Reflection on Women, Peace, and Security in the Arab Region

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Abstract

Eight years following my co-authored publication on National Action Plans (NAPs) for the United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325, I reflect on the progress in the Arab region with regards to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. No country in the region had an NAP at that time. Shortly after, Iraq became the first Arab State to adopt a NAP. Nine other Arab countries have since followed. This piece briefly analyzes seven of the ten NAPs in the Arab region. It identifies promising developments and practices in the region and reflects on persisting challenges in realizing the ambitious WPS agenda. Finally, it ends by offering three recommendations on how to accelerate WPS implementation moving forward.

Introduction

When you conduct a search for "women, peace, and security in the Arab region," you find disappointingly little. UN Women confirms that there are significant evidence deficits and data gaps on this topic, which demonstrates the importance of this *Al-Raida* issue on the subject (Parke et al., 2019). Eight years after my co-authored publication on National Action Plans (NAPs) for UNSCR 1325 (Miller et al., 2014), I reflect on the progress in the Arab region with regards to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. In the last decade, there are three developments that ESCWA et al. (2021) have identified. First, women continue to lead efforts related to peace and security in the region. Second, the WPS agenda is being more widely accepted at the grassroots and institutional levels in Arab States. Iraq became the first Arab country to adopt a NAP in 2014 and, as of November 2022, ten Arab countries have a NAP on WPS. Third, there is still much room for improvement to accelerate implementation of the WPS agenda across the region.

This reflection piece identifies promising developments and practices in the Arab region but also highlights persisting challenges in realizing the ambitious WPS agenda. The piece is intentionally broad given the wide-ranging scope of the WPS agenda.
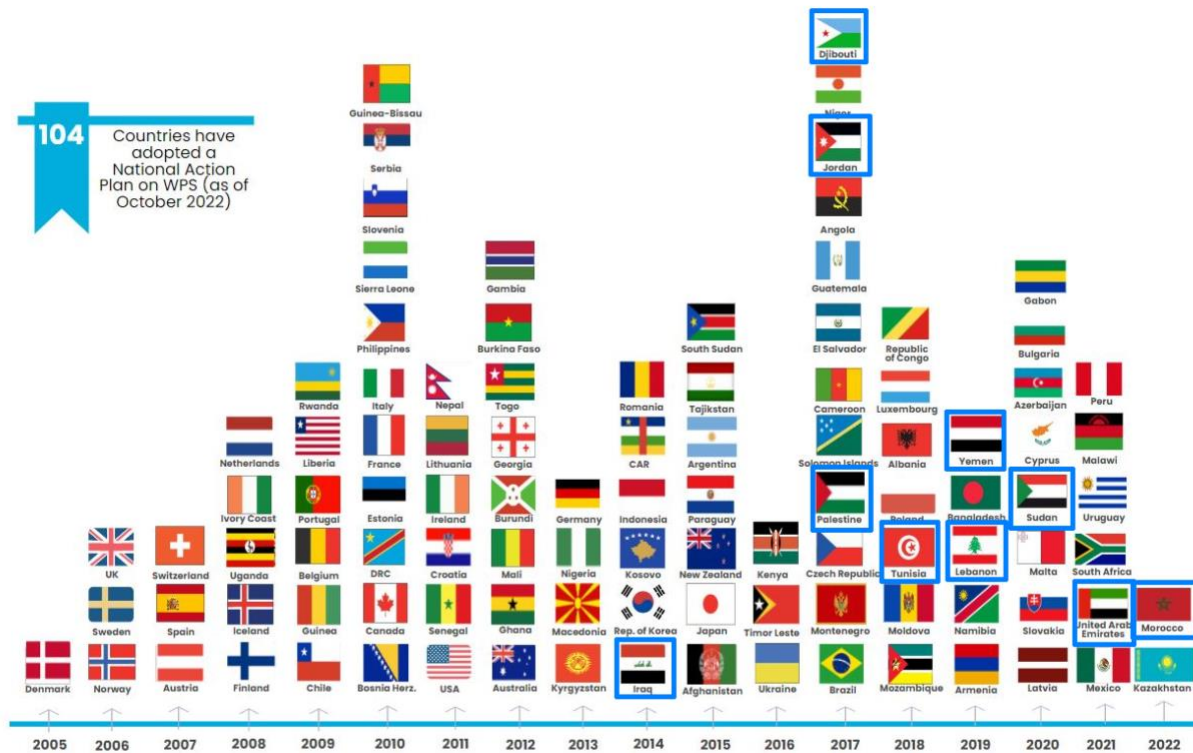
National Action Plans (NAPs) in the Arab Region

Although there is no one best practice for the implementation of the WPS agenda, adopting NAPs can be effective in outlining a course of action, including specific elements required to advance the agenda. These elements include, but are not limited to, identifying priority areas, assigning roles, establishing timelines, constructing indicators, and determining means of monitoring and evaluation. On the other hand, the process of adopting a NAP can be time-consuming and resource draining. Moreover, NAPs may be adopted but not implemented, thereby casting doubt on their value. It is clear that NAPs are not a panacea for implementation of the WPS agenda. In short, NAPs are critical yet insufficient in moving the WPS agenda forward.

Globally, 104 UN Member States have adopted a NAP for WPS,[1] compared to 42 countries just eight years ago (Miller et al., 2014). Regionally, ten out of the 22 Arab countries have at least one NAP, with Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine already on their second NAPs. This is noteworthy, given that it demonstrates a sense of continuity and learning, as countries revise and update their NAPs, adding more detail and attention, as required. This is a marked improvement from the situation eight years ago when no Arab country had adopted a NAP. As the graphic below shows, Iraq became the first Arab country to adopt a 1325 NAP in 2014, followed by a wave of three other Arab countries in 2017 (Figure 1). The pace since has been slow but steady with one or two Arab countries adopting a NAP each year since 2018.

Figure 1

NAP Adoption Over Time

Note. Arab countries are outlined by blue boxes. WILPF. (2022). *National Action Plans: At a glance.* https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/

In terms of the content of NAPs in the Arab region, Swaine's (2018) analysis of Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine found the following two key limitations:

- *Plans tended to focus on women and girls as a homogenous group*. At the time, the Iraq plan was the only plan that referred to the different identities of women, which is important given that adopting a one-size-fits-all approach is unresponsive to many women and fails to recognize the varied contributions they can make.

- *Plans often overlooked practical needs*. Only 8 percent of actions across the plans were directed towards practical needs. Instead, they excessively focused on strategic needs, which are important in the long-term but often fail to respond to near-term priorities.

In this piece, I offer a brief content analysis of the seven plans that were readily available in English as of November 2022. These were Iraq (2014–2018), Jordan (2018–2021), Lebanon (2019–2022), Palestine (2020–2024), Sudan (2020–2022), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (2021–2024), and Yemen (2020–2022).[2] I zoom in on three elements. First, what are the focus areas of the NAPs in the Arab region? This is critical because it provides the foundation of these NAPs and what they hope to achieve. Second, to what extent do the plans outline the funding requirements and sources for their implementation? This is important given that dedicated resources are needed to implement NAPs. Indeed, this was a serious gap identified in our original analysis from 2012, which found that financial allocation is rarely specified (less than 5 percent of NAPs). Finally, how is monitoring and evaluation (M&E) addressed in the NAPs? This was another serious limitation of earlier NAPs that we had identified, with almost half of NAPs not including measurable indicators (as of 2012). Establishing detailed M&E plans from the start is integral to any efforts in following-up on the implementation of objectives.

Figure 2

Summary of NAP Content Analysis

Country	Focus areas	M&E	Funding
Iraq	• Six pillars that correspond with the WPS framework, but nothing on Relief and Recovery • Includes extra pillars on "social and economic empowerment," "legislation and law enforcement," and "resource mobilization/M&E"	• Includes pillar on M&E • Does not provide details but mentions that an M&E plan will be elaborated by the internal structures created by the NAP	• Includes pillar on "resource mobilization" • Budget included as an annex
Jordan	• Four pillars closely aligned with the WPS framework, but includes one on "fostering a community culture"	• Indicators, targets, responsible institution, timeline for each activity are detailed • Each implementing party is required to	• Total estimated budget is 7,820,000 Jordanian dinar (JOD)

		submit a periodic progress report to the central focal point responsible for M&E	- Estimated total cost of each activity - Emphasis on need to mobilize national financial resources in addition to international funding
Lebanon	Five priorities closely aligned to four WPS pillars, including a "normative framework"	- Indicators, responsible institution, timeline as well as an overall plan for baseline and endline assessments - Specific budget for M&E	- Total estimated budget is USD 15,069,616/LBP 22,604,424,000 - Breakdown of national resources required and additional amount required for each activity
Palestine	Four pillars in line with the WPS framework, but combines prevention and protection and includes a pillar on "accountability" that is focused on data and awareness	Pillar 2 on accountability includes outcome on increased availability of periodic, high-quality data, information, and statistics on the implementation of UNSCR 1325. The output on institutional capacities on M&E of UNSCR 1325 implementation are	Refers to a costing exercise and establishing a NAP pooled funding mechanism

		strengthened. Activity to establish a unified national system to monitor and document all efforts invested towards the implementation of the second NAP on UNSCR 1325.	
Sudan	• Four pillars mirroring the WPS pillars	• A set of quantitative and qualitative indicators mentioned under each activity but without an implementation timeline • The responsible stakeholder is identified for each priority action area	• Nothing on funding
UAE	• Mentions four WPS pillars but focus areas are different: integrating women's needs into foreign policy, women's meaningful participation in promotion of conflict prevention and participation in peacebuilding activities, participation in peacekeeping forces and within the security sector, and women's meaningful participation in preventing violent extremism	• Has a logical framework at the activity level with relevant ministries named by sub-goal but nothing on M&E	• Nothing on funding

	and other emerging WPS challenges		
Yemen	• Four pillars mirroring the WPS pillars	• Indicators, responsible institution, and timeline by output are available • The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is responsible for establishing follow-up and evaluation mechanisms	• Nothing on funding

In terms of focus area, the NAPs from the region almost always cover all four pillars of the WPS agenda, namely: Participation, Protection, Prevention, and Relief & Recovery. While recognizing the four pillars, the UAE plan mainly focuses on participation in different areas, including in preventing violent extremism. Meanwhile, the Iraq NAP leaves the Relief & Recovery pillar unaddressed. Moreover, while the Sudan and Yemen NAPs exactly mirror the international agenda, the other NAPs go beyond it to include extra dimensions. The Iraqi and Lebanese plans include a focus on the legal framework, while the Jordanian NAP includes a pillar on fostering a community culture that is supportive of WPS.

NAPs are most effective when they are appropriately monitored and implemented. In terms of how M&E parameters are incorporated into the NAPs of the Arab region, the Palestinian NAP is perhaps a best practice given it has a pillar dedicated to accountability. The Iraqi NAP similarly has a pillar on resource mobilization and M&E but it is less specific, referencing a thorough M&E plan to be developed at a later date (an exact date has not been made clear). The Lebanese NAP is also worth highlighting given that is has a dedicated budget for M&E, including for a baseline and endline report.

Without dedicated funds to implement the outlined activities, NAPs are at risk of remaining solely aspirational. In the Arab region, three (Sudan, UAE, and Yemen) out of the seven studied

NAPs, fail to mention funding. The Jordanian NAP is noteworthy for its detailed cost projections per activity and its call to raise national as well as international funds to meet the projected needs. The Lebanese NAP is similar but goes one step further, delineating a breakdown of national resources required and an additional amount required for each activity. Such detailed funding requirements are welcomed but still require securing the projected funds. It is unclear how successful Arab States have been in this regard and further research is needed here.

Other Noteworthy Engagements in the Region

Apart from developing NAPs, there have been noteworthy efforts in implementing the WPS agenda in the Arab region from a wide range of stakeholders, reflecting the increasing salience of the topic across the region. It should be noted that there are many more engagements in the region and that these are a selection of the most noteworthy that the author has come across. The selection is intended to show the wide range of activities undertaken by a diverse group of stakeholders in the Arab region: ranging from universities holding academic conferences to LAS establishing a regionwide network to the UN convening webinars to member states' hosting conferences.

In 2016, the Lebanese American University's (LAU) Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (now the Arab Institute for Women) held a joint conference entitled, *Towards Prioritizing Women, Peace and Security in the Arab Agenda*. The meeting was attended by experts, academics, development and humanitarian practitioners, Arab civil society and non-government organizations, government officials, and various UN representatives. It culminated in the Beirut Call to Action (LAU et al., 2016) that identified the following three priorities: (1) localize the WPS agenda, (2) promote women's activism in peace and in war, and (3) institutionalize collaborations on WPS. Such conferences and their accompanying action items can provide the foundations for a regional roadmap but require follow-up and accountability mechanisms to ensure they are translated from paper into practice.

In 2020, the League of Arab States (LAS) established the Arab Women Mediators Network, functioning within the framework of the Regional Strategy and Executive Action Plan on the Protection of Arab Women: Peace and Security (General Secretariat of the League of Arab States

et al., 2016). Such an effort can help facilitate peer-to-peer learning across the region as well as offering a platform to recognize women in the Arab region who are directly involved in mediation.

In November 2020, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) organized a webinar to reflect on the WPS agenda in the Arab region, 20 years after the adoption of UNSCR 1325. It partnered with UN Women, LAS, and the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) at the LAU to engage governmental representatives in a regional discussion on the convention and the WPS agenda. Convenings such as this one can help galvanize action and support exchange of good practices. However, to ensure they are not one-off events, the WPS community in the region should consider creating a rotating series of events to keep the momentum and focus on evolving priorities.

In September 2022, the UAE held an International Conference on Women, Peace and Security. The conference was "organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in partnership with the Ministry of Defense, the General Women's Union (GWU), UN Women, the League of Arab States, and the Abu Dhabi Ports Group and saw the participation of international decision-makers, senior officials, diplomats, and advocates" (Emirates News Agency, 2022). It focused on achievements and challenges regarding the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in the UAE and throughout the region. As one of the latest countries in the region to adopt a WPS NAP, the UAE has been playing a prominent role in raising the profile of the agenda across the region.

Localizing and Democratizing the WPS Agenda

Localizing the WPS agenda has become a topic of growing importance globally. Essentially, it is "a people-based, bottom-up strategy that is based on the premise that local ownership and participation lead to more effective policy-making and implementation" (GNWP, 2018). One of its key objectives is to raise awareness about WPS, employing an inclusive approach to tailor it to the local nuances of each context.

In the Arab region, several developments are worth highlighting in this regard. A 2022 UN Women study looking at mediation efforts in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen concluded that "women have played a vital role in connecting the different tracks in national peace processes" (Parry, 2022). Indeed, while negotiators have often fixated on narrow security issues, it has been women

at the local level who have addressed daily concerns of local communities. If normative frameworks such as the WPS agenda are not grounded in local realities, there is a risk they will lose their relevance and salience. Localization efforts are thus especially critical.

In August 2020, the American University of Beirut's Issam Fares Institute (IFI) launched an initiative to promote "Women, Peace and Security" (WPS), with a focus on democratizing WPS (AUB, 2022). In a meeting with the initiative's Lead Advisor, Karma Ekmekji, she elaborated on the three main focuses of the initiative. First, it seeks to link the WPS agenda with other international commitments to promote coherent and relevant policy responses. In this pursuit, the Initiative is also working on launching a practical toolkit mapping the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the WPS agenda and a toolkit for policymakers to mainstream WPS into their Voluntary National Reports. Second, the Initiative produces a podcast series that aims to reach a wider audience and make WPS more accessible. Finally, the Initiative works on research highlighting women's contributions to WPS across the Arab region. Such an initiative is a welcome step towards producing accessible, relevant, and practical products that help turn the aspirations espoused by UNSCR 1325 and subsequent resolutions into reality.

Nonetheless, UN Women (Parke et al., 2019) revealed "limited localization and ownership of the agenda among women and civil society actors due to a growing perception that such ownership does not translate into action or positive impact" (p. v). UN Women calls for the proliferation of WPS material that is locally relevant, translated into local languages, and locally accessible. This requires deliberate dissemination campaigns to convey difficult concepts in a comprehensible manner. Much more remains to be done in this pursuit.

Moving Forward

Looking ahead to what is needed to accelerate WPS implementation in the Arab region, I identify three challenges and corresponding action points.

First, there is still a paucity of data and information on the topic. The research I conducted for this piece affirmed this reality. A potential solution, suggested by the Elders,[3] is to invest in a WPS regional center that studies the advancement in women's participation in regional peace and security, and identifies gaps and entry points (UN Women et al., 2020). Such a hub could encourage much needed scholarship on the topic. In lieu of such an institution, more research can

be funded on the topic. *Al-Raida*'s focus on WPS in the Arab region in this issue is most welcomed and can hopefully spur further research on a still largely under-researched and underappreciated topic. Regardless of how it is done, more research is sorely needed on WPS in the Arab region.

Second, there is still not enough funding dedicated to WPS. One solution is to develop more dedicated budgets to support WPS efforts. The NAPs in the region give us room for optimism as they identify the financial resources required to turn these ambitious plans into action. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether countries are able to secure the funds they require given that they often rely on international partners to fill funding gaps. To ensure the sustainability of the WPS agenda in the region, significant and reliable sources of funding will need to be secured and committed towards its implementation.

Third, the WPS agenda is still largely inaccessible and unresponsive to civil society. Indeed, in countries that are not in active war or violent conflict, it is perceived as irrelevant. This view needs to be challenged. Initiatives such as the podcast series launched by IFI are a step in the right direction. Nevertheless, much more needs to be done. The case is strong and clear. All members of society stand to gain from the WPS agenda, including those that are not a cite of active war or conflict. Finally, the WPS agenda is closely linked with other international efforts such as the (SDGs). The challenge is thus to localize and democratize the WPS agenda across the Arab region. Some action has been taken in this pursuit, but truly transformative change necessitates us all to play a role in supporting the lofty principles of WPS.

Notes

[1] https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/

[2] For various reasons, several plans were excluded. The Djibouti NAP was in French, the Tunisian NAP in Arabic, and the Moroccan NAP is not yet publicly available.

[3] The Elders are an independent group of prominent global leaders working together for peace, justice, and human rights. See their website here: https://theelders.org/who-we-are

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