

## Interview with Kelly Shannon of Florida Atlantic University

By Michael Fischer

Kelly Shannon, who received her PhD from Temple University is the author of *U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights*.

Q: Is there anything in particular that pushed you to study American foreign relations or Muslim women's human rights?

A: Foreign relations, I got interested in as an undergraduate. I actually started as a theater major. Vassar had a great theater department but also an incredible history department. I took a course on US Cold War history as a junior, and that is also when 9/11 happened. Between class and world events, I got really interested in US and world behavior. I initially was interested in US-Irish relations, but I moved beyond that through paying attention to world events and taking a course for women's studies when I was a master's student.

Q: Your book argues that, as U.S. attention to the Middle East and other Muslim-majority regions became more focused and sustained, the issue of women's human rights in Islamic societies was one that Americans gradually identified as vitally important to U.S. foreign policy. What made Americans key in on this as opposed to other aspects of foreign policy?

A: The story that I've traced is that this issue gets identified outside of government circles. The American public reacted to the loss of women's rights in Iran in 1979 sparks this sustained American response

that would only deepen in the years following. There had always been orientalist imagery, but the actual, substantive discussion of the real-life situation was new in 1979. People started incorporating languages of universal human rights and ideas coming out of the international feminist movement. By the 1990s, they had these successful campaigns the US government. Once you get the Clinton Administration, which was already sympathetic to feminist issues, in power, you get this moment of change.

Q: So you look at 1979 as a turning point, but it fluctuates with changes in administrations and the international political situation?

A: Yes policy-wise it starts in the 90s, but with respect to social movements and feminism, it starts earlier.

Q: How have American foreign policy aims with respect to Muslim women's human rights changed since the late 1970s, and perhaps an even more pointed question, how have they changed during the Trump Administration?

A: In terms of pre-Trump, there wasn't a policy until the Clinton Administration. The Clinton people, especially the First Lady, tried to mainstream women's issues across the Executive Branch. There were attempts to put women's issues front and center as a policy focus, along with arguments, for instance, that women's rights were also economically beneficial, in order to bring in as many constituents as possible. They tried to avoid that imperialist type of approach. With Bush, you get a focus on women's rights in the Islamic world as well, but it is not paired with the broader women's rights movement you had under Clinton. Those policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, I see them as being genuine, but he went about them in a way that was flawed. It bred resistance when paired with American military intervention. That was highly problematic. With Obama, there was an attempt to go back to that broader approach, but Obama was also trying to withdraw troops, which led to a tension. What happens to Muslim women's rights when we withdraw? I would say under Trump, there really is no women's rights agenda that I have seen.

Q: Where does this story end?

A: My original goal was to get this book out while Obama was still in office, but with publication and things, I wasn't in control. I ended up having to rewrite the conclusion the day after the election. The problem with doing something current events related is that you have to continuously add things.

Q: What types of roles do domestic social movements, such as the MeToo Movement, play in the reorientation of American foreign policy aims with regard to things like human rights abroad?

A: Depending on who ends up in the White House next, I think current movements are changing the ways in which people think about how women have to move in the world. We could end up going back to the policy trajectory that I found for the book before Trump. Trump has chosen not to fill those positions and offices, but those offices still exist.

Q: If I may shift gears a bit, what were some of the biggest challenges when writing this book, either in terms of particularly troubling sources or methodology?

A: There were several. One is the issue of source availability. There are government classification issues. The Clinton Library online made it look like there were all these available sources that were classified when I got there. But there were still lots of available sources, especially those relating to the First Lady. I consider my book a type of first draft on this topic. I did interviews to try and fill in the gaps in the record and also to confirm things. I did totally strike out trying to get Madeleine Albright and the Clintons, but I ended up interviewing some other individuals such as Theresa Loar and Mahnaz Afkhami who provided a great deal of information.

Q: Were all of your interviews in English?

A: Yes, for this project, the voices of those Muslim women who contributed to the conversation were largely in the United States and speaking Americans' language, both literally and figuratively.

Q: Contrarily, what were some of the fondest moments you had while researching and writing this book?

A: I would say doing the archival research was great, but my favorite thing was interviewing Mahnaz Afkhami. I know you're supposed to maintain a historical distance between yourself and your subject, but she was so great. She spent a whole day with me, and she was still running an NGO. She provided so much valuable information. She taught me so much, maybe a fraction ended up in the book.

Q: What is next for you?

A: I am starting a book project on US relations with Iran from 1905-1953. I'm looking at foreign relations as a broad category, so it's not just state to state. I'm looking at missionaries, financial advisors, travelers, things like that. There's not really a monograph that covers that period, so it's exciting to be able to break a whole bunch of new ground.