



Council of “Supreme Scholars” Rejects the Appointment of Women

A controversy erupted this week in Saudi Arabia when some scholars suggested that the top religious organization in the Kingdom, the Supreme Council of Scholars, should include women. [PI Online](#) examines the politically-charged rationale offered by one of the strongest members of the Council who rejected the idea.

The Council is presently composed of seventeen scholars appointed by Royal decree for a four-year term, which may be extended. The Council has the most influential say on all issues pertaining to the *Shari'a* and, given the nature of Wahabi rule in the Kingdom, their religious pronouncements touch on virtually every aspect of a Saudi citizen's life. The Council members also act as an advisory body to the King.



AbdelRahman Al-Zuneidi

The controversy erupted when two well-known Muslim Scholars, *Qays Al-Mubarak*¹ and *'AbdelRahman Al-Zuneidi*,² suggested that women should be included among the ranks of the council. They argued that the inclusion of women on the Council would reduce the embarrassment that women feel when submitting issues to the Council for advice and resolution. *Al-Mubarak*, who belongs to the reformist school of scholars, had also advocated previously for the intermixing of men and women in scholarly meetings, arguing that at the time of the prophet women and men were permitted to listen and discuss issues together. *Al-Zuneidi*, who is a prolific writer³ and well-known scholar, likewise emphasized that women members would fulfill an important role in understanding and responding to their female audience.



Sheikh Bin Mani'

The response was swift. One of the strongest members of the council, sheikh *Abdallah Bin Mani'*, stated that the Council is part of *al-imamah al-kubra* [The Highest Imamate] in the land. The sheikh argued that, as stated by the prophet Muhammad, “no People shall succeed if ruled by a woman” and, therefore, women cannot serve on the Council. What is striking is that this statement by the prophet has only been used to argue for the exclusion of women from occupying the highest leadership position in the land. By extension, *Bin Mani'* has effectively declared that the Council is as important as the King in ruling the country, and asserted that establishing the rules of Council membership is the prerogative of the Council rather than the King who appoints its members.

¹ Dr. *Qays AlMuabark* is a Professor of Islamic Jurisprudence at King *Faysal* University. He is known for his analytical thinking and for reaching practical solutions to the social problems confronting the Muslim world.

² Dr. *AbdelRahman Al-Zuneidi* is a Professor of Islamic Culture at King *Muhammad bin Sa'ud* University.

³ Among his books are: “Islamic Awakening and Western Globalization” and “Contemporary Salafi Problems.”

As we saw earlier this year when Egypt appointed women judges, the typical objections to women occupying such leadership positions rely on physical attributes such as child-birth and menstruation, which are viewed as making women weaker or “impure” and therefore leaving them unable to fulfill their duties. *Bin Mani*’s “highest imamate” argument, which puts the Council’s power on a par with the King’s, is far more significant. Analysts of the Kingdom have long acknowledged that the Council’s authority is part of the continuous power struggle in the country. That struggle has pitted the religious establishment and some older members of the royal family against younger members of the family who are now being joined by a new, more assertive generation of women in Saudi Arabia and who are supported by some reform scholars eager to take on the Council, with the tacit approval by the King.

Having rejected the appointment of women as members of the Council, *Bin Mani*’ then suggested that women could fulfill the objective of facilitating the advice and counsel of other women by acting in an advisory capacity. That suggestion was also supported by the powerful sheikh ‘*AbdelMoshesen Al-Ubaykan*, advisor to the Justice Minister. [PI Online](#) notes that the sheikh’s suggestion that women can, in an advisory capacity, perform essentially the same functions as Council members obviously undercuts their argument that women are not suited to be Council members. This suggests that their argument is, in fact, less about the ability of women to fulfill the role of a Council member and more about their desire to elevate the Council to the level of the supreme authority in the Saudi Kingdom – a position reserved under Islamic law to men only.

It is also worth noting that the choice of words has taken on special importance in the debate taking place over the role of qualified women in dispensing advice and guidance. The word *Ifta’*, from which the word “*fatwa*” [pronouncement] originates, means dispensing religious legal opinion, and the word “*mufti*” [jurisprudent] refers to the “pronouncer”, which in Islam has until now been a function reserved for men. As more reformists and liberals advocate for allowing women to fulfill such roles, these labels have taken on special meaning, at least for some. *Hayfa’ Al-Kharbushi*, who is in the progressive camp and is a *Shari’a* expert, has advocated for the acceptance of “*muftiya*” [a woman Jurisprudent]. In contrast, *Elfat ‘AbdelMoneim*, who is a professor of Jurisprudence in *Al-Ta’if* University, argues that a woman cannot be a jurisprudent (*muftiya*), but may be an “advisor” or “scholar”. There are, however, those, such as the Saudi activist *Suhayla Zin Al-‘Abidin*, who simply reject limitations on the role of women, regardless of the label, and aggressively argue that society is composed of both men and women and therefore both must have a say in and make a contribution to that society.

When one considers that the battle over the role of women is being waged in this most conservative of Muslim countries, challenging beliefs and pitting different segments of society against each other, it seems almost certain that the concentration of religious power in the hands of a few is eroding and that this debate is just beginning.

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