Unveiling Scheherazade: Feminist Orientalism in the International Alliance of Women, 1911-1950
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In an article published in 1982, Leila Ahmed chastised Western feminists for their "docility toward the received ideas of their culture" regarding Muslim women in the Middle East. She pointed to their complicity in perpetuating an image of Islam as monolithic and unchanging, a powerful force that not only prevents Islamic societies from emulating the "progress" of the West but that also keeps women in a state of abject slavery. That image belongs to the general constellation of ideas labeled "orientalism" by Edward Said, who used the term to designate the West's representations and domination of the East. His 1979 work analyzed the historical construction of a Western discourse that persistently misrepresents both Islam and its adherents, especially within the Arab world. As Said and other scholars since have documented, the West has long evinced an enduring fascination with the harem and the veil, recurring tropes in orientalist literature that symbolize Muslim women's oppression and eroticism simultaneously.

Said presented orientalism as a male preserve, a discourse articulated exclusively by men that "feminized" the East by attributing to it qualities typically associated with Woman herself—irrationality, licentiousness, exoticism. Recently, feminist scholars such as Billie Melman and Reina Lewis have augmented his work by examining the extent to which Western women participated in the construction of that discourse. Their attention to the ways in which gender and class mediated European representations of the Middle East during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has considerably enhanced our understanding of orientalism's complexity. Whereas Said described a unified, monolithic discourse created by imperialist men, Melman and Lewis have...
shown orientalism to be "multivocal and heterogeneous," open to inconsistency and rupture. As the inferior "Other within" Western societies, European women artists and travelers to the Middle East offered visions of the "Other without" that differed from hegemonic notions of the Orient but that still affirmed the basic separation between West and East. During the Victorian era, for example, middle-class English women visitors "domesticated" the harem—that archetypal symbol of unrestrained Eastern sexuality—by comparing it with an idealized, bourgeois home, a kind of female sanctuary. Such visions demonstrate, in Lewis's words, that "there is room within the discourse for a feminine, and perhaps less virulently xenophobic, version of Orientalism that adapts and amends but does not remove the imperial imperative."6

My concern here is less with the "feminine version" of orientalism than with an explicitly feminist one. What happened when the Western founders of the international women's movement first turned their gaze to the Middle East? How did European and North American women who were critical of their own societies contemplate the oriental "Other"? I focus specifically on the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (later, the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship and then the International Alliance of Women, or IAW). Of the three major organizations that attempted to mobilize women internationally during the first half of the twentieth century (the others were the International Council of Women and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom), the IAW was the most self-consciously feminist, regularly using that term to describe itself and its activities.7 In contrast to the ICW and the WILPF, the IAW claimed women's rights as its primary goal, espousing a liberal feminism that sought legal and political equality with men. Founded and led by European and North American women, the organization nevertheless tried to unite women across the world around the issues of suffrage and equal citizenship.8 Whatever the limits of their analysis of and proposed remedies for gender oppression, its members shared the fundamental feminist conviction that women worldwide were unfairly disadvantaged relative to men. That conviction contained the seeming potential for women's solidarity across boundaries of nationality, religion, and culture, making the IAW a useful case study of the juncture of feminism, imperialism, and orientalism.9
Given its origins in the tradition of the European Enlightenment, modern liberal feminism (of which suffragism was perhaps the paradigmatic expression) has hardly escaped orientalist influence. Indeed, with few exceptions, First Wave feminists of all stripes readily accepted a key element of the West's orientalist legacy—namely, the unquestioned belief in the superiority of "Western" ways. Manifested by representations of the harem and the veil as inherently more oppressive than monogamy and Western dress (representations that ignore the historical specificity of those institutions as well as their contested political meaning), this belief lies at the heart of what Joyce Zonana calls "feminist orientalism." Her analysis of Jane Eyre suggests that the use of orientalist imagery by British feminist writers to describe women's oppression blunted the radical edge of their feminism by implying that patriarchy was an "Eastern" element to be purged from the West. In Zonana's formulation, feminist orientalism was not merely a set of stereotypes about Muslim women but a threat wielded against Western men: they risked appearing "backward" if they behaved in "Eastern" ways.

The phenomenon of feminist orientalism and its ramifications for the international women's movement has thus far received little attention from historians. As Antoinette Burton as observed, although feminist scholars across disciplines have increasingly acknowledged and sought to analyze ethnocentrism in Western feminism(s), their insights nevertheless lack historical corroboration. Burton's own study of British suffragists' attitudes toward Indian women contributes much to our understanding of the historical relationship between early Western feminist movements and imperialism, yet further research is clearly needed. As Muslim feminists have repeatedly protested, their Western counterparts continue to display an astounding (and willful) ignorance about Islam. In light of the mutual suspicion that characterizes geopolitical relations between the West and the Islamic Middle East, and especially given today's polarizing debates between Islamists and feminists in some countries, attention to the historical role and consequences of feminist orientalism seems particularly significant. In contemporary Egypt, for example, the controversy over women's proper "role" is framed as a fight for the survival of Islam itself. Because feminism has been so closely identified with Western imperialism, many Muslims erroneously perceive in-
indigenous feminist movements to be inherently anti-Islam. A historical analysis of feminist orientalism may offer insights into the ways in which Western feminists, however inadvertently, have helped to circumscribe the debate over women's "role" in Islam.

In 1911-1912, International Woman Suffrage Alliance President Carrie Chapman Catt and Dutch feminist Aletta Jacobs embarked on a world tour to recruit new membership for the organization. This trip represented the group's first effort to expand its base outside of Europe and North America and marks the beginning of the international women's movement's encounter with women in the Middle East. In order to understand how that encounter was shaped by the geopolitical realignments that occurred after World War I, my study extends until 1950. The course of these forty years saw the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, its replacement in much of the Middle East with the Mandate system, and the emergence of Arab nationalism, profound transformations which formed the context in which the relationships between Western and Middle Eastern women evolved.

Between 1911 and 1950, approximately thirty articles concerning the Middle East (all in English) appeared in the IAW newsjournal Jus Suffragii (The right to vote). As the organization's most important forum for the exchange of ideas and information, the journal became the site of an evolving discourse surrounding Middle Eastern women. My analysis of that discourse asks a number of related questions: How did European/North American feminists understand and represent the institutions of the harem and the veil? Did those representations change over time? To what extent was Islam blamed for Muslim women's "oppression"? Did the encounter between Western and Middle Eastern women prompt a reevaluation of Western women's oppression within their own societies? Finally, how did their perceptions of Middle Eastern women influence the response of Western feminists to the rise of Arab nationalism? As numerous scholars have demonstrated, the success of the international women's movement often foundered on the failure of Western feminists to recognize the links between "Third World" feminism and nationalism, on the one hand, and those between Western feminism and imperialism, on the other. To what degree was that failure based on preconceived notions of "West" and "East"?

I argue that Western feminist attitudes toward Middle Eastern
women were more complex than the concept "feminist orientalism" suggests. Whereas Zonana used the term to denote a particular form of orientalism deployed in a particular strategic manner, I submit that there is tension between its two constituent elements. What emerges from the pages of Jus Suffragii is a complicated discourse in which feminist ideas sometimes subvert traditional hallmarks of orientalism. Beginning with Carrie Chapman Catt's impressions of Egypt and Palestine in 1911, Western members of the IAW expressed perceptions of Middle Eastern women that both challenged and sustained popular stereotypes. Their recognition that women around the world shared patriarchal oppression enabled them, in some instances, to transcend the orientalist distinction between "West" and "East." European and North American women could, and indeed did, forge bonds with their Middle Eastern counterparts based on their common experience as women. Moreover, their feminism allowed them to distinguish between myth and reality: in a departure from conventional Western wisdom concerning Islam, they did not attribute women's condition to religious prescription. Indeed, Western feminists sometimes sought to rebut common misperceptions of Islam, pointing to the gap between its true principles and actual practice.

But those insights notwithstanding, Western members of the IAW stopped short of acknowledging Islam's potential as a basis for feminist activism. Nor did their exposure to Middle Eastern societies prompt them to reevaluate the relative merits of their own. Ultimately, the belief of Western feminists in the superiority of European culture proved stronger than their belief in "global sisterhood." Their conviction that they needed to "help" their more oppressed sisters reflected an a priori assumption that women's seclusion signified their total helplessness, blinding them to whatever power and authority Middle Eastern women did possess. That conviction also underlay the failure of the IAW to confront head-on the West's imperialist legacy and would lead eventually to an enduring rift between Western and Arab feminists over the issue of Palestine.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Palestinian conflict became a rallying point for Arab women's activism throughout the Middle East, yet Western members of the IAW did not perceive the feminist implications of such activism, nor did they fully comprehend its source. As Margot Badran has shown, Egyptian women took
the lead in developing a pan-Arab feminist movement within the context of Arab nationalism, which saw women's liberation as part of the larger struggle for national liberation. In the eyes of Arab feminists committed to Palestinian national sovereignty, Zionism was linked directly to British imperialism. Their view was seemingly confirmed by the initial support for Zionist settlement expressed by Western representatives of the IAW (many of them British), who saw the presence of European Jewish immigrants as a stimulus to the region's "progress." Such support not only reflected orientalist assumptions about Western superiority but also ignored the nationalist ramifications of the Zionist project. Western feminists who visited Palestine commented on the "excessive nationalism" of Arab women but described the activities of Jewish women as though they lacked a political dimension, thereby overlooking the reality of Jewish/Arab nationalist tensions. Consequently, although the IAW avoided taking a stance on the political future of Palestine, the organization appeared to Arab feminists to be unsympathetic to their concerns. The ultimate break between Arab and Western feminists over Palestine was perhaps inevitable, but I argue that persistent ideas about the "backwardness" of Arab women prevented Western members of the IAW from a fuller appreciation of the conflict. And thus the vision of united womanhood so deeply cherished by the organization proved, in the end, illusive.

MAKING CONTACT: A VISIT TO PALESTINE AND EGYPT

In July 1911, International Woman Suffrage Alliance President Carrie Chapman Catt and Dutch feminist Aletta Jacobs took off on a trip around the globe to bring more women into the IWSA fold. Founded during the 1904 Berlin Congress of the International Council of Women (the oldest international women's group), the IWSA grew out of the frustration of some of the ICW members with that organization's refusal to take a stance on the issue of women's suffrage. Its membership originally included ten national suffrage associations; by 1914, that number had grown to twenty-five. As the first explicitly feminist international women's organization, the IWSA was primarily concerned with winning the franchise, although by 1920 its agenda had expanded to include a host of other women's rights issues. Dedicated to "the civil, moral, and economic enfranchisement of women," the alliance addressed
questions of women's status ranging from prostitution and slavery to equal pay and married women's nationality rights.20 In 1926, after women in many countries finally obtained the vote, the group changed its name to the International Alliance of Women (IAW) to reflect its broadened focus.

From its inception, the IWSA was dominated by women from the United States and Northern and Western Europe. Nevertheless, its members held high hopes that women from around the world could be brought together to protest their universal status as second-class citizens. Differences of race, religion, and culture would be overcome by commitment to a common cause. Finnish suffragist Annie Furuhjelm, reflecting on the heady days of the first IWSA conference in 1904, recalled the organization's founding ethos:

First and foremost we get to know the ideals of womanhood, and we find that our ideals as women citizens are strangely alike. In spite of differences of tradition and climate, of race, religion, and language, we feel we all have something in common. We perceive that the motor force of the whole movement is the intuitive comprehension of women that they have to go out of their individual homes in order to make the big world more of a home, through all we feel the warm beating of a woman's heart, and her wonderful optimism in regard to the problems of our day.21

If her words suggest the spirit of internationalism that IWSA members hoped their organization embodied, they also reveal a vision of feminism as one predicated on women's entry into the public sphere. Uniquely qualified as caretakers, women needed to bring their special abilities to bear on national and world affairs. Only by coming out of their "individual homes" could they hope to gain equality with men.

Such rhetoric, based on prevailing notions of female/male difference, was commonly used by Anglo-American suffragists to persuade their opponents that the franchise would not threaten women's traditional role. Yet the emphasis on extending women's work outside the home not only assumed a universal division between public and private spheres but also that the female/private sphere was, in Sheila Webster's words, "somehow peripheral to 'society.'"22 The feminist agenda set by the Euro/American leaders of the IWSA, which focused on the attainment of formal equality, put forth women's participation in public life as the touchstone of their emancipation. Accordingly, their assessment of women's status in non-Western countries would be colored by
the supposition that the degree of women's oppression mirrored the degree of their seclusion from the public sphere.

That belief formed part of the ideological prism through which Carrie Chapman Catt and Aletta Jacobs viewed Middle East societies during their fifteen-month trip to Africa and Asia in 1911-12. Their itinerary included South Africa, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Ceylon, India, Burma, the East Indies, the Philippines, China, Korea, and Japan. The two women set off on their journey as ambassadors of women's liberation, intending to spread word of the suffrage cause and to expand the alliance's membership outside of Europe, Australia, and North America. Their mission was also in part a fact-finding one, to collect information and report back on the varying conditions of women around the globe. Catt's personal diaries of the trip, along with the articles she wrote for *Jus Suffragii*, reflect her impressions and interpretations of the many foreign cultures she encountered. They offer a revealing glimpse into the broadening of her own intellectual horizons. Catt was undeniably ethnocentric, but she also made discoveries that challenged her cultural smugness. A self-professed American chauvinist before she left, she returned from her trip somewhat chastened: "Once I was a regular jingo but that was before I had visited other countries. I had thought America had a monopoly on all that stands for progress, but I had a sad awakening. . . ."

Despite Catt's acknowledgment of her former hubris, however, she remained assured that Western women would lead the international feminist movement: they had, after all, "left the seeds of revolution behind" them. That conviction underpinned the discourse of feminist orientalism that would evolve in the pages of *Jus Suffragii*. Beginning with Catt's reports from Palestine and Egypt, the journal's commentators displayed a growing preoccupation with the system of strict sexual segregation in Islamic societies, which they perceived as unrelievably oppressive to women. The veil in particular would assume prominence as the quintessential symbol of women's subordinate status. Because Western feminists assessed women's power and authority on the basis of their access to the public sphere, they were not only blind to the degree of social influence Muslim women actually possessed, but they also failed to consider how Muslim women interpreted their own status and needs. Nevertheless, it would be too simplistic to write off Western feminists' perceptions of Islamic cultures
as standard orientalist fare. Their expectations of female solidarity across racial, cultural, and religious lines, while admittedly naive, was not completely chimerical. As Catt’s own records and subsequent pieces in Jus Suffragii reveal, Western members of the IAW did form real and lasting bonds with women in the Middle East. Moreover, they frequently recognized and sought to correct popular misconceptions about Islam in the West. Ultimately, the construction of “Muslim woman” by the IAW was marked by the tension between orientalism and its particular brand of feminism. The result was a hybrid discourse that simultaneously veiled and unveiled its subject.

We did not expect to carry the woman suffrage movement to Jerusalem. It is a poor, sorrowful appendage of Turkey, without a government of its own, with no daily newspaper and not one public telephone. Its people are poor, illiterate, filthy. Those familiar with this country say the people today stand exactly where they did two thousand years ago. They are doing the same things and in the same old way. The only thing which has changed is religion. Mohammed has arisen since the days of Christ and counts millions among his followers. This is now a Mohammedan land, and the customs common in lands of that faith prevail there. But these customs, generally speaking, were usual to this part of the world in Christ’s day, so after all, even the changes brought by religion have not been very important.


The quotation above reflects Catt’s less than charitable opinion of life in Palestine, which in 1911 was under Ottoman rule. She went on to wonder what would have become of its people had it not been for the missionaries and their schools, noting the many “self-sacrificing, consecrated men and women” who were “doing their utmost to leaven this lump of fossilized humanity.”26 A striking example of orientalism, the passage presents Palestinian society as timeless and unchanging, a living relic from biblical days.

Indeed, Catt was initially charmed by this image: she thought every Christian clergyman and Jewish rabbi would do well to visit the Holy Land in order to understand the Bible more clearly. By the end of her stay, however, she had grown disillusioned by what she perceived to be rampant religious hypocrisy among all three of the faiths. She decided that Palestine was too religious, its
inhabitants excessively naive and credulous.\textsuperscript{27}

Of interest here is Catt's attitude toward Islam. Skeptical of all religions, she was not inclined to consider Islam any more--or less--"backward" than any other. Moreover, she recognized the difference between custom and religious prescription, noting the endurance of the former in spite of changes in the latter. If Palestine was hopelessly behind the times, it was due less to the rise of Islam that to the dominating influence on the region of all three major religions: Palestine would not progress until the time came when "the Jews will cease from their lamentations, when the priests will turn aside from the sacred spots they are guarding and the Moslems will cease praying long enough to give a day's serious consideration to the needs of present-day humans."\textsuperscript{28}

How, then, did Catt view the condition of women? For starters, she linked the level of their feminist consciousness to the relative "worldliness" of men: "Where men in the masses are illiterate, un-ambitious, superstitious, creed-bound, we can expect little better of women." She referred here specifically to Arab Muslim women. During her stay, Catt observed and met with European Christian and Jewish women, but she reserved most of her written commentary for the "mysterious women behind the veil." Nevertheless, the article submitted to \textit{Jus Suffragii} is revealing. Despite Catt's cynicism toward all religious creeds, she assumed that European Christians and Jews would be the agents of progress in Palestine. Just as the Zionist colonies "appeared like bits of the new world transplanted into the old," she concluded that Christian missionaries represented the best hope for Palestinian women. Noting that churches were more easily converted to the belief in sexual equality in countries where women had the vote, she closed her piece with the following exhortation: "Suffragists of the world, \textit{if you want to uplift the women of Palestine and Syria} get the women of your own country enfranchised!"\textsuperscript{29} (my italics). Palestinian and Syrian women clearly needed help from their more "advanced" Western sisters.

Her relative equanimity toward Islam notwithstanding, Catt never questioned the presumed superiority of the "West" over the "East." But her conviction that women's oppression was universal prompted a sincere eagerness to meet Muslim women and find out about their lives. Appointments with women from four different Muslim households had been arranged through the Jerusa-
lem mission where Catt and Jacobs were staying. Of the four families, two were prominent and well-to-do; the other two were from the middle class.\textsuperscript{30} Catt’s accounts of these visits reflected her natural curiosity about different cultures, as well as her assumptions about the state of Muslim women’s feminist “awareness.”

Invariably, Catt questioned her hosts about the veil. She wanted to know whether there was a movement for its removal, and if they would ever consider unveiling in public. Reaction to her query varied: some women expressed shock at the thought of showing their faces to men; others said they expected the custom eventually to die out. During one such conversation, Catt learned—to her surprise—that veiling was not prescribed by the Qur’an. Impressed by her young informant, Catt wrote of her: “She was intelligent and certainly a woman’s woman in sympathy and understanding of the movement, of which she had never heard until that day.”\textsuperscript{31}

What are we to make of these encounters? Catt’s interest in the veil clearly suggests that she took it to be a symbol of women’s subordinate status—and would have considered a movement for its abolition a positive step in the feminist direction. Consistent with the long history of Western fascination with veiling, such a view did not necessarily reflect what the veil meant to the women who wore it.\textsuperscript{32} Catt’s diary does not indicate whether she asked her hosts if they considered the veil to be a mark of inferiority, nor if she sought their views on women’s general condition. If she had, she might have discovered that Islamic law granted women full property rights—a gain Western women did not achieve until well into the nineteenth century. The lack of such information suggests that the dialogue between Catt and her new acquaintances was less than an equal exchange.

Nevertheless, Catt did not think that feminist consciousness was limited to the "Western" mind. She recognized a kindred spirit in the young woman described above and informed the readers of \textit{Jus Suffragii} of her "important discovery that the seeds of rebellion have already been planted" in the hearts of Muslim women.\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, she expressed a genuine sense of communion with them, generated by her belief that the root cause of women’s oppression everywhere was the same. Catt’s diary recounts a story she heard about a Syrian man who, having been to America, decided he wanted a "progressive" marriage and chose his own
wife. When he brought her home to meet his mother, the "shy girl" was too embarrassed to eat, so he slapped her, telling her she now "belonged to him" and threatening to hit her again if she did not eat. Catt's comment: "This beautiful story illustrates how readily men will grasp a new liberty for themselves but how utterly they fail to comprehend that women have a human liking for liberty too!"34 She blamed male presumption—rather than Islamic culture—for the young wife's misfortune.

By the time Catt filed her report on Egypt, her capacity for rising above orientalist assumptions had evidently grown. Struck by the difference in the degree of veiling there compared with Palestine (where women's faces were completely covered by a thick black veil, and their hands and arms concealed as well), she offered the following observations:

To the newcomer the unveiling of the Moslem woman seems the obvious first step towards an improvement of their position, but further acquaintance leads me to think that the veil is only an unimportant symptom of a condition. The seclusion of women and the wearing of the veil is not in response to commands of the Koran, but are customs which are supposed to have grown out of the long religious wars when no woman's life or virtue was held sacred. Christian women were as carefully secluded and throughout this Eastern country women wore the veil. . . . It is evident that the veil will soon take its departure, but it is not so easy a thing to unveil as it appears to the outside. . . . Women who can afford a carriage will not walk on the streets on account of the insults certain to be aimed at them. The better educated women do not approve of the veil and are much dissatisfied with the conditions which compel them to wear it. For the present, however, it is a protection which will doubtless continue, until the men of the land have been taught to respect women more than they do now.35

Here Catt demonstrated a sympathetic understanding of the present advantages that veiling afforded women. More significantly, however, she decided that the veil was merely an "unimportant symptom" of women's general condition. That perception not only constituted a departure from popular Western opinion on the subject but represented an evolution in her own thinking as well. Indeed, the passage as a whole seems to reflect what she may have learned through conversations with Egyptian women—an indication that she was receptive to their own analyses of their position.

Thus Catt established the beginning of the IAW's discourse surrounding Muslim women. Her impressions of the Middle East were at once patronizing and deeply sympathetic. To be sure, she
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did not consider Palestine and Egypt to be as "advanced" as Europe or the United States, nor did she think Islamic culture had anything to offer women in the West. Where exposure to Muslim societies had prompted some earlier European women travelers to the Middle East to become more critical of their own, nothing in Catt's writing indicates she did the same.36 Her empathy for the hassles unveiled Egyptian women faced from men, for instance, did not inspire a corresponding analysis of Victorian dress and the dictates of modesty in Western societies (other than a recognition of the absurdity of Parisian high fashion). Still, Catt's feminism did allow her to feel moments of real solidarity with Muslim women and, in some cases, gain deeper insights into their lives than the long history of Western orientalism might suggest. The discourse she initiated would continue in the same complicated, and at times contradictory, vein.

REPRESENTING MUSLIM WOMEN
The success of the Catt-Jacobs world trip in establishing new contacts outside the West was reflected in an announcement for the IWSA's seventh conference, to be held in Budapest on June 15, 1913:

Especially invited Delegates are expected from Egypt, India, Burmah, China, Japan and the Philippines. For the first time in the woman movement, it is expected that Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Mohammedan, Jewish and Christian women will sit together in a Congress uniting their voices in a common plea for the liberation of their sex from those artificial discriminations which every political and religious system has directed against them.37

Although not all the expected delegates actually attended, the Budapest conference signified the IWSA's efforts to become truly international. Yet that goal proved elusive: despite the gradual addition of member sections from Asia, Africa, and South America, the IWSA remained a Western-dominated movement.38 And, as has been well documented by historians Leila Rupp and Margot Badran, membership patterns within the organization ultimately reproduced the global relations of dominance between imperialist and colonized countries.39 Until the 1935 Congress in Istanbul, all its conferences and board meetings were held in Western Europe, and Jus Suffragii continued to be published primarily in English (with some articles appearing in French or
Moreover, European and American women filled most of the organization's leadership positions: in 1932, for example, its board membership included only two representatives from non-Western countries.

Such imbalance in representation stemmed from the IAW leadership's tacit belief that Western women had originated feminism. Given their identification of feminism almost exclusively with movements for female suffrage, that belief was not unreasonable: notwithstanding their acknowledgment of the commonality of discrimination against women in "every religious and political system," Western feminists who had won the vote considered themselves to be less oppressed than their disfranchised Eastern sisters. But their focus on the attainment of political rights necessarily limited their diagnosis of women's oppression in other spheres. Satisfied that the issue of women's equality would be resolved once women enjoyed the same civic opportunities as men, Western feminists avoided other, potentially more troubling, questions of gender relations. Moreover, measuring women's status solely in terms of their involvement in public life led them to conclude that Western societies were more progressive than non-Western societies in all aspects of civilization. That assumption—implicit in Carrie Chapman Catt's early reports from Egypt and Palestine—became more pronounced in subsequent representations of Middle Eastern women.

Between 1912 and 1950, twenty-seven pieces that made more than passing reference to the Middle East appeared in the pages of Jus Suffragii. With twelve issues published per year (a typical issue contained several feature-length articles plus many short news items), this is indeed a small amount. Most were submitted by European or American visitors to the region, although reports written by Arab contacts became more frequent in later years. Compared with its coverage of feminist movements in the West, the IAW paid only sporadic attention to Middle East women, yet a particular mode of discourse clearly emerges. Its chief hallmark is the juxtaposition of global-spirited feminism and Western ethnocentrism that characterized the IAW's vision of international sisterhood. For example, a 1915 report on women's progress in Egypt (then under a British protectorate) described the country as one where "religion teaches that women have no souls" and offered this bit of wisdom on the increasing support for women's edu-
cation: "Apparently it is dawning on the younger men of Moham medan countries that an educated wife and helpmate is more interesting than a woman whose most startling capacity is like that of 'Sal,' famous in Western song and story as a 'blame good sitter.'" 42 This piece full of orientalist clichés about the laziness and ignorance of harem women, was followed in 1923 by an article on Turkish women that sought to dispel Western misconceptions about Muslim societies. Its author, Arthur Field, secretary of the Anglo-Turkish Society, felt compelled to "protest emphatically against the still widely current belief that woman in Turkey has been a slave, as compared with woman in Christendom, as a whole." 43 Not coincidentally, 1923 was the year that Turkey—under the westernizing leadership of Mustafa Kemal "Ataturk"—declared itself a republic.

The seemingly paradoxical nature of these reports must be understood within the context of the major geopolitical realignments that occurred after World War I. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the Mandate system, while not explicitly recounted in the pages of *Jus Suffragii*, nevertheless influenced the tone of its coverage of the Middle East. Intended to prepare the people living in the Fertile Crescent for eventual independence, the Mandate project, which was initiated under the auspices of the League of Nations, placed Great Britain in charge of Iraq, Palestine, and Transjordan, while France received control of Syria and Lebanon. In its twentieth-century incarnation, then, Western imperialism assumed a tutelary capacity: its benevolent mission was to teach formerly subject peoples the Western art of self-government. The rise of nationalist movements in the Middle East—and the repression with which they were frequently met—indicated the hollowness of its rationale, yet European diplomats and writers continued to invoke its lofty terms. Words like "training" and "uplift" remained staples of imperialist rhetoric, which found expression even in the IAW journal. As the above example demonstrates, the tension between feminism and orientalism tended to resolve in favor of the former in cases where "progress" (i.e., westernization) was evident.

Nevertheless, the journal's discourse surrounding Islam and Middle Eastern women remained inconsistent as Western contributors continued both to indulge in and rebut common stereotypes. Overtly racist characterizations (such as one that called
Syrian Arabs "incurably lazy")' became less frequent as commentators increasingly focused on the "responsibilities" of Western feminists toward their "less advanced" sisters. Reflecting the ideology of the Mandate era, a 1929 piece on women in Syria and Palestine spoke of the need for education, since "ignorance and the stifling influence of long tradition can only be overcome by training and example." Its author encouraged American and European teachers to find work there, as "the women, bound by Moslem tradition, need encouragement from the West to strengthen them to help themselves." And yet a few months later, a Western (most likely British) observer of the women's movement in Iraq ended her report by concurring with a noted Iraqi poet who argued that "Islam was intended to bring woman her charter of freedom, not her sentence of perpetual confinement, and that seclusion is not of Arab, but of foreign origin."46

Hostility to Islam thus did not always figure in Western feminist reportage on the Middle East. Moreover, emphasis on the East's need of guidance from the West was occasionally offset by a growing awareness among some IAW members that feminist concerns were not the same for all women. In 1935, responding to pressure from various women's organizations, the League of Nations called for a worldwide study on the status of women.47 In turn, the alliance board asked its affiliates in nations with colonial possessions to submit information that would form the basis of a study of the position of "native" women. Jus Suffragii then ran a condensed version of a report submitted by Glencore Fiske Horne of the United States, who expressed strong reservations about the undertaking. She cautioned against employing Western standards to assess the welfare of non-Western women and rejected the presumptuousness implicit in the IAW's proposal. "Instead of stating the problem as . . . 'Let us secure freedom for enslaved women,'" she suggested that a more appropriate formulation would be "'Let us try to learn how to retain to native peoples their own cultural heritages as they come in contact with Western culture.'" As if to underscore the point, Horne then concluded that a study of "women of native groups under the jurisdiction of the United States" would be fruitless because they lived in "entirely different cultural eras" and had "entirely different life-problems."48

Horne's report, as well as the editorial comment that introduced it ("The following extracts seem calculated to help clear our
minds on the question of how we can set about giving useful consideration to a question which is a vital one"), signified an effort to confront—if not necessarily to resolve—the contradictions posed by a Western-led movement for international female solidarity. For at least some Western feminists, the conviction that all women experience oppression based on their sex mattered more than the particular forms that oppression might take. In fact, a resolution proposed at the alliance’s 1935 Congress in Istanbul had seemingly confirmed this principle by pledging support for Western women “who are in danger of losing” their recently won rights and Eastern women who fought "for the eradication of their special legal, social, and economic disabilities. . . .”49 Although the specifics of women’s struggle against patriarchy differed according to local conditions, in a larger and more abstract sense the struggle was everywhere the same. The universalist ethos of IAW feminism posited that women around the world could indeed unite in common cause, and the very fact that non-Western women eagerly embraced the organization testified to its strong appeal.

Still, the mitigating effects of feminism on orientalist thinking must not be overstated. Despite its occasional acknowledgment of the inapplicability of "Western" solutions to "Eastern" problems, the IAW continued to uphold the example of Western feminist movements as the archetypal expression of feminism. Indeed, the growing regularity with which Muslim women were described as "ignorant" or "tradition-bound" suggests that as Western women attained more of their own feminist objectives (beginning with suffrage), the "East" came to appear increasingly "backward." Although they did not necessarily blame Islam for that state of affairs, the writers nevertheless seemed to expect that Muslim women’s "liberation" could be achieved only by abandoning indigenous ways. In other words, Western feminists never considered that feminism in the Middle East might take an alternate route, using Islam as its guide.50 Although they perhaps recognized that Islam had been "misinterpreted" by male authorities, that recognition did not extend to accepting a reinterpretation of Islam as a legitimate framework for feminist movements.

Accordingly, Western feminists attached ever-greater significance to the veil as a symbol of "tradition" holding Muslim women back. Whereas Carrie Chapman Catt dismissed the veil in 1912 as
an "unimportant symptom" of Muslim women's general condition, her successors gave its abolition primary emphasis. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Jus Suffragii's reports from IAW trips to the Middle East, as well as its coverage of Arab feminist conferences, were filled with references to veiling. The British suffragist Margery Corbett Ashby, who had succeeded Catt as president in 1923, noted that women in Lebanon were "still handicapped by the custom of going veiled and in that respect are behind the moslem ladies we had met in Egypt and India, where the drive of the nationalist movement has educated the men folk into greater common sense." In 1947, IAW President Hanna Rydh would take an even more adamant stance. After meeting with members of the Iraqi Women's Union, she was convinced that a movement for women's civil and political rights would soon flower. Unveiling, however, constituted a necessary first step: "But first and foremost they must help their sisters out of the veil. It can never be repeated too often that the veil is no mere fashion, it is a wall which materially and spiritually is debarring its bearer from the developing intercourse and opportunity to co-operation with the men in a world crying for co-operation." Paradoxically, Western observers' growing preoccupation with the veil occurred simultaneously with their growing sensitivity to charges of ethnocentrism. Hanna Rydh in fact felt compelled to defend the alliance for assuming that European women had the right to advise "the women of the Orient." She did so on the grounds that industrialization and its social concomitants were coming inexorably to the East: Since "the peoples of the Orient are feeling inclined to take part in the advantages of the industrialism . . . we women of the West cannot say we should not interfere in the way of life of our Eastern sisters, because we know how industrialisation is changing the lives of women." For Rydh, then, the veil represented less a mark of degradation imposed by a repressive religion than a practical impediment to modernization (which she equated implicitly with progress). She saw its abolition as a prerequisite to Muslim women's participation in the public world of wage labor and politics.

By commenting on the veil in their meetings with Muslim women, and writing about it in a journal that Muslim feminists read, Western feminists interposed themselves in a highly charged debate that had been raging for years in some Middle Eastern
countries. At issue here is not the position taken by Muslim feminists themselves in that debate but, rather, the extent to which it was influenced by their Western counterparts. As numerous scholars have shown, veiling has long been a contentious topic in Islamic societies, and its political meaning has varied over time. To early reformers who advocated its abolition, it signified women’s relegation to the private sphere and their exclusion from public life. To others, it represented the preservation of female modesty and was seen to afford women some protection from male lechery. More recently, veiling has come to symbolize resistance to Western imperialism—and as such, has been advocated both by religious fundamentalists and some Muslim feminists.

Muslim feminists, however, have never spoken with one voice on the subject, nor have they necessarily even made an issue of it. In Egypt, for example, although the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) had worked for an end to the harem system and women’s exclusion from the public sphere (the dramatic gesture by Huda Sha’rawi and Saiza Nabarawi of removing their veils at the Cairo train station upon their return from the 1923 IAW’s Rome Congress was seen as a public articulation of that goal, and likely contributed to Western obsession with the issue), the organization never advocated unveiling as part of its formal agenda. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as Egyptian feminists sought greater social, political, and economic opportunities, they decided individually whether nor not to unveil. (In Turkey and Iran, on the other hand, this question was decided by the state, which encouraged and imposed, respectively, unveiling as part of each country’s modernization program.) Indeed, it is telling that four out of five articles submitted to Jus Suffragii by Arab women on the status of women in their own countries included no reference to the veil. Instead, these writers commented on issues that concerned them most, such as women’s access to education, changes in personal status law, and social welfare. Moreover, they occasionally expressed impatience with the way they were perceived by their Western counterparts. In "A Greeting from the Arab Women," Mme. El Khoury (a Christian) sought to dispel the "harem legend," noting: "Both Arab traditions and Islamic law are and always have been, against the seclusion of women."

Sensitive to Western stereotypes that denigrated Middle eastern culture, this author aimed to rebut the impression of Arab women
as uniquely oppressed, emphasizing their long history as useful and contributing members of society. But for Western feminists who equated women's status with their public visibility, the veil remained a troubling indicator of social inequality. And by establishing its abolition as an essential condition for women's emancipation, they may unwittingly have stifled the growth of feminism within Muslim societies. As Leila Ahmed has demonstrated, the present discourse surrounding the veil has its origins in the British colonial narrative of the late nineteenth century, which pointed to veiling as the preeminent symbol of the inferiority of Islamic culture. In proclaiming Islam to be monstrously oppressive of women—as evidenced by the veil—colonialist men used the language of feminism to justify their imperialism.6

As a result, the veil took on new significance for Muslim women and men, leading them to defend or oppose the practice in terms that suggested that the debate was really about the preservation of Islam itself. That veiling became freighted with so much symbolic meaning had unfortunate consequences for the cause of international feminist solidarity. Because colonialists used feminist rhetoric to undermine indigenous traditions, feminism itself became suspect in the eyes of many Muslims.61 The stance of IAW feminists did little to counteract that suspicion: although they were careful not to disparage Islam, their insistence that Muslim women needed to "be freed from" their veils perpetuated the discourse of colonialism. Ironically, their desire to "bring" feminism to the Middle East likely hurt rather than helped Muslim women.

NATIONALISM AND THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE

Although present-day attention to veiling by journalists and polemists alike might lead us to think otherwise, that issue was not the only—or even the most important—one to divide Western and Middle Eastern feminists. As we have seen, Western members of the IAW evinced contradictory attitudes toward Middle Eastern women, but unmitigated hostility to Islam was rarely one of them. Insofar as it tempered Western ethnocentrism, the universalist ethos of their feminism retained powerful appeal for non-Western activists. Conversely, when the tension between feminism and orientalism could not be sustained, relationships between Western and Middle Eastern feminists became strained.
The issue that brought them to the breaking point, however, was not veiling but the rise of Arab nationalism.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Arab women throughout the Middle East began to organize and demonstrate publicly around the Palestinian nationalist cause. Their activism constituted a key element in the emergence of organized Arab feminism.\textsuperscript{62} In her analysis of the construction of internationalism within transnational women's organizations, Leila J. Rupp writes that, for women from countries recently freed (or seeking freedom) from imperial domination, "national liberation was a prerequisite for internationalism, a view that women from long-established and often imperialist nations found hard to understand."\textsuperscript{63} In part, the difficulty that Western women had in understanding this may be ascribed to the temporal distance between national independence and the rise of feminist movements in their own countries. Women from countries with secure national identities could afford to separate feminist politics from nationalist politics and frequently misread the nationalist activism of "Third World" women—for whom the distinction was not so easy—as a betrayal of internationalist feminism. Although the relatively narrow conception of what counted as "feminism" among IAW members no doubt encouraged such a view, so too did persistent ideas about the "backwardness" of colonized peoples.

The clash between imperialism and nationalism finally exposed the limits of international sisterhood. Despite their claims of solidarity with "Eastern" women on the basis of common oppression, Western feminists rarely considered themselves to be equally oppressed. Nor did they question the conviction that "Eastern" women needed their guidance. These assumptions led them initially to support Zionist settlement as a harbinger of progress in Palestine—support that Arab women would later contest. The IAW's subsequent equivocation on the issue ultimately persuaded Arab feminists that membership within the organization would no longer serve their interests, and it helped create a rift within the international women's movement that persists to this day.

Upon her return from a trip to Egypt and Palestine in 1921, British suffrage leader and former alliance vice-president Millicent
Garrett Fawcett was interviewed by *Jus Suffragii* about the progress of the women's movement. She had little to report on Egypt—according to the article, Fawcett learned through conversations with two prominent Egyptian women that "a women's emancipation movement, such as we know it here, is not yet organized. The movements that exist are directed to the betterment of social conditions, the spread of education. But where the desire for education exists the desire for equality of opportunity follows, and from the present social movement in Egypt an emancipation movement will surely spring."64

The piece suggested that Egyptian women had thus far worked only for the "betterment of social conditions"—it makes no mention of any overt political activity. Yet a number of upper- and middle-class women were actively involved at this time in the Wafd movement, Egypt's nationalist struggle, including Huda Sha'rawi, who later became an IAW board member. As Margot Badran has argued, the participation of these women in the Wafd movement led directly to the formation of Egypt's first feminist organization in 1923. After Egypt gained independence in 1922, nationalist women found their expectations for a political voice dashed by an election law that restricted suffrage to men. Feeling betrayed by their male Wafd colleagues, they would continue their quest for national liberation—as well as for women's social and economic rights—within the framework of the independent EFU.65

In the 1930s and 1940s, the EFU assumed a key role in defining pan-Arab feminism, which centered around the Palestinian nationalist movement. As early as 1920, Palestinian Arab women had mobilized to protest both the British Mandate and the Zionist project; by 1929, Arab women's unions had been established in Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria (the Palestinian and Syrian unions affiliated with the IAW in 1935). In October 1938, Sha'rawi and the EFU sponsored the Eastern Women's Conference for the Defense of Palestine in Cairo (which included representatives from five Arab countries as well as from Iran), and Sha'rawi would become the leading spokesperson for the Palestinian cause at international feminist meetings. Egyptian feminists also took the lead in uniting feminist organizations from individual Arab countries: a 1944 Arab Feminist Congress resulted in the formation of the Arab Feminist Union (AFU), an umbrella group that sought to
strengthen individual feminist movements and to promote a collective Arab feminist vision within the international women's movement.66

Arab feminism, then, must be understood within the context of Arab nationalism. As Badran put it, pan-Arab feminists were responding "to the challenge of constructing citizenship in modern Arab states as independent countries in a postcolonial world."67 They linked their own emancipation to the broader project of emancipating the Arab world from imperialist domination. But the narrowly conceived feminist program of the IAW left little room for an analysis of that connection by the organization's European and American members.

If Fawcett had failed during her visit to notice that a women's movement "such as we know it here" was already under way in Egypt in 1921, her views on Palestine are even more revealing. There she met with Rosa Welt-Strauss and other members of the Palestinian Jewish Women's Equal Rights Association (PJWERA), a Zionist group working to secure political, social, and economic equality for Jewish women under the British Mandate. Jus Suffragii noted that she was suitably impressed by their organization: "Great is the contrast between these progressive women and the unorganized, inarticulate, little-educated Moslem women of Palestine. Who is to lead these, who is to work for them and help them to work for themselves? Mrs. Fawcett feels that it is to the organized Jewish women that these others must look for their first help toward self-help."68 The article concluded with a word of praise for the work of the PJWERA and an expression of hope that it "may help the whole country to a noble end."

That Fawcett considered Zionist women to be agents of progress in Palestine is not surprising. Carrie Chapman Catt had expressed a similar opinion ten years earlier. Both women undoubtedly found European Jewish immigrants to be more culturally familiar than indigenous Arabs, whether Muslim or Christian. What is unclear from the article is whether Fawcett was aware that Palestinian Arab women had already begun to organize on a nationalist basis—the Palestine Women's Union had been established in 1920.69 Had she known of its existence, she might not have been as sanguine about the prospects for a Jewish-led, interfaith feminist movement. In any case, her presumption that Arab women needed "encouragement" from the West probably
would not have disposed her to support their resistance to Zionist settlement.

Throughout the 1930s, Western observers tended either to overlook or to criticize the importance of nationalism to Arab women. In a brief report submitted to *Jus Suffragii* on the 1929 convening of an Arab women's congress that brought Muslim and Christian women together, Rosa Welt-Strauss, president of the PJWERA, commented that "the Conference marks a decided improvement in the status of Arab women in this country, and especially of the Moslem women who have hitherto been rigorously confined to the harems." Yet she included no reference to the very *purpose* of the congress, which had been called to pass resolutions protesting Zionist immigration and British policies in Palestine (these were later presented to the British high commissioner by a delegation of Arab women). Of course, as a member of a Zionist organization, Strauss undoubtedly had reason to downplay the significance of the event; nevertheless, that the newspaper ran the piece without an editorial introduction or comment is surely telling.

In part, the IAW's reticence on the subject stemmed from a bylaw introduced in 1908, which pledged the alliance to observe "absolute neutrality on all questions that are strictly national." This resolution reflected the organization's commitment to a vision of international sisterhood that, ideally, would transcend troubling relationships among different nations. But that vision could be sustained only by ignoring the forces responsible for such relationships, especially those connected with colonialism. Moreover, the unwillingness of Western feminists to confront the reality of vast inequality among nations was grounded—at least in part—in the fundamental orientalist assumption of Western superiority, an assumption that ultimately implicated Western feminists in the imperialist projects of their home countries. The previously quoted 1929 article on the women's movement in Iraq nicely captured the contradictions embedded in the IAW's vision of international sisterhood. The author, who acknowledged that "Islam was intended to bring woman her charter of freedom," did not question the leadership role of Western feminists:

*In Syria a certain section of the feminists are decidedly anti-foreign in tone. The more clear-sighted among the women see that it would be fatal for the movement to be committed to any political creed. They realise that feminism in the East can only gain strength by making common cause with feminism all over*
the world, independent of race or creed, and especially to the women of England and America, who have fought and gained their battle, they look for encouragement and practical assistance. In such a cause as this there can be no petty feelings of national jealousy or hatred, and it would be a fine gesture if the women of England were to think out some way of aiding the women of Iraq in the task which they have set themselves.\textsuperscript{73}

According to this presumably British writer, women from colonized countries needed to leave nationalism aside in the greater interest of international feminist solidarity. If that expectation reflected in some ways the noble ideal of women united across national boundaries, it also suggested a distrust of nationalism for the threat it posed to Western dominance. In fact, the air of defensiveness contained here indicates the predicament of British imperialists who, despite sincere beliefs that they were providing useful "service" to Middle Eastern peoples, encountered growing hostility to their presence and influence in the region during the interwar period.\textsuperscript{74}

The unquestioned assumption that Western leadership was natural as well as just resulted in characterizations of Arab women as somehow "too" nationalist in outlook, while obscuring the nationalist dimension of Zionist feminism. Such thinking was manifest in Margery Corbett Ashby's impressions of Palestine during her visit there in 1935. Tensions between Arabs and Jews were quite high by this time, a situation that did not escape Ashby's notice. Having met separately with members from both the PJWERA and the Arab Women's Union, she lamented that "the present political situation seems to make it impossible for Arab and Jewish women to work together." Reflecting on what this portended for the growth of feminism in the region, she added that Arab women were "too absorbed in the nationalist movement to have time or energy to spare for their own rights or for social and educational improvements," while PJWERA "finds all of its demands for better social legislation and for such reforms as the abolition of child marriage set on one side on the plea that the Association only represents one section of the community."\textsuperscript{75}

Whereas Ashby clearly saw the Jewish women's association as advancing the feminist cause, the very existence of an Arab Women's Union was apparently unremarkable. That the mobilization of Arab women around the nationalist cause might in itself constitute a feminist advance likely did not occur to her. Nor, evidently, did Ashby consider the women of the PJWERA to be similarly
engaged in a nationalist movement. Because their activities in the realm of social reform comported with her conception of feminist progress, she may well have found it easier than either Palestinian Arabs or British Mandate authorities to ignore the political ramifications of such efforts. PJWERA's "demands for better social legislation," while seemingly neutral on their face, can be viewed as a form of nation building, and thus enmeshed in the political conflict between Arabs and Jews. In Palestine, the neat distinction drawn by the IAW between feminism and nationalism was largely artificial. For Ashby and her colleagues who visited during the interwar period, to profess support for PJWERA while observing "absolute neutrality" was essentially a contradiction.

Just as they avoided the connection between feminism and nationalism implicit in the activities of Jewish women, the IAW's leaders overlooked the fact that Arab women organizing and demonstrating publicly in defense of Palestine marked an important stage in their political development. Indeed, Jus Suffragii reported on the 1938 Eastern Women's Conference in Defense of Palestine in Cairo (an event which brought together women from several different Middle East countries) with suprisingly little comment, except to stipulate that the IAW could not express any opinion due to its "standing position of neutrality on all national questions." It did, however, note that the conference's attendees were unveiled. Thus in an ironic twist, Western feminists assessed the feminism of Arab women not in terms of their active participation in political life but on the basis of their dress.

During the late 1930s and 1940s, as the future of Palestine became the focal point of pan-Arab feminism, Arab members of the IAW grew increasingly disenchanted with the organization's response to the issue. At the 1939 Congress in Copenhagen, the Egyptian feminist Huda Sha'rawi nearly resigned her board membership when it appeared that the delegates were more sympathetic to the concerns of Zionist women than to those of Arab women. Although she was persuaded to retain her position, the limits of international sisterhood had been exposed; her successor as the EFU's representative in the IAW, Saiza Nabarawi, would later find it impossible to work for Arab feminism within the organization.

In the end, orientalism exerted a more powerful hold on Western members of the IAW than their feminism could temper. Their
belief in the essential "backwardness" of Arab women prevented them from acknowledging the threat to their interests that Zionist settlement portended. More to the point, that belief led them to view Arab women as overly nationalist and insufficiently feminist and to praise the relative "progressiveness" of Jewish women. Although it cannot be claimed that the IAW supported Zionist hopes for a Jewish state, the organization considered the presence of European women (or women of European descent) in Palestine to be a sign of improvement—a fact not lost upon Arab women. Thus, despite sincere wishes to "uplift" their Middle East sisters, Western feminists succeeded only in alienating them.

CONCLUSION
This examination of the intersection of feminism and orientalism within the First Wave international women's movement reveals a tension that the term "feminist orientalism"—at least as it has been commonly used— inadequately describes. Western feminists were not free from ethnocentric assumptions of their own cultural superiority, but neither were they as hostile to Islam as some critics of orientalism might suppose. Indeed, their feminism enabled Western women to challenge some fundamental tenets of orientalism in important ways. Perhaps most significantly, it led them to recognize that male authority was the common denominator in women's oppression across the globe. That insight allowed them, in some instances, to distinguish between actual Islamic prescription and mere custom—a distinction that was (and is still) notoriously lacking in popular Western images of Islam. Although most European and North American members of the IAW stopped short of recognizing feminist potential within Islam, their assumption that women around the world were united by patriarchal oppression permitted them a certain measure of identification with Muslim women that transcended the orientalist distinction between West and East.

Ultimately, however, the legacy of orientalism proved too powerful to overcome. Despite their sympathy for and occasional identification with their Middle Eastern sisters, Western feminists never regarded them as equals. The "East" remained, in their view, less modern, less rational, and less civilized than the "West." Accordingly, the European and North American leaders of the IAW envisioned only one model for feminist movements, and they saw
themselves as its natural vanguard, bringing aid and enlightenment to their more "oppressed" sisters. Certain of their own comparative freedom, they neglected the opportunity to reevaluate their own oppression that actual exposure to Islamic societies had afforded an earlier generation of female travelers to the Middle East. Moreover, their unwavering conviction that they had nothing to learn from (and everything to teach) Middle Eastern women blinded Western feminists to the possibility of alternate bases for, and expressions of, feminism in cultures unlike their own. Thus, by reassuring Western women that perhaps they did not have it so bad after all, feminist orientalism not only forestalled the development of a more radical critique of Western patriarchy but prevented an expanded definition of feminism as well.

Finally, despite the IAW's conviction that female solidarity would transcend national and cultural differences, its vision of "global sisterhood" proved sadly naive. The failure of its leaders to acknowledge the rise of Arab nationalism as a response to Western imperialism, combined with their assumptions about the "backwardness" of Middle East societies, led the IAW to equivocate over the question of Palestine. Its early hopes that (European) Zionist women would "uplift" their Arab sisters ignored the reality of Arab/Jewish tension. More significantly, those hopes obscured the nascent feminism of Arab women (both Muslim and Christian), who were mobilizing increasingly against Zionist settlement. In these ways, orientalism served to subvert the idealistic goals of the international women’s movement, sowing the seeds of disunity that plague us today.

NOTES

I would like to thank Susan M. Hartmann, Jane Hathaway, Leila J. Rupp, and the two anonymous reviewers for Feminist Studies for their helpful comments.

3. Billie Melman, Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918 (Ann
Femininity,

Jane

Modern

has

Arbor:

University of Michigan Press, 1992); Reina Lewis, Gendering Orientalism: Race,


4. Lewis, 4.

5. Melman, chap. 5.


7. See Leila J. Rupp, Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), chap. 6: "How Wide the Circle of the

Feminist 'We,'" (130-55) for a discussion of the varied approaches and rationales that

activist women (whether they claimed the term "feminist" or not) adopted in their

efforts to improve the situation of their sex internationally.

8. The IAW did not, however, add sections from Latin America, Asia, the Middle East

and Africa until after World War I. See Leila J. Rupp, "Challenging Imperialism in


9. Given the variety of meanings attached to these terms in scholarly literature, some

clarification is in order. I use "feminism" in a broad sense to mean, in Nancy Cott's

words, "an integral tradition of protest against arbitrary male dominion." See her

"What's in a Name: The Limits of 'Social Feminism'; or, Expanding the Vocabulary of

Women's History," Journal of American History 76 (December 1989): 809. This definition

has the advantage of being capacious enough to include the myriad forms such protest

has taken across time and space. Other important works on defining feminism (and

categorizing different expressions of feminism) include Nancy Cott, The Grounding of

Modern Feminism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Karen Offen, "Defining

Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," Signs 14 (autumn 1988): 119-57; and


Although some scholars use "imperialism" and "orientalism" interchangeably, I view

the latter as a corollary of the former. I use "imperialism" here to refer to the structural

(i.e., political and economic) components of one country's hegemony over another and

"orientalism" to describe the cultural representations produced by the dominant nation

that sustain the unequal relationship.

10. Joyce Zonana, "The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of

Jane Eyre," in Revising the Word and the World, ed. Veve Clark et al. (Chicago: University

of Chicago Press, 1993). Zonana uses the term "feminist orientalism" to designate a

Western feminist imagination that automatically equates polygyny with female sexual

slavery, and female seclusion with imprisonment.

11. Although Rupp examines cross-cultural dynamics within the international women's

movement, she does not explore in depth the issue of feminist orientalism.


Important critiques of "imperial feminism" include Valerie Amos and Prathiba Pramam,

"Challenging Imperial Feminism," Feminist Review 17 (autumn 1984): 3-19; and Chandra

Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse," Feminist


13. See Valerie Hoffman-Ladd, "Polemics on the Modesty and Segregation of Women in

Contemporary Egypt," International Journal of Middle East Studies 19 (February 1987): 23-

50, for a penetrating analysis of these issues.

14. I am well aware that the designation "Middle East" is imprecise as well as politically

charged; nevertheless, it is too ingrained in common parlance to avoid. I use it here to

denote the geographic region that includes the present political states of Egypt, Sudan,

Lebanon, Syria, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait,

Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Turkey, and Iran. Although

the category "Middle Eastern" includes a multiplicity of religions and ethnicities, the

cultural influence of Islam and Arab civilization extends throughout the region. As I

hope will become clear, I do not use the term to mean either "Muslim" or "Arab" but,
rather, to suggest this basic fact.
15. The IAW’s journal appeared mainly in English, with occasional pieces written in French or German.
17. Margot Badran’s article, “Dual Liberation: Feminism and Nationalism in Egypt, 1870s-1925,” Feminist Issues 8 (spring 1988): 15-34, demonstrates the “dynamic interaction” between women’s feminism and nationalism in Egypt and points to the folly of viewing these two strands of women’s activism separately. She argues “that these women generated a construct of nationalism in which women’s liberation was embedded and fought concurrently as feminists and nationalists” (16). Her later work, Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), discusses the leadership role of Egyptian feminists in the pan-Arab feminist movement.
18. Prior to World War I, Palestine (and the rest of the Arab Middle East) was part of the Ottoman Empire. In the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the British government—which had earlier and secretly promised to uphold Arab claims to independence in exchange for their help in defeating the Turks—pledged its support for the creation of a Jewish “national home” in Palestine. In 1920, the League of Nations legitimated British mandatory control over Palestine (including what is now Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, and Jordan).
19. Lest I be misunderstood, let me say here that I do not equate Zionism with Western imperialism. My point, rather, is that the response of Western feminists to the turmoil in Palestine was influenced by imperialist modes of thinking.
21. Annie Furuhjelm, “Our Alliance,” Jus Suffragii 8 (1 May 1914), 99. This issue was devoted to the IWSA’s tenth anniversary.
23. Although she did not submit any to Jus Suffragii, Aletta Jacobs regularly wrote articles for Dutch newspapers which were later reissued in a two-volume collection entitled Reisbrieven uit Afrika en Azie (Travel letters from Africa and Asia). Harriet Feinberg has analyzed Jacobs’s letters from Egypt; see her article “A Pioneering Dutch Feminist Views Egypt: Aletta Jacobs’ Travel Letters,” in Feminist Issues 10 (fall 1990): 65-78. In an argument similar to my own, she distinguishes between two sorts of discourse that Jacobs used in her writing about the Middle East, which she labels “encouraging our peers” and “uplifting our native sisters.” Feinberg concludes that Jacobs’s feminism helped to pull her discourse more in the direction of the former, in which “some basic equality across cultural, national, and religious boundaries” is assumed (66).
25. The harem system in Muslim societies is designed to preserve social distance between the sexes in both the public and private spheres. It is marked physically by architectural features within family dwellings (the word harem—a derivation of an Arabic word meaning “forbidden” or “holy”—refers both to the portion of a house occupied by female family members and to the women themselves) and socially by the custom of veiling (through which women maintained their seclusion in public). The seclusion of women was common in Mediterranean societies before the rise of Islam and varies in degree and in kind throughout the Middle East. Historically, veiling and the rigid seclusion of women was a sign of wealth, an indication that a man had sufficient
"economic resources to safeguard the honor of his family by having servants to perform the jobs delegated to women in poorer households." See Webster, 253. Although elite and poorer women in urban areas wore the veil when venturing out in public, peasant and nomadic women could not afford to have their movements so encumbered. For more on the harem system, see Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation; and Fatima Mernissi, Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society, rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). The latter provides an explanation of the gender ideology common to most Muslim societies, in which women's sexuality is perceived to be a powerful, potentially chaotic force which must be restrained by strict sexual segregation.

29. Ibid. Catt's diary recounts in detail her visits with the female members of four Muslim families but says little about her interaction with Christian or Jewish women.
31. Ibid., 26.
32. Veiling has long been a subject of contention in the debates between reformers and traditionalists in many Middle East countries throughout the twentieth century. See Webster for a discussion of the different ways in which Western feminists and Muslim women have interpreted the veil. She argues that "customs of partitioning and veiling are as exclusive of men as they are exclusive of women, and that women in purdah societies are not as passive and down-trodden as may be supposed by outsiders" (252) and cites the opinion of many Arab women that the veil has been accorded disproportionate significance by those who consider its abolition to be of primary importance in women's emancipation. See also Beth Baron, "Unveiling in Early Twentieth-Century Egypt: Practical and Symbolic Considerations," Middle Eastern Studies 25 (July 1989): 370-86. For an insightful analysis of how the colonial discourses of the West shaped the modern debate over veiling within Muslim countries (and thereby set the terms for the veil's reemergence as a symbol of resistance to Western domination), see Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam, chap. 8.
34. Catt diary, 52.
36. See Melman. Her conclusion states: "Observation of women's life in another culture brought on a re-evaluation, by the Western women, of their own position as individuals and as a marginalised group in a patriarchal culture" (308).
38. The first women's organization from a Middle East country to affiliate with the IAW was the Egyptian Feminist Union (founded and led by Huda Sha'rawi), which sent delegates to the 1923 Rome Congress. Arab Women's Unions from Palestine and Syria joined later, in 1935.
39. Rupp, "Challenging Imperialism," 8; see also Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation, chap. 5.
41. The women were Egypt's Huda Sha'rawi and Uruguay's Paulina Luisi. Its nine officers, including Catt's successor Margery Corbett Ashby, were British and European. The remaining eleven board members hailed from Great Britain, Europe, and the United States.
42. "Women's Progress in Egypt," Jus Suffragii 9, no. 8 (1 May 1915): 282. The quotation
referred to the life of an uneducated harem woman.


50. See Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam for a discussion of the expectation by Western feminists that Muslim women’s "advancement" must be based on the adoption of Western culture. She also analyzes the appositional tendencies inherent in Islam which have allowed Muslim feminists to articulate a feminism compatible with Islamic precepts.


55. See especially Hoffman-Ladd.

56. On veiling as a symbol of resistance, see especially Frantz Fanon, A Dying Colonialism, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

57. Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation, 23.


59. El Khoury, 63.

60. Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam, chap. 5.

61. Ibid.

62. See Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation. My shift in emphasis here from "Muslim" to "Arab" is meant to reflect the fact that both Muslims and Christians participated in the construction of Arab nationalism and Arab feminism.


67. Ibid., 239.

68. Jus Suffragii, 15, no. 9 (June 1921): 130.
70. Rosa Welt-Strauss, 43.
73. E.S. Stevens.
74. See Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East, 1914-1971* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), for an account of British policymaking in the Middle East during the twentieth century. The story presented here, which pays only cursory attention to indigenous perspectives, is one of a Great Power’s inevitable decline in the face of militant nationalism.