mandatory powers. Bussey and Tims, Pioneers for Peace, 76.

International Zionist Organization was headquartered in London), a situation that likely influenced the views of its members. ⁴³⁷ There is evidence to suggest that at least some among them had more sympathy for Jewish grievances. Hilda Clark, for example, confided her opinion on the subject to Cor Ramondt-Hirschmann, a Dutch member of the international executive:

"We are going to have a discussion this month on the Palestine situation and I am not prepared before that to speak officially for the attitude of the Executive of the British section. My own personal feeling at present is that the Jews have a very real grievance against the British administration and that, while the Arab outbursts has a side to which should be given very careful consideration, there is much more danger that anti-Jewish feeling is leading to unfair treatment of the Zionists than that the carrying out of the terms of the mandate has been unfair to the Arabs. I say this in spite of the fact that I get a good deal irritated by much that the Jews say. I think that probably the chief work of the British section will be in bringing pressure on our own Government to improve the administration in Palestine. I doubt if it is so much the policy that is at fault, or that further inquiry will be of much use... In theory one feels inclined to try to get an inquiry by the League of Nations, but I do not trust the States on the Council who have large Jewish populations. They profess to be interested from the Jewish point of view, but one knows of course quite well that they are not, and that their own treatment of the Jewish populations shows the attitude which might greatly hamper League action. Anyhow I think that Great Britain ought to try first to put things straight. We have sufficient public opinion here in favour of fair treatment for the Jews." ⁴³⁸

Clark's co-national Mary Sheepshanks, who served as the League's international secretary in Geneva, seemed to share her views. After meeting with members of the Arab delegation to the League of Nations in March 1930, she complained to Gertrude Baer that "they are absolutely uncompromising, extremely nationalistic . . . they entirely refuse

⁴³⁷ The section's files are scattered with references to personal meetings with various Jewish women representing Zionist points of view, including members of WIZO. I did not find mention of any contact with Arab women, although both Edith Pye and Mary Sheepshanks met with representatives of the male Arab nationalist movement in London and Geneva.

⁴³⁸ Quoted in a letter from Mary Sheepshanks to Jane Addams, 4 January 1930, reel 8, Emily Greene Balch Papers, microfilmed by Scholarly Resources, Inc., Wilmington: Delaware, 1988. Jewish grievances in the wake of the 1929 riots centered on the lack of adequate protection by British forces.
to recognize the Mandate or the Balfour Declaration which Britain had no right to make."\textsuperscript{439} And her report to Emily Balch about a conversation with a member of the Permanent Mandates Commission inadvertently betrayed her own sympathies:

"[William] Rappard believes there is just a fighting chance for Zionism if for ten years the British administered the country by first rate officials protecting the Jews from onslaught and carrying out a general constructive policy for the whole country."\textsuperscript{440}

Both Clark and Sheepshanks interpreted the violence in Palestine primarily as a failure of local policy, remediable through a renewed commitment by the government to uphold its Mandatory obligations. "Fairness" in this case meant continuing to administer the Mandate as though British promises to Jews and Arabs could be reconciled—a position that, like Lucy Mair's, depended on a willingness to dismiss Arab opposition to the Balfour Declaration. Their focus on improving colonial administration no doubt reflected simple pragmatism, but it also precluded a more far-reaching appraisal of the conflict as inevitable under the Mandate's present terms.

The American Emily Balch, who visited the country in March 1930, was less sanguine about British justice and viewed the Mandate as fundamentally unfair to Palestine's Arab population. Writing in WILPF's newsletter the same year that Mair's article appeared in \textit{Jus Suffragii}, she observed "the central point in the consciousness of the Zionist is that he is in Palestine because he has a right to be. He unquestionably has, so far as such a right could be conferred by the British with the formal governmental

\textsuperscript{439} Sheepshanks to Baer, 13 March 1930, reel 45, WILPF Papers. Baer replied that "nationalism is everywhere. It would be strange if this were not the case in Palestine." Baer to Sheepshanks, 17 March 1930, reel 78, WILPF Papers.

\textsuperscript{440} Sheepshanks to Balch, 20 February 1930, reel 8, Balch Papers.
approval of many of the Allied Powers, of the United States and of the League of Nations. But what of the people of the country who were not consulted?"\textsuperscript{441} Although Balch's trip was personal and in no way sponsored by WILPF, she used the opportunity to gather information that might prove useful to a potential mission. Her determination to listen to both sides offended Rosa Welt Straus, who met with Mary Sheepshanks in Geneva in November. Unlike Azaryahu, Straus had little interest in joining WILPF, which she considered weak and ineffective, yet was "extremely annoyed and critical of [Balch's] having visited Palestine and not devoted more time and attention to the Jewish colonists," and believed Balch to have been "unduly influenced" by the Arab perspective. She told Sheepshanks frankly that "it was ridiculous to expect the Tel-Aviv group to include Arab women who represent a totally different and much more backward civilization and are 90 percent illiterate and up to the present have lived more or less in seclusion."\textsuperscript{442}

The League adopted an official policy on Palestine that blamed the conflict on the vagueness of the Balfour Declaration as well as the "narrow nationalistic views present among Jews and Arabs."\textsuperscript{443} It is to WILPF's credit that the international executive chose not to recognize the Jewish women's group as the official section of Palestine. But its


\textsuperscript{442} Mary Sheepshanks to Elisabeth Waern-Bugge, 24 November 1930, reel 83, WILPF Papers.

\textsuperscript{443} "W.I.L. Policy on Palestine," \textit{Pax International} 5. 7 (May 1930) 86, reel 111, WILPF Papers.
commitment to neutrality seemed self-defeating to Azaryahu, who wrote bitterly to Balch:

Our standpoint remains the same as when we explained it to you personally in Tel Aviv. We were and are now still ready to work together with Arab women for an improvement in living conditions for women in general and especially, for the ideas of the League. Whenever the Arab women desire to join our organization, we will gladly take up heart; if they find it more suitable to form a separate Arab group, we will be ready to work with their group on a federated basis. Unfortunately, present conditions are such that we, despite the best will, see no way toward a common effort in this sense, since the Arab women in Palestine demonstrate no efforts or special interest in the area of world peace, etc. It must be asked, therefore, why should the lack of understanding of the League's ideals on the part of Palestinian Arab women be an obstacle to their spread among Jewish women who are ready to serve them?  

WILPF never did see fit to change its position regarding the Tel Aviv group, whose affiliation with the international organization appears to have lasted only a few years. Its efforts to start a mixed national section in Palestine will be discussed below.

**PART TWO: RELATIONS WITH PALESTINIAN ARAB WOMEN**

Previously limited to charitable associational work, Arab women's activism in Palestine assumed a new, political character as the national conflict grew more pronounced. When it convened in Jerusalem in October 1929, the Arab women's congress drew more than 200 attendees, where speakers urged "a national movement for consolidated action on the part of all women's organizations." The women elected an Arab Women's Executive Committee to oversee the establishment and coordinate the activities of local Arab Women's Associations in every city and town, and passed

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444 Azaryahu to Balch, 31 August 1930 (in German), reel 8, Emily Greene Balch Papers.

445 Mughannam, *The Arab Woman*, 70.
resolutions supporting the abrogation of the Balfour Declaration; the establishment of a representative council whose membership would be determined in proportion to population; and the development of national industries through a boycott of Jewish goods and refusal to sell land to Jews.\textsuperscript{446} Legal and political rights for women never comprised an explicit part of the movement's agenda, although the by-laws of the Jerusalem society designated as among its objects "the development of the social and economic affairs of the Arab women in Palestine, . . . the extension of educational facilities for girls, [and] to use every possible and lawful means to elevate the standing of women."\textsuperscript{447} That the Arab women's movement in Palestine did not formally advocate equal rights dismayed many Western feminists, who would view its preoccupation with the nationalist cause as a threat to both to internationalism and to peace.

Sara Azaryahu's impatience at Arab women's "lack of understanding" of WILPF ideals was countered in \textit{Pax International} by an unidentified Palestinian Arab woman who, upon hearing about WILPF's work from British member Juliette Rao in 1930, proclaimed, "We desire justice first, then we will work for peace."\textsuperscript{448} Her simple statement (which anticipated Huda Sha'rawi's call five years later for a peace based on justice) captures both the dominant ethos of Arab women's emergent activism in Palestine as well as the reason behind international feminism's failure to bridge the gulf between Euro/American and colonized women. Rao considered it a case of putting the

\textsuperscript{446} Ibid, 70-73.

\textsuperscript{447} Ibid, 77.

\textsuperscript{448} Juliette Rao, "Palestine," \textit{Pax International} 5.3 (January 1930), 7.
cart before the horse: she replied that justice depended on peace, a conviction shared by many Western feminists. The difference was more than merely semantic. As Mervat Hatem has noted, the peace activism of many international women's groups was largely oriented toward the League of Nations and institutional mechanisms of conflict resolution (arbitration and in particular disarmament constituted key goals).⁴⁴⁹ Their work was resolutely and self-consciously practical, in part to avoid the stigma of sentimentality. But reliance on the League of Nations as the best hope for peace meant acquiescence to the prevailing geopolitical order and the perpetuation of Great Power dominance. Peace was envisioned as the absence of armed conflict. In contrast, Palestinian (and Egyptian) women--like other colonized peoples--spoke of peace as the restoration of national rights usurped by imperial power.⁴⁵⁰ In her effort to acquaint British readers with the Arab women's movement in Palestine, Matiel Mughannam emphasized its overarching goal as that of "peace and the protection of the rights of their nation"; all its efforts were aimed at "remove[ing] all causes of unrest and bloodshed," which she named as "the attempts . . . being made to establish a National Home for an alien race in a country which is already populated."⁴⁵¹ As long as international women's organizations accepted Jewish national rights in Palestine as enshrined in the Balfour Declaration, prospects for attracting Arab women to participate remained bleak.


⁴⁵⁰ Ibid, 63.

⁴⁵¹ Mughannam, The Arab Woman, 102.
The League's 1931 Mission to Palestine

After several months of internal discussion and consultation with outside experts, WILPF's international executive committee agreed at its October 1930 meeting to send Elisabeth Waern-Bugge of Sweden to undertake reconciliation work in Palestine.\textsuperscript{452} Gertrude Baer had earlier proposed sending WILPF's revered president, Jane Addams, but other committee members were reluctant to stake Addams' considerable prestige on such uncertain ground.\textsuperscript{453} Waern-Bugge dutifully accepted her charge, albeit with extreme reluctance; an expert on armaments, she feared she lacked sufficient knowledge of Palestine to be of much use.\textsuperscript{454} Daniel Olivier, a Quaker resident of Syria, echoed her doubts in a letter to Balch: "I have no doubt that Madame Waern-Bugge is all that you say she is, wise and tactful, and yet as she cannot know the Arabic language or the Arabic mind, I greatly fear that she cannot help much in the situation."\textsuperscript{455}

Waern-Bugge did all she could to prepare for the trip. She studied the reports of both the Warren and Hope-Simpson commissions\textsuperscript{456} and met with Emil Lofgren, former Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs and a member of the League of Nations delegation sent to investigate the Wailing Wall incidents. The more she learned the more pessimistic

\textsuperscript{452} International Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 26 April 1930, reel 10, WILPF Papers.

\textsuperscript{453} Mary Sheepshanks to Members of the Executive Committee, 18 December 1929, reel 44, WILPF Papers; "Palestine," n.d., reel 70, ibid. The proposal to send Jane Addams came from Gertrude Baer.

\textsuperscript{454} Elisabeth Waern-Bugge to Mary Sheepshanks, 17 July 1930, reel 83, WILPF Papers; Waern-Bugge to Edith Pye, 6 August 1930, ibid.

\textsuperscript{455} Undated letter, reel 10, WILPF Papers.

\textsuperscript{456} To placate Zionist opposition to the Shaw findings, the British government sent the Hope-Simpson Commission investigate land and immigration issues in Palestine. Its findings basically corroborated those of the Shaw Commission and were incorporated into the Passfield White Paper.
she became, complaining to Sheepshanks that "the whole Palestine problem is so complicated and entangled, that it is impossible for a stranger to come to the bottom of it!" Her visit to Palestine lasted only a few months: she arrived in early January 1931 and issued her report to the international executive committee in April. It is unclear why a longer mission wasn't planned, especially since committee members recognized that the complexity of the situation called for a long-term commitment. One reason may have been a shortage of funds; another may have been the general recognition that the mission was unlikely to bear fruit. Several outside sources had expressed doubt that a WILPF mission would be useful, including Judah Magnes, rector of Hebrew University, who warned that representatives from WILPF "would be subject to all kinds of attack and intrigue, and in the end might themselves be drawn into the whirlpool of politics here." (The American social reformer Lillian Wald, who, according to Balch was "much in touch" with Arab advocates in the U.S., also counseled against a WILPF mission). The strongest support for a WILPF delegation apparently came from WIZO, whose administrator in Palestine was "very keen" to bring Arab and Jewish women together.

Once in Jerusalem Waern-Bugge relied predominantly on European Christians and Jews for help in coordinating outreach activities, including High Commissioner John

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457 Waern-Bugge to Sheepshanks, 5 November 1930, reel 83, WILPF Papers.


459 Emily Greene Balch to Edith Pye, 26 October 1929, reel 44, WILPF Papers.

460 Sheepshanks to Waern-Bugge, 25 July 1930, reel 83, ibid.
Chancellor, Magnes, and the Swedish Consul Lewis Larson and his wife. (Among other things, Larson arranged an interview with Grand Mufti Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni, who expressed appreciation for WILPF's telegram urging commutation of capital punishment for those convicted of murder in the 1929 riots.) The mission yielded little success. Although Waern-Bugge established a warm relationship with Sarah Azaryahu's Tel Aviv affiliate and managed to interest a number of Arab students at a Quaker-run school for girls in Ramallah in joining the League, she was unable to achieve the chief objective of forming a mixed group in Jerusalem.

Her report to WILPF's international executive committee offers some revealing glimpses of the difficulties she encountered. According to Waern-Bugge, the primary obstacle proved to be "overwrought sensibility and suspiciousness of the Arabs." Whereas the Jewish women she met all showed "great understanding and willing sympathy" with respect to her goals, Arab women displayed "the most obstinate chauvinism and the bitterest hatred against the Jews." Waern-Bugge unfortunately did not name any of the Arab women with whom she met, but she referred to Arab Christian members of the "newly started movement for women's rights in Palestine,"--probably a reference to the Arab Women's Executive Committee (Emily Balch had met with

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462 Elsewhere Waern-Bugge referred to these women as belonging to the "new Arabic feministc movement for women's rights," an intriguing description since the Arab women's movement in Palestine did not formally promote a right-based agenda. In contrast, Margery Corbett Ashby--who met with members of the Jerusalem Arab Women's Union in 1935--described them as "too absorbed in the nationalist movement to have time or energy to spare for their own rights or for social and educational improvements." Ashby, "An International Pilgrimage," Jus Suffragii 29.6 (March 1935).

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Matiel Mughannam during her own trip)--and noted that she had to visit them repeatedly and work slowly so as "not to bewilder them with too many new ideas at the [same] time." Of their unwillingness to join with Jewish women in forming a mixed League group, she wrote, "Their complete ignorance of [international questions], their quite new-born and confused conception of women's possible contribution to the common welfare of mankind were insurmountable obstacles as well as their blind and unreasoning hatred of the Jews."464

Waern-Bugge was unable to reach Muslim women at all, despite a promise from Hajj Amin al-Husayni that several of them (including his wife) would attend a tea party hosted by Mrs. Larson that was intended to bring European (Christian and Jewish) and Arab (Christian and Muslim) together to hear about the League. Only one Muslim woman attended the event; the rest made various excuses.465 Several Arab Christian women ("who did not belong to this new political women's movement") expressed enthusiasm about the League's work, but when Waern-Bugge asked if they would be willing to join a mixed group, they demurred for fear of being viewed as traitors by the Muslim majority, whom--as members of a minority--they dared not oppose.466 A three-

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463 Palestine trip journal, 7 March 1930, reel 18, Balch Papers.

464 Waern-Bugge, "Report on Palestine."


466 In a letter to WILPF's new international secretary Camille Drevet, Waern-Bugge reported an additional reason, noting that one young Arab Christian woman compared Jewish settlement to "a rope around their throat, and that not until they could be sure it would not strangle them, they could think of a real cooperation with the Jews." Waern-Bugge to Drevet, 2 February 1931, reel 83, WILPF Papers.
hour conversation with nationalist leaders `Auni `Abd al-Hadi and Musa Alami convinced Waern-Bugge that their fears were justified:467

Among other questions I put this one to him [al-Hadi]: "Don't you see that your press . . . is constantly exhorting an inciting and inflaming influence on the great, ignorant, hot-blooded and easily stirred-up masses of your people? You must understand what the consequences might be. Do you dare to take them on your responsibility?" He answered: "We take the responsibility. If there is no other way to do it, we will have to do it thus." I said "But don't you see, that if you are going to use this "way," as you call it, the purpose you openly admitted a few minutes ago (namely to "stamp out the Jews and compel the British to leave their unlawful possession of Palestine") you will rouse the League of Nations against you?" He answered: "We are not afraid neither of Great Britain, nor of the League of Nations. Remember, madame, that we have behind us not only the whole Arab race, but also the Moslems of the whole world." I then turned to another man among them, a lawyer with a fine Oxford education and well known as a modern and broad-minded man, and said: "I want to have this point quite clear and beyond any mistake. Do you really mean to say, that you are expecting and perhaps preparing another riot?" He said: "Not one, madame, but many."468

Its explicit racism aside, Waern-Bugge's report indicates that she and her WILPF colleagues had underestimated the depth of Arab opposition to a Jewish National Home. But where she might have been led to a fuller appreciation, Waern-Bugge drew the wrong lesson from her encounter with Arab nationalism, taking its prevalence and emotional power as prima facie evidence of its irrationality rather than a sign of how deeply threatened Arabs felt. Despite her genuine efforts to present an unbiased consideration of Arab and Jewish perspectives on the ground, Waern-Bugge's analysis

467 The meeting took place at Alami's home, to which Waern-Bugge had been invited to discuss the prospect of a mixed WILPF group with Alami's wife. The Christian women had said that her participation would legitimize their own. Badra Kanaan, a member of the Jerusalem Arab Ladies' Association, was also present. Ibid.

468 Waern-Bugge, "Supplement to the Report on Palestine," n.d., reel 10, WILPF Papers. The exact role of the Arab nationalist leadership, particularly the Mufti and the Supreme Muslim Council, in the riots of 1929 has been the subject of contentious debate. The Shaw commission officially exonerated al-Husayni and the Arab Executive of responsibility for inciting the violence.
inevitably hinges on her belief in Arab backwardness. Even her deep suspicion that many Zionists harbored ambitions beyond the British promise of a National Home did not lead her to sanction Arabs' mistrust of Jews.\textsuperscript{469} Instead, her report tacitly suggests that their fears stemmed more from ignorance and overheated passion than from a reasoned appraisal of the Zionist project. This is especially clear in her depiction of the Arab women, whom she dismissed as mere mouthpieces for their men (an assessment most eloquently belied by Mughannam's 1937 book \textit{The Arab Woman and the Palestine Problem}, which British M.P. Anthony Crossley deemed the clearest argument of the Arab case he had yet seen).\textsuperscript{470}

Arab women were indeed militant, but they had not needed men to instruct them to oppose foreign rule. Their nationalism was nurtured through direct experience of the flip side of British "tutelage": force. In the wake of the 1929 riots, Arab women's groups stepped in to alleviate the hardships faced by families of those killed or imprisoned by authorities. When violence escalated in the 1930s and British reprisals became increasingly brutal (particularly during the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939), they continued their vital role of communal support. As Ted Swedenburg has noted, thanks to the voluminous protests by Arab women of repressive measures taken by British forces that

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{469} She wrote, "It seemed to me also obvious that the extreme Zionists hope that great immigration of young healthy people, the raising of numerous big families, an excellent infantile welfare activity, a likewise excellent medical care and sanitary conditions etc. will in a comparatively short time make the Jews a strong majority of the population, and that their great financial power in the whole world will enable them to exert a pressure on both the British government and the League of Nations in favor of their nationalistic plans." Ibid.

\textsuperscript{470} Crossley, Preface to \textit{The Arab Woman and the Palestine Problem}, 10.
\end{quote}
are preserved in the Colonial Office archives, "a documentary record exists of British abuses, a subject to which insufficient attention has been paid." 471

By contrasting Jewish willingness to cooperate against Arab intransigence, Waern-Bugge's analysis obscured the fact that Jewish women had far more to gain from joining a mixed group than Arab women--namely, an implicit acceptance of their right to settle in Palestine. What seems to have so frustrated the WILPF representative is that Arab women were no more willing to sacrifice national self-interest upon the altar of "reconciliation" than men. That unsettling discovery must have left her faith in the possibility of peaceful coexistence badly shaken. But Waern-Bugge evidently found it easier to focus on Arab backwardness than on the utter incompatibility of the British Mandate with peace in Palestine. In a supplement to her report on Palestine, she included a section entitled "Steps for Solution of the Palestinian Problem." Beginning with the caveat that she had not been sent to study the political situation, that it was vastly complicated and beyond her capability to "fathom these very intricate and difficult problems," the section went on to point out some issues that WILPF ought to bear in mind. "The main difficulty for a conciliatory work in Palestine seems to me to consist in the difference of development that exists between the races," Waern-Bugge wrote. She stressed the need for education and labor regulations among the Arabs, "if they are to be raised to modern civilization." Waern-Bugge wanted to avoid politics, but the conflict in Palestine was political to the core.472

471 Swedenburg, Memories of Revolt: The 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 176.

In hindsight, it is easy to see that the "peace mission" was doomed to fail. As an organization committed to nonviolence and that placed hope (if not always faith) in the League of Nations as an impartial arbiter of international disputes, WILPF was unlikely to be welcomed by a community who saw the League as complicit in its dispossession. In 1942, historian Paul Hanna offered an appraisal of the Shaw Commission that applies equally well to the women's peace organization: "In seeking the elements of compromise, the commission adopted the basic assumption that the Balfour Declaration and the mandate placed two equal obligations upon Great Britain--one to the Jews and one to the Arabs. It recognized that this interpretation was satisfactory to neither, but it refused to draw the logical conclusion that this very fact would make mandatory administration on the basis of an equality of obligation a cause of growing friction and not of peace." WILPF learned the hard way that with respect to Palestine, "neutrality" was rarely perceived as such by Jews or Arabs. Neither group would be represented in WILPF until Israel was admitted as a national section in 1953.

The 1939 Alliance Congress in Copenhagen

Another reason for Palestinian Arabs' loss of faith in the League of Nations was that residents of mandated territories had no direct representation before the Permanent Mandates Commission. Under Mandatory policy, complaints against a Mandatory power had to be lodged instead with the high commissioner, who was supposed to send them (with his own comments attached) to the home government. "The criticized government then presented the appeals and had the right of rebuttal, thereby diluting the impact of any criticisms." Fleischmann, "The Nation and Its 'New Women," 18, n. 28, quoting Ann Lesch, Arab Politics in Palestine, 38. See also Mughannam, "The Mandates Commission Versus the Arab Woman," The Arab Woman and the Palestine Problem, 84-92.

Hanna, British Policy in Palestine, 100.

In contrast (and ironically, considering WILPF's more progressive record on opposing imperialism), the Alliance scored a major victory in persuading the Arab women to affiliate in 1935, but the new relationship would prove to be short-lived. The political crisis in Palestine inaugurated by the Arab Revolt of 1936-39 made active contact impossible: after requests to Huda Sha’rawi to act as an intermediary "in view of the present difficulty of communications from Great Britain" went unanswered, the Alliance board dropped the Palestinian Arab group from affiliation in September 1937 because it never paid membership dues. In the meantime, the Peace Committee held desultory discussions about following up the successful 1935 Near East tour with reconciliation work among Arabs and Jews, but nothing came of these. Just as Arab women across the Middle East were organizing around the defense of Palestine, the Alliance--preoccupied with darkening skies over Europe--kept its distance, shunning the conflict in Palestine as "too acute" for action and a political issue beyond the organization's purview. When *Jus Suffragii* reported the 1938 Eastern Women's Conference for the Defense of Palestine in Cairo, which was sponsored by the Egyptian Feminist Union and included representatives of five Arab countries as well as Iran, it declined to express an opinion on the proceedings because “apart from our standing

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476 Executive Board Meeting Minutes, Brussels, 9-10 September 1936, IAW Papers, Fawcett Library. The Arab Revolt began in 1936 when the newly-formed Arab Higher Committee, which temporarily united competing nationalist factions, called a general strike. By 1938 violent resistance against both Jews and British troops had become widespread but the Revolt collapsed in early 1939. The Peel Commission, sent to investigate the situation in 1937, recommended that Palestine be partitioned into separate Arab and Jewish states.

477 Executive Board Meeting Minutes, Treasury Report, Geneva, 10-12 September 1937, IAW Papers, Fawcett Library.

478 Executive Board Meeting Minutes, Zurich, 25 February and 1-2 March 1937, ibid.
policy of neutrality on all national questions, we have a faithful feminist group among the Jewish women of Palestine who have suffered so much.”

By the late 1930s, the dire situation facing Jews in Europe made the question of Palestine immensely more complicated. Refugees from Nazism found few countries willing to admit them, and immigration to Palestine (both legal and illegal) increased the Jewish population there to nearly 30 percent by 1940. Meanwhile, the country itself was engulfed in turmoil. The Arab Revolt had challenged British authority to the extent that by 1938, in the words of one official, "civil administration and control of the country was, to all practical purposes, non-existent." At the 1938 women's conference in Cairo, Sadhij Nassar exhorted Arab women to unite in defense of Palestine and prove that "Arab women are just as capable as men and can accomplish great acts." In a show of pan-Arab solidarity, the conference drew sixty-seven delegates from Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq (there was also one woman from Iran). The conference was originally planned to convene in Bludan, Syria (where men were planning to hold a Pan-Arab Congress for the Defense of Palestine), but British authorities intervened to prevent it. Meeting in Beirut in July 1938, the leaders of women's groups from several Arab

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479 “Egypt,” Jus Suffragii 33. 2 (November 1938), 12.


482 al-Mar'a al`Arabiya wa-Qadiyat Filastin: al-Mu'tamar al-Nisa'i al-Shargi, 188-93, translated by Mary-Rose Halim. Nassar's speech, which purported to be a "survey of Zionism, its history, and the dilemma of Arabs in Palestine," was blatantly anti-Semitic, accusing "worldwide Judaism" of seeking to "control the whole Arab Islamic East . . . using Bolshevik and Zionist means." It blamed Jews for the Young Turk revolt against the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid as well as World War One ("which they had inflamed in their cunning ways"). Other speakers, including Huda Sha'rawi, took pains to emphasize their desire for peaceful coexistence with Jews and opposition only to Jewish domination of Palestine. Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation, 230.
countries—including Ibtihaj Qaddura, head of the Lebanese and Syrian Women's Union—wrote a letter to Sha’rawi authorizing her to represent Palestinian Arabs before international forums.  

As the conflict between Jews and Arabs deepened, the Alliance tried to steer a neutral course. In January 1939, Jus Suffragii published an appeal from the Palestine Jewish Women's Equal Rights Association calling on women to aid European Jewry by demanding unrestricted immigration to Palestine, "the natural and most important shelter for the Jews."  

It is telling that the piece was published without editorial comment, unlike a similar appeal from Czechoslovak women after the German invasion in 1938, which ran with an accompanying declaration of sympathy "with the Czech nation and especially for its women, our sisters, and in our admiration of their discipline and self-sacrifice and our wish to do anything we can to help them."  

Although the Alliance intended to remain above the fray, the winds of war now blowing across Europe would test its commitment to neutrality as never before. In the wake of Hitler's aggression, Jus asked rhetorically, "The Alliance is pledged to neutrality on all questions that are strictly national, but can it be claimed that the forcible taking over of one country by another, a country with a different race, culture and language, is purely a national question?"

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483 Badran, ibid, 227-28.


486 "Czechoslovakia," Jus Suffragii 33, no. 7 (April 1939).
The issue of Palestine came to a head at the 1939 Alliance congress in Copenhagen—an event treated most thoroughly by Margot Badran in her book on Egyptian feminism. The impending war prevented many European delegations from attending, and in contrast to their sizable presence at the 1935 congress, the only Eastern countries represented were Egypt, India, and Palestine (though only by Jewish women). In Copenhagen, the fragile unity between Arab and Western women celebrated at Istanbul collapsed in the face of what Saiza Nabarawi described as a "regrettable spirit of intolerance" on the part of European delegates who refused to condemn the imperialist politics of their "supposedly democratic" governments. The clash was inevitable. The EFU on several occasions sought to raise the question of Palestine and expose what it perceived to be the Alliance's double standard when it came to supporting democracy; the most contentious concerned the issue of immigration. Although the Alliance board tried hard to placate Sha`rawi and her colleague, the Egyptian women would not have been satisfied with anything less than an official condemnation of Jewish immigration to Palestine, which most delegates were not prepared to support, both out of sympathy for European Jewry and the belief that the issue was "strictly national."

According to the minutes of the pre-congress executive board meeting, the trouble began when a letter from the Hungarian affiliate was read asking that the Alliance protest against manifestations of anti-Semitism. Huda Sha`rawi, presenting a declaration from Arab women authorizing her to represent them, responded that Arabs had also suffered

greatly, and that Arab women strongly resented the Alliance's failure to protest the injustices in Palestine. It was "elementary," she continued, that the Alliance must demonstrate its sympathy if good relations were to continue, and that in view of her responsibilities to Arab women, it would be impossible for her to remain on the board without such a demonstration. After a long discussion, the board decided to appoint a sub-committee to draft a general resolution on emigration and immigration (given the prohibition on "strictly national" questions) to submit to the congress and persuaded Sha’rawi to postpone her decision about resigning from the board.489

Rosa Manus and Saiza Nabarawi present somewhat conflicting accounts of the meeting. Manus implies that Sha’rawi initiated an intervention into the forbidden territory of nationalist politics, writing to Carrie Chapman Catt that Sha’rawi "came to present a resolution to the Board that she wanted the Board to accept and put to the Congress in which it was asked that we should take a vote that from now on Palestine would not let in any more Jews. . . . You can well imagine that the Board Members did not want to go into any discussion about it as it was not within the scope of the work of the Alliance but meant mere politics."490 She makes no mention of the Hungarian letter. Nabarawi suggests that Sha’rawi’s proposal came only after the issue of Jewish refugees was raised, writing in L'Egyptienne that Jewish members of the board (not the Hungarian affiliate) had proposed the protest against anti-Semitism, and that Sha’rawi in response requested that a "message of sympathy" be sent to the Palestinian Arab affiliate. A sub-

489 Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, 6-7 July 1939, Copenhagen, IAW Papers, Fawcett Library.

490 Manus to Catt, 31 July 1939, in Bosch and Kloosterman, Politics and Friendship, 246-51.
committee drafted a message that, due to the "hostility of the Zionist bloc," was reworked until it lost its value, prompting Sha’rawi's resignation.\footnote{Saiza Nabarawi, "La délégation égyptienne au Congrès de Copenhague," 5, 7.}

Manus' account suggests that Sha’rawi, violating the Alliance spirit of neutrality, came to Copenhagen intending to use the congress as a platform for the Palestinian cause; this view is somewhat undercut by the other sources which show her to have raised the issue only in response the question of Jewish refugees. (Nabarawi wrote that Sha’rawi had received a mandate from Arab women to speak in their name "if the question [of Jewish immigration] was raised.")\footnote{Ibid, 7.} Sha’rawi appears to have recognized that the subject was technically beyond the organization's scope, but she also understood that the plight of European Jewry directly affected the fate of Palestine. The issue came up again on the last day of the congress, when resolutions proposed by affiliates societies and the executive board were put before the congress for voting. The Egyptian delegation proposed a resolution demanding that no immigration be imposed on a country without the freely expressed consent of its population, to which the Palestinian Jewish delegates strenuously objected. The Alliance board tried to appease both sides with a resolution that, after condemning discriminatory state policies that forced people to flee their country of birth (a reference to Germany), and noting that the problem of refugees was impossible to solve by imposing immigration on a country without the consent of its population, called for an international conference to study the problem. The Jewish delegates maintained their objection; the Egyptians also rejected it on the grounds that "the terms of condemnation were not applied equally to totalitarian and

\footnote{Ibid, 7.}
democratic states" and that "interested populations" would not be represented at an international conference because of the mandate. A reworded draft satisfied their objections but was again rejected by the Jews.493

For its part, the Palestinian Jewish Women's Equal Rights Association was also on the defensive. Hannah Brachyahu, its president, wrote that "for many of the delegates, our enterprise in Palestine was an obscure mystery and we made every effort to provide an honest explanation of our aspirations and our situation in Palestine." Its delegates interpreted both proposed resolutions as implicit attempts to "undermine the right of the Jewish people to emigrate to their country."494 After intense debate the ERA succeeded in having the motions removed from the agenda; outraged that further discussion was shut down, the Egyptian delegation left the hall in protest.495

The episode exposed the limits of the Alliance's policy on avoiding "political" questions. With respect to Palestine, nationalism was more than mere politics; for Arabs and Jews alike, it was a struggle for survival. It is hard to blame the Alliance for wanting to drop the subject altogether. The organization was placed in an impossible bind, caught between two communities facing annihilation--one physical, the other national. The

493 Ibid, 8.

494 Hannah Brachyahu, "From the International Women' Movement: The 13th International Suffrage Congress," Davar Hapoelet, no. 8 (21 November 1939), translated from Hebrew for the author by Eytan and Marcia Rubinstein. Brachyahu's account of the congress says that at a public meeting devoted to youth programs, the Egyptian delegate ended her speech with the call, "Save the Palestinian Arabs from the Jewish flood." The ERA delegate who took the podium immediately afterward received "thunderous applause."

495 Manus noted that at one point in the debate an Indian delegate "got up and said this was out of order and that the Indian women did no talk about their Indian politics and that is was wrong to do so." Manus to Catt, 31 July 1939.
subject was in fact beyond its scope, a fact acknowledged by Nabarawi when she noted that "feminist and pacifist problems were relegated to second place."\footnote{Nabarawi, "La délégation égyptienne," 3.} And yet it is equally difficult not to sympathize with the Egyptian delegates, who found their European colleagues lamentably ignorant about Palestine. Shortly after the congress, Margery Corbett Ashby wrote to Sha’rawi, "I could never have imagined that the people in the Northern countries lacked so much information concerning the situation in the East."\footnote{Ashby to Sha’rawi, 14 August 1939, quoted in Hawwa Idris, \textit{Ana wa-al-Sharq}, vol. 2, (Egypt, n. d.: microfilmed by Princeton University), 439. Ashby tried to placate Sha’rawi by assuring her that the board had agreed to study the problem more closely: "If you could provide the documents that support the cause, you will find in the next meeting that those who appeared disengaged or uninvolved in what concerns us today will have turned around and become strong supporters in the domain of cooperation between the East and the West." Her letter helped persuade Sha’rawi, who acknowledged Ashby’s "great and sensitive task" in promoting cooperation among women, not to resign her board membership. Sha’rawi to Ashby, n.d., ibid, 434. I thank Mary-Rose Halim for assistance with the translation.} The organization's equivocation on the question of Palestine led Arab women to conclude that it was unsympathetic to their concerns.

Indeed, from the perspective of Western feminists in the Alliance, the upheaval of World War II and the enormity of the Holocaust would inevitably marginalize Arab grievances—which receive no mention in organizational sources during the war years. There is no question that Alliance members harbored great sympathy for Jews, and news of their persecution and then extermination slowly filtered onto the pages of \textit{Jus Suffragii}. But the Alliance never endorsed Jewish immigration to Palestine, even after the war when thousands of Jewish DP's languished in refugee camps. The matter came up directly at a meeting of the International Committee in October 1945, where a telegram from the ERA seeking women's help in resettling European Jews in Palestine was read. Germaine Malaterre-Sellier remarked that it was impossible for the committee to
consider "the whole vast and complicated question of the Jewish National Home however deep our sympathy;" Cecile Brunschvicg of France noted the many other homeless people whose plight also deserved sympathy; and Ismet Assem of Egypt spoke for the Arab states who "felt that the difficulty was in allowing a mass of people who had no previous roots in Palestine to settle there" and warned of possible consequences, including war. The committee agreed that it could not express an opinion on the future of Jewry or Zionism.498

The Alliance had realized, however, that the postwar reconfiguration of international politics meant that "national questions" were increasingly unavoidable. Earlier that year, Margery Corbett Ashby had received a letter from the All-India Women's Conference requesting that the Alliance clarify its position on Indian independence. At its April 1945 meeting, the Executive Board recognized "the difficulty of having a general policy towards these national questions" and adopted a resolution calling for India's full and immediate independence, "since there can be no freedom for women when freedom is not the recognized right of every individual."499 When the International Committee met in October, the attendees discussed how the Alliance could aid the cause of national freedom. Malaterre-Sellier insisted that although the Alliance was primarily devoted to sex equality, it needed to fight imperialism as a danger to freedom. She promised to continue to do so in France and said she knew that Ashby, as an Englishwoman, would do the same. Presenting another view, Miss Valdirnrsdottir

498 Minutes, International Committee Meeting, Geneva, October 1945, IAW Papers, Fawcett Library.
499 Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Board, Sussex 24-27 April 1945, IAW Papers, Fawcett Library.
(sic) commented that "imperialism was sometimes an effort, even if a mistaken one, towards unity and that in combating it we must be ready to put forward another alternative."\textsuperscript{500} The discussion showed the divergence of opinion on both the question of imperialism and on what counted as a "feminist" issue. Still, the Alliance board's decision to endorse India's demand for independence indicated its support for the principle of national self-determination. From the perspective of many (if not most) Arabs, who viewed Zionism as an artifact of British imperialism, consistency would have required the organization to equally support immediate independence for an Arab Palestine.\textsuperscript{501}

The issue of Palestine would cast a shadow over the Alliance's efforts to reconstitute its ties with Arab women after the war. In 1945, Sha'rawi extended an invitation to the Alliance to hold its next congress in Cairo. Ashby wrote to Catt that "recent events in Egypt make it look as if we should be very unwise to plan to go there, especially as the President of our society, Mme. Charaoui, is such a very violent nationalist."\textsuperscript{502} The pros and cons were discussed at the next meeting of the executive board, where members weighed the "advantages of nearness and convenience to women of the Middle East and Mediterranean" against the "difficulty of avoiding national controversies (e.g. Palestine, French and British relations in Syria, Egypt, etc.)." Hanna Rydh of Sweden thought it "essential to have a pledge from the hostess society in Egypt

\textsuperscript{500} Minutes, International Committee Meeting, October 1945.

\textsuperscript{501} This perspective was shared by other colonized peoples. The All-India Women's Conference in 1946 passed a resolution calling for the annulment of the Balfour Declaration.
that no national questions of this political type would be brought up.\textsuperscript{503} The board eventually decided against holding its next congress in Cairo but hoped to hold a regional conference there in the near future. In 1947, Rydh, as the new president of the Alliance, and British board member Nina Spiller visited Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Greece, and Ethiopia to strengthen the organization's contacts in those countries. Syria and Lebanon had been included on the itinerary but at the last minute Spiller was denied entry because authorities wrongly believed her to be a Zionist. Reporting on their trip at a 1947 board meeting, Rydh read a letter from a Lebanese member of the reception committee who explained that they had been "alarmed at the possibility of a Jewish visitor as they thought it might create a dangerous situation." The board discussed the situation and decided that its affiliates in Lebanon and Syria should be informed of "the Alliance constitutional principle of non-discrimination accepted by their Governments in signing the Charter of the U.N., and the hope expressed that they share this point of view and will urge its practical acceptance by their Governments."\textsuperscript{504} The incident was a harbinger of the Arab-Israeli conflict's enduring impact on relations between Arab and Western women.

\section{Conclusion}

\textsuperscript{502} Ashby to Catt, n.d., box 3, folder 11, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, New York Public Library. She noted that the prospect of a Cairo congress was appealing since "it is after all the women of the Near and Middle East who most need the equality work of the Alliance."

\textsuperscript{503} Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, London, February 1946, IAW Papers, Fawcett Library. At the same meeting, Rydh--who had attended the All-India Women's Conference-expressed regret at its resolution against the Balfour Declaration, which she attributed to "strong national feeling reaching out in sympathy to other national sentiment."

\textsuperscript{504} Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, Stockholm, 28 April - 2 May 1947, ibid.
In July 1948, after the creation of the State of Israel and the eruption of the first Arab/Israeli war, a British member of the League’s International Executive Committee wrote in her report on Palestine, “If ever in our state of mortal imperfection an absolutely good solution were possible, then I am certain that the time for it has been missed.”\(^5\) Whether reconciliation and collaboration between Arab and Jewish women had truly been possible in the 1920s and 1930s is doubtful. The well-intentioned efforts by two international women’s organizations to foster such cooperation foundered for many reasons; as this chapter has shown, not least among them was an underlying perception among Western feminists that Arab women lacked sufficient awareness of their own best interests. Although the response of the international women’s movement to the question of Palestine was not monolithic—revealing indeed that first-wave feminism was not monolithic—the view of Arab women as backward held sway over both the Alliance and the League.

But this is not the whole story. The failure of both organizations to win the trust of Arab women owed as much to the difficulties of creating international consensus on the issue of Palestine as it did to conventional Eurocentrism. Some leaders, like Emily Balch, Gertrude Baer, and Germaine Malaterre-Sellier, held more progressive views on imperialism and seemed more sympathetic to Arab grievances than many of their colleagues; those attitudes had to compete with widespread support for the idea of a Jewish national home. The unwillingness of both groups to take a strong position on the question stemmed primarily from the desire to be fair to both Arabs and Jews. Because

their conception of neutrality, however, was based on the acceptance of the Balfour Declaration, it clashed inevitably with Arab ideals of justice and self-determination, sowing the seeds of discord between Western and Arab feminists that continues to plague the international women’s movement today.
CONCLUSION

In 1944, another incarnation of pan-Arab feminism took place with the convening of the Arab Feminist Conference in Cairo. Huda Sha'rawi had planned the conference partly in response to the dispiriting events of the 1939 Alliance Congress in Copenhagen, which made her realize that "it had become necessary to create an Eastern feminist union as a structure within which to consolidate our forces and help us to have an impact upon the women of the world." Like the 1938 conference (although twice as large), this one took place with state support and drew delegates from the Arab East, including Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Trans-Jordan. This time, however, feminist demands topped the agenda: the 51 resolutions called for women's right to vote and hold political office; limits on men's rights to divorce and polygamy, a minimum marriage age of 16 for girls; and the suppression of feminine suffixes in the Arabic language. Nationalist concerns were expressed in resolutions supporting Arab unity and the Palestinian cause. In her keynote address, Sha'rawi directed her remarks to men:

The Arab woman who is equal to the man in duties and obligations will not accept in the twentieth century the distinction between sexes that the [developed] countries have done away with. The Arab woman will not agree to be chained to slavery and to pay for the consequences of men's mistakes with respect to her country's rights and the future of her children. The woman also demands with her loudest voice to be restored her political rights granted to her by the Sharia and dedicated to her by the demands of the present. ... The [developed] nations, after careful

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506 al-Mu'tamar al--Nisa'i al-'Arabi. 27; quoted in Badran, Islam, Feminists, and Nation, 238.

507 For accounts of the conference, see Badran, ibid, 238-46; and Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 272-76.
examination into the matter, have come to believe in equality of sexes in all rights, even though their religious and secular laws have not reached the level Islam has reached in terms of justice toward the woman. ... Gentlemen, . . . I do not believe that the Arab man who demands that others give him back his usurped rights would be avaricious and not give the woman back her own lawful rights, all the more so since he himself has tasted the bitterness of deprivation and usurped rights.  

Sha’rawi's speech employed many of the rhetorical strategies that feminists from colonized countries had used since the turn of the century to make their cause truly their own. Defending Islam from Western denigration as well as from the monopolized interpretation of conservative clerics, she proclaimed it to be both superior to the West and the indigenous basis for women's political rights. Seeking the support of secular nationalists, she positioned women's equality as the key to national strength and progress and appealed to men's experience of subjugation to persuade them that her demands were just. It was, in short, a speech that carried all of the discursive burdens unique to "Eastern" feminism in the first half of the twentieth century.

At the time of her speech, the era of liberal constitutionalism in the Arab world and elsewhere in the Middle East was nearly over. The postwar years would see the emergence of authoritarian regimes that left little space for independent feminist activism. In a context of mounting disenchantment and anger at the West, the pressure on Middle Eastern women to define an "indigenous" feminism would become even greater.

For the international women's movement, the consequences of a postcolonial world no longer held in thrall to a Western-defined modernity have been messy but
productive. Among other things, they have helped force a reckoning with the historical cost of Western feminist assumptions about the nature of women's oppression and paths to liberation--a project to which this dissertation contributes.

My examination of the encounter between Western and Middle Eastern feminists in the first-wave international women's movement has yielded several important insights. Marked by a tension between its two constituent elements, the discourse of feminist orientalism was more complex than previous studies of imperial feminism might lead us to expect. Influenced by the growing ethos of cultural internationalism, Western feminist attitudes toward Middle Eastern women were less overtly racist and hostile to Islam than critics of orientalism have suggested. Yet their unwavering conviction that they had little to learn from (and much to teach) Middle Eastern women blinded most Western feminists to the possibility of alternate bases for, and expressions of, feminism in cultures unlike their own. To the extent that it suggested to Western women that perhaps they did not have it so bad after all, feminist orientalism forestalled the development of a more radical critique of Western patriarchy. Above all, it helped to cement the liberal vision of women's emancipation as the model for international feminism during the interwar period.

As we have seen, liberalism itself was a seductive yet problematic basis for solidarity among women. The ideals of linear progress, emancipation, peace, and justice were shared by Western and Middle Eastern feminists alike, although the experience of colonialism would result in their different interpretations. All aspired to a universal modernity that was premised on national sovereignty. As a result, Western women believed themselves naturally in a position to "help" their unenfranchised sisters, and their
leadership role was one that colonized women were quite prepared to accept. Indeed, many of the sturdy assumptions on which first-wave international feminism rested--particularly the belief that Western women were the most advanced--were not seriously challenged by the interactions between Western and Middle Eastern women. And yet it was precisely their manipulation of ideals like progress, equality, and justice that allowed Middle Eastern feminists to attempt two goals. Through their participation in the international women's movement, they simultaneously sought to make nationalist men more receptive to feminism and feminist women more receptive to nationalism. As long as national independence was either established or within reach, as it was by the early 1940s for most countries of the Middle East, collaboration between Western and Middle Eastern feminists stood a good chance of continuing. But the question of Palestine finally exposed the cracks in the foundation on which their unity had been built. It was around this issue that Western feminist orientalism collided most forcefully with Middle Eastern feminist nationalism. "Global sisterhood" proved unable to transcend directly conflicting national interests.
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