

Between secular and Islamic feminism/s:  
reflections on the Middle East and beyond.

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## **Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond**

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

BETWEEN SECULAR AND ISLAMIC FEMINISM/S Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond Margot Badran  
Feminism/s in the Middle East are more than a century old.<sup>1</sup> There have been two major feminist paradigms referred to as "secular feminism" and "Islamic feminism." The foundational moment of women's "secular feminism" may be traced to the late nineteenth century while the emergence of "Islamic feminism" became evident in the late twentieth century. These feminism/s appeared mainly in Muslim-majority societies with plural religions and/or multiple ethnicities. They evolved in historical contexts in which new subjects and identities were being re/fashioned out of shifting combinations of religious, class, ethnic, and national affiliation. The two fin de siècle feminisms surfaced as efforts to re/construct states and vibrant social, economic, and technological transformation were underway. Secular feminism and Islamic feminism may be seen as two discursive modes. Secular feminism draws on and is constituted by multiple discourses

including secular nationalist, Islamic modernist, humanitarian/human rights, and democratic. Islamic feminism is expressed in a single or paramount religiously grounded discourse taking the Qur'an as its central text. In this paper I reflect on the two modes of feminism in the Middle East, secular feminism and Islamic feminism and consider what makes them distinct and how they intersect.

TWO ARRIVALS

When feminisms first arose in the Middle East in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, countries were variously confronting western imperialism and colonialism, declining Ottoman suzerainty, and decaying dynastic rule. The region was experiencing uneven socioeconomic and technological transformation. Some segments of the population drew benefits from the swirl of change, while others faced setbacks as they were left out of the loop of modernity or access to new opportunity was slowed. The Tanzimat reforms underway in Turkey from the middle of the nineteenth century and the constitutionalist movement in early twentieth century Iran occasioned lively debate about religion and modernity. The Islamic reform movement began in late nineteenth century Egypt under the lead of Islamic modernist Muhammad cAbduh, influential well beyond the borders of Egypt, and even the region, calling for a revival of ijtihād or independent investigation of religious texts, helping people face the challenge of how to be "modern and Muslim."<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the Arab Nahda movement led by Christians and Muslims from Greater Syria (many of whom had fled to Egypt escaping Ottoman control), generated a broad movement of Arab intellectual and cultural revival. The discourse of national liberation calling for the creation of independent countries based on bonds of shared space and local culture was the overriding discourse in Middle Eastern countries under expanding western colonial rule and declining Ottoman control. The new national identities in the making were not coterminous with religious affiliation as they were in the Ottoman millet system. Secular nationalism visioned the construction of a new kind of collective identity bonded by people's historical roots in shared territory and a common, if variegated, cultural experience. Within the imagined secular nation, religion was taken for granted and citizens' plural religious identities accorded recognition and space. From within this dynamic context, urban women of the middle and upper strata in various locations in the Middle East began to generate a "feminist discourse" that was both a critique of being held back from accessing the benefits of modernity as freely as their male counterparts because they were female and a legitimization of their moves forward (Badran 1986). The rise of secular feminism coincided with two phenomena: the spread of new information technology in the form of the arrival of the printing press; and the spread of literacy among women (of the middle and upper strata). Together these phenomena gave rise to a new female writing and reading public. Women transcended the bounds of religious community as they joined efforts in crafting a feminist discourse articulated in the new writings and fresh networks of women (Badran and Cooke 2004; Baron 1994; Booth 2002). Women anchored their feminist discourse firmly within the discourse of religious re-

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## BETWEEN SECULAR AND ISLAMIC FEMINISM/S

Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond

MARGOT BADRAN



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### TWO ARRIVALS

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