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

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Good afternoon Chairman Deutch¹, Ranking Member Wilson², and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Maha Yahya, and I am the Director of the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. Prior to joining Carnegie, I led the work on participatory development and social justice at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia; I was also the regional adviser on social and urban policies at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA). The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace or any institution that I was formerly associated with. I would like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the status of gender equality and women's rights in the Middle East. Today, I would like to highlight some of the key issues that affect women and girls and elucidate several factors that contribute to current societal dynamics and inequalities in the region.

Women in the Middle East, like other women around the world, are at the forefront of calling for political change, socioeconomic reform and fighting a global pandemic. They are at the heart of the multiple social and political movements that have spread across the region and of the health emergency response to the pandemic, as doctors, nurses, pharmacists and paramedics. Whilst pandemic related prevention measures have heightened preexisting inequalities, felt by both men and women, they have also exacerbated gender inequalities. Women and girls are shouldering expanding responsibilities as unpaid caregivers for children and the elderly and suffering from increasing gender-based violence. Despite the diverse nature of Middle East countries, region specific characteristics including legal frameworks and societal norms, are further sharpening the impact of the global pandemic on women and girls and increasing societal fragility.

I. Precedent Setting Decade

The onset of the 2011 Arab uprisings also unleashed the potential of women across much of the Middle East and North Africa. Tens of thousands of women today are playing an increasingly

¹ Congressman Theodore Deutch, Chairman for the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism on the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

² Joe Wilson, Ranking Member of the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism Subcommittee

visible role in public life as political actors, advocates, business entrepreneurs and heads of professional associations. They are leading political protests³ and forming new political parties, protesting injustice,⁴ building new businesses, supporting their communities, forming or forwarding the cause of organizations that demand and work towards women's rights, or running for office in municipal and parliamentary elections.⁵ Many more are also joining male dominated sectors such as the police and armed forces⁶.

II. Challenges facing MENA women

- **Profound Gender Inequality**

The MENA region is currently the **second lowest ranking region on gender equality** (after Sub-Saharan Africa), with Yemen being the only country from the region to fall in the global bottom ten list.⁷ And even though the region has a relatively good score on measures related to access to basic services (except for Yemen), it still falls short in other indicators such as legal rights, workplace equality, and women in government. The three countries which received the lowest scores in the region are Yemen, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. And even though Algeria (ranked at 65) and Tunisia (ranked at 67) received the highest scores in the region, they are still performing poorly.

- **Constrained Economic and Political Participation**

These activities are taking place in a region that is marked by **profound structural inequalities** affecting both men and women. These include declining living conditions, and a rentier political economy that allows for a privileged political class to live at the expense of most of the populace. This is evident in both access to services and economic opportunity. One indicator is the profound

³ BBC News, April 2019. [Why has this woman become symbolic to Sudanese protesters?](#)

⁴ Middle East Eye, March 2020. [In pictures: The women driving protests across the Arab world.](#)

⁵ The National, November 2020. [Women are rising in Middle East Politics.](#)

⁶ Ghanem and Arakji, March 2020. Women in the Arab Armed Forces. Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center and Alhashmi, 2018. [Cracking The Glass Ceiling: Gulf Women In The Police.](#) Arab Gulf States Institute In Washington.

⁷ [Harnessing the Power of Data for Gender Equality \(Equal Measures 2030\)](#)

income inequality that marks the region. Between 1990 and 2016, it is estimated that 64 percent of total income went to the top 10 percent of income earners in the Middle East, compared to 37 percent in Western Europe and 47 percent in the United States⁸.

These inequalities are even more profound when it comes to women. Even though the World Economic Forum report on gender gaps ranks the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region highly on the subindexes of educational attainment (0.95) and health and survival (0.969), the region continued to lag in economic participation and opportunity (0.425) and political empowerment (0.102)⁹. For example, in 2019, female participation in the workforce in countries like Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE stood at 24.6%, which accounts for around half of the global average¹⁰, and is considered the lowest female participation rate in the world. This is the case even though girls in the MENA region were found to be significantly outperforming boys in learning outcomes¹¹. Male participation rate in those countries, however, stood at 77.1%, which is on par with the global average estimated at around 75%. And of those in the workforce, women hold only 6 to 10% of senior management positions in countries such as the UAE, KSA, and Egypt. The WEF estimates that the Middle East needs 139 years to close this gender gap¹². The regional rankings vary between the more highly ranked United Arab Emirates (0.655) and one of the lowest ranked countries in the world, Yemen (0.494)¹³.

Women also still have a long way to go on the **political participation** front. At best, if we include North Africa, female representation in national parliaments has reached 25 percent in Tunisia in 2019 (and similarly in Algeria in 2017). Even Lebanon, which was among the first nations in the world to grant female suffrage in 1952, only has 6 female parliamentarians out of 128¹⁴. In the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, newly instilled regimes in Tunisia and Egypt sought to adopt

⁸ Alvaredo, Assouad, and Piketty. Measuring Income Inequality in the Middle East 1990-2016. The Review of Income and Wealth 2018.

⁹ World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2020, page 22

¹⁰ Assi, Rima, and Chiara Marcati. 2020. "Women at work: Job Opportunities In The Middle East Set To Double With The Fourth Industrial Revolution". McKinsey & Company. Page 15. Available at:

¹¹ World Bank Group. 2019. "Expectations And Aspirations: A New Framework For Education in The Middle East And North Africa". World Bank Group. Page v.

¹² Ibid, page 20.

¹³ For comparison the United States is given a 0.724 score in this report.

¹⁴ [International Parliamentary Union data, October 2020](#).

some measures to improve female political representation and participation. Yemen witnessed similar attempts which were not realized due to the eruption of war. Other states such as Jordan, Morocco, and member states of the GGC have also introduced some reforms, performed in part as preemptive measures against potential protests; yet, despite these improvements, women remain largely underrepresented at all levels of governance in the Arab region¹⁵.

- **Legal and socio-cultural Disparities**

Region specific legal frameworks and socio-cultural specificities further amplify the impact of such inequalities on women. Personal status laws still discriminate against women in inheritance, divorce, child custody, marriage and other personal matters. Limited policies on work-life balance, limited mentors in the workplace, and lack of clarity on advancement opportunities hinder their economic participation.¹⁶ Additionally, with technology quickly changing the landscape of the labor market, the current discrepancy in the number of males and females with degrees from STEM disciplines¹⁷, presents a challenge for women seeking to enter the labor market of the twenty first century.

Meanwhile, deficits in political representation is attributed not only to sociocultural factors but also to institutional barriers, legal discrimination under family or personal status laws¹⁸, and lack of support for civil society organizations that advocate for women's rights¹⁹. Even though the rate of female members of parliament has been increasing, albeit due to quotas, women remain underrepresented in the executive branch and the judiciary branch in particular²⁰.

¹⁵ UNESCWA, 2017. "[Women's Political Representation in The Arab Region](#)." United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA). Page v.

¹⁶ Assi, Rima, and Chiara Marcati. 2020. "Women at work: Job Opportunities In The Middle East Set To Double With The Fourth Industrial Revolution". McKinsey & Company. Page 39.

¹⁷ Assi, Rima, and Chiara Marcati. 2020. "Women at work: Job Opportunities In The Middle East Set To Double With The Fourth Industrial Revolution". McKinsey & Company. Page 18.

¹⁸ Ibid, page 24.

¹⁹ Ibid, page 26.

²⁰ Ibid, page 59.

III. Disproportionate Vulnerability

Conflict, instability and COVID 19 pandemic have aggravated the situation of women and girls in the region causing disproportionate vulnerability.

- Authoritarianism Conflict and Instability

At least four countries in the region (Yemen, Syria, Libya and in a more limited way Iraq) are witnessing active conflict and many more facing significant instability. This has contributed to considerable social vulnerability. Millions of individuals have been forcibly displaced from their homes seeking refuge in camps for the internally displaced within their countries or as refugees across the world. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that there are 11.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, and more than 5.6 million refugees registered from Syria alone²¹. These communities are facing considerable hardships. The vulnerability of refugee populations and IDPs as a result of prolonged displacement has worsened over time, with poverty rates continuing to exceed 60 percent in some countries. These populations are in urgent need of cash assistance, which has proven to be an effective tool to reduce the risks of child labour, early marriage and gender-based violence²².

Nevertheless, the burden of conflict falls **disproportionately on female shoulders**. War-torn countries like Syria²³, Libya²⁴, and Yemen²⁵, have witnessed a tremendous increase in female-led households as a result of the conflict. And while an increasing number of women have taken on additional responsibilities including being the sole wage earners in the family, they continue to be subjected to significant gender-based violence. Syrian female refugees face sexual assaults and harassment, difficulty in enrolling in schools due to gender barriers and child marriage, human trafficking, and barriers in reporting sexual and gender-based crimes²⁶. And in Yemen, Amnesty

²¹ UNHCR Global Appeal [report 2020-2021](#), page 101, 105.

²² UNHCR Global Appeal report 2020-2021, page 106.

²³ UNFPA: Syrian women- headed households: hoping to survive and move on

²⁴ Save the Children: Protection Assessment in Libya, 2016

²⁵ UNHCR Yemen Update, April 2018

²⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/5a3bb9b77.pdf>

International²⁷ has recorded several violations to which women have been subjected such as attacks at checkpoints, harassment, arbitrary detention, and torture by security forces.

With an authoritarian resurgence, the arbitrary detention of female human rights advocates has also become more widespread, with multiple cases recorded in a number of different countries including Egypt²⁸, Iran²⁹, and Saudi Arabia. Four of Saudi Arabia's most prominent human rights advocates, Loujain Al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, Nouf Abdulaziz and Nassimah Alsadah, continue to be imprisoned in Saudi Arabia and the cases of Loujain and Samar were recently transferred to the court for terrorism and national security crimes³⁰. And in Egypt, authorities are incarcerating several human rights activists including Azza Soliman³¹, and Sanaa Seif, who was arrested outside the Public Prosecutor's office "where she was waiting to file a complaint after suffering a violent assault"³². Iraqi female activists have also been targeted³³ over the past year, with the deadly shooting in August of Dr. Riham Yaqoub and the attempted assassination of Lodya Remon Albarti, in Basra, both of whom had led women's marches. Iraqi authorities have also detained thousands of women, many of whom were subjected to torture and sexual abuse or the threat of sexual assault, as documented by Human Rights Watch³⁴.

Although child marriage has become less common in the Middle East and North Africa over the past 25 years, progress appears to have stalled in the past decade. The region is home to nearly 40 million child brides. On this issue, as with many others, the region is not uniform, with 1 in 3

²⁷ Amnesty International, December 2019. [Yemen: One of the Worst Places in the World to be a Woman](#).

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, December 2019. [Egypt: Jailed Activist's Life May Be at Risk](#). and Aljazeera, May 2020. [Egyptian media outlet Mada Masr says editor Lina Attalah arrested](#).

²⁹ Al-Arabiya, September 2020. [Iranian women's rights activist risks deportation after being arrested in Turkey](#).

³⁰ Hubbard, November 2020. [Saudi Activist Who Fought For Women's Right to Drive Is Sent to Terrorism Court](#). New York Times.

³¹ Frontline Defenders: [Arrest of Azza Soliman](#).

³² Amnesty International, June 2020. [Egypt: Human rights activist arrested outside Public Prosecutor's office](#).

³³ UN News, October 2020. Iraq urged to investigate attacks on women human rights defenders.

³⁴ Human Rights Watch. 2014. "Iraq: Security Forces Abusing Women In Detention". Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/06/iraq-security-forces-abusing-women-detention>.

women in Sudan and Yemen who were aged 20 to 24 years first married or in union before age 18 (while the ration goes down to 1 in 50 in countries like Tunisia)³⁵.

- COVID 19

The onset of the pandemic has aggravated fundamental inequalities in the MENA region with a disproportionate impact on women. Lockdowns, quarantines in overcrowded homes, economic duress and food insecurity, have forced women in the region, like millions of women around the world, to juggle between being unpaid caregivers to various family members including children, and any external jobs they may have. They alternate between being homemakers, teachers, nurses, for any infected family member and sometimes income earners. As Iman Al-Sin stated in April, “the coronavirus has taken women back in time. Women are no longer able to go out or to work, which means it is taking away from the strength they’ve acquired. It’s taking away from our confidence and independence,”. Al-Sin was married at the age of 16 in rural Syria³⁶ and now works with an NGO, where she advocates against child marriage³⁷.

Worldwide surges in domestic violence, or what the UN has termed as a “shadow pandemic” are also apparent across the region, where even in countries like Lebanon has seen a dramatic surge.³⁸ Domestic violence laws, where they exist often fail to criminalize marital rape, and legal protections from domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment remain at best, insufficient.

The impact of the economic downturn on livelihoods will particularly affect female-led households as well. Women in the Arab region have limited access to land and financial resources compared with men, and as a result the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic has affected them considerably more. On average, women earn 78 percent less than men on a per capita basis and, as of July 2020, the United Nations estimate that women in the Arab region, stand to lose

³⁵ UNICEF Profile of Child Marriage in Middle East and North Africa, 2019

³⁶ the legal age for Syrian girls to marry is 17

³⁷ Syrian refugee women face new COVID-19 battleground, The New Humanitarian, April 2020.

³⁸ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/lebanon-domestic-violence-abuse-lockdown-coronavirus.html>

700,000 jobs particularly in the informal sector where they constitute almost 62 per cent of workers, working in agriculture and other sectors with no job security or health insurance³⁹.

Under a pandemic, resources have also inevitably become scarcer, and sexual and reproductive health services for women and girls have not been spared this scarcity. Many suffer from “a lack of access to emergency obstetric care, limited access to contraception, forced cesarean sections”⁴⁰ in addition to access to feminine hygiene products. For example, Care International reports that 1 in 3 Lebanon adolescent girls (mostly Syrian refugees), 1 in 2 Syrian refugee women in Turkey, and 1 in 2 urban Jordanian women (refugees & Jordanian citizens) were without access to female hygiene products in the first half of 2020⁴¹. In the early months of the lockdown, 83% of women in Lebanon reported not accessing sexual and reproductive health services due to fear of COVID-19 transmission⁴². The lack of access to basic women’s hygiene products is itself an epidemic in the MENA region.

- **Continued Exclusion in Peace Building**

The positive impact of women on governance and peace building have been well documented. Studies noted how promoting female representation leads to prolonging post-conflict peace⁴³, supports economic growth⁴⁴, and can lead to reducing the rate of corruption⁴⁵. The landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security also reflects the belief in the positive impact of active female participation in peacebuilding activities at all levels. Yet, the political underrepresentation of women in national and regional institutions

³⁹ United Nations policy brief. [The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region An Opportunity to Build Back Better](#), July 2020.

⁴⁰ Yasmine, Rola, and Catherine Moughalian. 2016. "Systemic Violence against Syrian Refugee Women and the Myth of Effective Intrapersonal Interventions." *Reproductive Health Matters* 24, no. 47, p.27. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26495888>.

⁴¹ Care International, [Rapid Gender Analysis COVID-19 for Middle East](#), June 2020

⁴² [Plan International Assessment, April 2020](#)

⁴³ Shair-Rosenfield, Sarah and Reed M. Wood. 2017. "Governing Well After War: How Improving Female Representation Prolongs Post-Conflict Peace." *The Journal of Politics* 79 (3): 995-1009.

⁴⁴ Arjan de Haan. 2017. "The Win-Win Case for Women's Economic Empowerment and Growth: Review of the Literature". *Institute for the Study of International Development*. Available at: <http://grow.research.mcgill.ca/publications/working-papers/gwp-2017-03.pdf>

⁴⁵ Dollar, David, Raymond Fisman, and Roberta Gatti. 2001. "Are women really the “fairer” sex? Corruption and women in government." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 46, no. 4: 423-429.

continues to be pervasive, even in United Nations-led peace processes. Libyan women are excluded from formal peace and political negotiations, despite experts frequently calling for greater inclusion of civil society and local governance leaders in peace-building efforts for the peace process to be more representative of ordinary citizens⁴⁶. It is the same for Syria, where women groups and activists have been calling for their effective inclusion and participation in the UN lead Syrian peace process since 2013. Similar to Libya, women civil society groups are active in protecting civilians, combating extremism and promotion of nonviolence. The UN established a Syrian Women’s Advisory Board in 2016⁴⁷ to consult with the UN Special Envoy to Syria. However, while the establishment of this board is laudable, it has been criticized as superficial⁴⁸ as women are not given a key role in peace talks⁴⁹. Yemen is a similar case. In the 2018 Peace talks for Yemen, the percentage of negotiators who were women was 4%⁵⁰.

IV. Implications for US Policy

Despite the significant challenges facing women in the Middle East and North Africa, women from the region are no longer waiting for an invitation to influence public life. This presents a unique moment to empower and support the participation of women in political and economic life. The challenges faced by the MENA region today are massive. Bad governance, conflicts, mass forced population displacement, widespread destruction and shirking economies are becoming key regional hallmarks. Given the stakes, it is critical that the United States support the mainstreaming of Women’s participation across all areas and not simply to so-called “women’s issues”. Without the involvement of women, the challenges facing the MENA region cannot be addressed. This means making the inclusion of women in the political and economic life and the release of human rights defenders a central tenet of any and all support to the region. And as it

⁴⁶ Atlantic Council, November 2019. [How the exclusion of women has cost Libya.](#)

⁴⁷ UN Women, February 2016. [Statement on the establishment of the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board.](#)

⁴⁸ O’Keefe, November 2020. [A Patriarchal Peace in Syria.](#) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁴⁹ UN Women, June 2019. [Inclusion of Syrian Women in peace efforts is essential for long-lasting peace.](#)

⁵⁰ Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, July 2019. [A Feminist Peace Process: Yemen’s Future Is in Women’s Hands.](#)

demonstrates higher support for gender equality programs, it is also important to include young female activists “at middle and lower levels of the community”⁵¹.

Support for Gender justice

Furthermore, in a region that has experienced a large share of violence and wars, transitional justice initiatives are crucial for building peaceful societies. However, transitional justice cannot be complete without addressing the gender-based violence during conflict or under authoritarian rule. In other words, transitional justice is incomplete without gender justice, which addresses the causes and consequences of all abuses against women in a meaningful way. In Tunisia, for example, the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in 2011 was followed by the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms to address decades of gross human rights violations. This was accompanied by a Women’s Committee within the Tunisian Truth and Dignity Commission to support female victims and fully integrate their participation in the truth-seeking process⁵². More of such initiatives are necessary for peaceful societies in the region to be built in the future.

Female Participation in Political Delegations

The United States can actively encourage the United Nations and other regional bodies to impose quotas for political delegations participating in peace discussions. It can also advocate for direct participation and representation of women in all peace processes, ensure the use of a variety of approaches to influence the representation of women and civil society (and which can include women quota across delegations, independent women’s delegation, gender commissions, and female participation in advisory boards).

⁵¹ Anderson, Kristine. 2017. "Now Is the Time: Research On Gender Justice, Conflict And Fragility In The Middle East And North Africa". *Oxfam*. Page 8. Available at: https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/file_attachments/cs-yemen-gender-justice-conflict-fragility-mena-050617-en.pdf.

⁵² International Center for Transitional Justice. Gender Justice - accountability for gender-based atrocities.

Gender due diligence audit

The United States Congress can also require a gender due diligence audit as a prerequisite for funding any project or peace process

Finally, the promotion of programs to increase the involvement of women in political and economic life, insistence on gender sensitive policies, or support of organizations that monitor gender-based violence, are crucial for the advancement of more equitable societies in the region. They also cement the United States as a partner for such advancement in this region. Exerting pressure on states to uphold clear and transparent laws and regulations, end arbitrary detentions, and ensure local female participation in peace-building and peace-keeping activities in war torn countries are central to ensuring future peace and stability in the region.