

[Omelicheva on Shannon, 'U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights'](#)

Discussion published by Jessie Frazier on Wednesday, May 23, 2018
X-Post from H-Diplo

Review published on Saturday, April 14, 2018

Author:

Kelly J. Shannon

Reviewer:

Mariya Y. Omelicheva

Omelicheva on Shannon, 'U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights'

Kelly J. Shannon. *U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights*. Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. 288 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4967-5.

Reviewed by Mariya Y. Omelicheva (University of Kansas) **Published on** H-Diplo (April, 2018)
Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=51412>

Human rights became an increasingly prominent part of US foreign policy after World War II. The end of the Cold War elevated concerns for human rights—from religious and political persecution to oppression of ethnic minorities—to a top priority for US administrations. Despite the permanence of human rights principles in US foreign relations, there has been a great variation in the content of rights prioritized by the United States over time, connections of rights to US foreign policy priorities, and specific actions that the US government pursued in the name of human rights. Women's rights, for example, were not traditionally a priority for American foreign policy in general or in US relations with the Muslim world. It was only in the 1990s that the global human rights and women's rights movement and American feminist activism succeeded in bringing Muslim women's human rights onto the US foreign policy agenda.

U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights traces the evolution of women's rights in US foreign policy discourse and practices toward the Muslim world. It begins with an analysis of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that became “the catalyst for intense U.S. public attention to Muslim women's rights” and “a conceptual precursor” for US understanding of women's rights in the Muslim-majority countries (p. 14). The book proceeds to discuss how American public perceptions of Muslim women's rights solidified in the 1980s and early 1990s on the backdrop of the global human rights, women's rights, and feminist movements that contributed to the inclusion of women's rights into the foreign policy discourse. Kelly J. Shannon interrogates this complex discourse—voices from the US government, American feminist organizations, human rights activists, and

nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—during the first Gulf War of 1990-91. The book then examines these discourses in the context of US efforts to eradicate the practice of female genital mutilation, which Americans perceived as an Islamic custom, and the Bill Clinton administration's refusal to recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government out of concerns for its deplorable treatment of women. The book concludes with the analysis of Muslim women's rights in the US foreign policy discourse and practice in the post-9/11 context.

Shannon's rich historical account based on a wide range of sources—government records, UN documents, news media, films, scholarship, novels, and oral histories—illuminates tensions between principled commitments to human rights and instrumentality of US opposition to practices that subordinate Muslim women. It demonstrates how US policy has absorbed some of the deeply ingrained cultural attitudes and stereotypes about Muslim men and women, and taps complex relations between American feminism, imperialism, and US foreign policy regarding women in Muslim-majority countries.

Shannon challenges traditional interpretations of US foreign policy that insist on the primacy of strategic and security-related considerations in US decision making. The book asserts Muslim women's human rights as the driver of US policy toward the Muslim-majority countries since the 1990s. Yet the evidence presented in the book provides firm support for neither side. Instead, the book highlights the multiplicity of voices within the US government with some seeking to co-opt the human rights movement and others expressing the growing awareness of pervasive gender inequalities and sincerity in their concern about Muslim women's rights. The complexity of discourses surrounding the US practices abroad makes it virtually impossible to decouple the instrumentality of a foreign policy decision from the principled commitments to human rights.

Shannon has no pretension to assessing the outcomes of US foreign policy in the area of Muslim human rights. However, the lack of critical engagement with the consequences of US global efforts lead the reader to conclude that the US government and activists who have brought Muslim women's rights on the US foreign policy agenda have succeeded in alleviating Muslim women's plight. Some discussion of the powerful backlash across the Middle East in response to the US global economic and military policy would have tempered this impression. Whether in the Middle East or Pakistan and Afghanistan, the United States has been culpable for the deterioration of women's rights. Historically and in present time, the US military and security assistance, sanctions, and "soft power" interventions worsened the status of women's rights, broadly defined.[1] Consistent with the dominant human rights discourse, the book focuses on civil and political rights, but a broader human rights perspective also sheds light on poverty, conflict, and the lack of access to health care as having deeply troubling consequences for the women in the Middle East and beyond. The United States has been linked to the creation of the dire social and economic situation for the Muslim women in, for example, Afghanistan and Iraq.[2]

While recognizing the tensions within feminism and the contentious imperial undertones of the global human rights movement, the book gives prominence to the liberal feminist discourse dominating the public and policy realms in the United States. It offers a platform for few Muslim women's voices—Betty Mahmoody, Fatima Mernissi, and Nawal el Saadawi, among others—but those reinforce the themes of oppression and victimhood and perpetuate a somewhat singular representation of women in the Muslim world. Radical feminists who rejected any collaboration with the US

government or other state systems, and Muslim women who tried to articulate a different vision of rights for themselves are rarely consulted in the book.[3] As a consequence, the interpretations of US foreign policy and Muslim women's rights take on a liberal flavor and maintain the idea that Muslim women should and would value the same set of rights as those enjoyed by their Western counterparts. A corollary to this position is a refusal to recognize that liberal feminism that claims to be anti-colonial, post-Oriental, and anti-imperialist is more imperial than it admits in that it continues denying Muslim women agency and does not accept their adherence to religion as an expression of free choice.[4] The book would have benefited from giving voice to the representatives of intellectual thought and women's rights activism from the Muslim world muted by the dominant discourse, considering some of the by-products of liberal feminist work, such as the creation of alliances with the state to pressure Muslim countries to pursue the path to progress defined in the West and calls for intervention in Muslim states on behalf of Muslim women.

Regardless of the omissions, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights* is a timely addition to the corpus of texts on US foreign policy, human rights, and US relations with Muslim states. In the current political climate of fading human rights commitments and the rhetoric that emboldens anti-Muslim practices, the book offers a powerful reminder of the role of human rights in the US national identity and lessons that can be used for charting its way forward.

Notes

[1]. Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 339-354. See also Roksana Bahramitash and Hadi Salehi Esfahani, eds., *Political and Socio-Economic Change in the Middle East and North Africa: Gender Perspectives and Survival Strategies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), which criticizes economic development politics in the MENA region, largely supported by the United States, which disproportionately affected youth and women.

[2]. Janine Rich, "'Saving' Muslim Women: Feminism, U.S. Policy, and the War on Terror," *International Affairs Review* (Fall 2014), https://www.usfca.edu/sites/default/files/arts_and_sciences/international_studies/saving_m...

[3]. See, for example, Karen Garner, *Gender and Foreign Policy in the Clinton Administration* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 2013); Homa Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran: Women at the Crossroad of Secularization and Islamization* (Ann Arbor, MI: Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Winter 1999); Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut, "Women and the Making of Civil Society in Post-Islamist Iran," in *The Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979*, ed. Eric Hooglund (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 56-73; and Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[4]. Cyra Akila Choudhury, "Empowerment or Estrangement? Liberal Feminism's Visions of the 'Progress' of Muslim Women," *University of Baltimore Law Forum* 39 (2009): 164. See also Roksana Bahramitash, "The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 221-235.

Citation: Mariya Y. Omelicheva. Review of Shannon, Kelly J., *U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. April, 2018. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51412>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).