

Advancing the Rights of Women and Girls in the Middle East: An Analysis of Current Trends and U.S. Policy

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Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about advancing the rights of women and girls in the Middle East.

The fate and future of half the population is an urgent question that bears on the fortunes of each one of us here today, and I am truly delighted to see this committee focus on this topic. I have seen firsthand for years the truth of the following statement: Suffocated opportunity is the enemy of global stability. Each person, each policy maker, who is focused on our shared stability, security and prosperity must focus on the rights of women and girls if they are to turn that interest into action. There simply is no better ally than the women who serve as the heart and live at the center of their communities in the fight for a future that is brighter than the past, in a tomorrow that is better than today, and a social and economic landscape where possibility and opportunity are not the terrain of a limited few but the inheritance of a striving many.

I have seen firsthand in northeastern Syria since 2017 the legacy and the power of women from across communities to create change that benefits the many. I have met girls from Arab communities displaced by last fall's incursion who want nothing more than to be in school once more. Met mothers who told me of their daughters driving their family's tractors full of all that they had left to their name to safety while braving airstrikes. Been moved by a woman named Batoul whose story stays with me forever: she led her entire family out of Raqqa while 8 months pregnant. She sold everything she had to pay a smuggler to get her out of Raqqa in the summer of 2017 while ISIS continued to defend its so-called capital. She arranged for passage out of the city braving ISIS snipers and mines and the coalition

air strikes aimed at routing the Islamic State and pushing the group out of Raqqa. She and her children were in the first car of the five-car convoy aiming to escape the city. The last car blew up as it struck an ISIS mine. When I met Batoul, she had a few-week-old baby girl born dangerously early following that journey. We did not know if the baby would make it and neither did she. But she said that she never doubted the wisdom of that journey out of the terrain of the Islamic State. "I would not have a child born under ISIS," she said. She wanted her daughter to know peace, freedom from terror, hope. She wanted only for her to have an education.

I have met a 13-year-old girl who faced the terror of the Islamic State, and lost her education and her sibling to their horrors and their hell and who wanted only to be studying once more. When I asked what subject was her favorite, told me, "all of them, I don't care, I just want to be learning." When I turned to leave the camp at Ain Issa, she said to me something I will never forget. "I wish you would come every day." I have met women from Raqqa who joined the city's Women's Council put in place after the Islamic State, women who never had the chance to go to school themselves and who cannot today read or write. But they came to the women's council to be part of rebuilding their city after ISIS and they told me, when I asked who watched their children, that their mothers-in-law did. "We never had such a chance," one woman's mother-in-law told her, "you have to take yours." I have met university students who saw their study of science cut short by the arrival of ISIS. One young woman came immediately to rebuild her hometown of Raqqa as part of the local security force as soon as ISIS rule ended. When I asked what she would say to people who said that serving in the local security force was not women's work, she said, "I would tell them they think like ISIS. This is my town and it's my duty to be part of helping it." I have met women entrepreneurs opening shops after ISIS. Teachers living on precious little in order to be part of educating children who they prayed never had to live under the hell of the Islamic State. Illiterate and incredibly bright and daring women who risked family disapproval to take their children away from in-laws friendly to the Islamic State after their husbands were imprisoned by the Islamic State and then died fighting the extremist group as part of the SDF forces backed by the United States.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Wilson, we do not meet these women often enough. We do not hear these girls frequently enough to benefit from all that we have to learn from their courage and their experience. We do not consider their fate and their needs frequently enough. And we do not do enough to make sure that these girls I have had the privilege of meeting have access to opportunity that would allow each one of us to benefit from their ingenuity and their intrepid spirits who can survive things that would make lesser people weep.

On the other side, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Wilson, I have spent time visiting Al-Hol camp where women who were married to fighters from the Islamic State and who joined ISIS willingly as young people now live in limbo with their children. I submit to you that while the world wants to look away from the fates of these women and children, we must not. Wishing this challenge of extremism away will not make it invisible. The only thing that will allow us to deal with the hunt for community that led so many of these women to join ISIS is to invest in something different for them and their children. It is also utterly untenable and unsustainable that the very same people who lost ten thousand of their own serving as the ground force to stop the Islamic State are now asked to care for those suffering and enduring its aftermath. The woman who leads security for Al-Hol camp also fought ISIS in the town of Manbij. She told me she never expected to be caring for the children born of marriage among Islamic State members, but that that she is prepared to if only the world will do its part. The United Nations estimates that the camp, which holds many IDPs who fled ISIS as well as a smaller number of those who belonged to the Islamic State and their children, is home to 65,000 today, an overwhelming 94 percent of whom are women and children. An estimated fifteen percent of this number is made up of foreigners. Work must be done to understand the stories of those in this camp and to move forward with their return home to either reintegrate with their societies or to face justice. What is not up for dispute is that we must afford their children a future: the children did not choose the path of their parents and forcing them to pay for it will only create more hardship and heartbreak.

I have spent time with women who were part of the Islamic State who now live in Hol Camp. They have all asked to return home. Unsurprisingly, their home governments do not wish to take them back. When I ask them why they join, nearly invariably they said that they wanted to be part of something bigger, to be part of making a difference. The conditions facing their children now are extreme and dangerous. They live in tents in the cold without access to sufficient resources and the administration of the camp is pleading for the world to take seriously its request for more help. It should not be left to a non-state actor to deal with the remnants of international extremism. This is everyone's work, and the United States must play its part, just as it played a crucial role in leading to the end of the Islamic State.

Finally, I want to speak about what I have seen in northeastern Syria. Much has been written about the all-women's force who fought ISIS as America's partner and ground force in the ISIS fight. I have seen it up close since the summer of 2017 and this is the topic of my next book, out in February. I will say that what ISIS has left in its wake is the most far-reaching experiment in women's equality in the least likely place. These women are building a future in which women and girls play a central role, with women co-leading each town's civil council and women's councils active in each town. It is not perfect. But it is an enduring structure which has lasted even past the challenge of the Turkish-backed incursion of last October.

I spoke to you of Batoul, the mother I met who led her family out of Raqqa while in her last trimester of pregnancy. When I asked her two years ago what message she would share with the U.S. people, she said this: Please tell America that we are here and fighting for our own future. We are trying to build something better for our children. And we are thankful for America's support.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, members of this Committee, I submit to you that America has a role to play here. By investing in stability, by supporting those already battling each day for security on the front lines of extremism, we can help them and the American people. We can shine a light on those shaping the tomorrow their children will inherit and we can support those who stand each day for the universal rights we hold so very dear: freedom of speech and belief, freedom from fear and want, freedom from tyranny and oppression, women who push each day for opportunity and a future marked by shared security and growing prosperity. Their battle for tomorrow is one we all must win if the world our children receive is to look brighter and safer than it does today.

Suffocated opportunity is the enemy of global stability. By investing in those investing in their own way ahead, we all will take a step forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.