

**A Transcript of Secretary Madeleine K. Albright's Remarks
The Inaugural Haleh Esfandiari Forum
Wednesday, March 29, 2017
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
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Thank you very much Jane. There's nothing better than to be introduced by a really good friend. Jane, we have done an awful lot of things together, and all of them were fun, and they go on. You have been a remarkable public servant, so thank you very much for inviting me and for being able to do this.

And Henri, we have known each other for a long time. Thank you so much for making me a part of this incredible celebration and the Inaugural Haleh Esfandiari Forum. I think Haleh is terrific, and I'm always delighted to return to the Wilson Center. I really do recall my time as a Wilson Fellow.

There was a lot to like about that experience. I had the opportunity to do independent research, to meet scholars from all over the world, and I got paid to work in the Smithsonian castle – which dates me quite a bit.

In a town full of memorials, what sets the Wilson Center apart is that it is in fact, a living monument. It memorializes not only Wilson, but Wilson's lifelong effort as an educator and as president to map a trail for the future that would elude the traps of the past.

I am sorry the Czech Ambassador isn't here because there is a great link between Czechoslovakia and Woodrow Wilson or as we call him there "Woodrow Vilson."

And really that relationship between him and the first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Masaryk, was something that was so important and the Czechoslovak constitution was modeled on the American one, except that in 1918, it actually had women's rights in it.

And Tomáš Masaryk, very apt for this particular session, was somebody who got married in the last quarter of the 19th century, he married an American and he took her maiden name as his middle name, her name was Charlotte Gerrigue and he was Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk – it's very apt that we're doing this here.

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.

Because those who abuse the dignity of some people, endanger the security of all.

And those who care about their own security had better stand up for the rights of women and girls.

Of course, the problem of gender discrimination is not limited to Afghanistan and it's a problem that is felt acutely across the Middle East and North Africa, where women have the lowest labor force participation rate and the lowest rate of political representation in the world and this matters, because we have learned that when women have the power to make their own economic and social choices.

The chains of poverty can be broken; families are strengthened; and whole societies are more likely to be prosperous and at peace.

Looking at the Middle East today, we see neither widespread peace nor broadly shared prosperity, but a toxic brew of challenges that is affecting the entire globe and America's own vital interests.

More than fifteen years after 9/11, Americans are clearly not in the mood to embark on an ambitious new effort in the region. Yet walking away from the Middle East is not a viable option.

What is needed is a durable strategy for the region that reflects the world as it is today.

For the past two years, I have co-chaired an Atlantic Council Task Force with former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley aimed at developing such an approach.

In undertaking this effort, Steve and I deliberately sought to "step back" from the cycle of fire drills and Band-Aids and crisis response that dominates the discussion in Washington.

We wanted to take a deeper look at what was happening and listen to voices from the region. So we traveled there extensively, and sought perspectives from all levels of society – from refugees and students to business leaders and monarchs.

What we found was that many positive things are happening in the Middle East, despite the dire headlines.

Across the region, civic activists are working to make their local communities stronger and more resilient.

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

become a reality, they must be allowed a prominent voice in new governing structures.

Still, I am concerned that chauvinistic habits die hard.

Many men in the region are undoubtedly sincere in their desire to protect women from the rough and tumble of politics.

But they should understand that the way to protect women in the Middle East is not to patronize them, but to allow them to exercise their rights.

Historically, it has fallen on the United States government to make the case for empowering women – not because it makes us popular, but because it is so clearly in our interests and so consistent with our values.

Yet today, it's unclear how hard the new administration will fight for women's rights. The budget cuts they have proposed – including to the Wilson Center – would directly reduce our influence and effectiveness in dealing with these issues, but at least, we won't be forcing men to many senators about mammograms.

The truth is that foreign assistance is among the most efficient and valuable tools we have. In the long run, nothing is more expensive than poverty, suffering, and war. So I sincerely hope that Congress rejects these unwise cuts, protects programs for women's empowerment around the world.

We seem to be living in a moment when “hard power” is all that can grab the attention of the administration. We should remember that the women's movement has endured and prospered not because it is trendy but because of the underlying power of its central premise, which is that every individual counts.

This basic idea of valuing each person fairly is what has united women's movement across the boundaries of geography, ethnicity, vocation and generation.

It is what gives us faith that the day will come when every girl everywhere will be able to look ahead with confidence that her life will be cherished, her individuality respected, her rights protected and her future determined, solely by her own ability and character.

The philosophy is not based on any illusions.

Advocates of social progress have seen far too much of the hardship and frustration to indulge in sentimentalism. But we live in a nation and in a world that

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 – women cannot do.

Today, our goal must be to see that opportunity exists for every girl and every woman everywhere and that's a big job and a big commitment. But it is a commitment that must be made by America and all those around the world who share our hope for the future more democratic, prosperous than the past.

So in closing, I would really like to thank Haleh and the Wilson Center – Jane really for what you have done to try to achieve this goal and I congratulate you and salute you, and I now really look forward to having a discussion and answering your questions which I will be able to do since I am no longer in the government.

A special thanks to Oumama Kabli for her transcription of the above remarks.