

A Transcript of

The Wilson Center is a place where scholarly independence is prized and open dialogue is practiced and it's also a place that is unafraid to shed light on tough issues.

And that's especially true when it comes to the issue of women's empowerment in the Middle East, and The Wilson Center's important role in that field has everything to do with the woman we're honoring today, Haleh.

As the founding director of the Center's Middle East Program, and as a lifelong advocate for women and girls, Haleh has been a force for change and a resource for those committed to change, and like many of the women she has studied, Haleh has drawn the ire of authoritarians.

I still recall that anguish we all felt when she was unjustly imprisoned and our relief that she was able to persevere through her release. Haleh's bravery in defying – and defeating – repression gives hope to all who cherish liberty and who believe in a better future for the women of the Middle East and North Africa.

So I want to commend the Wilson Center for establishing this forum in Haleh's name, and for committing resources to promote the public discussion of women's empowerment in the MENA region.

Especially at this moment in history, I can't think of a topic more vital, nor of a region more in need of increased political and economic participation by women.

And this is especially true because the world today seems full of self-proclaimed experts who consider women's rights to be a marginal concern when compared to the so – called hard issues of big power politics and the military.

They simply don't "get" that the quality of women's lives has something very basic to do with the safety of our citizens and the overriding issues of war and peace.

Even when I was in office, there was an obvious piece of evidence in support of that proposition: Afghanistan.

What happened there, with the Taliban, is proof that the mistreatment of women is not a side issue; it is a symptom of the whole issue.

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Entrepreneurs are building small and medium-sized businesses rather than relying on the government to provide employment.

And some leaders are beginning to recognize that the region's greatest resource is not its oil, but its people.

In other words, there is something to work with. There are green shoots of progress that need our support, and countries that need our sustained engagement and to that end, we proposed a two-prong strategy in our task force.

And while the first prong involves using military and diplomatic tools to wind down the civil wars and get political settlements, it is the second prong that we believe holds the key to long-term stability for the region.

The second prong focuses on supporting bottom-up efforts of social activists and civic entrepreneurs, and on encouraging governments to invest in the education and empowerment of their people.

We believe that this is the only way to address the societal, economic, and governance issues that are key to future peace and success.

Ultimately, our strategy seeks to unlock the significant human potential in the Middle East – and one of the region's most undervalued and underdeveloped resources is its women.

In making this recommendation, we were sensitive to the idea that some in the Middle East might see this as an attempt to impose Western values on the region.

When I visited Saudi Arabia last year, I obviously met with a group of women, many of whom had high positions or were members of their Parliament and they actually said that in some cases it was counterproductive for Westerners to constantly keep focusing on the issues.

It was a reminder that we shouldn't simply expect women in the Middle East to be our mirror images and I hope we talk about that more because we have that tendency to think that everybody wants to do things exactly the way we do. They actually have other interests than driving.

At the same time, there are some principles that cross every border or nation and culture, namely that women are entitled to have our voices heard and the contributions of women are essential to the success of any country.

So we need to find the right way to stress the importance of women's empowerment in the region and that's why the work of the Wilson Center Middle East Program and the Global Women's Leadership initiative is so important.

There are a hundred different ways in which women with power can contribute to their societies and perhaps those who view women's empowerment as a threat will resort to anything, including violence to stop it.

Which brings me to something that is too often overlooked in discussions of women's empowerment and that is the alarming but uncounted number of women who are specifically targeted because they are engaged in political activity – whether voting, running for office, or simply expressing their political views.

This type of violence is not limited to that which makes headlines.

It can be threats made in the home, as in the case of one Tunisian woman whose fiancé told her he would end their relationship if she continued to run for office.

It can be threats made in cyberspace, as in the case of countless politically active women who are subjected to online harassment.

I've been determined to call attention to this problem, and that's why, on International Women's Day last year, I helped the National Democratic Institute launch a global campaign to stop violence against women in politics.

In the months since the campaign's launch, NDI has been collecting incident reports – including in Arabic – to help establish better data and raise global awareness. It has also developed detailed program guidance so that people working in the field can incorporate the issues into their training.

All this matters because no country can build a healthy growing economy or establish trust in government if half its people are held back, pushed aside, left behind, or beaten up.

From Tunisia to Syria, women have played a significant role in organizing opposition to autocratic regimes; if the promise of political openness is to ever

has been enriched beyond measure by those who have overcome enormous obstacles to build platforms of knowledge and accomplishment from which others might advance.

More than two decades ago, I was honored to lead the U.S. delegation to the Beijing women's conference and in the run-up to that event, I came upon a poem that reflected an old folk tradition.

In the poem, a father says to his young daughter, "We keep a dog to watch the house, a pig is useful too; we keep a cat to catch a mouse, but what can we do with a girl like you?"

Across the Middle East today, millions of women have answered that question in a way that cannot be denied. Through their accomplishments, they have demonstrated that and given the opportunity, there is nothing – and I mean nothing

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