

Women at War: Gender, Agency, and Peacebuilding in the Middle East

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Introduction

War is often narrated through the movements of armies, the strategies of commanders, and the signatures on ceasefire documents. This book begins elsewhere: in kitchens turned aid hubs, on WhatsApp groups mapping safe corridors, in clandestine schools, at checkpoints where a conversation averts a clash, and on frontlines where women take up arms to defend their communities. Women across the Middle East experience the wreckage of conflict—displacement, hunger, loss, and the violation of bodies and rights. Yet they also exercise agency that is frequently overlooked: they organize, negotiate, heal, and rebuild. By centering these intertwined realities of suffering and leadership, *Women at War* argues that any serious account of conflict and peacebuilding in the region must account for women not as a footnote, but as protagonists.

The chapters that follow profile combatants, peacebuilders, and everyday leaders who shape conflict trajectories and postwar recovery. We encounter Kurdish units that redefined military participation; Palestinian organizers who sustain long arcs of popular resistance; Syrian women who quietly broker local ceasefires and prisoner exchanges; Yemeni networks that keep food and health services flowing amid siege; municipal councilors in Libya and Lebanon who mediate at the neighborhood scale; and researchers, lawyers, and therapists who document abuses and accompany survivors toward justice. These are not isolated stories. They are connected through transnational solidarities, remittance circuits, digital platforms, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda that—when localized—can transform political possibilities.

A gender lens does more than “add women” to existing analyses. It reveals how power, care, and security are organized and contested. Wartime economies depend on women’s unpaid and underpaid labor; militia recruitment, displacement, and detention reshape households and community authority; religious and customary systems can both constrain and empower. Understanding these dynamics clarifies why inclusive peace processes are not a matter of symbolism. They are strategically necessary to address root causes, prevent relapse into violence, and design institutions that people trust. Where women influence negotiations and reforms, agreements are more likely to consider community safety, education, health, and accountability—elements that determine whether peace is lived beyond the conference hall.

This book is intentionally multi-sited and interdisciplinary. It draws on interviews, legal and policy analysis, trauma-informed practice, and participatory research with activists, aid workers, survivors, and former fighters. It also recognizes the ethical stakes of writing about ongoing violence. Names and locations are anonymized where required; testimonies are presented with consent and care; and claims are grounded in triangulated evidence. The goal is neither to romanticize resilience nor to reduce women to victims. Instead, we trace how constraints and possibilities evolve across contexts—and how women navigate, resist, and reshape them.

While focused on the Middle East's diverse societies, the insights here speak to global debates on demobilization and reintegration, security sector reform, transitional justice, and the design of peace processes. We attend to the uneven implementation of international norms such as UNSCR 1325 and its successors, identifying the gaps between diplomatic rhetoric and local realities. Throughout, we translate findings into concrete, gender-sensitive policy recommendations for governments, multilateral organizations, and civil society: resourcing women's organizations as security providers in their own right; protecting civic space; embedding survivor-centered justice; and building feedback loops so that peace agreements remain accountable to those who live with their consequences.

Ultimately, *Women at War* is a book about power: who wields it, who is harmed by it, and how it can be reimagined. By following women who fight, feed, teach, negotiate, document, and heal, we see war and peace differently. Their labor—often invisible, sometimes controversial, always consequential—helps determine whether communities fracture or endure, whether violence metastasizes or is contained, whether postwar orders reproduce exclusion or open paths to dignity. The chapters ahead invite readers—scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike—to listen closely, learn collaboratively, and act with humility alongside those whose everyday leadership makes peace possible.

CHAPTER ONE: Framing Gender, War, and Peace in the Middle East

The landscape of war and peace in the Middle East is a complex tapestry, often viewed through the narrow lens of geopolitical strategies, military might, and male-dominated leadership. However, to truly understand the dynamics of conflict and the pathways to sustainable peace, it is crucial to adopt a gendered perspective that acknowledges and analyzes the diverse experiences, roles, and agency of women. This approach moves beyond simply "adding women" to existing narratives; instead, it fundamentally re-evaluates how power operates, how societies are structured during conflict, and what truly constitutes security and peace.

For too long, women in conflict zones have been relegated to the sidelines in analyses, primarily cast as passive victims of violence or, at best, as beneficiaries of humanitarian aid. This limited framing fails to capture the full spectrum of their engagement. While the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls is undeniable—manifesting in increased sexual and gender-based violence, displacement, and limited access to essential services—it is only one part of a far more intricate story. Women are not merely acted upon by war; they are active agents

who influence, resist, and shape its course in myriad ways.

A gender lens, therefore, involves dissecting the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, and power relations between women and men, and how these are dramatically altered and reinforced during times of conflict. It recognizes that war is not a gender-neutral phenomenon; rather, it exploits and intensifies pre-existing gender inequalities, while simultaneously creating new vulnerabilities and opportunities. For instance, traditional patriarchal norms, often rooted in culture and religion, may confine women to the private sphere, yet conflict frequently thrusts them into public roles out of necessity, transforming their economic and social agency.

The term "gender" itself often sparks a certain unease, sometimes misinterpreted as exclusively referring to women or as a Western imposition. In this book, "gender" is understood as a social construct, distinct from biological sex, that shapes expectations, behaviors, and power dynamics for both women and men. It encompasses femininity and masculinity, and how these are fluidly expressed and contested within diverse cultural and social contexts across the Middle East. Applying a gender lens means scrutinizing how these constructions are manipulated, challenged, and reinvented during periods of acute crisis.

The Middle East, a region of immense diversity in its cultures, religions, and political systems, presents a rich and complex canvas for exploring these gendered dynamics. From the nuanced interpretations of Islamic frameworks for women's rights to the secular feminist movements that have emerged, the region defies simplistic generalizations. Historical shifts, such as colonial influences, modernization efforts, and political upheavals, have profoundly reshaped traditional gender roles and expectations over the past two centuries. Women's movements, often intertwined with nationalist and anti-colonial struggles, have consistently challenged patriarchal norms and advocated for greater rights.

This historical context is crucial for understanding the contemporary agency of women in the Middle East. It illustrates that women's engagement in public life and resistance is not a novel phenomenon but rather a continuation of long-standing struggles and adaptations. From the early 20th century, when women in some MENA countries gained voting rights and increased access to education, to their active roles in independence movements and political activism, their presence has been a consistent, if often under-documented, force.

However, even with these historical precedents, women's political representation in the Middle East has remained comparatively low in many areas. Cultural attitudes that often relegate women to the domestic sphere and limit their participation in decision-making institutions contribute to this exclusion. These societal norms, coupled with the political realities of conflict, have often resulted in women being marginalized from formal peace processes, even when their grassroots efforts are vital to community

survival.

The concept of "intersectionality" becomes particularly vital when framing gender, war, and peace in the Middle East. First articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality highlights how various social and political identities—such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, and religion—overlap and intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. In conflict settings, this means acknowledging that not all women experience war in the same way. A refugee woman from a marginalized ethnic group, for instance, faces different challenges and vulnerabilities than a politically connected urban professional woman.

In Yemen, for example, the humanitarian crisis has disproportionately affected women, exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities. Within this context, Muhammasheen women, a marginalized racial minority group, face distinct challenges due to illiteracy, economic disadvantage, and systemic exclusion from education, civil documentation, and work prospects. Their social standing often prevents them from even accessing humanitarian aid, despite their urgent needs. This intricate interplay of identities profoundly shapes women's experiences of conflict and their capacity for agency and peacebuilding.

Furthermore, a critical examination of how external actors, particularly Western governments and international organizations, engage with gender in the Middle East is essential. The implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), a landmark resolution calling for women's inclusion in conflict prevention, resolution, and peace processes, has seen mixed results in the region. While some countries have developed National Action Plans (NAPs) for 1325, their consistent application across the region remains a challenge, often perceived by local activists as an "abstract, foreign-imposed formula" that doesn't always align with their lived realities.

There's a delicate balance to strike between advocating for universal gender equality principles and respecting local contexts. Some critiques suggest that a focus on "women as victims" by external actors can inadvertently obscure their agency and their capacity for peacebuilding. There's also the risk of "gender mainstreaming" becoming a superficial exercise if it doesn't adequately address power structures and provide meaningful agency to local stakeholders. The rhetoric of protecting women, children, and minorities has, at times, even been used to justify military interventions, highlighting the need for careful scrutiny of such narratives.

Moreover, the exclusion of women from formal peace negotiations remains a persistent barrier to sustainable peace in the Middle East. Despite evidence suggesting that peace agreements are more likely to last when women are involved, their participation in high-level talks is often minimal. This exclusion is not merely a symbolic oversight; it has tangible consequences for the inclusivity and effectiveness

of peace provisions, often overlooking issues critical to community safety, education, health, and accountability.

This book aims to move beyond these limitations by centering women's lived experiences and diverse forms of agency. It will delve into the often-invisible labor of women who, amidst the chaos of war, sustain their communities, negotiate local truces, provide essential services, and actively challenge oppressive structures. By understanding the intricacies of their roles, we can develop more effective and gender-sensitive policy recommendations that genuinely empower women as architects of peace, rather than merely recipients of protection. This framing sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how women in the Middle East navigate, resist, and ultimately reshape the harsh realities of conflict.

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