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PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IN MIDDLE EASTERN WOMEN'S HISTORY

Elizabeth Thompson

It is remarkable that the conceptual framework of public and private spheres has never dominated Middle Eastern women's history. Given the media's sensationalist fascination with Muslim women's veils, one might have expected a vigorous scholarly critique of its simplistic dichotomies of public and private. While much has certainly been written about the current revival of veiling in Middle East, little has been written on the historical contexts that have defined the meaning of those veils. There has thus been virtually no debate about the usefulness of the terms "private" and "public" in defining those contexts. Why this surprising lacuna? It may simply reflect the thin ranks of historians who specialize in the Middle East. It also likely reflects postcolonial scholars' general distrust of terms that carry the baggage of Western imperial hegemony. As Europeanists have also acknowledged, Habermasian public and private spheres are historically contingent categories that do not travel well through European history, much less the histories of other regions. So the lacuna may be a healthy sign that scholars of the Middle East have avoided normative European categories that might distort local experience. But avoidance may also incur steep costs to historical understanding. First, by not interrogating the terms public and private directly, scholars are unable to check their misuse—for the terms are widely used by non-specialists in contemporary debates about modernity, democracy, women's status, and Islamic morality in the region. Second, rejection of universal categories in favor of localist terminology may encourage the cultural exceptionalism and essentialism that revisionist and feminist historians have sought to combat. A purely local focus denies the reality of transnational historical experience.

This essay therefore argues, in likely contrast to others in this retrospective, for more extensive experimentation with public and private as lenses of historical analysis. It is only through the direct interrogation of the concepts in local historical contexts, and through direct scholarly debate about their merits, that we may succeed in redefining them in truly universal terms or in identifying new conceptual frameworks that foster comparative and transnational historical understanding. As a step toward that goal, this essay examines the tentative and often unexamined uses of the terms "public" and "private" in historical studies of gender boundaries in the Middle East. It aims to tease out areas of consensus and debate

that are often only implicit in the most influential revisionist and feminist scholarship found in English. In brief, dichotomous models of public and private have not served medieval and early modern women's history well. Preliminary efforts to reconceptualize the topography of women's lived experience in graded terms of seclusion and mobility seem more promising. Despite the seeming durability of legal texts prescribing women's proper sphere of action, historians have shown that the location and function of gender boundaries have shifted over time, especially in response to state-building and class formation. They generally agree that the colonial encounter with Europe in the late nineteenth century caused a profound and explosive shift in the discourses and practices that set gender boundaries. The precise nature of the colonial and postcolonial shifts in gender boundaries, however, remains unclear partly because of our poor understanding of precolonial boundaries. Dichotomous conceptions of public and private that emerged out of the colonial encounter have combined with older repertoires to create a volatile and complex reality for Middle Eastern women today.

The Elusiveness of Public and Private in Medieval Law and Practice

Research on gender boundaries in the seventh through eighteenth centuries has made important first steps in deconstructing ahistorical ideal models based solely on legal texts. Obstacles to a fuller understanding include not only a rarity of sources, but also the limits of polemical intent. The dominant inspiration for such research has been reaction to the polarized and dichotomous discourses of Westernization and Islamization that confront Middle Eastern women today. This has resulted in a tendency toward undertheorized usage of the terms "public" and "private." Critics of these approaches have substituted a variety of other terms that, so far, have not brought conceptual clarity to the question of women's status within emergent Islamic societies.

Contemporary debate about gender boundaries in Islamic societies gravitates toward analysis of the Prophet Muhammad's words and deeds. Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, and Barbara Stowasser, an Arabist at Georgetown University, represent two important schools of interpretation among feminist scholars. In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi argues that the Prophet intended to create the ideal Muslim society, based on the principle that all believers are equal before God, through what she calls a revolutionary conflation of public and private spheres. That is why he situated his wives' apartments adjacent to the first mosque in Medina, where they might participate in communal debates, and why he took them along to battlefields. "The Prophet's simple manner of living was a threat

to those around him, for he cared nothing for the virtues of the public/private division of space, and male supremacy can only exist and be consolidated if the public/private division is maintained as an almost sacred matter," Mernissi argues.¹ But building a state and defending the nascent community interfered with these ideals. According to Mernissi, prominent converts protested Islam's challenge to their patriarchal privilege in the home, and the Prophet feared they would defect from the army. As Mernissi notes, it was only after these confrontations that revelations appeared ordering the Prophet's wives to veil. She insists that such revelations must be read as historical contingencies that conflict with the enduring principle of equality.

Like Mernissi, Stowasser applies the terms "public" and "private" to seventh-century Arabian society in their commonsense meaning of today. Her study of the Qur'an and its commentaries also stresses their egalitarian and communitarian vision: "Beyond ensuring public morality by way of personal example, however, God's men and women must also do so through active involvement in communal participation 'in obedience to God and His Prophet.' In pursuit of these communal goals, men and women are equal 'guardians of each other'(9:71)."² As evidence of women's public role, Stowasser argues, women took oaths of allegiance and service to the community. However, in contrast to Mernissi, Stowasser argues that later revelations on veiling are integral to the Qur'anic vision. They explicitly defined a private family sphere for women and children that was strictly off-limits to strangers, especially men. This definition of a private family sphere was not intended to cut women off from politics. Stowasser, like other scholars, uses the term "segregation" rather than "seclusion" to emphasize the nature of the male-female divide as a spatial separation, rather than a dichotomy of public/private spheres. Both Stowasser and Mernissi are struggling to fit the terms "public" and "private" to a society undergoing a transition from tribal organization to more urban, communitarian, and individual forms. Neither scholar, however, defines the terms to fit consciousness or social structures of seventh-century Arabia. Did the Prophet really conceive of, and therefore intend, a conflation of two dichotomous spheres? To what degree was the nascent community (*umma*) conceived in terms that we might call public? What did privacy mean when the community's well-being and interest focused on intimate sexual habits of its members? Might property, and the Prophet's emphasis on women's rights to it, be an indicator of a personal, if not private, realm?

Feminist scholars generally agree that the rise of a class of male legal scholars, and the extension of the state far beyond Arabia, contributed to extreme readings of scripture that became enshrined in Islamic laws still used today. Leila Ahmed, author of *Women and Gender in Islam*, chose to

describe that process largely without reference to public and private spheres, relying instead on the concept of patriarchy. Ahmed argues that Persian and Byzantine cultures of women's veiling and imperial harems were carried into Islamic societies by converts from those regions. Legal scholars based in the non-Arab provinces of the new empire extended Islamic definitions of gender roles in the family to the wider community in a long continuum of patriarchal dominance. As a result, Ahmed argues, hierarchical legalism stifled the egalitarian, ethical voice of Islam.³ In an exceptionally nuanced study, historian Denise Spellberg approached Iranian and Iraqi religious texts of the ninth and tenth centuries as political debates and found that the figure of the Prophet's favorite wife, 'A'isha, became the focus of ideological battles between rivals for leadership of the medieval Islamic community, the Sunnis and the Shi'is. This rivalry drove scholars of both camps to cast 'A'isha's involvement in politics in progressively negative terms, in part reflecting the prevailing norms of gender separation rooted in pre-Islamic culture. Scholars' interpretations of scriptural references to 'A'isha eventually asserted that all women were a source of disorder and sexual temptation to men and that they should therefore be excluded from politics. Spellberg also avoids use of the private/public dichotomy in favor of a continuum of male authority based on genealogy and marriage: "The development of 'Ai'sha's historical persona definitively demonstrates the nexus between the personal and political in Islamic historiography."⁴ Her argument contributes to a general consensus that the historical context of the emergence of Islamic law privileged interpretations favoring female exclusion rather than egalitarianism in community affairs. In Islamic legal discourse, segregation became seclusion.

By the fourteenth century, social practice appeared to mirror Islamic law in its emphasis on a rigid boundary between the harem and outer world. That boundary was constructed as both sacred and sexual—emphasized by the posting of eunuchs as guardians not only at the doors of imperial harems in Cairo, but also at the Prophet's tomb in Medina and the holy Ka'ba in Mecca. As historian Shaun Marmon has argued, the eunuchs guarded against the dual forces of *fitna* (anarchy): sexual temptation and political discord.⁵ Prominent religious scholars in Egypt sought to ward off social anarchy, according to historian Huda Lutfi, by urging Muslims to maintain a "clear division between the public domain of men and the private domain of women" in the home.⁶ The meaning of this boundary was ambiguous: was it meant to conceal or to confine, or both? Women's association with the harem appears to have been both a source of power (because the Prophet had intended the family as the sacred cornerstone of a just and godly community) and a virtual jail (because it de-

fined women primarily in terms of their sexual threat to male authority and social order). Historian Leslie Peirce evokes this ambiguity in her study of the sacred-sexual meanings of the Ottoman imperial harem.⁷ She argues that the Ottoman harem was not initially defined as a female space; rather, it represented the innermost sanctum of power inhabited by the sultan. No other adult males were permitted in what Peirce calls the "vortex" of imperial rule. This arrangement echoed key concepts in Islamic mysticism, where Sufis viewed the *zahir* (public sphere) as a realm of corruption and the *batin* (inner or private sphere) as the site of truth and spirit.⁸ Because women occupied the sacred center of family and society, Peirce argues, their seclusion was not by definition exclusion from the most important functions of maintaining a moral and just society. Peirce's vortex model attempts to explain how royal women continued to exert political influence through their sacred roles in family networks, despite their physical (and sexual) confinement in a guarded harem.

Indeed, Peirce and other historians of the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries have challenged the trend toward women's seclusion suggested by medieval legal history with evidence that a more egalitarian segregation persisted in social practice.⁹ In their view, segregation captures better the primary function of veiling, which is to obstruct illicit sexual relations and to assure lines of paternity. Segregation also captures the realities of social practice preserved in sources unavailable for earlier centuries. According to this research, women's physical restrictions to domestic space were only partial, and such restrictions did not foreclose activity beyond the home, through servants, intermediaries, and feminine social networks. Elite urban women remained active in business transactions and charities, while their poorer female neighbors routinely worked at home in cottage industries or outside as peddlers, bathhouse attendants, servants, and so on. And despite pressure from religious scholars, women continued to play important roles in popular religion, as wailers at funerals, in tomb-visiting rituals, and at religious holiday festivals. Class, rather than gender or religious law, according to this view, was a primary determinant of practice: both women and men of the elite protected their status by not appearing on streets without being guarded and veiled by large retinues.

Gender boundaries clearly varied over place and time, but research has yet to explain fully how and why. Preliminary evidence suggests links to class and state formation. At times, hardline religious scholars enlisted states to enforce not just segregation, but women's seclusion. The Mamluks, a slave-military elite that ruled Syria, Egypt, and Arabia between 1260 and 1517, entered into an alliance with the religious-scholar class to justify their rule. The Mamluk state and scholars regularly blamed women's presence in public for such calamities as drought and plague, and issued

edicts forcing them to stay home. In addition, the Mamluks financed the spread of male-only law colleges that effaced women's longtime but informal role in religious education.¹⁰ In the Ottoman and Safavid empires, an early laxness in sexual morality reflecting the dynasties' roots in the Central Asian steppe appears to have disappeared by the seventeenth century as state bureaucracies expanded and a religious lobby emerged. In 1599, as Arabs and Egyptians had before them, the Ottomans decreed women's political exclusion on the basis of a tradition that the Prophet said, "A people who entrusts its affairs to a woman will never know prosperity."¹¹ Evidence from the eighteenth century, however, suggests that the trend toward rigid segregation was not uniform. In the prosperous Tulip Era of the 1720s, for example, Ottoman rulers loosened enforcement of gender segregation as the court sponsored public festivities in the parks, gardens, and waterways of Istanbul.¹² And practice in the Arab Ottoman provinces varied widely, although ascendant scholarly families appear to have imposed class-based definitions of male and female space at times to mark their status.¹³

In sum, medieval and early modern Islamic law and social practice appear far more flexible than today's polemics represent them to have been.¹⁴ Public/private dichotomies are difficult to discern in the historical record. In an article unique in its self-conscious interrogation of terms, historian Abraham Marcus confronted the full complexity of privacy as practice and ideal in eighteenth-century Aleppo, a principal trading center in Ottoman Syria. Local Arabic speakers had no word for privacy, and it certainly was not defined as the opposite of public. Rather, privacy was a function of enduring sacred and communal values of modesty and honor built around the gender segregation said to have been ordained by the Prophet. Great emphasis was placed on physical modesty, through high walls and indoor privies, segregated usage of bath houses, and veiling of women outdoors. Even inquiries about female members of a man's household were considered taboo. During urban riots in Syria in 1769, "Nothing raised such universal horror as a few instances of the rebels breaking forcibly in the Harems." However, honorable seclusion of women was an elite ideal only; the poor huddled in very public spaces like mosques. And private space did not necessarily mean private life: crowded neighborhoods thrived on gossip about inhabitants, male and female. Islamic law of the time contained few safeguards against surveillance or intrusion by the state, business interests, or social rivals.¹⁵

Marcus contextualizes the terms "public" and "private" in historical time and in the usage of space, and so takes a step toward their redefinition in transhistorical, truly universal terms. Already clear is that if public and private realms might be discerned, they were not defined in dichoto-

mous terms. The complex relationships between female and male spheres of action, and between the harem and the wider community, have been described in a variety of ways: Ahmed's patriarchy, Spellberg's genealogical nexus of personal and political, and Peirce's Sufi model of inner-outer gradations. The variety of terminology attests to the tentative nature of research so far. The attempt at conceptual consistency through the use of the term "segregation" is still problematic. "Segregation" may capture women's continuing, wide range of political, economic and social activity, but it does not capture what Marcus's walls and Marmon's eunuchs highlight about veiling and seclusion—that they conceal and confine something taboo, powerful, and sacred. Might we translate these meanings of the harem as a form of privacy? If so, might the world beyond the harem, the *umma*, be understood as a form of public? Might modified versions of public and private demonstrate more clearly how class and state formation intersect with textual practices to define gender boundaries? Or is there an alternative conceptual framework that might better capture the changing locations and functions of gender boundaries in the medieval and early modern eras? We are a long way from answering these questions, and it is important to recall this uncertainty when we consider how colonialism altered those boundaries.

The Reformulation of Public and Private in Response to European Imperialism

At first glance, historian Farzaneh Milani's discussion of privacy in late-twentieth-century Iran resonates remarkably with Marcus's discussion of eighteenth-century Syria. Like Marcus, Milani wants to stretch the term "privacy" to embrace a variety of forms. In Middle Eastern cities, the boundaries of the private realm are not necessarily wider than elsewhere, she argues, just more physical: "'There are no walls around the houses here,' I wrote in my diary, in an entry dated 24 December 1967. This was a few days after my arrival in America. It took me years to realize that in America other kinds of walls, mainly invisible, existed. . . . privacy can take different shapes and can be protected in more ways than one."¹⁶ In contrast to Marcus, however, Milani appears to evoke a much more starkly polarized and durable system of gender segregation. She notes that even thirty years after the modernizing Shah banned veiling in 1936, Iranian men and women felt uncomfortable socializing together. Moreover, while historians of earlier periods stress evidence of women's activity beyond the harem, Milani emphasizes that seclusion has severely limited women's access to courts, employment, education, politics, and, most of all, writing. "The veil is such a pervasive cultural issue that veiled/unveiled could

be added in the case of Iran (and Islamic Middle Eastern countries) to the rather universal dichotomization of masculine and feminine in terms of such polarities as culture/nature, reason/passion, self/other, subject/object, law/chaos, day/night, rational/irrational."¹⁷ Mernissi echoes Milani's polarized perspective in describing gender boundaries in contemporary Morocco: "Public means public. It is not possible for an individual to claim a private zone in public space. . . . A woman has no right to use male spaces. If she enters them, she is upsetting the male's order and his peace of mind. She is actually committing an act of aggression against him. . . . The Moroccan term for a woman who is not veiled is *aryana* (nude)."¹⁸

Does the dichotomy that Mernissi, Milani, and others describe today represent a dramatic change in social realities since the eighteenth century or does it reflect a discursive shift, or both? Women's history of the twentieth century appears at times like a hall of mirrors where it is impossible to distinguish actual practice from ideal images. There is little doubt, however, that the discursive repertoire of gender boundaries was profoundly altered by the ascendancy of European power and the influence of European dichotomies of public and private. A second important shift has been the definition and extension of an explicitly public realm defined dichotomously against private. Amid evidence of change, however, continuities appear. Just as in the ninth century Spellberg studied, in the twentieth century, gender boundaries and women's association with the family have been a central focus of political debates about the nature of the Islamic community, state authority, and social rights.

Critiques of binary colonial discourses have been most influential in framing twentieth-century Middle Eastern women's history. Ahmed argues that European colonizers promoted a public/private dichotomy that has stymied women's efforts to attain equality. Typical was the view of the notoriously anti-suffragist British ruler of Egypt, Lord Cromer, who pronounced Egypt doomed to backwardness as long as its women veiled themselves. Egyptian elites replicated that dichotomous discourse in such books as Qasim Amin's 1899 *The Liberation of Women*, which argued that Egypt's path to modernity lay in the unveiling and education of its women.¹⁹ This binary opposition between modernity and tradition also inspired a reactionary politics of authenticity by nationalists and Islamists who urged women to stay home and protect indigenous family values. Colonial binarism ultimately worked against women, Ahmed argues, by forcing them to choose between their liberation and their patriotism, a choice eventually symbolized by their decision of whether or not to veil. "And therefore, ironically, it is Western discourse that in the first place determined the new meanings of the veil and gave rise to its emergence as a symbol of resistance," Ahmed concludes.²⁰

Even countries that escaped direct colonial rule absorbed European dichotomies, as sociologist Nilüfer Göle argues in her controversial book on Turkey, *The Forbidden Modern*. Göle argues that Turkish women's bodies have been a political site of difference and conflict since the nineteenth century, and that their veiling habits can therefore serve as an analytic thread "that interweaves the power relations concealed by the 'civilizing process' between 'East and West.'"²¹ In the Ottoman era, Göle argues, nationalists drew upon Turkish folklore about the equality of men and women in pre-Islamic culture precisely to avoid the binarism that trapped their opponents, modernizers who focused upon unveiling women as a universal totem of progress and civilization. But in the 1920s, Mustafa Kemal and his fellow founders of the Turkish Republic deviated from Turkism, tilting toward elitist notions of a universal civilization, where the West was the ideal model, and where the private was made public (Göle follows Foucault's idea of the modernity of public confession). Hence the unveiling of women and the abolition of Islamic laws on their status were central to what became an authoritarian, Westernizing Kemalist project. Kemalists' destruction of gender segregation was a direct attack on the Islamic social order. Göle enraged contemporary Kemalist feminists by suggesting that Islamist women who choose to reveal are not reactionaries, but rather reformers who can help Turkey supercede the binary trap of Westernization and assert its own historical agency.

Political sociologist Parvin Paidar also privileges the power of discourse in her study of women in modern Iranian history. Paidar argues that Iran's two revolutions in 1905 and 1979 were complex historical conjunctures that produced fundamental shifts in political discourses about women. The constitutional revolution produced a dominant discourse of modernization that emphasized women's education and unveiling but, as in most Arab countries, left women firmly under religious law and male authority at home. The Islamic republic in the 1980s finally broke with the discourse of modernization and its equivalence of modernity and unveiling. An Islamic revolutionary discourse anchored the new regime in state-enforced veiling and policing of gender segregation. Competing interests, however, would eventually encourage women's public education, suffrage, employment, and even military service in the war with Iraq. Despite women's mobilization, however, the Islamic republic, like the modernizing monarchy before it, remained the primary architect of their status.²²

As these scholars hint, and as other scholars have shown, state-building and class politics are integral to understanding who wins the discursive competition for women's bodies and the soul of the nation. Historian Akram Khater's recent study of Mount Lebanon, for example, suggests how class formation inflected the adoption of foreign models of gendered

space. In contrast to most studies, which have focused on Muslim urban elites, Khater studied Christian peasants who rose into the middle class by breaking gendered honor codes. In the mid-nineteenth century, these mountain peasants risked shame by sending their daughters to work in silk mills for a little extra income. When the silk industry declined in the late nineteenth century, these daughters and their brothers migrated temporarily to the Americas, where they again worked outside of the home. Many of those who returned to Lebanon with their foreign fortunes, however, asserted their new middle-class identity by advocating the American model of at-home motherhood.²³ Foreign models of maternalism appear to have coincided with women's local strategies. Early twentieth-century maternalism in the Middle East may be understood as a solution both to the class anxiety of middle-class women activists concerned to preserve their respectability, as well as to the political dilemma posed by East/West, tradition/modernity discourses. Women reformers in Cairo, Beirut, Tehran, and elsewhere framed their activism as necessary extensions of their family role in education and health to the national sphere. Many drew upon an old repertoire available within Islam that anchored community welfare within the family. Even as teachers and charity workers, however, women had to defend their presence outside of the home as necessary service to their nations.²⁴ Maternalism, even when it deployed foreign discourses, was no mere imitation of foreign ideas; rather, it was a strategy adapted to new political structures that emerged in the late nineteenth century.

Most consequential to women was the growth of state power, according to sociologist Deniz Kandiyoti. While nationalist states may have awarded women basic political rights, she has argued, they have also made patriarchal bargains with their most recalcitrant opponents, especially rural and tribal elites, who controlled resources the states needed. When states intervened against the interests of local powers and male household heads, they often sparked backlash movements defined around patriarchal control of women. Women who fear for their security in changing economies may opt for the security of patriarchy.²⁵ Kandiyoti's model of patriarchal bargaining captures the potential variety of public/private boundaries set in the region's emergent nation-states. Her accomplishment is to carve a space outside of liberal models of state-building and citizenship to consider the specific practices of colonial and postcolonial politics in the Middle East. It is a model, however, that explains better the defense and expansion of the private sphere than the effect of the new public sphere in which these contests take place.

The state's preeminent role in creating new public arenas is a subject of my study of Lebanon in Syria just after World War I. While, in Europe

and the United States, it may have been the emergent bourgeoisie that sparked development of print capitalism, a discursive public sphere, public education, and new shopping districts, in the Middle East it was the reforming state that utterly transformed and expanded the public arena, in a non-Habermasian fashion, to mobilize resources, finance expansion, and forge avenues of state intervention. To reflect this difference, I call the new sphere a civic order rather than public sphere or civil society. In the civic order, private associations mushroomed around competition for control of the state and access to its resources. The state played a primary role in setting the rules of competition in the civic order. The French, who ruled in Syria and Lebanon from 1920 to 1943, set those rules to favor their patriarchal clients and to marginalize women, the labor movement, and Islamic reformers. The nationalists who inherited the states perpetuated French practice in what amounted to gender pacts that underpin their regimes and continue to subordinate female citizens to males through support of religious laws. Differences in the Syrian and Lebanese pacts reflected the differing structures of their colonial civic orders.²⁶ Political scientist Mervat Hatem has demonstrated the greater latitude that Nasser's regime in Egypt had in redrawing the gender boundaries of the public realm (civic order) once it had dismantled the previous colonial regime's network of patriarchal intermediaries. The 1956 constitution granted women rights to vote and hold office, while the state promoted women's social rights, such as education, health, and employment. "Not only did women's right to work need protection but the state was aware of the fact that their private/domestic roles as mothers and wives also needed its social support. By themselves, the legal rights given to women were not enough to secure their equality in the fraternal public space. The state believed that its political commitment was needed."²⁷ However, postcolonial Egyptian leaders, like their Syrian and Lebanese neighbors, also refused to reform women's personal status under Islamic law. Hatem argues that this left a critical opening for Islamists supported by Nasser's liberalizing successor Anwar Sadat in the 1970s.

Indeed, the emergence of dual legal systems—secular/state and religious/private—has been important in defining the new public and private realms. Expanding states whittled away at the historically autonomous (private) power of religious scholars to interpret and enforce legal norms. They did so by building competing, often secular (public) legal systems and by usurping scholars' independent sources of wealth. This challenge to the authority of religious scholars and to the autonomy of their class contributed as much or more to the rise of Islamist movements as Westernizing discourses did. In response, colonial regimes and weak postcolonial states appeased Islamists by ceding authority in areas now termed

"personal status law" to religious scholars. Because those laws subordinated women to male family members, they compromised women's citizenship rights. Religious reaction was not only Islamic, as anthropologist Suad Joseph's study of Lebanon (with its powerful Christian minority) demonstrates. Joseph argues that the line between public and private in Lebanon is not feminist scholar Carole Pateman's line between the realm of state regulation and natural law, but rather between state and religious law.²⁸ As Joseph suggests, "By delegating kinship to religious law and funneling citizenship through religious membership, however, the state erased the line it drew between public and private. It made religious laws, in effect, the laws of the state [and] assimilated the rules of extended patrilineal kinship codified by sectarian family laws into the codes and practices of Lebanese citizenship."²⁹

Legal codification and state alliances with Islamic scholars have, in turn, promoted a new rigidity in legal definitions of gender boundaries.³⁰ Contemporary legal arguments reach back to the repertoires of the past to define distinctly new—and newly gendered—public and private realms. As legal scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl notes, "The most pronounced feature of the legal determinations that exclude women from public life is the obsessive reliance on the idea of *fitnah* [anarchy] . . . women are persistently seen as a walking, breathing bundle of *fitnah*."³¹ However, Abou El Fadl argues, such legal positivism ignores basic moral principles of Islam, especially the principle that no one should answer for the sins of another. Women should not suffer seclusion because of men's unrestrained sexual appetites. He argues against the maximalization of the private sphere to mean women's confinement to the home; rather, he finds a basis in the Qur'an for only a minimal requirement for concealment of one's private parts (*awra*). The old tensions between seclusion and segregation, between harem as seat of power and as jail, thus persist in the postcolonial era. Today, however, women trained in Islamic law are building an alternative school of interpretation that recoups women's equal participation in the *umma*, refusing the postcolonial dichotomy of submission or betrayal.³²

Points of Departure for Future Interrogations of Public and Private

Broad continuities between the medieval and postcolonial eras are evident in the research presented here: the sacred-sexual conception of gender boundaries, the negotiated nature of those boundaries, and the importance of the boundaries in the politics of state formation. Also bridging the eras is the scriptural repertoire that scholars and politicians have used in negotiating gender boundaries. Apparently new in the twentieth century are realms called public and private, the organized involvement

of women, and the addition of dichotomous notions of East/West and tradition/modernity. These studies of discourse and citizenship have clearly demonstrated that current gender boundaries in the Middle East are neither mere imitations of, nor deviations from, European practice. They have refocused our attention on the local historical contexts that have shaped the meanings of gender boundaries.

A precise understanding of those contexts, and of how they have changed in the postcolonial era, requires more research and conceptual experimentation. One clue to the novelty of gender boundaries today is the change in women's own speech as they have entered the new publics. Milani's study of Iranian women poets reveals the new boundaries in its description of how gender segregation had previously meant women's silencing: "a woman's voice was considered part of her *Owrat* (pudenda) and subject to strict concealment."³³ She and others have shown how women adapted their voices to the public realm of lectures, publishing, theater, and song. They have, for example, employed various strategies to confront the shamefulness of publicity, such as adopting rhetorical veils, desexualizing their vocabulary, and addressing classical and religious themes.³⁴ How might this new, public discourse reveal the meaning and boundary of what has been newly defined as private? How might shifts in women's public discourse reflect shifting distributions of power? As political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott has remarked, "the frontier between the public and the hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate—not a solid wall."³⁵ Along similar lines, we may question the degree to which colonialism and responses to it altered public and private conceptions of the self. Revisionist studies of autobiography as a genre in Arabic literature, for example, challenge assumptions that Arabs did not portray their private lives until after encountering European writings and that European standards of privacy and publicity define the genre.³⁶ These works contribute to an effort to find a new language to articulate the relationship of the self to community, of male to female, in indigenous terms.

Future research is also poised to address the larger postcolonial project of provincializing Europe and rethinking the universal, evident especially citizenship studies.³⁷ Gender critiques of republicanism and Islamism in the Middle East have demonstrated, for example, the need to conceptualize citizenship outside of liberal, European frameworks.³⁸ Middle Eastern historians might take inspiration here from subaltern studies approaches to South Asian history. Dipesh Chakrabarty's discussion of Bengali republicanism, for example, suggests how concepts like public might translate across regions without the baggage of being labeled deviations from liberalism. Chakrabarty argues that late nineteenth-century Bengali elites

espoused a non-Lockean fraternity that coexisted with, rather than supplanted, patriarchy. They defined a public realm constituted not of contractual individuals competing in a market, but rather of scions of ancestral/sacred realms defending their authority against liberalism and the British. They articulated that defense by creating a corresponding private sphere, where housewives were admonished to observe discipline and to cooperate with their husbands and brothers so as not to divide families.³⁹ This model echoes, but is distinct from, contemporary European and American models of domesticity, thereby fostering transnational historical understanding without reimposing European hegemony.

Finally, another promising point of departure toward defining Middle Eastern gender boundaries is to consider households and families outside of the usual urban and elite context. Villages where physical walls are rare have prompted reflections on economic logics, mythical deployments, and poetical transgressions of public/private dichotomies among rural and tribal societies that are now challenged by state expansion and global capital.⁴⁰ In provocative apposition to Khater's work on Lebanese migrants, anthropologist Jenny White has studied rural migrants to Istanbul working in post-Fordist export clothing manufacture. Here, employment and kinship intertwine in a realm that straddles any clear boundary between public or private.⁴¹ These studies capture the mobility of gender boundaries in recent history, and may help us to reconceptualize those of the more distant past. They also enable us to resist and critique media images of Afghan women in *burqas* as essentially Middle Eastern and as throwbacks to an essentialized past tradition. What the pioneering, if rudimentary, scholarship reviewed here has clearly demonstrated is that public and private gender boundaries in today's Middle East are as much products of transnational discourses, politics, and economies as they are of internal crises in state formation and class identity.

NOTES

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¹Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1991) 111. Original edition was *Le harem politique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987).

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⁴Denise Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of 'A'isha Bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 6. See also Denise Spellberg, "Political Action and Public Example: 'A'isha and the Battle of the Camel," in *Women in Middle Eastern History* ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991) 45–57.

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⁶Huda Lutfi, "Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'i Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises," in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, 99–121, esp. 100.

⁷Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); see especially the introduction on methodological issues.

⁸For contemporary views of these concepts, see Mehdi Abedi and Michael M.J. Fischer, "Thinking a Public Sphere in Arabic and Persian," *Public Culture* 6, (fall 1993) 220–30.

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¹⁷*Ibid.*, 4–5.

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²⁵Deniz Kandiyoti, "Women, Islam, and the State: A Comparative Approach," in *Comparing Muslim Societies: Knowledge and the State in a World Civilization* ed. Juan R. I. Cole (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992) 237–60. See also her edited volume, *Women, Islam, and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

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⁴⁰Erika Friedl, "The Dynamics of Women's Spheres of Action in Rural Iran," in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, 195–214; Mary Elaine Hegland, "Political Roles of Aliabad Women: The Public-Private Dichotomy Transcended," in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, 215–30; Michael Gilson, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Arab World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982) 164–91; and Lila Abu Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

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