
The Rise of Saudi Women in Tech

For Women Wearing Hijabs, Power Persists

Muslim Women in Public Diplomacy

Women Continue to Shine in Positions of Leadership at the MWL



WOMEN IN ISLAM



Saudi leadership has recognized that empowering women in STEM has proven to be highly beneficial for any nation, and designed programs and initiatives to drive opportunities in these fields.”



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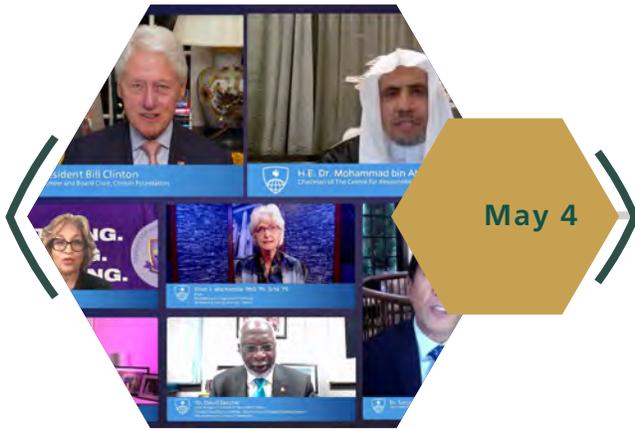
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Muslim World League

Recent Activities in Review



Dr. Al-Issa participated in Bridging Faith & Science event with President Bill Clinton, discussing efforts to combat the opioid crisis in the United States.

Dr. Al-Issa met with the Prime Minister of Pakistan. The meeting dealt with a number of issues of common interest. He praised the efforts of Pakistan to promote dialogue among followers of different religions.



Dr. Al-Issa spoke with Mr. Adama Barrow, President of The Gambia. Mr. Barrow praised the efforts of the MWL and called for an international conference to be held in The Gambia.





May 11

Dr. Al-Issa signed a MoU with the Islamic Commission of Austria to establish working relations to achieve the objectives of the Charter of Makkah.

The MWL ended the Holy month of Ramadan with a message of joy and blessing to all Muslims from ourselves and our partners across religious communities.

May 14





In this issue, we take a look at women in the world of Islam, from a historical and current perspective. It is myth that Islam teaches the subordination of women to second-class status, when in fact, women played prominent roles in the rise and spread of Islam in its early days and occupied important positions and made significant contributions to government, society, academia, science and the professions in Islamic societies for centuries.

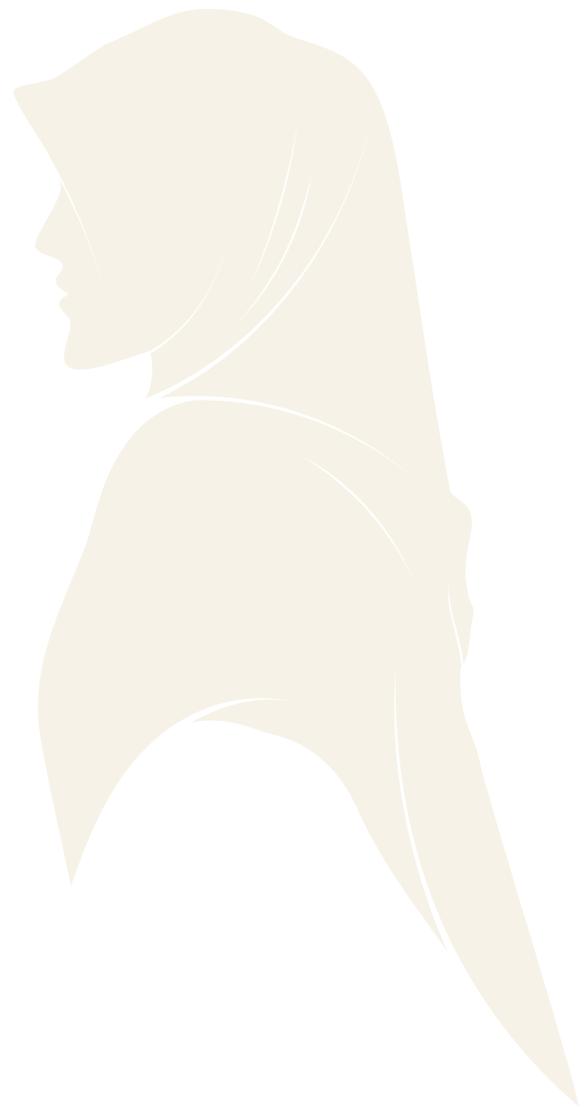
If women have been relegated to second-class status in some Islamic societies, it is not due to Islamic teaching but to cultural and political forces in those societies. Some cultural practices in Muslim societies stem from Islam, but others only coexist with it.

We take a look at the establishment of Islam and at some astonishing discoveries and achievements by Muslim women scientists from the Middle Ages until today. We also see the emergence of a large new class of women who are expanding the uses of technology in the Middle East and throughout the world.

We also discuss the tradition of the covering of the female body—the hijab is one example—as a matter of choice, Muslim women are not forced to wear it. As Muslim populations have grown in traditionally non-Muslim societies—particularly secular nations of the West—a certain unease has developed among native populations. There was a time not too long ago when just about everyone covered their head in some way, but that tradition was cast aside in the West and even the Far East nearly 50 years ago. So head coverings attract attention and even a bit of discomfort if they seem to symbolize something. Some of this may be attributable to Islamophobia, some to a general unease with public religious displays and some to a simple misunderstanding of why Muslim women cover themselves. We seek to shed some light on that.

Regardless of whether a Muslim woman covers her head or drapes her whole body or chooses to do neither, what is clear is that Muslim women are stepping forward to lead and make a difference in this world, whether they live in an Islamic society or not.

- The Editors





Deemah AlYahya, Digital Transformation and Innovation Advisor.

The Rise of Saudi Women in Tech

Saudi women have played a prominent role in the country's recent scientific achievements, and their influence is growing.

Saudi Arabia has actually surpassed Silicon Valley for women's participation in tech. According to the director of future recruitments at Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), Bandar Al-Duwais, the number stands at around 17 percent in San Francisco's world-renowned hub for high technology and innovation. In the Kingdom, that number in 2021 is 24 percent, more than double what it was in 2017.

The significant increase can be attributed to the Kingdom's deliberate efforts to increase women's participation in the communications and IT sector. Through Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has been working on diversifying its economy and reducing its dependence on oil. One of its main focuses has been developing its technology sector and also encouraging women to play a bigger role in the Kingdom's advancement. In fact, the Kingdom was recognized by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) with an award for its Women Empowerment Program in Technology, an initiative by the Kingdom's Ministry of Communication and Information Technology.



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Women Empowerment
Program in Technology. "

During the Kingdom's recent G20 presidency, Saudi Arabia focused on human empowerment, the earth's sustainability and implementing New Horizons, an OECD report requested by the G20 to support its Action Plan in response to the COVID crisis. Dr. Hala Al-Tuwaijri, head of G20 Women's Empowerment team, said that women's empowerment was at the core of all of these. Saudi leadership has recognized that empowering women in STEM has proven to be highly beneficial for any nation, and designed programs and initiatives to drive opportunities in these fields.

Saudi Arabia's national effort to build digital transformation strategies with space for women to excel in the industry includes integrated programs, scholarships, conferences and training, as well as fostering working environments that empower women. As a result, Saudi women currently make up 40 percent of digital entrepreneurs.

Notably, Saudi Arabia is the top-ranked Arab country, and number 13 in the world in the Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI), a trusted reference that measures the commitment of countries to cybersecurity at a global level. Saudi Arabia's investment in cybersecurity has led to its recognition as a pioneer, rated number one regionally and 13 internationally by the ITU. When the Kingdom recently hosted the

International Forum for Cybersecurity, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman called for the adoption of an initiative to serve global cybersecurity that focused on empowering women and increasing their participation in the field.

In addition to hosting conferences and providing platforms for women in the field of information security and tech to grow and network, Saudi Arabia also provides scholarship programs. According to Arab News, 67 percent of the applicants for the National Academy for Cybersecurity's scholarship are female. Women make up 62 percent of participants in another initiative, Cyber Pro, which focuses on building a cybersecurity workforce in the Kingdom.

The high rate of participation by young talent is particularly strong in the space sector. For instance, Noura Saud Al-Tuwaim is an engineer who leads the optics department at the National Satellite Technology Center. The center aims to raise national capabilities for developing, manufacturing, testing, launching and operating satellite systems. While working at the National Center for Satellite Technology, Al-Tuwaim participated in the Saudi Sat 5A/5B project, one of the prominent national projects that was successfully launched into space in 2018.

Al-Tuwaim started her career in 2012 as a trainee in the King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), while completing her studies at Prince Sultan University. After graduating first in her class, she pursued her postgraduate studies in the US and secured a master's degree from the McCormick School of Engineering at Northwestern University. Al-Tuwaim encourages other women interested in technology to embrace their potential and lean into their role in advancing society and as creators of the future.

One of Saudi Arabia's leading women in tech, digital transformation and innovation advisor

Deemah AlYahya, is helping young Saudi women make that difficult transition from a technology degree to a technology career, by addressing issues like confidence, skill-building, and career progression. AlYahya's "Women Spark" initiative has helped thousands of young women by providing technical skills, soft skills and business skills.

In the first three years, in partnership with Microsoft, they educated more than 37,000 women. Now that entities such as the MISK Foundation are also providing such training, Women Spark is creating opportunities for women to create their own jobs and businesses. As angel investors, they create funding for women-led startups, and are helping women of wealth diversify their investments and support other women.

No doubt initiatives like Women Spark are contributing to Saudi Arabia's surge in women-run companies. In 2018, the BADIR Program witnessed a 144 percent growth in tech firms run by Saudi women, a significant increase compared to previous five years. BADIR is a Technology Incubator Program launched by KACST in 2007. The word 'Badir' means 'to initi-

ate.' The national program aims to accelerate the growth of emerging technology-based businesses in Saudi Arabia and provides women with support and workshops. BADIR's CEO, Nawaf Al-Sahhaf confirmed that the growth of women-led firms can be attributed to the support they are receiving with regards to their ambitious initiatives and innovative ideas.



Notably, Saudi Arabia is the top-ranked Arab country, and number 13 in the world in the Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI), a trusted reference that measures the commitment of countries to cybersecurity at a global level. "



Noura Saud Al-Tuwaim, Engineer at National Satellite Technology Center.

Leading for a Better Future: Muslim Women Inventors

When you think about famous computer scientists, names such as Bill Gates or Steve Jobs may come to your mind. But did you know that the first personalized computer was designed by none other than a Muslim woman, Mariam “Al-Astrolabiya” Al-Ijliya?

Born and raised in 10th century Syria, Al-Ijliya learned design techniques from her father. The nickname “Al-Astrolabiya” was not a matter of coincidence. Her single-handedly crafted astrolabe was an innovative device to determine the position of the sun and the planets. Thanks to her contributions to astronomy, she was employed by Sayf Al Dawla, the ruler of Aleppo.

Al-Ijliya is not alone among the Muslim women inventors and scientists leaping generations

ahead. In 859, Fatima Al-Fihri founded the University of Al Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco, the world’s first university. The school became a leading intellectual center of the historic Muslim world and functions to this day as the oldest continuously operating higher educational institution in the world.

The work of these ancient forerunners is carried on today by women and men alike in modern science and technology. In 2015, the tech scientific world’s attention was turned to Saudi female students at the Princess Nora bint Abdulrahman University. Bedour Al-Maghra-bi, Maha Al-Qahtani, and Thekra Al-Otaibi invented a device for sense rehabilitation and stimulation in patients with sensory neuropathy issues. At the same time, Al-Maghrabi and



Mariam “Al-Astrolabiya” Al-Ijliya invented the astrolabe, commonly known as the first computer.



Dr. Hayat Sindi’s Diagnostics For All aims to close the health-care gap in developing countries.

Al-Qahtani designed glasses for people with cerebral blindness. The invention allows the patients to identify objects around them.

Egyptian-born Dr. Tahina Amer is an accomplished technologist at NASA. With a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering, a master's in aerospace engineering, and a doctorate in engineering from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, Amer supports aeronautical research efforts. She is an inventor of a system to measure the thermal conductivity of a thin film. This measurement is used in the thermal modeling of several techniques for determining boundary-layer transition location on models being tested in wind tunnels.

Dr. Hayat Sindi is a famous scientist from Makkah and the first woman from the Middle East to hold a Ph.D. in biotechnology. Working to tackle inequalities in global healthcare, she founded a non-profit organization, Diagnostics For All, and she helped create a device to diagnose disease

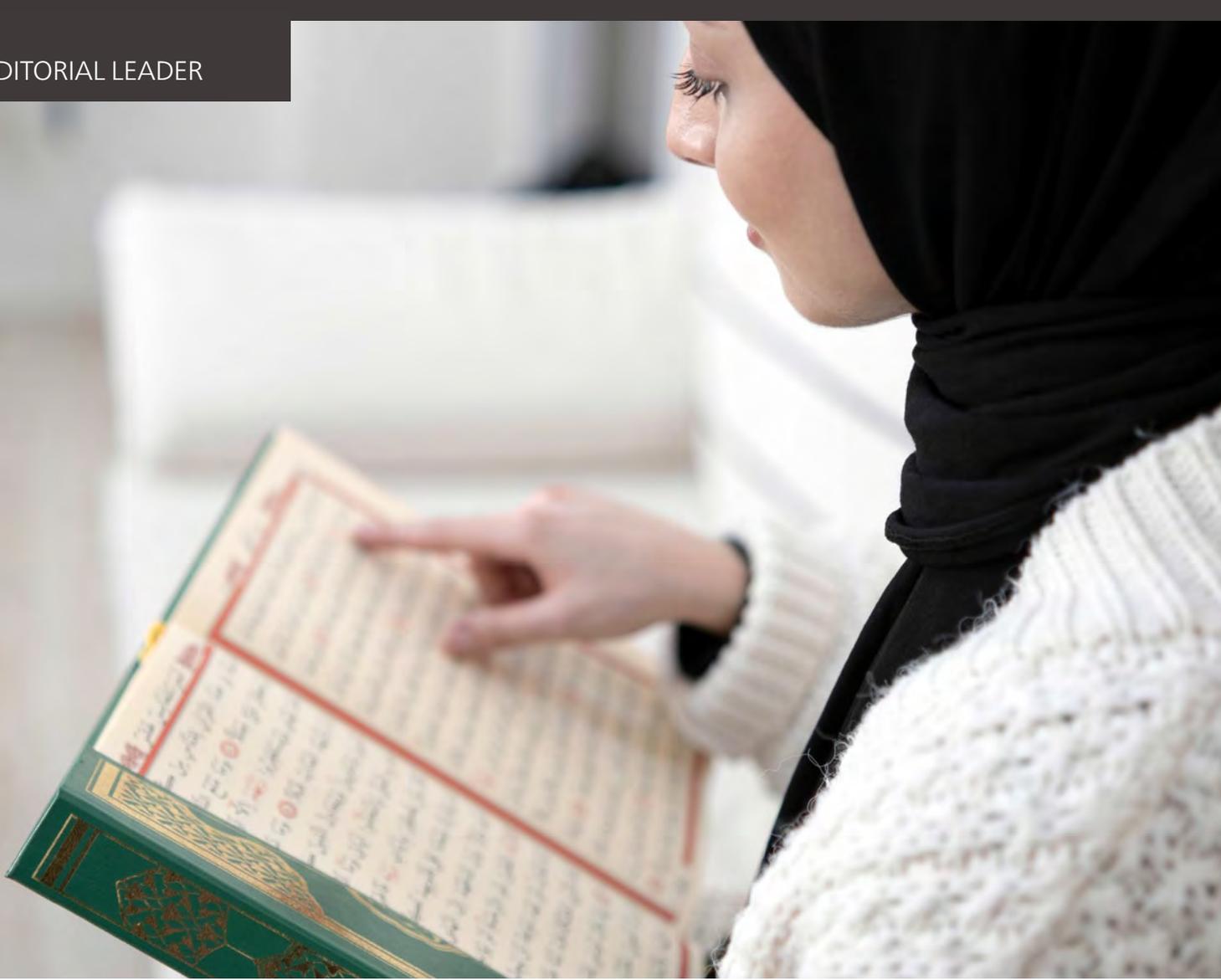
in developing countries at a low cost. Dr. Sindi funded her project by collecting the \$100,000 award in the prestigious Harvard Enterprise Competition and secured another \$10 million through a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In 2018, Sindi was named one of BBC's 100 Women, BBC's list of 100 inspirational and influential women from around the world.

These are only a few of the talented Muslim female inventors who have contributed to women's empowerment and helped create a better future for generations to come. But is there anything that makes Muslim women predecessors to the science and invention scene?

"Having been raised in Saudi Arabia, I was fortunate to get this strong foundation of self-belief," Dr. Hayat Sindi told *Entrepreneur Middle East*. "My culture, my family, and my faith have all contributed to that foundation. I had a father who could teach me anything I wanted," she added.



Muslim women inventors contribute to women's empowerment and help create a better future for future generations.



A young Muslim woman reading Quran.

Reciting the Quran Empowers Women, Opens Minds and Changes Perspectives

Muslim history is replete with examples of women who have left their mark in religious, political or social spheres of their respective societies, and the contributions of those women are realized in many different ways. Even though Muslim women have played an important role in the transmission of hadith and the development of Sufism, many have generally been marginalized from Islamic interpretation, including Sharia law and public wor-

ship. But this has changed in recent times. For example, in many Muslim-majority countries such as Algeria, Nigeria, Malaysia, Indonesia and Bosnia & Herzegovina, it is common for women to recite the Quran in public spaces for both men and women to hear. But in some Muslim communities, some hold the opinion that women cannot recite for audiences that include men, as they see the woman's voice as "awrah", as part of that which should be

covered. However, many Muslim women are currently seeking to reclaim their right to speak in order to re-appropriate their own destinies, with a movement that is reviving the practice of female public Quran recitation all across the globe.

In the twenty-first century, the combined spread of literacy; the availability and promotion of public education for both girls and boys; expansion of job opportunities for women; and the rising number of conversions to Islam from other religious traditions, particularly in the West, have added to the desire of Muslim women for greater empowerment in the practice and interpretation of their faith. According to the Pew Research

Center, “Muslims are the fastest-growing religious group in the world,” and due to the sheer number, it is obvious that Muslim women have an even greater role to play in the development of their societies and economies. This is in spite of the challenges they have often faced in gaining access to the appropriate religious training facilities and establishing credibility with the religious establishment. As in other areas of life, Muslim women have proven to be resourceful, creative, and dedicated to claiming ownership of and responsibility for their faith lives, both individually and communally. Until now many have managed to do so not despite their Muslim identities but precisely because of their belief in Islam.



Woman reading Quran.



According to the Pew Research Center, “Muslims are the fastest-growing religious group in the world,” and due to the sheer number, it is obvious that Muslim women have an even greater role to play in the development of their societies and economies.”

Contrary to popular misconceptions, there is nothing that bars females from reciting the Quran. In fact, it is incumbent on all Muslims to learn it and recite it daily without distinction in gender. But many women don't hear or see people who look or sound like them reciting the Quran and that must change. Despite monolithic depictions in both Eastern and Western media, Muslim women represent a diverse and heterogeneous sociological group. While they may confront similar challenges or find common ground in some areas, the lived experiences of Muslim

women vary considerably, depending on the socio-historical and political contexts in which they lead their lives. In fact, recitations of the Quran by Muslim women are by no means a modern phenomenon; however, there have been growing efforts in recent years to ensure that legacy is maintained, particularly across social media, to encourage more female reciters and the memorization of, and listening to the Quran. As a result of the digital age, Muslim girls and women have built a beautiful community that is now able to share their recitations online, to raise awareness and help revive the sacred tradition of Quran recitation.

Islam teaches us that every human being is created in God's image, therefore we are one. The Muslim World League stands true to this divine purpose, which is human diversity, that aims at promoting peace, harmony, tolerance, and cooperation between peoples and nations. When we exclude the voice of women, we indeed deprive all of us of half the opportunity of honoring Allah. Today, Muslim women are active in Quran study circles, mosque-based activities, community services sponsored by religious organizations, and Islamic education, as both students and teachers. Women are increasingly taking stronger and higher positions in their religions, so it's not surprising that they want to participate in equal ways. For Muslim women in particular, learning the Quran is inherently valuable and a beautiful thing to do and committing oneself to learning the practices of recitation is one of the most intimate forms of worship.





A Young Muslim Woman Works.

For Women Wearing Hijabs, Power Persists

Depending on who you are and what area of the world you reside in, a hijab can be used as a tool for religious devotion, a symbol of identity, a flag for women’s rights, a fashion accessory, or, unfortunately, a target for discrimination. Globally, the right for women to choose to cover their bodies has become a controversial issue that is rooted in hijabophobia and islamophobia. The right of Muslim women to wear a hijab, chador, niqab or burqa have recently resulted in religious and cultural hostilities that are occurring in public places.

In Arabic, hijab means “barrier,” but the practice of women choosing to veil themselves has a history much longer than Islam. As far back as 2500 BCE, it has been noted that women wore veils and chose to dress modestly in a variety of societies, a cultural norm until the latter part of the past century. Women in the ancient Mesopotamia, Byzantine, Greek, and Persian empires wore veils as a sign of respectability. To this day, many devoted women in the three Abrahamic faiths, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, choose to cover themselves.



A Group of Muslim Women Wearing Hijabs with Pride.

In Islam, the true purpose of the *hijab* is to strengthen a woman's individual connection with God. It is a deeply personal choice. Women find the act of covering themselves as a way to fulfill Allah's commandment for modesty, and this is a woman's right that should not be taken lightly.

Many women find comfort and security in this anonymous modesty. Some women feel more empowered to move about in areas massed by men when they are well-covered. The Quran says, "O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful." Women feel safer in

hijabs and find that wearing the *hijab* tends to keep them free of sexual harassment in public.

Mohajaba, or women who wear hijabs, often feel they are more appreciated and intellectually valued because of their modesty. By liberating oneself from vanity, *hijabis* no longer feel the need to live up to society's expectations of desirability that pressure women daily. Despite the narratives of "oppression" that are rooted in hijabophobia, many women believe that wearing revealing clothing in public for the benefit of the male gaze does not equal liberation.

Muslim women have joined together to create greater understanding and gain greater cultural acceptance of the role of covering



A Proud Muslim Woman Showing Strength in Her Hijab.

for Muslim women. Efforts like that of Nazma Khan have taken off to promote tolerance and



In Islam, the true purpose of the hijab is to strengthen a woman's individual connection with God. It is a deeply personal choice, similar to one's personal freedom to worship. "

educate non-Muslims about the history of the hijab. Khan created World Hijab Day (WHD), in recognition of millions of Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab and live a life of public modesty.

Many *hijabis* are gaining global attention and using their platforms to show that there is strength in modesty. Constable Zeena Ali recently made history by becoming New Zealand's first *hijabi* police officer. Raffia Arshad was a trailblazer when she became the UK's first hijab-wearing judge. Bilqis Abdul-Qaadir was the first *hijabi* player in NCAA Division I basketball. Mariah Idrissi became the first *hijabi* model in a western fashion campaign. World-wide, *mohajabas* are showing the world how much power can be found in personal choice.



Princess Reema Bandar Al Saud in 2020.

Muslim Women in Public Diplomacy

As the face of global diplomacy grows and evolves, women are playing an increasingly impactful role on the world stage. After World War I, many countries began opening up the profession – formerly reserved for men – to both genders. In July of 1920, Diana Abgar was appointed Ambassador of the First Republic of Armenia to Japan and the Far East, making her the first woman in the world to hold the title. Since then, female diplomats have become more common, and the past few decades have seen a surge in the number of Muslim women involved with international policy. Highlighted next are some of the female Muslim leaders at the forefront of public diplomacy:



In July of 1920, Diana Abgar was appointed Ambassador of the First Republic of Armenia to Japan and the Far East, making her the first woman in the world to hold the title.”

One of the first practicing female lawyers in Bahrain, **Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa**, broke another barrier in 1999 when she became Bahrain's first female ambassador. Al-Khalifa's impressive legal career includes obtaining three diplomas from two different countries, starting her own law firm, and serving as vice chairwoman of the International Bar Association. Al-Khalifa served as ambassador to France for five years, as well their non-resident Ambassador to Belgium, Switzerland and Spain. She was also the permanent delegate to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the third woman and first Muslim to preside at the UN General Assembly. Her illustrious career also includes receiving several notable awards,

including the United Nations Millennium Development Goals Special Award in 2007, the Path to Peach Award in 2007, and the Social Creativity Award for Arab Women in 2002.

Roya Rahmani became her country's second female ambassador when she was appointed to Indonesia in 2016. A lifelong advocate of women's rights, Rahmani argued that Muslim women were a necessary diplomatic presence and that they should be recognized as strong negotiators because they could "embrace people more effectively and tenderly than men." Prior to entering international diplomacy, Rahmani worked for several non-profit organizations that supported human rights, legal reform, and women's em-



Haya Rashed Al Khalifa.



Ambassador Roya Rahami.

powerment. Currently, she serves as ambassador to the United States, the first Afghan woman to do so. She is also non-resident ambassador to Argentina, Mexico, the Dominican Republics, and Columbia. When she was one year old the Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan and Rahmani's family fled to Pakistan. She has said that growing up as a refugee inspired her lifelong motto "doing the best with what you have."

Princess Lalla Joumala Alaoui is currently the ambassador of Morocco to the United States and is the former ambassador of Morocco to the United Kingdom. In 2003, she founded the Moroccan-British society aimed at creating opportunities for social, cultural, educational, business, and charitable activities. Throughout her career, Princess Lalla Joumala has worked to develop inter-faith conversations between

Islam and the West. In 2007, under the joint patronage of His Majesty King Mohammed VI and his Royal Highness Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, her highness organized the "SA-CRED Exhibition of Manuscripts of the Three Religions of The Book" in the British Library.



The growing role of Muslim women is an evolution, not revolution ."

- Princess Reema Bandar Al Saud



Princess Lalla Joumala Alaoui.

As one of the world's most vocal advocates of female empowerment. **Princess Reema Bandar Al Saud** has noted that the growing role of Muslim women is an "evolution, not revolution." Born in 1975, she became Saudi Arabia's first female envoy in 2019 when she was appointed the Kingdom's ambassador to the United States. Throughout her extensive career, Princess Reema has been a pioneering voice for empowerment and increased opportunities for Saudi women. Before taking on her current role, she was CEO of Al Hama LLC, a luxury retail corporation, where she worked with the Ministry of Labor to include more women in the country's retail sector. She is also a member of the World Bank's Advisory Council for the Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative. More recently Princess Reema has garnered international praise for her phil-

anthropic efforts, particularly as a founding member of the Zahra Breast Cancer Awareness Association in 2007.





Women Continue to Shine in Positions of Leadership at the MWL

The Muslim World League strives to be an example for the universal empowerment of women in the work it carries out worldwide. Every day, the inspirational women of the MWL work tirelessly to advance the MWL's mission to promote and perpetuate a tolerant and more peaceful Islam. Collectively, they are more than just a part of the MWL's machinery. In fact, much of the MWL's rapid success can be attributed to the women that work there.

International Women's Day 2021

"Women are counterparts of men. They have a prominent presence and influence in society, so we must always call for their rightful empowerment in all fields in which they have excelled and continue to excel in," reflects Secretary General Mohammed Abdulkarim Al-Issa regarding the importance of equality between men and women. During this year's International Women's Day, the MWL was able to deliver a message of solidarity and uplift.

Profiles of Women in Leadership

The MWL's global reach spans numerous governments and NGOs through philanthropy and aid. These partnerships would not be possible without the leadership of the MWL's very own **Sumaiah Redwan**, who serves as our Director of Media Partnerships and Relations. Under her guidance, the organization has been able to spread the message of peace, equity, and humanity not only throughout the Islamic community, but around the world.

In addition to strengthening its existing partnerships, the MWL's global events are an important vehicle for forging new relationships and reinforcing our existing commitments to our allies. Pivotal events including Dr. Al-Issa's historical visit to Auschwitz and the signing of the charter of Makkah are some of the most important successes to date for the MWL. These efforts are led by yet another great woman, **Laila AlMansour**, who serves as the Planning Officer for International Cooperation and Event Management. Coordinating logistics for events that are actively impacting and inspiring our audiences is no small feat. The



Women are counterparts of men. They have a prominent presence and influence in society, so we must always call for their rightful empowerment in all fields in which they have excelled and continue to excel in. "

- Mohammed Abdulkarim Al-Issa

organization is incredibly thankful for Laila and her steadfast leadership.

Through its executive team, the Undersecretariat for Executive Affairs, the MWL has been among the first responders to calls for disaster relief around the world. The Undersecretariat's General Administration for Relief, Welfare and Development, headed by **Eman Filimban**, Director of General Department for Relief, Welfare and Development of the MWL Undersecretariat for Executive Affairs, has been executing annual and emergency humanitarian programs in Africa and Asia. The department manages emergency relief actions and sustainable development projects and humanitarian free medical care in regions in need.

Women employees at the MWL operate with the highest level of professional competence and integrity while respecting our religious and social values. Through its efforts and programs, MWL is presenting clear evidence of the Muslim woman's capability of playing a major role in the developmental and intellectual advancement of Islamic communities.

Masouda Bint Laham, a former minister of agriculture in Mauritania, is Director of the MWL's office in that country, where she has been supervising numerous MWL projects, including providing potable water in dry areas and delivering annual free healthcare. She remembers that when she was appointed at the MWL office years ago, she didn't expect her job to be easy, considering that she would be working in an organization where most employees are men. But she was pleasantly surprised that work at the MWL is based on teamwork and shared responsibilities, with no discrimination or exclusion.

"Throughout my time at the MWL and during my visits to the MWL headquarters, I realized



- **Sumaiah Redwan**, Director of Media Partnerships and Relations.
- **Laila AlMansour**, Planning Officer for International Cooperation and Event Management.



that this long-standing Islamic organization does not discriminate between men and women when it comes to responsibilities and tasks. From this prospective, the MWL represents a civilizational model to be followed by all in the Islamic World.”

The MWL’s reliance on women leaders in its headquarters and offices around the world has had a significant impact in familiarizing and communication with many women of different societies and had facilitated the introduction of moderate Islam that our holy prophet brought upon us.

Dr. Eiman Sayedalamin m. Almami, Deputy Regional Director of the MWL London Office, says the MWL’s plan to empower women in building societies and serving the local and international community is clear to anyone working at the organization. She says everyone can speak freely and both men and women can collaborate between departments without any issues.

Empowering women is important to achieve comprehensive development, economic integration, and intellectual and cultural advance-



- **Eman Filimban**, Director of General Department for Relief, Welfare and Development of the Muslim World League Undersecretariat for Executive Affairs .

- **Masouda Bint Laham**, Director of the Muslim World League Mauritania Office.



Every day, the inspirational women of the MWL work tirelessly to advance the MWL’s mission to promote and perpetuate a tolerant and more peaceful Islam. ”

ment. She and her team are working to achieve several goals. Some are short-term, and some are medium and long-term, and all are included in the concept of integration of efforts to highlight the moderation of Islam, serving the community and employing our talents to communicate with the people of the world.

Representing the MWL in Italy is **Fatima Alzahra bin Bali**, Director of Public Relations. She has participated in several symposiums on women, religious dialogue, co-existence and peace, as well as in cultural events. Fatima had a major role in coordinating the MWL Secretary General's historic visit to Italy, where he met Pope Francis in 2017. She is currently working on a study on "family in Islam." The study is part of the office's participation in the Islamic-Christian Friendship 5-year project in Italy.

Women and the Quran

Dr. Al-Issa speaks ardently on the prevalent misinterpretation of the Quran and its implications for the role of women in civic society. The teachings of Islam are rooted in equality and dignity. All people are encouraged to conduct themselves in a pious manner through charity and selflessness, two qualities our female leaders personify.

The commitment to women's empowerment doesn't stop at the placement of women in positions of influence. Once a woman occupies a position, it is important to ensure that she has all the necessary tools at her disposal to be successful. This means access to resources and equal compensation and reward that is equal to that of her male counterparts.

The success of the MWL in the future will heavily depend on the ways our organization prioritizes women in the present, and now more than ever the MWL is committed to catalyzing that change.



- **Dr. Eiman Sayed Alamin m. Almami**, Deputy Regional Director of the Muslim World League London Office.

- **Fatima Alzahra bin Bali**, Director of Public Relations of the Muslim World League Italy Office.



A police officer in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019 patrols the area around one of two mosques involved in a mass shooting in which 51 Muslim worshippers were killed. (Vincent Yu/AP)

Opinion: To save Muslim lives, let Muslims tell their own stories

Opinion by Dr. Muhammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa

Source: Washington Post

This month, a Canadian Muslim family was nearly wiped out after four members were killed in an Islamophobic terror attack, while the fifth — a 9-year-old boy — was left with serious injuries. This came two years after a gunman murdered 51 Muslims on the other side of the world, at a pair of mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. In the face of such mindless hate, many are asking what more can be done to save Muslim lives.

One way forward begins simply: Let Muslims tell their own stories.

Muslims often do not have agency over even their most traumatic stories. Earlier this month, a film called “They Are Us” was announced, starring Rose Byrne as New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. The film focuses not on the murdered Muslims and their bereaved families,

but on Ardern's experience of the terror attacks. Even when portraying the worst instance of Western Islamophobia in years, Muslims are reduced (at best) supporting roles. The film was denounced by Ardern herself, who said her story is "not the one to be told."

The chronic underrepresentation of Muslims in Hollywood and other Western media cannot be separated from the widespread bigotry faced by many members of our faith. This year, Islamophobia — which is not just the fear and hatred of Islam but also includes anti-Muslim discrimination and violence — reached "epidemic proportions." The United Nations reported that nearly 1 in 3 Americans, and an even higher percentage of Europeans, view Muslims negatively.

Islamophobia is grounded in misunderstanding and the failure to comprehend our diverse beliefs and respect our rich faith. The potential for intolerance, discrimination and even violence is significant. To convey Islam as part of the rich tapestry of human culture and civilization, Muslims should have the opportunity to define and explain Islam — on our own terms.

Instead, we are faced with pernicious narratives that reduce us to caricature: either violent oppressors or the violently oppressed. In the case of "They are Us," we are the latter.

The denial of telling our own stories is not exclusive to Muslims.

This month, Canadian sitcom "Kim's Convenience" was criticized by its own cast for producing "racist" story lines and perpetuating one-dimensional Korean characters. Last week, Lin-Manuel Miranda apologized for the failure to include Afro-Latino characters in the film "In the Heights." The criticism of "They Are Us" for how it frames the 2019 Christchurch massacre is part of this broader context, yet also specific to how Muslims are depicted.

Violent tropes are rampant in Western culture, while nuanced and authentic representations of Muslims are rare. If this is all that is portrayed

on mass media, why would Muslims be viewed as anything but vectors of intolerance, violence and oppression? Research by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative reveals that Muslims hold just 1.6 percent of speaking roles in popular Western films. In those, 53.7 percent were targets of violence and 32.8 percent were perpetrators of violence. Nearly 90 percent of Muslims on screen spoke no English, or did so with an accent, and almost 60 percent were immigrants or refugees.

Despite this context, times are finally changing. In recent years, people have embarked on vital conversations concerning the portrayal of minorities. Increasingly, we rightly hear the importance of letting the marginalized speak for and define themselves. In this case, it starts with Muslims themselves.

The Muslim World League's #RejectHate campaign, which combats online hate speech, is being complemented with a broader commitment to Muslim storytelling. Oscar-nominated actor Riz Ahmed, who said a lack of positive Muslim representation in media "measures its cost in blood," recently published "The Blueprint for Muslim Inclusion," which assists filmmakers in sharing the captivating life experiences of the world's many Muslims. This blueprint and other projects such as Ahmed's Pillars Artist Fellowship, which financially supports and trains aspiring Muslim artists, are welcome and necessary.

Those in the arts, media and entertainment — Muslim and otherwise — who are eager and able to help Muslims tell their stories should share their voices. In so doing, we can contribute to de-escalating the hate targeted at the world's 1.8 billion Muslims, which only fuels division on a global scale.

Representation can change how Muslims are understood, softening hearts and changing minds. This, in turn, can transform Muslims from enemies and strangers to colleagues and neighbors.

Ultimately, this is crucial to a future in which Muslims around the world can take family walks or pray at the mosque without fear for their lives.



Pakistani and Afghan senior scholars during the conference held under the umbrella of Muslim World League

Under MWL umbrella and with Saudi government support Pakistani and Afghan senior scholars sign “Declaration for Peace in Afghanistan”

Makkah - MWL

Senior scholars from Pakistan and Afghanistan have signed the “Declaration for Peace in Afghanistan,” which paves the way for resolving the long Afghanistan conflict. The historic declaration was signed in Makkah following negotiations between the fighting factions and agreement on condemning all acts of violence and extremism regardless of their forms.



Dr. Al-Issa described the conference as a historic meeting in Makkah

The signing was attended by Sheikh Dr. Noor-ul-Haq Qadri, Pakistan’s Minister for Religious Affairs and Inter-faith Harmony and Sheikh Muhammad Qasem Halimi, Afghanistan’s Minister of Haj, Endowments and Guidance.

Sheikh Dr. Muhammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, the Muslim World League (MWL) Secretary General attended the signing ceremony at the end of the conference, which was held under the MWL umbrella and the Kingdom’s sponsorship and support. The conference brought together, for the first time, senior scholars from Pakistan and Afghanistan to achieve reconciliation between Afghan people.

The declaration witnessed an agreement to find a comprehensive and final solution to the Afghan conflict and to support the process of reconciliation between the fighting factions in the country in order to find common ground on all political, social, economic, and other related issues. The



Dr. Al-Issa: Great support of the Saudi government is part of its efforts to serve Islam and fulfill its historic responsibility

parties also agreed to work together towards putting an end to the ongoing bloodshed in Afghanistan and lead the Afghan people to the path of peace, reconciliation, stability and progress. They rejected linking violence with any religion, nationality, or race, stressing that all forms of extremism and terrorism, as well as suicide bombings against civilians, are against the fundamental principles of Shari’ah.

Pakistani and Afghan scholars expressed their thanks and gratitude to Custodian of the Two



Pakistani and Afghan scholars expressed their thanks and gratitude to the Saudi government for its unremitting support



Dr. Al-Issa: Issues of peace involving religious debate can only be resolved by scholars in a conducive and supportive environment

Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman for the Kingdom's unremitting support to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan, commending the Kingdom's sincere efforts to build bridges that unite Afghan people and bring together the scholars of both sides.

The scholars underscored the Kingdom's role in building solidarity and harmony in the Islamic Ummah, expressing their wishes that the Kingdom will continue to provide its support and maintain the momentum created by the declara-

tion in the Islamic World, in general, and among the scholars of Pakistan and Afghanistan, in particular.

During the opening session, Dr. Al-Issa said this brotherly historic meeting in Makkah is the result of the Kingdom's support and sponsorship, noting that Pakistani and Afghan scholars who attended the conference prove that the Islamic Ummah wishes its people and all of humanity nothing but well.

He added, "Pakistan and Afghanistan are held dearly in the hearts of Muslims, and everyone knows this fact. We have great confidence in them as we share the same religion."

The Secretary General noted, "Brotherly peace which is characterized by strong faith, sincere determination and responsibility, and which is made in the most sacred place on earth by religious scholars ... this type of peace is one of the stron-



Senior scholars of Pakistan and Afghanistan sign the Declaration for Peace in Afghanistan



Dr. Al-Issa: Those who have faith and knowledge are the most truthful in delivering on their promises and fulfilling their responsibilities

gest and most successful, God willing.”

Dr. Al-Issa said, “The Kingdom’s support and sponsorship is part of the Kingdom’s efforts to enhance Islamic action and fulfill its responsibilities and duties, being the country which Allah Almighty honored and chose to serve the Two Holy Mosques.”

He said by meeting in this scared place, the scholars of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan are sending an impactful message to the public and individ-

uals. “The people of knowledge and faith are the most truthful in delivering on their promises and fulfilling their responsibilities. They are the most knowledgeable of the words of Allah Almighty when He says: {And whoever fulfills that which he has promised Allah, He will bestow upon him a great reward}.”

He pointed out that “there is nothing remaining in Afghanistan that can be used as a pretext to obstruct peace, thanks to the scholars’ determination and declaration for peace from the Holy City of Makkah. The Role of the scholars remains pivotal and critical, and their religious sentiment calls upon them to fulfill this role.”

“And here you are, esteemed scholars, you have risen to the occasion and fulfilled your responsibilities, may Allah reward you abundantly.”

He commented that influential scholars from Afghanistan and Pakistan attended the conference



Pakistan's Minister for Islamic Affairs Noor-ul-Haq Qadri



Dr. Qadri: The Kingdom has always played its role effectively to achieve peace in Afghanistan.

and promised to make a unified declaration for peace in Afghanistan, adding that issues of peace involving religious debate can only be resolved by scholars.

Dr. Muhammad Qasim Halimi, Minister of Hajj, Endowments and Guidance of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, stressed that the Holy Qur'an considered reconciliation the optimal solution to resolving disputes and disagreements. The Qur'an encouraged it and considered adhering to it among the virtuous deeds.

He said, "There are many initiatives and voices

calling for acceleration of reconciliation among the people of Afghanistan and assisting them out of this crisis and bitter conflicts. These voices represent the victor of good judgment over the sound of bullets and the acts of suicide bombings."

"Fortunate is the one whom by his hands Allah has brought about good, making him a reason for reunification and ending this bloodshed that lasted for years," he said, stressing as a "government official" that all the barriers to reconciliation are removed and none of them remain.

Sheikh Dr. Noor-ul- Haq Qadri stressed that peacemaking, tranquility and promoting tolerance in society are primary objectives of Islam as a religion.

"Our religion teaches us harmony and unity and supports international cooperation and participation in all charitable works. Islam speaks of protecting the nation, encourages development and prosperity, commands the promotion of peace



Afghan Hajj Minister Muhammad Qasem Halimi

and the avoidance of subversive acts," he added.

"The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has always effectively played its role in bringing peace to Afghanistan," Dr. Qadri stressed, adding that "Pakistan has always sought peace and reconciliation."

"Both countries have supported every step taken to bring security and peace to the entire region, especially in Afghanistan and globally. I hope that both countries will continue to play a dynamic and active role in promoting peace," he said.

Afghanistan's Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Ahmed Javed Mujadidi, said the Kingdom has never failed Afghanistan and is still working on and contributing to achieving its peace and security.

"The Muslim World League exerts great efforts to resolve Islamic issues and causes, and prevents all forms of discord and conflict," he said, adding that "the conference sends a message of peace and love."



Dr. Halimi: The Noble Qur'an considers reconciliation the optimal resolution for conflicts and disputes.

Ambassador Shafiq Shamim, Afghanistan's permanent representative to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, said, "The efforts of the Kingdom and its Leadership are always fruitful and aim to find solutions to conflicts in the Muslim World."

"Afghanistan," he said, "has suffered from bitter wars for over four decades in a row, and has witnessed bloody destructive battles," adding that "the conference is a true and serious attempt to find ways and solutions for the Afghanistan problem through constructive dialogue and mediation."



MWL supports Kingdom's decision on Hajj for this year

Makkah - MWL

On behalf of all scholars under its umbrella, the Muslim World League (MWL) issued a statement supporting the precautionary measures taken by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for this year's Hajj following the emergence of the new mutated strain of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Secretary General of the Muslim World League Dr. Muhammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa said the rules of the Shari'ah emphasizes the imperative for taking all safety precautions in such a pandemic. The statement indicated that a number of senior scholars of the Islamic World contacted the Muslim World League expressing support for the decision made by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia regarding the Hajj of this year. The scholars described the decision as wise and imperative for protecting the souls and lives of all pilgrims and others.

The statement underlined the exceptional efforts the Saudi government continues to exert out of its concern for the safety of visitors and pilgrims of the Grand Holy Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque.





MWL condemns terrorist Houthi attacks against civilians in Kingdom

Riyadh - MWL

The Muslim World League (MWL) strongly condemned the continued terrorist attacks by the Houthi militia, which has escalated its attacks against civilian targets in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

In a statement, the Secretary General of the Muslim World League Sheikh Dr. Muhammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa said the launch of 17 booby-trapped drones in 24 hours against civilians in Saudi cities confirms the "inherent" criminal behavior of this terrorist coup militia, and its continued violation of all international laws, charters and norms.

Dr. Al-Issa explained that these attacks,

which, thank God, did not lead to any casualties, reflect the militia's level of barbarism and state of humiliation and despair. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's confrontation of these terrorist attacks confirms its full ability to protect its lands against such criminal acts. The Kingdom is committed to the moral obligation that stems from its religious and national values and the international laws, charters and norms while it leads the Arab Coalition intervention to support legitimacy in Yemen.

The statement affirmed the support of the Muslim World League for all the means taken by the government of Saudi Arabia to protect its security, stability and the safety of its citizens and lands.



Dr. Hadeel Alyenbaawi works to unravel valuable information to develop curative and preventive measures for dementia

Dr. Alyenbaawi: Preventive treatment for dementia is the goal

By Rob Wagner

“ As women worldwide struggle to be empowered, Saudi female professionals are enjoying unprecedented support of the government with empowerment falling within the heart of the Kingdom’s Vision 2030 and within the context of Islam. Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has said in interviews that he supports Saudi Arabia and supporting the country means providing support to its female citizens.

More than half of the five million Saudi students studying abroad are female. Women returning to Saudi Arabia are joining their sisters with women comprising about one-quarter of the Saudi workforce. By 2030, women are expected to make up 30 percent of the workforce.

This is particularly true for Saudi women professionals in the fields of science and academia. Dr. Hadeel Alyenbaawi is one such professional who has benefited from government support of her obtaining her doctorate degree and ensuring that she has full access to the tools necessary to conduct medical research. She represents a new generation of young Saudi scientists returning from the West to apply their fresh skills in research. Her nearly 10 years of study in Canada and position as assistant professor at Majma'ah University outside of Riyadh is part of a trend among young Muslim women to return to Saudi Arabia to serve the medical community.

Alyenbaawi, 33, of Madinah, was the lead author of a study examining the long-term effects of traumatic brain injury and developing dementia. She recently completed her Ph.D. dissertation on the topic at the University of Alberta's Department of Medical Genetics in the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry. Her return to Saudi Arabia is paving the way for other young Saudi scientists to engage in precision health, an emerging approach in the health care system and medical research that takes into consideration patients' genetic makeup, lifestyle and environments. It is a field in which the talent pool of Saudi medical researchers was once shallow, but now attracting more interest among researchers in the Middle East.

At Majma'ah, Alyenbaawi will focus on various health issues. "Recently, the university has established a lab space for scientific health research that is fully equipped for faculty members to conduct their own research," she said.

Her research is especially vital in helping scientists in Muslim countries break down barriers



Alyenbaawi was the lead author of a study examining the long-term effects of traumatic brain injury and developing dementia

and tackle the treatment of dementia that was considered the natural process of aging and that has no cure.

"Despite the fact that dementia is prevalent in Arab countries, research directed towards the study of brain injuries, dementia and the possible links between them are limited in comparison to Western countries," Alyenbaawi said, "This may be due to general perception of dementia as many view it as a normal part of aging and not a disease. However, there are now an increase in people's awareness about dementia and there are also an increase in funding directed towards this field of study so I am optimistic that we will see advances in the future."

Alyenbaawi noted that brain injuries and dementia are among the leading causes for disability and mortality. The prevalence of dementia is expected to increase dramatically by 2050 due to a rising aging population. "These are devastating conditions that are associated with emotional and economic burden. So I wanted to be one of the many scientists to work on this area and unravel valuable information that would help develop curative and preventative measures."

The key to sustained success in medicine among the emerging crop of Muslim scientists returning from the West is to increase research opportunities that aim to encourage them to pursue their passion for research and teach the ethics of conducting scientific study. Many research centers in Arab countries are investing in hands-on workshops and summer research opportunities.



Saudi female professionals are enjoying unprecedented support of the government thanks to Vision 2030



Her research is especially vital in helping scientists in Muslim countries break down barriers and tackle the treatment of dementia

Alyenbaawi benefited from a mentor in Canada to guide her through her research and ensure that she followed an ethical course. She sees the same opportunities for young Saudis.

“(Mentoring) could be fostered by actively imple-

menting systems to connect young scientists with more senior and experienced scientists in the field of their interest to guide them on how to become successful in their career as researchers,” she said.

“I think young researchers, especially women, should not hesitate to take the first step in finding mentors if such systems are not available for them.”

The doctor is optimistic that preventative treatment of brain injuries and dementia in Muslim countries is an obtainable goal. “As a health researcher, my hope is to have various scientific contributions that will open gates for the development of therapeutic strategies and preventative measures for many incurable diseases.”



During prayer, Muslims all across the world face Makkah in the direction (qibla)

Hajj Journey over the Ages

By: Tasnuva Jahan

Every year, millions of Muslims around the world travel by road, sea, and air to Makkah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, completing a journey faster than those who came before them. The Hajj, annual pilgrimage to Makkah, is regarded as the largest human congregation on the planet.

All Muslims who can afford to undertake the journey at least once in their lives are obliged to do so. Many Muslims also perform the Umrah, a small pilgrimage to Makkah, throughout the year. It is estimated that about 2.5 million pilgrims performed Hajj in 2019. A large number of international pilgrims arrived by flight - 93 percent - with 5.2 percent arriving by land, and the rest arriving by sea.

In the bygone era before the introduction of steamships, railways, and air travel, when the lengthy and hard journey of pilgrimage to the Haj was the norm and traveling overland used to be done mostly by camel, camel caravan, and traditional sailing dhows, Kufa in Iraq, Damascus in Syria, and Cairo in Egypt were the three central points, where people gathered on foot. Pilgrims arriving by boat would enter Arabia via Jeddah's port on the Red Sea. However, Makkah, the holy city of Islam, is only about 45 miles from the port in western Saudi Arabia. For the Muslims, the city has a special spiritual significance. During prayer, Muslims all across the world face Makkah in the



Kufa in Iraq, Damascus in Syria, and Cairo in Egypt were the three central points where people gathered on foot before embarking on a Hajj journey

direction (qibla). The city has been the site of pilgrimages since ancient times. The racial diversity of the gathering serves as a reminder that, while Makkah is an Arabian city, the Hajj is a worldwide phenomenon. One that has captivated the imaginations of people from all eras, from ancient to medieval, and medieval to present. They gathered all across the world, to connect with the spiritual realm.



An adult Muslim must perform Hajj at least once in his lifetime



The General Presidency of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque launched a digital robot to distribute the Zamzam water in order to minimize the risk of contamination.

The Noble Qur'an calls all Muslims to perform the Hajj. Surat Ali Imran Verse 97 declares that '...And [due] to Allah from the people is a pilgrimage to the House - for whoever is able to find thereto a way. But whoever disbelieves - then indeed, Allah is free from need of the worlds.' The hajj is a pilgrimage that brings Muslims across the world together for spirituality and solidarity. Those who are capable of making the pilgrimage can add Hajji (El-Haj, La Haji, etc.) to their names. In their own countries, they are highly respected.

The story of the prophet Ibrahim and his family is a crucial point to the hajj. In Islamic tradition, Allah commanded Ibrahim to abandon his wife Hagar and their young son Ismael in the deserts to put their faith to the test. The mother and infant were half a mile from the current location of Kaaba, between the hills of Safa and Marwah. She ran south toward Safa, up the hill, and searched for an oasis. She dashed back to check on Ismael before running north toward Marwah, which was only a quarter-mile distant. There was no water available. She ran seven times between the two hills. Water was streaming from beneath Ismael's feet, where he had been kicking the sand, as she returned from her last journey to Marwah. She noticed the water and cried, 'zome, zome' or 'Stop flowing, stop flowing'. The water had slowed down, and Zamzam became the name of the spring. Similarly, pilgrims run seven times between Safa and Marwah to reenact Hagar's search for water. In a ritual called 'sa'y',

Safa and Marwah walk a distance of two miles. The vestiges of the hills were paved in white marble and encompassed in the eastern flank of the complex during Saudi Arabia's expansion of the mosque. A two-tiered covered walkway was built along Hagar's path with wheelchair routes in the middle. On the Safa's top, the hill's remaining gray rocks are protected by glass.

Domestic and foreign pilgrims visiting Makkah and Madinah in the past faced numerous difficulties due to the harsh and hazardous character of the roadways. At present, the construction of highways and other road networks has made pilgrims' journeys easier and safer for those traveling by road. The Saudi government has spent billions of dollars on hajj infrastructure in order to manage and simplify the annual pilgrim flow. This covers the hajj air terminals, sanitation and health services in and around Makkah, and the routes and tunnels that connect the locations. The Haramain High Speed railway between Makkah and Madinah, is regarded a milestone in pilgrim service. Saudi Arabia has taken a number of steps to decrease the risk of COVID-19 spreading among pilgrims since the outbreak began. In order to aid sterilization operations in the Grand Mosque, ten robots were introduced. The robots follow an automated control system to ensure a safe, healthy, and environmentally friendly environment, as well as a smart evaluation of sterilization requirements. The General Presidency of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque launched a digital robot to distribute the Zamzam water in order to minimize the risk of contamination. The machine allows staff to take a water bottle and pass it. In 2020, Around 1,000 pilgrims from across the Kingdom have performed hajj with severe health precautions, with social separation and a full medical staff available.

The Grand Mosque in Makkah was gradually extended and embellished as the Umma grew larger. Despite being ruled by several rulers, the city remained the holy center of Islam. The hajj symbolizes the fifth pillar of Islam and regarded as a yearly rite of passage for renewing one's spiritual and ethical connection.



Hajj Ministry made it mandatory that only those who have been vaccinated or immunized against the virus will be eligible for Hajj

Holding Hajj during a global pandemic: Saudi Arabia limits number of pilgrims to 60,000

By M. Nasir Jawed

“ The Prophet said, “If there is plague in a town no one should leave it or go into it.”

These are tough times. The world is currently grappling with the corona pandemic. As of June 15, 2021, the deadly virus has killed nearly 4 million people worldwide while the total number of infection cases has reached 180 million.

While the contagion spread fast and affected nearly each and every country, Saudi Arabia grabbed attention owing mainly to the Holy Mosques in the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah that annually attract millions of pilgrims from across the world for Umrah and Hajj. With a forecast of no less than 25-30 million Umrah and Hajj pilgrims per year by 2030, the Kingdom was in an immediate spotlight, as gatherings of such a magnitude carried risk of infections.

Due to being a convergence point for millions of pilgrims, Makkah has often been feared to be a flashpoint for the spread of contagious diseases, like MERS-CoV in the past; however, the Saudi leadership has always proven alert in staving off such contagions.

Under the leadership of King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the government and all the concerned ministries swung into action to protect the nation from the deadly scourge.

Even before March 2, 2020, when the first case of coronavirus was detected in the Kingdom, the Saudi authorities had begun taking immediate measures that included a public awareness campaign, a travel ban, and Umrah suspension for overseas pilgrims. Other measures including the closure of schools and universities - without disrupting education as the Ministry of Education immediately set up virtual platforms - and the banning of all international flights as well as the closure of malls, restaurants and public parks were implemented within four days of the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic.

"This was a time when many countries were still debating the seriousness of the outbreak," says Maha Akeel, a senior journalist.

The most critical decision that was to be taken by the government was the holding of 2020 Hajj with a very limited number of pilgrims. The Saudi leadership made the responsible decision to conduct the Hajj pilgrimage under strict health measures for only about 1,000 pilgrims, who were tested and quarantined before completing it, and thankfully no COVID-19 cases were detected among them. It was a



Saudi authorities had begun taking immediate preventive measures before the first case of coronavirus was detected in the country

successful experiment and was praised by the WHO.

Forbes magazine in May considered Saudi Arabia as one of the few safest countries in the pandemic-affected world.

Hajj 2021

Buoyed by the previous successful experience and a relative control over the virus, Saudi Arabia gradually opened up and allowed the pilgrims to visit the Holy Mosques. For Hajj this year it restricted the annual ritual to its citizens and residents – aged 18-65.

Limiting the number of pilgrims to 60,000 people this year, the Hajj Ministry made it mandatory that only those visitors who have been vaccinated or immunized against the virus and are free of chronic diseases will be eligible for the annual pilgrimage.

Health Minister Tawfiq Al-Rabiah said, "The decision [was made] to guarantee the safety of Hajj amid uncertainty over the coronavirus."

He said, "Despite the availability of a vaccine, there is uncertainty over the virus and some countries still record high numbers of COVID cases, another challenge is the different variants of the virus."

The minister said only approved COVID vaccines from Pfizer, Astrazeneca, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson will be valid for the Hajj.

Before the pandemic enforced social distancing globally, some 2.5 million pilgrims used to visit the holiest sites of Islam in Makkah and Madinah for the week-long Hajj, and the lesser, year-round Umrah pilgrimage.



Forbes magazine in May considered Saudi Arabia as one of the few safest countries in the pandemic-affected world

Both the Umrah and Hajj pilgrimages were not unchallenging for most of 2020 due to the outbreak of the virus. Yet Saudi Arabia did its best in handling the pandemic. It has had low mortality rates and minimal social and economic disruption. There has been widespread testing and vaccine access. This allowed it to open up for pilgrims.

Based on Quranic injunctions and Prophetic sayings, Grand Mufti of Dubai, Dr. Ali Ahmad, recently said: "There should be neither harm nor malice; the suspension of group prayers is allowed by Islam to prevent harm and protect people from any form of

damage resulting from bad weather, epidemics or wars."

Decision welcomed

The decision to curtail the number of pilgrims and other measures was welcomed by Muslims all over the world. Supporting the move, the Council of Senior Scholars in the Kingdom said it would save lives.

In a statement on June 12, the Council noted the decision to limit the Hajj for this year (1442 H/ 2021 AD) is part of the coronavirus-containment measures and is aimed at ensuring that Hajj is performed in a safe manner, adding that the decision is in line with the teachings of Islam in preserving the lives of human beings.

Citing experts' warning that large gatherings increase risk of coronavirus infections, the Council described the Saudi government's decision to limit this year's Hajj as responsible and highly needed to protect human lives and ensure safe Hajj.



The decision to curtail the number of pilgrims and other measures was welcomed by Muslims all over the world

OIC welcomes the move

In Jeddah, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Secretary-General Dr. Yousef Bin Ahmed Al-Othaimeen also welcomed the measures announced by the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah regarding the Kingdom's decision to organize the Hajj season for this year in accordance with health measures and to limit the performance of Hajj to citizens and residents inside the Kingdom, in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the emergence of new mutations of the COVID-19.

Dr. Al-Othaimeen said the decision emanates from the Kingdom's success in organizing last year's Hajj season which was held in accordance with all the precautionary and preventive measures since the emergence of the pandemic, which effectively contributed to reducing the negative repercussions of the pandemic and preventing its spread.

The secretary-general indicated that the Kingdom assumes its responsibility towards organizing Hajj,



Hajj Minister: Only approved COVID vaccines from Pfizer, Astrazeneca, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson will be valid for the Hajj

which calls on the Kingdom to take strict decisions and measures based on current health data and well-established Islamic jurisprudence rules.

Egypt's Grand Mufti hails decision

In Cairo, the Egyptian Grand Mufti Shauqi Allam hailed the decision. "A wise decision that honors the Islamic ritual while taking into account the safety of the pilgrims. It is in line with the Sharia principles on preserving the lives and safety of pilgrims and reflects the awareness and wisdom of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz and his



Makkah is a convergence point for millions of pilgrims every year



Harsh penalties are imposed on anyone not wearing a face mask to protect public safety

Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman,” he said.

A valued move, says GCC

In Riyadh, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Secretary General Dr. Nayef Falah Mubarak Al-Hajraf has valued the Kingdom’s decision to restrict registration for performing this year’s Hajj to only citizens and residents, already inside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, due to the Coronavirus spread.

He lauded also the noble attention paid by Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman to best serve pilgrims, in particular, and all visitors of the Grand Holy Mosque and the Prophet’s Holy Mosque, in general.

UAE ‘supports’ decision

The United Arab Emirates has welcomed the decision. In a statement, Khalifa Shaheen Al-Marar, minister of state, said the UAE supports all measures the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is taking as part of its efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, contain its spread and ensure the safety and security of pilgrims and the community.



The most critical decision that was to be taken by the government was the holding of Hajj with a very limited number of pilgrims last year

Al-Marar praised the scientific progress made by Saudi Arabia against the pandemic. “The scientific achievements of Saudi Arabia recently testify to the importance the Kingdom attaches to science as the key driver in supporting healthcare and overcoming the major challenges from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic,” he added.

Saving lives important, says Bahrain

The Kingdom of Bahrain has reaffirmed its full support for Saudi Arabia’s decision to hold this season’s Hajj with a limited number of pilgrims due to the ongoing world-wide pandemic and the emergence of its variant strains.

Bahraini Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs and En-



Pilgrims fully vaccinated and free of chronic diseases will be eligible for Hajj this year

dowment Sheikh Khalid Bin Ali Al Khalifa confirmed that such a decision falls in line with Sharia principles that call for saving lives and supports the requirements and world standards to combat the epidemic.

Crowd management

Saudi Arabia's handling of these rituals of high spiritual importance – right since March 2020 when the first virus infection was detected – merits attention. The authorities took all the precautions while allowing pilgrims to perform Umrah when it opened up. All the foreign pilgrims were required to have a negative PCR test report. Upon arrival, all pilgrims either had to do a mandatory quarantine at a government approved hotel for six days, or take a PCR test after 48 hours of quarantine. They could leave the hotel only if they were found negative. Travelers from countries categorized as “high-risk” were required to do a mandatory seven-day quarantine, but also needed to have a negative PCR test upon completion.

In addition, all pilgrims who wanted a permit to enter Haram – the Grand Mosque of Makkah – needed to have a COVID-19 vaccination certificate.

These measures add layers of protection and prevent situations from becoming super-spreader events. A negative PCR test alone may not be enough. There is always the risk of a false negative for technical reasons or due to fraud. There have been reports of large numbers of travelers testing positive at their destination points after testing negative at departure.

Social distancing

All instructions coming from the WHO were followed, including maintaining social distancing.

The flow of the visitors to the Holy Mosques was controlled and efforts were made to avoid congestion and crowding. A limited number of worshippers were allowed in at a time and there was clear demarcation to ensure physical distancing. Police and mosque orderlies monitored and directed the pilgrims.

Face masks – which provide a barrier and keep the new coronavirus from spreading – were mandatory. Harsh penalties were imposed on anyone not wearing a mask or trying to enter the Haram without a valid permit. Daily text messages reminded us about the required public health measures.

In Ramadan, the iftar meal – taken at the break of fasting – was provided in neatly sealed packages. Pilgrims previously would eat these meals together. This risked a high-risk situation for the virus transmission in times of the pandemic.

Zamzam water was dispensed by mobile porters as opposed to watering points, as the people would crowd there to collect the water.

Social media

The Saudi authorities took utmost use of modern technology to handle the situation. They used mobile apps to help monitor infections. These included test results and vaccination status. The Tawakkalna app is being used across the country for contact tracing and it is needed to access public places as it shows the person's PCR results and vaccination status. It is also used to apply for a gathering permit. The app would then provide contact tracing in the case of any positive case emerging after the event.

For pilgrims wanting access to the Haram, there is an app called Eatmarna. Created by the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, which allows pilgrims to book a specific time-slot for access to the Grand Mosque, meaning numbers are capped. The app is also linked to the Tawakkalna app, which means access is granted based on COVID-19 status.

These apps are crucial in preventing the spread of the new coronavirus as they limit crowding.



This year's Hajj pilgrimage will be the second under the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic

Presidency of the Two Holy Mosques unveils operational plan for Hajj

MAKKAH - MWL

Saudi Arabia's General Presidency for the Affairs of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque has recently launched its operational plan for this year's Hajj.

Acting Minister of Media Majid Al-Qasabi said "the Kingdom's government has enabled all the concerned sectors in the country to facilitate the service of pilgrims, and to harness all capabilities to enable them to perform the rituals of Hajj with safety and ease."

This year's Hajj pilgrimage will be the second under the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, and takes place as new variants of the coronavirus continue to emerge. The decision to limit Hajj to 60,000 citizens and residents of the Kingdom aims to protect them and ensure their rituals can be carried out as safely as possible.

President General of the Grand Mosque and Prophet's Mosque Affairs Sheikh Dr. Abdulrahman bin

Abdulaziz Al-Sudais thanked the Saudi leadership for the great care it offers to the Two Holy Mosques and their visitors, lauding the proper decisions and preventive precautions the government has taken since the declaration of the global pandemic. He said the Presidency is intensifying health precautions and utilizing technology to facilitate performing the rituals while providing the pilgrims with the good hospitality the Kingdom has been known for since its foundation.

As part of its plan, the Presidency will hand out bottles of sterilized Zamzam water using robots and high-tech smart vehicles. Around 5,000 workers have been recruited to wash the Grand Mosque and sanitize its floors 10 times a day using the latest cleaning technologies; all facilities are constantly sterilized and sanitizers are available all over the mosque.

The Presidency is providing over 800 manual and electric vehicles to help the elderly and the disabled move within the Grand Mosque and its courtyard.

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