

Women in the Arab Defense Space

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Women are slowly proving their effectiveness in Arab armed forces, but the potential for disruption of this effort remains great.

Across Arab states, women are slowly marching into the defense space. Tunisian women [command naval vessels](#) and [fly fighter aircraft](#); Emirati women [serve](#) in specialized security forces such as the Presidential Guard and provide military and peacekeeping training to servicewomen from other Arab countries; and Saudi women [can now serve](#) in all four branches of the armed forces.

Effectiveness on an Evolving Battlefield

As the region's "[360-degree battlefield](#)" continues to evolve, increased female representation in the security sector becomes an inevitable part of sustainable defense reform. The character of defense is moving from a focus on interstate conflict to a more nuanced mitigation of threats from terrorism to climate change and pandemics. The evolution of defense technology also makes it increasingly difficult to separate gender-based defense roles into frontline and rear echelon. As then

Norwegian minister of defense Anne-Grete Stroem-Erichsen [explained](#) when Norway adopted gender-neutral conscription in 2013, “in order to secure our operational capabilities in the future we need to recruit the best, and we need diversity.”

Expanded the recruitment and advancement of women within security institutions promise potentially transformational social impacts. These range from the empowerment of women within families and society as they gain access to jobs and training to better outcomes for women and girls in conflict zones, not least due to the [reduced risk of sexual violence and exploitation](#). But rather than framing gender inclusion as part of a social project, this objective may well be furthered by an increasing focus on improving mission effectiveness.

In Jordan, for example, the Directorate of Women’s Military Affairs has, since 1995, [provided education and skill development](#) to female recruits to a competitive standard, particularly by cultivating relations with foreign military institutions. It has also successfully advocated for barrier-reduction measures, such as paid maternity leave and improved uniform design. The Directorate’s success stems from demonstrating female competence rather than a normative argument based on equal rights. This commitment to maximizing effectiveness contributed to an expansion of women’s recruitment into counterterrorism and intelligence units in the wake of the 2005 Amman bombings, on account of the prominent role played by the female extremist Sajida al-Rishawi.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, where women have engaged in armed resistance for decades, efforts to strengthen education and training over time have enabled women to compete more equally with men for leadership roles and led to [growing female representation at the top of the police and Peshmerga forces](#). The battle with the self-proclaimed Islamic State has only enhanced the perception of young female fighters as protectors of their communities, which itself provides a powerful argument for women’s rights. In this inverted process, access to opportunity precedes recognition of rights, and demonstrable merit becomes a gateway for moving forward on equality.

Potential for Disruption

However, it is worth noting that progress of this kind, based on facts on the ground rather than on policies, is especially vulnerable to disruption in an environment already beset by obstacles for women. In Lebanon, for example, Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Joseph Aoun has [boosted female enlistment](#) from 1,000 at the end of 2016 to 4,000 in 2019, yet the ministerial resolutions governing women’s participation in the military are almost three decades old, lack binding power, and can easily be revoked.

Iraq, for its part, was the first country in the region to pass a National Action Plan for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in 2014, but both then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and his successor Haider al-Abadi failed to allocate a corresponding budget, casting doubt upon its acceptance and obstructing its implementation. Despite the increased participation of women, [gender policies remain opaque](#) throughout the region and women struggle to access the command positions central to forging and ingraining change.

Still, as emerging hybrid threats take center stage in the evolving regional battlespace, the value of female recruitment and leadership will be made manifest. As [NATO armed forces](#) and [NATO itself](#) have recognized, a better gender balance is ultimately a means of expanding the talent pool and of improving performance. This reality empowers uniformed women to slowly create rather than await social change, opening another important pathway for the military institutions of Arab states toward sustainability and [professionalism](#).

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