



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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**"Women and Democratic Transition in the Middle East"  
Women's Learning Partnership & Woodrow Wilson Center  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza – 1300 Pennsylvania Ave N.W. Washington D.C. 20004  
Thursday September 15, 2011, 9:00am-12:00am**

On Tuesday, the Women's Learning Partnership cohosted an event entitled "Women and Democratic Transition in the Middle East" with the Woodrow Wilson Center. The discussions addressed the challenges faced by women in the MENA region and how to achieve viable democracies, given that women's position is a barometer for the success of democratic transition.

**Haleh Esfandiari**, Director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center offered some opening remarks introducing the first panel, entitled "Perspectives from the Region." **Asma Khader**, Secretary General of the Jordanian National Commission for Women, opened the panel by discussing the underrepresentation of women in Jordanian politics, but stressed that **women in the country are beginning to realize their innate power and are more willing to participate in the change process.** She also raised the issue of Jordan's limited civil society which has stunted democratic growth. **Farida Naqash**, Chairperson of the Forum for Women in Development, began by saying that "seven months ago, this panel wouldn't have happened." She spoke of the large role that women played in the Egyptian revolution, but **noted that their expectations have not been met since the fall of Mubarak as their role has diminished considerably.**

**Rabéa Naciri**, a founding member of the Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc, was the last panelist to address the audience, and she documented that **reforms were already well underway for women in Morocco, but that Arab Awakening reinvigorated the process.** She added that progress must be made through meaningful constitutional reform, but that women's rights are far more complex than that. **Jackie Lyden** of National Public Radio moderated a brief Q&A session in which some of the panelists addressed the role of fundamentalism in the future of Middle Eastern women. They all agreed that **fundamentalism represented a challenge for women, but that it was an obstacle that could be overcome.**

The second panel, entitled "The Arab Spring: Influences and Outcomes," was moderated by **Jacqueline Pitanguy**, the founder and Director of Cidadania, Estudo, Pesquisa, Informação e Ação in Brazil. **Yakin Ertürk**, a Former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, opened the panel by asking whether it was appropriate to use Turkey as a model for ongoing revolutions in the Middle East. She urged that **leaders should not be allowed to raise fear about Islamism because she believes that helps justify repression.** She stressed the importance of a strong civil society and suggested that women and other marginal groups will find and define their own space in due time.

**Masoumeh Hassan**, a former Cabinet Secretary in Pakistan, then detailed the progress of women's rights in Pakistan, including large representation in various work sectors and constitutionally guaranteed political rights. She posited that Pakistani civil society is on the rise, which will undoubtedly help expand women's rights.

**Mahnaz Afkhami**, the founder and President of the Women’s Learning Partnership, noted that women have **largely been left out of the post-demonstration process despite playing a large role in the protests**. She drew on lessons garnered from the Iranian Revolution in 1979 by noting that rhetoric of new leaders can quickly change, and that Arab societies must be prepared for such actions. Additionally, she said that we must avoid measuring democracy as simple procedures such as elections, but instead must measure the presence of democratic values that emerge in the Arab world. During a brief Q&A session, the panelists agreed that the ongoing peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine will continue to play an immense role in the stability of the region, and Ertürk declared “it is time for the international community to get serious about this issue.”