

Women and the Politics of Resistance: Law, Religion, and Power in the Muslim World

10 Weeks Course Syllabus

COURSE OVERVIEW

In the modern Muslim world, many states emerging from conflict or shaped by authoritarian legacies sustain power through centralized systems of coercive governance. These regimes often justify their authority through claims of religious legitimacy, national security, or social order; narratives enforced by militaries, intelligence agencies, and police forces. Yet dissent persists in diverse forms; from civic activism and religious movements to transnational advocacy for human rights and justice. Women play a critical role in these struggles: as activists, scholars, and community leaders, they challenge both state repression and patriarchal interpretations of religion and law.

This course explores *how women resist coercive systems of governance and security, and how law, religion, and legitimacy intersect in these struggles*. Drawing on political science, feminist theory, Islamic legal thought, and human rights scholarship, it examines how coercive institutions justify and sustain authority; how Islamic legal, ethical, and philosophical traditions are mobilized or contested; and how international norms, local moral orders, and transnational feminist movements interact in shaping political opposition, reform, and agency. Case studies focus on Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Analyze the institutional and ideological bases of coercive governance in Muslim-majority states
2. Evaluate how Islamic legal and ethical traditions are mobilized to justify or contest state authority
3. Situate women's activism within broader debates about legitimacy, rights, and political belonging
4. Apply feminist and postcolonial frameworks to case studies across Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen
5. Critically assess the role of international human rights norms in local struggles for justice

WEEK-BY-WEEK SCHEDULE

WEEK 1 Coercive Governance — Concepts and Frameworks

Lead: Hasina Jalal; Co-instructor: Dr. Hazaea

Overview

This week introduces foundational concepts in the study of authoritarian and coercive governance; state power, legitimacy, and the monopoly over violence, and surveys how these frameworks apply to Muslim-majority contexts.

Guiding Questions:

- › *How do authoritarian regimes construct and maintain political legitimacy in Muslim-majority states?*
- › *Why have many coercive regimes in the Middle East remained resilient despite pressures for democratization?*

Recommended Readings

- › Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger. "Waiting for Godot: Regime Change without Democratization in the Middle East." *International Political Science Review* 25, no. 4 (2004): 371–392.
- › Eva Bellin. "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective." *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 139–157.
- › Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (2010). Cambridge University Press. Introduction.

WEEK 2 Islamic Law, State Power, and Religious Legitimacy

Lead: Dr. Hazaea; Co-instructor: Hasina Jalal

Overview

How do states mobilize Islamic legal traditions to justify authority? This week examines the relationship between shari'a, state formation, and the politics of religious legitimacy in modern Muslim states.

Guiding Questions:

- › How do modern states use Islamic law to justify political authority?
- › Who has the authority to interpret sharia, and why is this politically contested?

Recommended Readings

- › Wael Hallaq. *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (2013). Columbia University Press. Introduction and Chapters 1–2.
- › Khaled Abou El Fadl. *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (2001). Oneworld. Chapters 1–2.
- › Noel Coulson. *A History of Islamic Law* (1964). Edinburgh University Press. Chapters 8–9.
- › Asifa Quraishi-Landes. "The Sharia Problem with Sharia Legislation." *Ohio Northern University Law Review* 41 (2015): 545–566.

WEEK 3 Gender, Patriarchy, and Islamic Feminist Thought

Lead: Dr. Hazaea; Co-instructor: Hasina Jalal

Overview

This week surveys Islamic feminist scholarship and debates about gender, jurisprudence, and interpretation. It examines how women scholars and activists have challenged patriarchal readings of Islamic law.

Guiding Questions:

- › How have Islamic feminist scholars challenged patriarchal interpretations of religion?
- › Can feminist interpretations of Islam coexist with traditional religious authority structures?

Required Readings

- › Amina Wadud. *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999). Oxford University Press. Introduction and Chapter 1.
- › Fatima Mernissi. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991). Perseus Books. Chapters 1 and 3.
- › Ziba Mir-Hosseini. "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism." *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 629–645.
- › Kecia Ali. *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (2006). Oneworld. Introduction and Chapter 1.

WEEK 4 Security Sectors, Intelligence, and Gendered Repression

Lead: Hasina Jalal; Co-instructor: Dr. Hazaea

Overview

How do security apparatuses, including militaries, police, and intelligence service, function as instruments of gendered repression? This week examines how coercive institutions target women activists and use gender as a tool of political control.

Guiding Questions:

- › How do security institutions use gender as a tool of political control and repression?
- › Why are women activists often perceived as threats by authoritarian regimes?

Recommended Readings

- › Valentine Moghadam. *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, 3rd ed. (2013). Lynne Rienner. Chapter 3.
- › Human Rights Watch. *Boxed In: Women and Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship System* (2016). HRW Report.
- › Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt. *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (2009). University of California Press. Introduction.
- › Cynthia Enloe. *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (2000). University of California Press. Introduction

WEEK 5 Case Study — Iran: Revolution, Theocracy, and Women's Resistance

Lead: Hasina Jalal; Co-instructor: Dr. Hazaea

Overview

Iran offers a paradigmatic case of governance through religious legitimacy, where the Islamic Republic has deployed the state and judiciary to regulate gender. This week examines women's organized resistance to these structures.

Guiding Questions:

- › How has the Islamic Republic of Iran used religious legitimacy to regulate women's lives?
- › What strategies have Iranian women used to resist state control and gender restrictions?

Recommended Readings

- › Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Richard Tapper. *Islam and Democracy in Iran: Eshkevari and the Quest for Reform* (2006). I.B. Tauris. Chapters 1–3.
- › Nayereh Tohidi. "Women's Rights in the Muslim World: The Universal-Particular Interplay." *Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* 1, no. 2 (2003): 152–188.
- › Shirin Ebadi. *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (2006). Random House. Chapters 1–4.
- › Camelia Entekhabifard. "Iran's Women's Movement and the One Million Signatures Campaign." *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 5, no. 1 (2008).

- › Homa Hoodfar and Shadi Sadr. "Islamic Politics and Women's Quest for Gender Equality in Iran." *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 6 (2010): 885–903.

WEEK 6 Case Study — Saudi Arabia: Guardianship, Reform, and Dissent

Lead: Dr. Hazaea; Co-instructor: Hasina Jalal

Overview

Saudi Arabia's mahram (male guardianship) system has been a focal point of international human rights advocacy and domestic women's activism. This week examines how women have navigated and challenged this system within a context of monarchical authoritarianism and religious establishment authority.

Guiding Questions:

- › How has the male guardianship system shaped women's political and social participation in Saudi Arabia?
- › To what extent have recent reforms improved women's rights while maintaining authoritarian control?

Recommended Readings

- › Rajaa Alsanea. *Banat al-Riyadh*. Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2005.
- › Alsanea, Rajaa. *Girls of Riyadh*. Translated by Rajaa Alsanea and Marilyn Booth, Penguin Press, 2007.
- › Bendouma, Noureddine, and Salim Kerboua. "Islamic Feminism at the Crossroads between Apologetics and Defending Women: Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* in Context." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2023, article 11

WEEK 7 Case Study — Afghanistan: War, Taliban Rule, and Women's Agency

Lead: Hasina Jalal; Co-instructor: Dr. Hazaea

Overview

Afghanistan presents a case where coercive governance has been exercised by both state and non-state actors, including the Taliban, with devastating consequences for women. This week examines Afghan women's resistance under occupation, civil war, and authoritarian religious rule.

Guiding Questions:

- › How have decades of conflict and Taliban rule affected women's rights and political participation in Afghanistan?

- › In what ways have Afghan women resisted coercive governance under both state and non-state actors?

Recommended Readings

- › Lila Abu-Lughod. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013). Harvard University Press. Introduction and Chapters 1–2.
- › Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam. "Afghan Women on the Margins of the Twenty-First Century." In *Nation-Building Unraveled? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan*, ed. Donini et al. (2004). Kumarian Press.
- › Rosemarie Skaine. *Women of Afghanistan in the Post-Taliban Era* (2008). McFarland. Chapters 1–2.
- › Anand Gopal. *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes* (2014). Metropolitan Books. Chapters 1 and 8.
- › UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). *A Return to Darkness: Human Rights in Afghanistan 2021–2022* (2022). UN Report. Sections on women's rights.

WEEK 8 Case Study — Yemen: Conflict, Displacement, and Women's Political Participation

Lead: Dr. Hazaea; Co-instructor: Hasina Jalal

Overview

Yemen's compounding crises, civil war, humanitarian catastrophe, and fragmented governance, have reshaped possibilities for women's political agency. This week examines how women have organized in the context of armed conflict, tribal authority, and competing claims to religious legitimacy.

Guiding Questions:

- › How has armed conflict reshaped opportunities and barriers for women's political participation in Yemen?
- › How do tribal, religious, and political structures influence women's activism during conflict?

Recommended Readings

- › Al-Maqtari, Bushra. *What Have You Left Behind? Voices from a Country at War*.
- › Al-Ghafoori, Marwan. *Sa'adah's Braids*.

Added Scholarly Reading

- › Hazaea, Abdulqawi. "From Silence to Defiance: Testimony, Gendered Precarity, and Feminist Anti-War Resistance in Marwan al-Ghafoori's *Sa'adah's Braids*."

WEEK 9 Transnational Feminism, Human Rights Law, and Local Moral Orders

Lead: Hasina Jalal; Co-instructor: Dr. Hazaea

Overview

How do international human rights frameworks interact with local legal and moral orders? This week examines the tensions and alliances between transnational feminist movements, international human rights law, and women's activism in Muslim-majority contexts.

Guiding Questions:

- › How do international human rights frameworks interact with local religious and cultural norms?
- › What tensions exist between transnational feminist advocacy and postcolonial critiques of intervention?

Recommended Readings

- › Celestine Nyamu-Musembi and Andrea Cornwall. "What Is the 'Rights-Based Approach' All About? Perspectives from International Development Agencies." IDS Working Paper 234 (2004). Institute of Development Studies.
- › Saba Mahmood. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005). Princeton University Press. Introduction and Chapter 1.
- › Ratna Kapur. "The Tragedy of Victimization Rhetoric: Resurrecting the 'Native' Subject in International/Post-Colonial Feminist Legal Politics." *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 15 (2002): 1–37.
- › Karen Engle. *The Grip of Sexual Violence in Conflict: Feminist Interventions in International Law* (2020). Stanford University Press. Introduction.

WEEK 10 Legitimacy, Justice, and Political Futures

Lead: Dr. Hazaea; Co-instructor: Hasina Jalal

Overview

The final week synthesizes course themes by examining emerging frameworks of Islamic constitutionalism, transitional justice, and feminist political thought. It asks: what visions of legitimacy, justice, and political belonging are women articulating and what possibilities exist for transforming coercive systems?

Guiding Questions:

- › What alternative visions of legitimacy and justice are women activists articulating in Muslim-majority societies?

- › What possibilities exist for transforming coercive systems through feminist and democratic reform movements?

Recommended Readings

- › Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im. *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (2008). Harvard University Press. Introduction and Chapter 1.
- › Nadjé Al-Ali. "Gendering the Arab Spring." *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5, no. 1 (2012): 26–31.
- › Chandra Talpade Mohanty. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003). Duke University Press. Introduction and Chapter 1.
- › Fatemeh Sadeghi. "Bypassing Islamism and Feminism: Women's Resistance and Rebellion in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 128 (2010): 209–228.
- › Robin Wright, ed. *The Islamists Are Coming: Who They Really Are* (2012). United States Institute of Peace. Selected chapters on Iran and the Gulf.

Submitted by:

Dr. Abdulqawi Hamood Hazaea, Resident Fellow Researcher, Columbia Global Center–Amman, Columbia University, and New University in Exile Consortium member

Hasina Jalal, Pittsburgh Threatened Scholars Network member from Afghanistan and New University in Exile Consortium member