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# ARAB WORLD'S FIRST FEMALE INTERIOR MINISTER



# RAYA EL HASSAN

Trailblazing Raya Haffar El Hassan became the first female Minister of Interior in the Arab World this year and served as the first female Minister of Finance in Lebanon (2009 to 2011). With extensive experience in both the private and public sectors, public finance and social development make up her areas of expertise.

While women have been largely excluded from Lebanese politics, Raya El Hassan's appointment as minister heralds an era of gender inclusivity — where women will gain the same decision-making power as their male counterparts. As of 2019, four out of 30 ministries are led by women — still a meager figure but an improvement, nonetheless. With leadership qualities and an impressive roster of achievements to her name, El Hassan dispels the misconception that politics is synonymous with the patriarchy. A framed poster in her office touches on this point: "In politics, if you want anything said, ask a man. If you want anything done, ask a woman."

**Can you tell us about your background?**
After receiving my bachelor's in business administration at the American University of Beirut, I pursued my MBA at George Washington University then stayed in the United States for an extra two years afterward, working temporary jobs. I wanted to do my Ph.D. and got accepted into New York University but then my plans changed when I came to Lebanon for a short visit in 1991 and I met former Prime Minister, Fouad Siniora. He was the chairperson of Group Mediterranée which was owned by late former minister Rafik Hariri. They made me an offer and convinced me to stay which is why I ultimately decided to remain in Lebanon.

**Your career has given you insight on the inner workings of two ministries. In your opinion, what were the unique challenges that you encountered in both positions?**
Through my first position as Minister of Finance, I learned how to act in a council of ministers, in parliament and within public administration settings that I was heading. By the time I entered the Ministry of Interior, I had already gained many skills and became confident in those areas which made my new job easier in that way. My mind was not set anymore on how to speak with the media. There no longer was that fear factor — I overcame it. I encountered a different set of responsibilities when I became the Minister of Interior, such as handling the civil work component [handling ordinary citizens and their concerns]. Also, you need to impose yourself in a male setting. There is the security component which I do not have a background in. All of the ministers that came before me, except for one or two, had no experience with interior security. Most were, like myself, outsiders that were able to figure out how to adapt and make a difference. There was a learning curve, of course. Finding my way around the security agencies and building that mutual respect took several months to achieve.

**You occupy a role that no other woman in the region has reached before you. Do you feel a big sense of responsibility in this position?**
Yes. As a woman, I feel it even more.

**To what do you credit your success?**
The circumstances were different for me as minister of finance and internal security but, under both contexts, I think the credit is owed to one person: Prime Minister Saad Hariri. He is a great believer in the role that women can play in Lebanon. He holds the conviction that women should be in decision making roles and can contribute positively to society. There are many other women under different political parties and in civil society but frankly, if it weren't for Hariri's willingness to take a bet on a woman, I don't know whether that would have ever happened.

I also had substance for this position.

I was lucky enough to have worked in the private sector for more than 25 years. Another plus was my specialized expertise, as I'd already worked at the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economy and Trade, the prime minister's office, with international financial organizations and so forth.

All in all, this produced a capable candidate that has the credentials to successfully address her job's challenges. During my appointment at the Ministry of Finance, we were able to showcase that a woman can do this. At the Ministry of Interior, Hariri wanted to make another statement: that women can also take on the security dimension. If you have the technical know-how, being a woman should not be a problem.

**There is so little time and so much to do. Do you think you'll be able to enact real change given time restrictions?**
I hope so. As a minister of finance, I was given 1.5 years in total. Even though I managed to gain credibility for my achievements at the previous ministry, I was not able to fulfill all the plans I had in mind. Today, I hope that I will have the time to establish or launch certain projects that my successor will be able to complete.

**Ministries often face the problem of continuity. One minister will begin working on a specific agenda only for those efforts to be ignored by the next minister who has a different set of priorities to achieve. This creates a sort of stalemate. How do you think that this problem can be addressed?**
By changing the mentality within the culture of politics so that each political actor builds on previous work rather than working from scratch. Of course, it is easier for a minister to ensure continuity if their successor adheres to the same political beliefs. If they come from a totally different political perspective, then the likelihood of them continuing your work is much lower. I think continuity also depends on how transparently one works. If I start something with total transparency then whoever follows me will hopefully be more inclined to continue my work.

**You've been working on several ambitious dossiers since your appointment. What are a few highlights?**
We are working on several things in parallel right now including many changes in legislation. The traffic law is undergoing serious changes. We reactivated the Traffic Management Authority which is under my jurisdiction, and the National Traffic Safety Authority, which is under Prime Minister Saad Hariri's command. These two institutions had not met in a long time. We brought them together and developed a strategy for traffic safety that has since been implemented into the national traffic law. Now we are taking the whole action plan and trying to implement it as we go along.

In the Traffic Management Authority, we are working on launching a new car inspection bill. We want to open up 16 car motor inspection vehicle centers across Lebanon so one is not limited to going to the one in Dekweneh. Another one of our goals is to formalize the work of driving offices. When buying license plates, people now need to pay for unique numbers, as opposed to resorting to *wasta* [nepotism] and other short cuts.

Now, the Ministry of Interior's website officially lists the prices and annual fees to facilitate transparent plate purchasing.

One of the grievances our citizens have is with regards to circulation of motorbikes in Lebanon. Most motorcycles are not registered. In order to bring them into the system, we've worked on reducing inspection fees, registration fees and driver's fees for registration, hoping that this will incentivize drivers to come forward.

We are also working toward enforcing existing laws that have so far not been implemented. For example, the point system [a car insurance system based on an accumulation of penalty points on driving records] is a part of our law but was never enforced.

**Beirut is a congested city that struggles with major traffic on a daily basis. How have you been addressing this concern?**
It's probably one of the files that I will have less success with. The heavy traffic, in large part, has to do with the large number of cars that go into Beirut every day. There won't be a real solution unless we implement a public transportation system which operates under the Ministry of Transportation and not the Ministry of Interior.

**You have made headlines with regards to civil marriage in Lebanon. Can you tell us more about this complex issue?**
I stated my personal position: Outside of the Ministry of Interior, I am with civil marriage. However, as the minister of interior, I cannot single-handedly enforce civil marriage. There was pressure on me to register a couple as wed by civil marriage. Had I officially signed off this couple's wedding, they would have faced lots of problems in the absence of a civil law to protect them. Things like getting a divorce, having a baby or leaving an inheritance would have caused them major complications. It would be irresponsible for me to allow for this registration when I know that it could not be properly implemented.

From the start, I have said that this issue is at a national level and should be discussed in parliament through a proposal for a civil law to be presented and discussed by representatives of the people. This is not a matter that I, alone, can take a decision on.

**What other improvements can we look forward to seeing?**
At the Rafic Hariri International Airport, we've introduced new equipment and procedures in the hope that we can facilitate the flow of arrivals and departures. By September, the final luggage check after passport control will be removed which will significantly reduce the congestion. We worked on this alongside the Ministry of Public Works and Transport that oversees airplanes in Lebanon. The airport was created to accommodate 6 million people but actually accepts 10 million per year. A major improvement will not take place until we launch the expansion project.

**What would you like to see as an upcoming initiative launched alongside or within the Ministry of Interior?**
We need to leverage the link between the diaspora and different municipalities. Imagine that I come from Miniyeh [a district in the north of Lebanon] but live in Australia. I would still love to know what's going on in Miniyeh, about projects that I could potentially be a part of or how I can support institutions from there. This can be achieved through a website or an application whereby each municipality has its own page where they can share statistics, images, and a list of initiatives that they have been working on. They can even include a crowdfunding mechanism that reaches out to diaspora for support. The idea is present. Next is finding the funding to realize that idea then engaging all municipalities so that they can feed into the platform.

> "It's definitely difficult but we need to always feed into that hope.

**All things considered, how much hope do you have?**
Hope is very important. I am always hopeful. Once that disappears, then everything disappears. There are new faces in government with new ideas who want to work and change. It's definitely difficult but we need to always feed into that hope.

**On a more personal note, you have three girls, ages 14, 23, and 26. How do they see their mom?**
They're very proud. They have grown used to me being in government or in a position where most of my time is spent outside of the HOME. While my absence around the household may have impacted them negatively in some ways, it has helped in other respects because it has taught them to be independent.

**Many Lebanese parents send their children to study abroad. At some point, you also left the nest for the United States for four years to study and work. How did this time away contribute to your formation?**
I went alone at the age of 21. I lived in an international student house where I was exposed to 50 or more nationalities. I had 13 roommates from all walks of life and from all backgrounds. While pursuing my MBA, I was the youngest in my promotion. At first, I was scared stiff when doing presentations. I wasn't used to public speaking up until that point. Studying abroad built me up and gave me confidence. I also learned how to deal with case studies instead of theory and rote memorization. It was great! You leave the protection of the family, learn to stand on your own two feet and gain a different perspective than you do staying in the cocoon that we live in here.

**Has your success impacted your relationship with your spouse?**
My husband is my first supporter. He is a well-established physician who has a very good reputation. Even when I was at the Ministry of Finance, he was always a source of support for me. I am lucky as I could have had a partner with a more oriental thinking. My husband is very progressive and confident, which are two essential character traits for a man to be supportive. Never, not at any point, did I feel that he felt undermined or insecure in his position as father, husband, or man in society. On the contrary, he is proud.

*With competence and savvy, Raya El Hassan's impressive track record reminds us of the obvious: that women are highly capable of being in leadership positions. In fact, their exclusion is to the disadvantage of everyone. It is about time that the deadlock that has been holding Lebanon back from its full potential be disrupted by a more inclusive political body. This historical moment has championed gender equality on a global scale and it would be a shame if Lebanon were to be left behind.*



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