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Female leadership in Islamic societies past and present.

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Introduction

Since the end of the 20th century, the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women has become a matter of increasing concern to international organizations. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, and by 2006 had been ratified by 183 countries. While the text of that convention refrained from being too specific, aiming primarily at urging states to provide for more participation of women in politics and society (at least in principle), the declaration signed sixteen years later at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing goes one step further, calling for concrete measures to achieve this end. Amongst other things, the declaration demands that women be given access to leadership positions in politics and society and that the level of their participation be increased. Article 13 of the Beijing Declaration states: “Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace“.

For Islamic societies, this statement presents a great challenge, as it is understood by many conservatives as contradicting the fundamental principles of Islam. If they do not wish to be accused of westernization, reformers must justify gender equality and gender justice not only politically but also theologically. Two approaches lend themselves for that purpose: reinterpretation of the *Qur’an* and/or the reconstruction of history. To a certain extent, both strategies are closely interlinked, because whenever controversy arises regarding the interpretation of a particular text passage, reference is always made

¹ This online version of the book chapter has undergone thorough language editing. In terms of content, however, the text is identical with the print version.

to the *Sunna*, the life of the Prophet, and his pronouncements regarding the questions and problems people brought before him. In recent years new readings of the *Qur'an* have been presented by a number of scholars, and several methods have been used in that process: re-translation of key terms, re-evaluation of the relative significance of various verses, and a re-contextualization of the Revelation. In the present contribution, I shall focus mainly on historical and current political dimensions of re-shaping Islam, and explore whether and how women used to perform, and still perform, in political and military leadership positions.

Re-constructions of history

Not only orthodox but also liberal and feminist Muslims and Muslimas accord the history of Islam a central role in determining the legitimacy of social and political structures. This has to do with the significance of the *Sunna* for Islamic studies and the exemplary status attributed to the Prophet's actions and decisions regarding certain issues, which even today are treated as precedents to be emulated; it has also to do, however, with the importance of the re-constructions of pre-Islamic society, against which Islam seeks to distinguish and thereby define itself. A third component in such re-constructions of history are the biographies of renowned historical figures, the writings of Muslim/Islamic scholars, and historical events which are resonant of present-day circumstances – in the sense that these events represent either developments from which society must dissociate itself, or such that ought to be emulated. Islamic intellectuals differ with respect to the degree to which they feel specific cultural and historical contexts must be taken into account, i.e., the relevance history has for the present. In simplified terms, one might say that the intellectual dividing line runs between relativists and ontologists, with the latter striving to re-establish a social order which they believe existed during the lifetime of the Prophet and the reign of the four rightly guided caliphs.

The construction of Islamic gender history is thus not only important, but inevitably controversial. In the following, I will discuss approaches taken by scholars in their efforts to legitimize the participation of women in leadership positions by de-essentializing prevailing feminine stereotypes. More concretely, I will show that women in the Muslim world were able to attain influence and autonomy; that they were warriors, rulers and businesswomen, and thus transcended the bounds of conservative gender models.

Muslim scholars such as Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed have been dealing with this issue since the 1980s in their efforts to legitimize the ideals advanced by the modern women's liberation movement. Mernissi in particular has again and again described in her books how common patriarchal notions, as well as statements made by Islamic politicians and clerics, prompted her to seek a truth that differed considerably from the one usually brought forth to justify the exclusion of women from leadership positions. Whether women can rule an Islamic state or serve as imams, whether they can independently run businesses, whether they should become leaders of political parties, professors or ministers, or whether they should generally be allowed to work outside the home, even without the permission of their husbands or fathers – all these are questions that are not primarily answered politically, but theologically. In this context it is helpful to turn to the historical evidence, which proves that a hierarchical gender order or the seclusion of women in the home while men occupy the public sphere are by no means dictates of an essentially Islamic historical tradition. Instead, these phenomena have turned out to be modern innovations which are themselves subject to change.

Regarding the structure of pre-Islamic Arab society, there is no scholarly consensus, particularly with respect to the nature of relations between the sexes. While not only conservatives, but also many Muslim liberals and feminists believe that the so-called "age of ignorance" (*jahiliyya*) was characterized by a denial of human status to women, some Islamic studies scholars, such as Gudrun Krämer and Leila Ahmed, think that the role of women in pre-Islamic society as depicted in the *Qur'an* was cast more negatively than was actually the case, and that the advent of Islam even brought a deterioration in the status of women. This view is in accordance with the consensus held in classical western Oriental Studies. The British Orientalist Robertson-Smith found evidence suggesting matrilinearity, polyandry, and uxorilocality in his 1907 study of kinship, and concluded that pre-Islamic Arabia had been a matriarchal society. Later, William Montgomery Watt refined this view, emphasizing the existence of matrilinear geneologies. Both scholars believed that 7th-century Arab society was undergoing radical changes in which matrifocal structures were being superseded by patrilinearity, polygamy, and virilocality. According to their view, the driving force behind this social transformation was the emergence of private property obtained through trade, which men wished to pass on to their sons. Leila Ahmed also found evidence suggesting the

existence of polyandry in Mecca and Medina; she refers to the documented kinship relations of the Prophet on the one hand and to A'isha's classificatory model of Arab marriages, as reported by al-Bukhari, on the other. In order to clarify these various reconstructions of Arab history, it is helpful to recall Arabia's geopolitical and ethnographic situation during the time of the Prophet. Compared to the powerful political centres of Byzantium and Persia, the huge Arab Peninsula was a climatically disadvantaged, peripheral region in the 6th century C.E. (with the exception of South Arabia where water was plentiful). The population was made up of nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists as well as sedentary traders and agriculturalists in the oases, and all these groups cooperated in numerous ways. The most important social and political unit was the kin group; however, trans-regional associations based on alliances between clans or tribes were crucial as well, and violent clashes were frequent. Since there is no evidence documenting the existence of political authority independent of kinship structures, it is unlikely that there was any social homogenization of the various societies of the Arab peninsula. Forms of marriage were probably heterogeneous: both polygyny and polyandry were quite common, existing as temporary marriages in which a man would occasionally seek out several women living within the group, and a woman would likewise visit men but did not live with them continuously. Marriage proposals could be initiated by either women or men, and both sexes had the right of divorce.

The existence of Jews and members of Christian sects is historically documented, but the Arab tribes continued to worship their own goddesses. Cults existed in Yathrib – the city which would later become known as Medina –, in Ta'if, and in Mecca. Meccans worshipped al-Uzza, the All-Mighty, who was associated with a sacred black meteorite, the Ka'aba. The tribe of the Quraish controlled and maintained this shrine. The throngs of pilgrims that flocked to Mecca had made the Quraish and the city rich, which is why the local population was not particularly eager to join Muhammad's new religion. Of course, we cannot simply draw conclusions about relations between the sexes on the sole basis of the existence of female deities; but if we consider religion, social structure, and economy combined, it seems that the advent of Islam did initiate the patriarchalization of Arab societies. Such a development corresponds with the course of history as sketched by historian Gerda Lerner for the Middle East as a whole.

Yet, it would be incorrect to conclude that Islamization only brought disadvantages to women. The prohibition of female infanticide may definitely be counted amongst the positive reforms, and several of the rights Muhammad is reported to have introduced, such as a woman's entitlement to a share of the inheritance, were real novelties in some patriarchal groups. Many *hadith* recount how controversial Muhammad's innovations were amongst his male followers, and how often such resistance prevented him from putting his ideas into practice. It is also documented, however, that self-confident women who knew how to fight for their rights were living in both Mecca and Medina. Just how unproblematic female dominance was can be gleaned from the Prophet's own biography. After the death of his parents, Muhammad ibn Abd'ullah of the Banu Quraish was first raised by his paternal grandfather and then by his paternal uncle Abu Talib. At the age of about twenty, he entered into the service of the wealthy merchant Khadija al-Kubra, a widow and mother of several children, who was the daughter of Khuwaylid ibn Asad. After Muhammad had worked for her for several years and gained her trust, she proposed to him in 595 C.E., and he accepted. The age difference between them is reported to have been fifteen years. The marriage lasted twenty-five years until Khadija's death, and remained monogamous. Fatima was born of this union, and it is through her that the Prophet's patrilineage continued. Two aspects of this dissimilar couple's relationship are repeatedly emphasized: Khadija's wealth, which enabled Muhammad to live a life of material security and comfort, and her role as his closest confidante. It is her who is said to have solaced him when he returned from the Cave of Hira on the Jabal al-Nur in the Hijaz, completely distraught after having received his first revelation. It was also her who supported him in his capacity as Prophet, and who became his first follower. A third aspect of their relationship is implicitly manifest in the historical reconstructions: her role as protector. Muhammad's position in Mecca was precarious: the Meccans found his rejection of traditional polytheism and his assertion that he was the voice of God presumptuous and viewed him with increasing hostility. Yet, it is quite apparent that he was protected by two powerful supporters – Abu Talib and Khadija -- and it was them who made his continued presence in Mecca possible. When they died, Muhammad and his followers were no longer safe, and they were forced to flee to Yathrib/Medina.

After Khadija's death, Muhammad married thirteen other women, many of them widows. This subsequent polygyny is significant, because as with everything the Prophet did, it set a precedent. Nevertheless, his wives are reputed to have been anything but submissive, and the Prophet is reported to have been very affectionate towards them. Women were amongst the Prophet's active followers. They participated in worship, received religious instruction, and discussed religious matters with him. They were not known to have held back with their criticism, and on occasion they even regarded his instructions with some bemusement. Thus Hind bint Utbah, when informed by Muhammad that upon her conversion she would not be permitted to commit adultery, retorted that she seriously doubted that a free woman could ever commit adultery. Another account mentions Umm Salma who reportedly asked Muhammad why the *Qur'an* only addresses men. According to Fatima Mernissi, it was not only Umm Salma who complained about being left out in the sacred text. She believes that there was a female "protest movement" (Mernissi 1991:119). The objections raised by women seem to have not gone unheeded, since in the subsequently revealed verse 33:36 both men and women are explicitly addressed: "For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women, who give in charity for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise – for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward."

Women at arms

A'isha, the Prophet's youngest wife, is regarded as the first Muslima to have actively intervened in political events and raised a claim to leadership which she tried to assert against opponents. During the dispute over who would succeed her husband as Commander of the Faithful, she turned against Ali ibn Abu Talib and in 656 C.E. even led an armed uprising against him. She mobilized her followers in the mosques, called them to arms, and ultimately found herself leading a troop of several thousand men into battle. Because she was riding on a camel on that occasion, the incident came to be known as the "Battle of the Camel". In the end seven thousand men died, and A'isha lost the battle. Mernissi writes: "A'isha was the first woman to transgress the *hudud* (limits),

to violate the boundaries between the territory of women and that of men, to incite to kill, even though the act of war is a privilege of men and belongs to the territory outside the *harem* [...]. A'isha as the first woman who took a political decision by leading men, remains forever linked in Muslim memory with *fitna* (disorder and distraction)" (Mernissi 1993:66).

Mernissi's argument clearly draws on the dominant patriarchal discourse, and thus fails to consider that it was hardly uncommon for women in 7th-century Arabia to participate in military activities. Ali Ashgar Engineer notes that there is a *hadith* in the *Sahih al-Bukhari* which relates how women participated in the Battle of Uhud, how they tended wounds, how they carried the dead and injured from the battlefield, and how they distributed water. The Indo-Pakistani historian, biographer and scholar of Islam Sayyed Sulaiman Nadvi points to a pre-Islamic custom in which wives accompanied their husbands into battle, and believes that this changed only gradually after the advent of Islam. However, women did not just care for the injured or bring provisions, but also served in battle. Nusaiba bint Ka'b al-Ansariya fought at Mount Uhud by the Prophet's side, and according to several sources Muhammad even referred to her as his shield. Accounts say that she protected him with her sword and crossbow until her own wounds made it impossible for her to continue fighting. On the Meccan side, too, women participated in battle. The traditions mention several women, amongst them Hind bint Utbah, Abu Sufyan's wife, who spurred on the troops with her singing and playing of the tambourine. She was out for revenge because her father and one of her brothers had been killed in previous clashes with Muhammad's supporters. When the Meccans won, she carved the livers out of all the fallen Medinan fighters and cut off their noses and ears, made the latter into bracelets and necklaces, climbed atop a cliff and, in full view of the Medinans, danced wildly, all the while mocking and ridiculing the defeated. She is even said to have eaten the liver of Hamza, one of the Prophet's uncles. Later, after she had converted to Islam, she participated in the Muslim conquests along with her daughter Huwairah.

Even after the death of the Prophe women continued to be involved in military activities. One of them, Umm Hakim, is said to have killed seven Byzantines with a tent pole. Another account mentions a group of women, led by Azdah bint al-Harith, who during a battle at a Persian harbour turned their veils into flags and marched onto the battlefield.

Their deployment is said to have been decisive in helping the Muslims to victory. However, female militancy was not only accepted in Arabia. Engineer mentions Indian women fighters such as Gul Bahisht who led an army against the Raja of Jahore, and Nurjahan who is said to have killed elephants and lions. Several Islamic sects such as the Kharijites, which emerged from the conflict over the Prophet's succession, even expressly encouraged women to take up arms, as they regarded armed defence of the faith a duty to be performed by all Muslims. According to Leila Ahmed, several Kharijite women attained renown as fighters, amongst them Ghazala who according to accounts won a duel. To the Kharijites' adversaries, however, such manifest female militancy was a serious provocation, and they responded with sexual humiliation, stripping the dead women fighters off their clothes and publicly displaying their naked bodies.

Yet these and other cases cannot simply be explained away by pointing to cultural patterns that overlay pure Islam. Miriam Cooke quotes Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, the founder of the Shafi'i *madhab* (law school), who in the 9th century defined *jihad*, and in particular armed struggle, as a religious duty tantamount to prayer, the *hajj*, and *zakat*. According to Cooke, the patriarchal turn in the Islamic world did not take place until the 12th and 13th centuries, a time when the idea gained currency that those who had suffered martyrdom in battle against unbelievers would go to paradise where they would be spoiled by heavenly virgins.

Despite this shift towards patriarchy, women were never entirely excluded from military campaigns, but rather were to some extent able to attain respectable positions as resistance fighters. If they were the widows or daughters of military leaders killed in action, they could even assume leadership positions. When the former Sultanate of Aceh became embroiled in a bloody, thirty-year battle in an effort to prevent the occupation of that territory by the Dutch, a woman named Cut Nyak Dien attained lasting renown as a guerilla fighter. Being descended from the local nobility, she was the daughter of Teuku Nanta Setias and the wife of Teuku Ibrahim Lamngas, two men who were military leaders. After they had died, Cut Nyak Dien took over leadership of their units, reorganized them, and continued the fight. Her second husband was also a military leader, and she subsequently fought side by side with him. Weakened by advancing age and the hardness of life in the forest, she was taken captive after his death.

In certain historical situations women were able to become fighters even without kinship ties to male military leaders. Many women participated in the Algerian liberation war, while in Iran they demonstrated against the Shah, despite the great risk involved, and they even smuggled weapons under their chadors. In Palestine they held prominent positions in the various organizations of the liberation movements.

Even today, women members of militant Islamic groups in various countries are active as suicide bombers, for example in Chechnya where they are referred to as *shahida* or “black widows” because of their long black robes and the black veil over their heads and faces. The first known *shahida* was Chawa Barajewa who in July 2000 drove a truck loaded with explosives into a Russian road blockade. Two-and-a-half years later another woman drove a car full of explosives into a government building in the capital of Grosny. Still another woman tried to assassinate Jurt Ahmed Kadyrow, Moscow’s man in Grosny, while he was at a fair in Ilischan; in doing so, she also killed eighteen bystanders. On 13 October 2002, a Chechnyan commando seized a theatre in Moscow, taking hostage the entire 850-people audience who had come to see the musical “North-East”. Amongst the hostage-takers were thirteen women dressed in black garments over which they wore explosive belts in a highly visible fashion. Two other spectacular attacks were the suicide bombings by women in the midst of an open air concert in Tushino, formerly a village and now a suburb of Moscow, in July 2003 (thirteen casualties), and the bombings of two booked-out passenger planes in 2004 which were on their way to Sochi and Volgograd, respectively. In the same year, and only a few days later, a woman detonated devastating explosives at the entrance to the Ryzhskaya metro station. The worst attack to date was the seizure of a school in Beslan on 1 September 2004, where more than 1,200 women and children were held hostage without food and water. The building was mined, and hostages were murdered. By the end of the ordeal, officials counted a death toll of more than 300 people. In this terrorist operation, too, women did participate. However, the conclusions this allows with respect to gender relations are a matter of debate. The Moscow journalist Julia Jusik did research among Chechnyan women terrorists and found out that self-determination only played a secondary role in their actions. The female assassins had generally come into contact with recruiters following family difficulties, often the death of a father, brother, or husband, and were sought out, trained, and deployed for particular operations. One

young woman who refused to execute the orders given her, left the organisation, and has since then been in hiding described a depressing scenario of rape, coercion, and hopelessness at the hands of the men who planned the operation. The accounts in Jusik's monograph were particularly shocking because they revealed that many women, once they had been armed and sent off to execute a particular operation, could no longer decide whether they would actually carry out their orders or whether they would break off the operation: the actual detonation of the explosive charge, according to Jusik, was controlled by unknown men behind the scenes.

The second region in which female suicide bombers have become active is Palestine. The first Palestinian *shahida* was named Wafa Idris and detonated her bomb inside a shopping centre in Jerusalem. She and one other person died, thirty-one were injured. The journalist and Middle East expert Barbara Victor who investigated Wafa Idris' story encountered numerous inconsistencies which suggest that the act may have been an accident and that the young woman, at that time twenty-eight, only intended to transport the bomb for her brother. It was apparently he who was selected to carry out the operation. Yet another of the many versions of the account relating to this almost legendary figure portrays an unhappy woman who, following the death of her newborn baby, was told by a doctor that she would never again be able to have children. Upon hearing this, her husband left her, depriving her of any further reason to live. This personal catastrophe, says Victor, suggests that Wafa Idris did perhaps act intentionally. Yet underlying both Victor's and Jusik's interpretations is the implicit assumption that women do neither commit themselves to such acts out of their own political convictions, nor willingly transform themselves from bearers of life into killer machines (Victor 2004:33).

In Victor's view, personal frustration was also decisive in the making of another *shahida*, Darine Abu A'isha. The diligent student, youngest child of a middle-class couple, had an academic career in mind and did not intend to become a housewife and a mother. However, a small incident nullified all her plans. One day, she was pressured into behaving improperly at an Israeli checkpoint by a soldier: in the queue waiting to pass the checkpoint, there was a woman with a baby that urgently needed medical care; the Israeli soldier agreed to let the mother and child pass immediately, but only on condition that Darine publicly kiss her male cousin who was accompanying her. According to the

Palestinian moral codex the cousin had to marry her. Otherwise Darine would have lost her honour. Her cousin asked her parents for her hand in marriage that same day, as such an insult to her honour was considered a grave matter. Darine is said to have refused, preferring to die as a martyr. A third Palestinian assassin reportedly chose to become a *shahida* because her husband, whom she loved very much, betrayed her. According to Victor, however, even more than the oppression experienced at the hands of Israeli soldiers it is the patriarchal gender relations that are crucial in women's decision to become *shahidas*. In her words, "[...] if these people are forced to live in a society filled with punishment and prohibition, and if they are offered equality and respect only by becoming martyrs, it is not surprising that there is an increasing number of Palestinian women who are opting for the latter alternative" (Victor 2004:196). Victor is no doubt correct in concluding that the majority of Palestinian women are prevented from fulfilling themselves by rigid moral codices, the tyranny of parents, brothers, uncles and other high-ranking family members, as well as by a rigid, pre-determined life plan. Moreover, Palestinian women are particularly likely to become victims of family violence and "honour killings". The participation of women in armed struggle can therefore hardly be regarded as an indicator of a social order particularly favourable to women. However, it is just as questionable whether we can decisively say that this is indicative of precisely the opposite situation. Women's attainment of honour and glory by joining the struggle for liberation has some historical tradition in Palestine. During the nation's more recent history, secular women fighters made headlines on numerous occasions during the first Intifada. The most well-known of these was Leila Khaled, a former member of the Marxist People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), who on 6 September 1970 hijacked a passenger plane belonging to the Israeli airline El-Al. Assisting her in the operation was a comrade-in-arms by the name of Patrick Arguello. On the way from Tel Aviv to London both were overwhelmed by security officials; Arguello was shot and killed, Khaled herself wounded and arrested. The picture of her lying on a stretcher, her fingers raised in the sign of victory, went around the world. Only a short time later the PFLP carried out another hijacking, using this operation to pressure officials into releasing her. Leila Khaled was a public heroine. For photographers, who in the 1970s saw her as an icon of the new femininity and aestheticized resistance, Khaled posed with her

Kalashnikov, a *keffiyeh* draped loosely around her head, and a ring sporting the safety pin of her first hand grenade.

Arafat took up the story of militant feminine resistance in a speech held on 27 January 2002 and called upon Palestinian women to set out for Jerusalem to become *shahidas*. Organizations such as Hamas interpret Islamic doctrine rather conservatively and therefore tend to be rather ambivalent with respect to female militancy. A highly regarded widow who was given the honourable title of “*Umm Jihad*” spoke out decidedly against women’s participation in war, pointing out that they are not permitted to walk alone in the streets and are obliged to maintain proper dress. Thus, women would either be hindered in battle by long, impractical garments or, if they opted for combat dress, bring shame upon themselves and their families. That such views do not go unchallenged is evident from the respect accorded to women fighters. Hamas even engages women as military trainers, such as in the case of Samira Sabih who was hired to work in Gaza as an explosives expert. Being by no means the tool of her male superiors, she trained men until she was captured by the Israeli military. Such developments are not simply social deviations or lapses, but represent a new view of femininity, or rather a partial departure from binary gender constructions. However tentative this development might be, it does force the spokesmen of such influential organisations as Fatah and even the Hamas to at least publicly pay lip service to the idea that women, too, can fight. Even Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the founder of Hamas, told Victor that he supports the participation of women in armed resistance.

Feminists support a quite heterogenous spectrum of views with regard to the issue of female militancy, adopting positions ranging from absolute rejection to euphoric support. In Germany the feminist activist Alice Schwarzer advocated that women be allowed to defend, or even fight for, their own peace (Plockstedt/Schwarzer 1980); others have argued in favour of an absolute ban on armies and military service, or equated femininity with the negation of militant aggression. As becomes apparent from Christine Eifler’s and Ruth Seifert’s work on the military, the integration of women into armies does not change the gender hierarchy, but may instead even reinforce it. It is not unusual for women who dare to push their way into “the boys’ club” to become victims of sexual violence.

Women in positions of political leadership

Just as controversial an issue as women fighters and soldiers are female political leaders, or more generally, the issue of women in leadership positions in the Islamic world. Conservative Muslims, who regard leadership positions as being the domain of men, cite verse 32:34 that says: “Men are protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more strength than the other [...]”. They will also quote a *hadith* that says: “A people which has a woman as a leader will not succeed.” Such arguments are invoked especially when a woman strives to achieve the highest position in government, as was the case in Indonesia when Megawati Sukarnoputri sought to become Suharto’s successor. Megawati’s Democratic Party for Struggle (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan*) appeared as the driving force behind the democratization process, and her prospects of winning the election were quite good. This sparked an unprecedented national discussion between politicians, religious leaders, members of civil society, and representatives of the major Islamic organizations, which centred on the question as to whether it was permissible for a woman to be elected president of a country with a Muslim majority. The influential Indonesian Council of Ulema (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI) threatened to issue a *fatwa*, and this threat, according to Sonja van Wichtelen who examined the role of the media in the 1999 and 2004 elections, was treated as if it actually was an issued religious injunction. Many influential Muslims rejected the idea of a woman becoming the highest representative of the state, and radical organizations like the Islamic Defender Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) further fanned the flames of controversy. Liberals were likewise forced to publicly defend their position. On 22 June 1999 a group by the name of Civil Society for the Political Rights of Women went public with the statement that religion should not be misused to exclude a woman from presidency, and that women’s rights must be asserted regardless of age, class, education, religion, ethnicity, or political membership. Sanusi, who has reflected on this frequently quoted *hadith*, concludes that there is no logical basis for the establishment of a link between gender and political action. Moreover, it is not true that female leaders are the product of westernization.

Despite these interventions and the PDI-P’s victory, Megawati did not become president. The parliament instead chose a man, Abdurrahman Wahid, for president, and Megawati had to content herself with being his deputy. Only when Wahid was impeached for his

involvement in a financial scandal after having served just two years of his term did she advance to the nation's highest political office.

Notwithstanding the public debate over Megawati, it is not at all uncommon for women in the Islamic world to move up to the highest political offices. Pakistan, Turkey, and Bangladesh all had women prime ministers; Pakistan and Bangladesh even on two occasions. When Indira Gandhi stood for office in India, she was elected by the overwhelming majority of Muslims. According to the internet site of Majid Ali, a Pakistani investment banker and self-proclaimed feminist, statistics indicate that in the last fifty years more than 750 million Muslims have elected a woman to be their head of state (Ali 2005). However, in most cases these female heads of state were successors to powerful men, and thus can be said to have benefited from dynastic power relations.

Yet, female power is not a recent phenomenon, even if women are rarely mentioned in Islamic history. Fatima Mernissi was the first scholar who explicitly turned her attention to female Islamic rulers. In her monograph *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* she identifies fifteen women in positions of political leadership who were so important that their images were minted on coins and Friday prayers were spoken in their names. The rulers studied by Mernissi were not only the wives of rulers or mothers of future rulers, but also women who deposed their husbands, such as A'isha al-Hurra of Andalusia in 887 C.E. The terms Sultan and Malik, which in the Islamic world are used to refer to rulers, exist in both masculine and feminine forms: Sultana or Malika. Other titles for female rulers were: *al-Hurra* (the free woman), *Sayyida* (mistress) oder *Sitt* (lady) (Mernissi 1991:19). However, the rulers whose biographies Mernissi examines were all acting as representatives of men, or achieved a certain degree of power and influence as concubines, wives, or mothers. The Christian Subh, also known as the "Queen of Cordoba" (*Sahiba Malikat Qurtuba*), was a slave and won the heart of Caliph al-Hakam who, as the years went by and his youth waned, entrusted her with his duties because he wished to devote himself chiefly to the sciences. After his death she ruled in the name of his underage son, but was soon ousted by a young secretary who was her confidante, perhaps even her lover. Al-Khaizuran, the wife of the Abbasid caliph Muhammad ibn Mansur al-Mahdi, followed a similar biographical trajectory, first having been the Caliph's favourite slave, then becoming his wife and finally managing to have her sons named the legitimate successors to their father. Her son al-Hadi is said to have

tried to curtail her influence, whereupon she murdered him when he was only 24 years old. Harun ar-Rashid's youngest son, on the other hand, loved his mother dearly and gave her free rein at court. Shajar ad-Durr took power in the 13th century after her husband, al-Malik as-Salih Najm ad-Din Ayyub, had died and her son al-Muazzam Turanshah proved unfit to rule and was assassinated in 1250 C.E. But the Sultana was only able to maintain her hold on power for a few months before being forced to yield to a man. According to Mernissi, female rule never went unchallenged. Instead, it was often discredited as a "violation of the spiritual principles that underpin and legitimize political authority" (Mernissi 1993:30). According to the hegemonic discourse, the feminine was subordinate to the male, implying that the former was to be ruled by the latter. From this followed that a woman could never become sovereign. The cases examined by Mernissi show that women could and did attain power and influence over their husbands or sons; that during periods of transition they could take over the reins of government; but that ultimately, they were exceptions from the rule that political and spiritual power was considered to be male power. Furthermore, it is often asserted that their rule was a sign of decline, or that female rule contributed significantly to the weakening of the polity. This is the argument implicit in works such as that of Anthony Reid, who studied the rule of four sultanas who reigned over the Sultanate of Aceh in northern Sumatra in the 17th century. The rule of these four women sovereigns came at a time when the Sultanate, which formerly had undergone a period of rapid expansion, experienced serious political decline when it was no longer able to fend off the encroachments of the European maritime powers, particularly those of the Dutch. Reid attributes poor leadership to these four sultanas, and views this as the decisive factor in Aceh's change of political fortunes. The Acehnese scholar Sher Banu A.L. Khan, on the other hand, does not believe that the Sultanas were the reason for the Dutch victories. Rather, she emphasizes that in this difficult situation these women rulers had demonstrated considerable negotiating skills. "A more accommodative and consensual approach," she writes, "based on law and the ability to keep foreign diplomats and merchants happy could well be the answer to Aceh's continued peace, prosperity and survival as an independent kingdom" (Khan 2007:x).

Weak leadership is something present-day women heads of state in Islamic polities are accused of as well. Megawati is a prime case in point. According to her critics, although

she embodied considerable symbolic power she was constrained by female stereotypes of femininity and was incompetent when it came to dealing with everyday political affairs. Yet at another level women have without doubt been making progress for years in Islamic countries. In Iran and Jordan half of the university students are women. In Turkey, Tunisia, and Algeria quotas existed for many professions stipulating that women had to make up a specific percentage of the workforce. And in many Muslim countries women have little difficulty pursuing careers as lawyers, university professors, doctors, theologians, or higher level government officials. Women's organizations in countries with Muslim majorities are amongst the most active mouthpieces of civil society, while institutes for gender studies have been established at universities in order to scientifically monitor the process of gender mainstreaming. Even in countries such as Yemen there are now ombudsmen for women's issues in the ministries, and the Yemenite government has established a national Women's Committee which demands that thirty percent of the seats in parliament be reserved for women. Of course, reality is a bit different, and there is still a long way to go until that goal is achieved: so far there is only one woman in the cabinet, the minister for human rights, Amar al-Alim al-Suswa. As far as Indonesia is concerned, Abshar-Abdalla of the Liberal Islam Network (*Jaringan Islam Liberal*) emphasizes that both conservative and liberal Muslims advocate the involvement of women in the public sphere. The two largest Islamic organizations, the *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*, have made the advancement of women part of their agendas and have each established their own women's associations. These work to improve women's education, provide adequate medical care, and prevent domestic violence and the trafficking of women and children. The young women who are active in associations working towards these ends go even further and demand reforms in family law, the prohibition of polygyny, and increased participation of women in leadership positions. Conservative groups, too, have their own women's organizations, such as those established by *Persatuan Islam* (Persis) and *Al Irsyad*. That is even true for those groups generally regarded as fundamentalist, such as the Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, PKS) which Abshar-Abdalla considers to be analogous to the Muslim Brotherhood. In PKS publicity campaigns fifty percent of the activists are women. The only party that excludes women from the public sphere is the MMI (*Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia*), which was established in 2000 by Abu Bakar Ba'ashir.

Despite many positive developments, it would be too early to speak of a shift that has taken place in the Islamic world towards the equality of women and an acceptance of women holding leadership positions. Hibba Abugideiri, portraying several female Muslims thinkers who have “created an epistemological shift whereby religious knowledge, rather than being understood as authoritative and incontestable, is revealed to be constructed, value laden, and context specific” (Abugideiri 2001:100), points out that many of these women are U.S. citizens and thus advocate their ideas in an open society. Even if I do not agree with her thesis that feminist Islam is a phenomenon embedded in American society, or that American Islam might serve as a model for global Islam, it is true that liberal and feminist reformers often are not able to withstand the repression in their home countries. Rauffa Hassan, for example, a professor of mass communication, taught at a centre for women’s studies in Yemen until it was forced to close due to pressure by radical Islamists. A death warrant was issued against her, and in 1999 she had to flee the country. Even more famous is Asma Barlas, a professor of Pakistani origin, who today teaches politics at Ithaca College in New York and is considered to be one of the most important representatives of Islamic feminism. In 1983 she was forced into exile for having criticized the Pakistani regime, and was granted asylum in the USA. The Islamic theologian and human rights activist Riffat Hassan, who became famous for her reinterpretations of the sacred texts, resides in the USA, too, and the Iranian feminist Ziba Mir-Hosseini is currently living in exile in London. This shows that the Islamic world still has to go a long way until gender justice is no longer regarded as heresy or blasphemy. But there are also encouraging developments. In Southeast Asia, where supporters of a more radical Islam have so far been kept in check by moderates, feminists can work towards an understanding of Islam in which women are included as actors in all spheres, be it as imams, as businesswomen, or as politicians. This does not mean that women in leadership positions are already accepted as a matter of course. But things are in motion. At gender conferences, which have become very popular in recent years, men will announce that they fully support women’s equality and that supporting his wife in her professional career earns a man much respect, while being married to a woman who has succeeded in a leadership position is a source of pride.

Even more vehement than the disapproval of women exercising worldly power is the disapproval of women exercising religious power. According to Mernissi's research, no woman in the history of Islam ever occupied the position of *caliph* or *imam*. But now even this bastion of patriarchal religious interpretation is being challenged. Women study Islamic theology, and at the Al-Azhar University in Egypt a number of women have been appointed deans of the department of Islamic Studies. Women may become muftis (*muftiyya*) and thus may issue *fatwas*, and some even do so on television or in the print media. The internet site *Islam online*, for example, has its own *muftiyyas*, one of whom is Suad Saleh, also a dean at Al-Azhar University.

In 2005 a woman entered into the last bastion of male dominance, claiming spiritual leadership over both women and men: on 18 March 2005 Amina Wadud, professor of Islamic Studies at the Virginia Commonwealth University, became the first woman ever to lead both men and women in the Friday prayer and to hold the Friday sermon. For her, leading Friday prayers and holding the sermon were just two of many important steps in what she calls a "gender *jihad*", a struggle for equality between the sexes, which according to her is integral to Islam. "Gender justice is essential to the divine order", she writes (Wadud 2006:10), but "patriarchal control over what it means to be human robs females of their God-given agency and full humanity" (Wadud 2006:255). The backlash was immediate, and some of it even anticipatory. Because of threats coming from the fundamentalist milieu, it turned out to be a challenge even to find a place where to hold the Friday service. Finally, an Anglican church provided the space.

On 28 March 2003, the Egyptian-American journalist Yasmin Mogahed, who also works for the online programme "Ask About Islam", spoke out against Amina Wadud holding the Friday sermon. "God dignifies both men and women in their distinctiveness, not their sameness", she argued, referring to a quotation of the Prophet which says that paradise lies at the feet of mothers. She went on to state that although no man can become a mother, no one ever complained that this was unjust. Women thus should not try and be like men, but rather concentrate on their own sphere and draw their self-esteem and respect from that. The portal is part of the internet portal "Muslim Wake Up" where Amina Wadud's sermon was announced on 18 March 2003 to those wishing to attend. That announcement was undeniably positive, reading: "On March 18, 2005 Muslim women will reclaim their right to be spiritual equals and leaders. Women will move from

the space tradition has relegated them in the back of the mosque and pray in the front rows” (MWU 18 March 2005). The headline read: “Muslim Wake Up! And the Muslim Women’s Freedom Tour”. Even amongst spiritual leaders the response was mixed. Egypt’s Grand Mufti Sheikh Ali Guma declared in an interview on Egyptian television “that there is no consensus among religious scholars on the issue of female imamat of mixed gender congregations, pointing out that respected scholars like Imam Tabari and Imam ibn Arabi found the practice permissible.” Sheikh Sayyed Tantawi of Cairo’s Al-Azhar mosque permits women-led prayers only in a service without men. Critics, on the other hand, castigate Wadud as a heretic. Thus, the Egyptian religious scholar and preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi accused Wadud of having simply ignored fourteen centuries of Islamic tradition. Similarly, the Grand Mufti Abdul Azziz al-Sheikh decried her as “an enemy of Islam” who has transgressed “divine law”. Muslim protesters outside the church where the service took place could be seen holding signs with the slogan “Mix-gender prayer today. Hell fire tomorrow”. Supporters insist that it is legitimate for women to hold the *khutba*, arguing that the Prophet himself authorized one of his followers, Umm Waraqah, to lead Friday prayers and that the qualifications to perform such a task are completely gender neutral. The only requirements are that a person has sufficient knowledge of the *Qur’an* and the *Sunna* and that he or she is a morally upright member of the community. The Women Muslim League regards such conservative readings of the sacred text as symptomatic of the oppression of women in the contemporary Islamic world. Women, according to the League, have always been regarded as a source of authority in Islam, and a large number of *hadiths* can be traced back to A’isha. The professor and scholar of Islamic law Khaled Abou El Fadl is of the opinion that the *Qur’an* by no means prohibits women from becoming *imams*. And in Indonesia, Sheikh Hussein Muhammad of Cirebon believes that women may indeed lead both men and women in prayer. Other voices, such as the Secretary General of Islamic Commission of Spain, enthusiastically declared the service a “historical event, [...] a recovery of genuine Islam, and a break from the macho Islam which has nothing to do with the Prophet's teachings” (Prado 2005).

Amina Wadud herself commented on the New York prayer service only sparingly, wishing to avoid the attention of the yellow press. She regards her spiritual activities as part of a greater struggle, a gender *jihad*, which aims at achieving an order based on

divine justice. "Gender justice", she writes, "is essential to the divine order of the universe" (Wadud 2006:10). Although justice has been granted by Allah, it has been ignored by the people. According to her interpretation of the *Qur'an* and *Sunna*, women and men are equal before Allah, who is sometimes referred to as "She" in her writings. Wadud is optimistic that the world will change and that gender jihadists "will become representatives for achieving a new world order removed from the entrenched patterns and diverse forms of patriarchy" (Wadud 2006:262).

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