

## **Salafi Scholarly Views on Gender-Mixing (*ikhtilāṭ*) in Saudi Arabia**

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### *I. Introduction*

Few words are more associated with Salafism than “*niqāb*”. This veil, which many Salafi women wear, seems to represent the way Salafis appear to view women: as persons whose physical appearances should be shielded from everyone outside immediate family. A lesser-known dimension of “shielding” women from view is the issue of gender segregation: keeping unrelated men and women apart from one another in the public and private sphere. Its opposite – gender-mixing (*ikhtilāṭ*), an ill-defined situation in which unrelated men and women freely mingle – is something Salafis often reject, which has had particular consequences in Saudi Arabia. There, a Salafi version of Islam has been institutionalised to such an extent that there is a prohibition on gender-mixing in many public spaces. This results in, for example, separate queues for men and women at public facilities and separate waiting rooms at airports.

The subject of *ikhtilāṭ* in Saudi Arabia is the topic of several academic publications. While rightly analysing this issue as part of the debate on reform in the Saudi state, these publications pay little attention to the detailed religious arguments that Saudi Salafi scholars use to express their views on *ikhtilāṭ*.<sup>1</sup> As a result, we know little about this aspect of opposition to *ikhtilāṭ* among Saudi Salafi scholars. This article therefore focuses on this subject. Given that the primary literature on *ikhtilāṭ* is extensive and this article short, I focus especially on two different primary sources in Arabic: a selection of the scholarly writings on this topic downloaded from *saaid.net*, a well-known Salafi website that has an entire section on *ikhtilāṭ*, and the book *Fatāwā l-Mar’a*, a collection of fatwas (legal opinions in Islamic Law) from major Saudi Salafi scholars on issues related to women. Based on these and other sources, this article first gives a short and general overview of Salafi ideas on gender relations. It then moves on to the contextual factors influencing the debates on *ikhtilāṭ* in Saudi Arabia. Next, it presents the religious arguments and proof texts used by many Saudi Salafi scholars to show their opposition to gender-mixing, before lastly dealing with arguments in favour of *ikhtilāṭ* by other Saudi Salafi scholars and authors. As such, this article seeks to explain the arguments and highlight the proof texts used by Saudi Salafi scholars who are so often seen as reactionaries whose views are not worth listening to, but who – whether one agrees with them or not – are an influential factor in Saudi society with regard to this topic.

### *II. Salafism and Gender Relations*

Salafi views on gender relations are sometimes partly informed by conspiratorial ideas about “Westernisation” (*taghrīb*) caused by supposed “enemies of Islam” who try to corrupt the religion in general and the chastity of Muslim women in particular. Such views are often portrayed as part of a wider “war on Islam” and are by no means limited to Salafism. Yet given the explicit attempts by adherents to the latter to be loyal to Islam and disavow everything else (*al-walā’ wa-l-barā’*) and therefore avoid resembling “unbelievers” (*kuffār*, sing. *kāfir*), Salafis are perhaps slightly more inclined to be against any real or perceived attempts by non-Muslims to influence female Salafis.<sup>2</sup> Their alternative to “Western”

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<sup>1</sup> Kraidy, *Reality*, 2009, 345-66; Meijer, *Reform*, 2010, 80-100; al-Rasheed, *Most*, 2013, 153-72; Le Renard, *Only*, 2008, 610-29. An exception is al-Khidr, *Al-Sa’udiyya*, 2010, 328-40.

<sup>2</sup> Wagemakers, *Framing*, 2008.

lifestyles with regard to gender relations is one of piety and modesty for men and women, with both being created as equals yet enjoying different rights and duties. While the former need to support the family financially, the latter are to stay home in order to take care of the children, raise a new generation of pious Muslims and refrain from working outside the home, which is an activity that supposedly clashes with women's nature.<sup>3</sup>

In practice, Salafi scholars state that this attitude may be expressed in men helping their wives with household work, being friendly and gentle to them and spending time with them. Men must not, however, interfere with things that are seen as clearly their wives' responsibility, like cooking, and should take care not to punish their spouses while other people (even the children) are present. Women, for their part, are described as having positive roles as wives, mothers and ladies of the house, through which they serve their husbands, to whom they should listen. Wives should also obey and love their husbands, ask them for permission and try to look beautiful and well-dressed at all times.<sup>4</sup> The latter does not, however, necessarily mean wearing a *niqāb*. Although many Salafis believe that women should cover their faces in public, the major Syrian Salafi scholar Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914-1999) claimed that a woman's face and shoulders are not part of her 'awra (the parts that she needs to cover). He bases this on Q. 24: 31, which states: "And say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts, and reveal not their adornment save such as is outward (*illa ma zahara minhā*) [...]"<sup>5</sup> Based on a number of *hadīths*, Al-Albani claims that the latter words indicate that the face and shoulders may be left uncovered, thus making a *niqāb* or any other facial veil unnecessary.<sup>6</sup>

### III. The Saudi Scholarly Context

While Salafi views on gender relations such as those mentioned above are based on old texts, they are also shaped and influenced by the current political and socio-economic context. In Saudi Arabia, the version of Salafism mostly referred to as Wahhabism has been the state's official version of Islam since Muhammad b. Sa'ud (d. 1765) made a pact with Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), in which the former maintained political and military power while the latter was responsible for the state's doctrinal underpinnings, in 1744.<sup>7</sup> Since then, Salafi scholars – as ideological heirs to Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab – have had a dominant role in the state's official religious discourse. As such, their beliefs have permeated several aspects of Saudi life, like education. There, scholars have not only been influential with regard to the contents of what is taught in schools, but also in relation to the amount of Islam that should be part of teaching curricula.<sup>8</sup> Although this might suggest that gender relations in Saudi Arabia have long been dictated by Salafi scholars, this is not entirely the case. Girls' education, for instance, was a controversial topic among scholars but was nevertheless pushed through by the regime.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, employment opportunities for women in agriculture prior to the exploitation of the kingdom's considerable oil reserves in the 1950s were dictated more by economic necessity than religious doctrine.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Abu Haniyya, *Al-Mar'a*, 2008, 25-43.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Qaysi, *Al-Usra 1 and 2*, 1992-1993, 67-70, 44-6.

<sup>5</sup> All Qur'anic citations are taken from Arberry, *Koran*, 1955, but using the more common verse-numbering of Egyptian editions of the Qur'an.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Albani, *Jilbab*, 2002, 3-23, 96-117.

<sup>7</sup> Commins, *Wahhabi*, 2006; al-Rasheed, *History*, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Abdella Doumato, *Manning*, 2003, 230-47; id., *Saudi*, 2007, 153-76; Prokop, *Education*, 2002, 559-81; id., *Saudi*, 2003, 77-89; id., *War*, 2005, 57-81.

<sup>9</sup> Abdella Doumato, *Education*, 2003, 239-57; al-Hariri, *Islam's*, 1987, 51-7; al Rawaf and Simmons, *Education*, 1991, 287-95.

<sup>10</sup> Altorki, *Women*, 1992, 96-110.

All of this shows that the way Salafi scholars implement their ideas on gender relations in Saudi Arabia is shaped by the specific context of the kingdom. Three contextual factors in particular need to be taken into account to understand the Saudi discussion on gender-mixing. Firstly, there is the role women play in the Saudi national-religious identity. Given the state's claim to be Islamic, with Salafi scholars acting as guardians of this status, the position of women has become what may be described as a litmus test of the country's religious character. This obviously gives "women's issues" a much greater importance and relevance.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, the oil wealth generated since the 1950s has not increased the standing of women in the oil industry, but – instead – allowed them to leave the work force altogether. In fact, Saudis' wealth often enabled families to hire servants, thereby also depriving many women of control over their own households. This partly turned women into people who were taken care of at home rather than active agents, which reinforced the religious idea of keeping women indoors.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly, the Islamic mandate of Saudi Arabia's Salafi scholarly establishment had always been limited, but became even more so throughout the kingdom's history.<sup>13</sup> The state compensated for this loss of power, however, by giving the scholars more influence in social and personal matters. Salafi scholars have subsequently exploited this mandate to the full by focussing almost entirely on relatively minor doctrinal issues, including aspects of gender relations, like *ikhṭilāt*.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV. Saudi Salafi Scholars against Gender-Mixing

##### IV.1 Gender-Mixing Linked to Temptation

Apart from contextual factors influencing Salafi scholars in Saudi Arabia, it also seems that some of them believe that a prohibition on *ikhṭilāt* is not something that people will easily accept. As such, several scholars feel the need to accompany their proof texts against gender-mixing with more general arguments on gender relations and the supposedly harmful practices *ikhṭilāt* can lead to. The concept underpinning this type of reasoning is *sadd al-dharā'ī* (blocking excuses). This term denotes, among other things, that the harmful nature of some matters may not be immediately apparent, but that they may nevertheless lead to forbidden acts. Concretely, this means that the supposed evil nature of gender-mixing may not be obvious to all, but that it can nevertheless lead to *fitna*, a term best translated here as "temptation".<sup>15</sup> Scholars point out their belief that the presence of the opposite sex can lead to temptation by referring to a *hadīth* in which the Prophet is said to have warned that "I have not left after me a temptation more harmful to men (*fitna adarra 'ala l-rijal*) than women".<sup>16</sup> Such *hadīths* are interpreted by Saudi Salafi scholars as indicating that one should be careful not to engage with unrelated members of the opposite sex because of the detrimental consequences it can have.<sup>17</sup> Thus, one author states that "[t]he essence of the problem of gender-mixing is not just sexual

<sup>11</sup> Abdella Doumato, *Gender*, 1992, 31-47; al-Khidr, *Al-Sa'udiyya*, 2010, 329; al-Rasheed, *Most*, 2013, 8-20. After the terrorist attacks of 11 September, 2001, however, when Saudi Arabia came under fire because 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis and the kingdom was seen as a bulwark of "extremist" ideology underpinning such acts, the Saudi state actively started promoting itself as "modern", again using women as a symbol of this by giving them more rights. See al-Rasheed, *Most*, 2013, 134-72.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Rasheed, *Most*, 2013, 22-5.

<sup>13</sup> Steinberg, *Religion*, 2002, 427-69.

<sup>14</sup> See also al-Rasheed, *Contesting*, 129-31.

<sup>15</sup> Al-'Ajlan, *Al-Ikhtilat...*, n.d.; al-Majid, *Al-Waqi'iyya*, n.d.

<sup>16</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 62 ("Kitab al-Nikah"), *bab* 18 ("Ma Yashaqqa min Shu'um al-Mar'a wa-Qawluhu Ta'ala 'Inna min Azwajikum wa-Awladikum 'Aduwwan la-kum"), no. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Al al-Shaykh, *Risala*, n.d.; al-Shayḥ, *Al-Ikhtilat*, n.d. (originally published in *Al-Iqtisadiyya*, May 30, 2008).

harassment (*al-taharrush al-jinsi*), but [also] forbidden relations (*al-'alaqat al-muharrama*), even with the consent of both sides".<sup>18</sup>

Efforts to make the prohibition of *ikhhtilāt* look more obvious do not stop at such general warnings. One scholar states that men and women desire one another and that gender-mixing has "effects that lead to the obtaining of an evil objective (*gharad sayyi*)".<sup>19</sup> In practice, the latter refers to things such as homosexuality,<sup>20</sup> sexual harassment, rape, abortion,<sup>21</sup> adultery and children born out of wedlock.<sup>22</sup> These phenomena, all of which are presented as the result of temptation caused by *ikhhtilāt*, are much easier to present as evil and unwanted, including with reference to the Qur'an and the Sunna. The story of Yūsuf (Joseph), whose slave master's wife tried to seduce him, is used to make this point. Several scholars recount this story (Q. 12: 22-34), especially verse 22, which states: "Now the woman in whose house he was solicited him, and closed the doors on them. 'Come,' she said, take me!". The objective is clear: the fact that Yūsuf was alone in a house with a woman he was not married to caused temptation to reach a point that it almost led to adultery.<sup>23</sup>

A similar attempt to link gender segregation with presumably more acceptable and certainly more common issues among Muslims is found in scholars' writings about the connection with the headscarf (*hijāb*). These two issues are clearly linked, one author writes, because, like gender segregation, "the *hijab* is the obstacle that separates between two things. The headscarf of a woman is what blocks her from the man's gaze at her body."<sup>24</sup> The similarity between gender segregation and the headscarf, with both aimed at taking away temptation, not only allows authors to tie gender segregation to the probably much more popular wearing of a *hijāb*, but it also enables them to cite Qur'anic verses they see as dealing with the headscarf as proof of the correctness of their position.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the most prominent Qur'anic verses cited in this context are Q. 24: 30-31, which state that both "believers" and "believing women" must "cast down their eyes and guard their private parts". As partly mentioned above, "believing women" are further told to "reveal not their adornment (*zīnatahunna*) save such as is outward; and let them cast their veils (*khumurihinna*) over their bosoms (*'ala juyūbihinna*), and not reveal their adornment [except to certain people]; nor let them stamp their feet, so that their hidden ornament may be known". Saudi Salafi authors direct their readers' attention to these verses for a reason similar to why they focus on the story of Yūsuf: exposing women to unrelated men will lead to temptation. Believing women should therefore separate their beauty (through some sort of covering) or, in the case of gender segregation, themselves from men altogether.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, the interpretation that Q. 24: 31 may not call for covering the face, as al-Albani believed, or even the entire head, but instead refers to other body parts is not one shared by the scholars whose work I read. To them, the overriding goal of avoiding *fitna* by keeping men and women separate is most important, thereby underlining their rejection of *ikhhtilāt*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Al-'Uqayli, *Al-Raja'iyun*, n.d.

<sup>19</sup> Al al-Shaykh, *Risala*, n.d.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Azraq, *Al-Ikhtilat*, n.d.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*, *Ihsa'iyat*, n.d.

<sup>22</sup> Abu Sara, *Li-Madha*, n.d.

<sup>23</sup> Al al-Shaykh, *Risala*, n.d.; al-'Urayfi, *'Ashruna*, n.d.

<sup>24</sup> Abu Sara, *Hadatha*, n.d.

<sup>25</sup> The headscarf and women's clothes are, indeed, issues often discussed by Saudi Salafi scholars. See *Fatawa*, 1414/1993-1994, 154-85.

<sup>26</sup> Abu Sara, *Hadatha*, n.d.; Al al-Shaykh, *Risala*, n.d.; Ibn Baz, *Hukm*, 1414/1993-1994, 192-4; *id.*, *Amal*, 1414/1993-1994, 194-6; al-'Umari, *Akthar*, n.d.; al-'Urayfi, *'Ashruna*, n.d.

<sup>27</sup> For more on alternative interpretations of these verses, see Motzki, *Kopftuch*, 2004, 175-201; *id.*, *Zij*, 2009, 65-72.

## IV.2 Opposing Gender-Mixing as Such

Apart from the *ikhṭilāt*-related arguments Saudi Salafi scholars use, they also mention a number of Qur’anic verses and especially *hadīths* to make the case that gender-mixing in and of itself is forbidden. One verse mentioned with regard to this issue is Q. 33: 33, which seems to tell the Prophet’s wives to “remain in your houses (*wa-qarna fi buyutikunna*)”. This verse is part of a series of commandments that strongly appears to be aimed at Muhammad’s wives only and is immediately preceded by a verse stating “[w]ives of the Prophet, you are not as other women”, which could be interpreted as meaning that different rules apply to women in general. Saudi Salafi scholars, however, seem to ignore this distinction or consciously apply the admonition to stay indoors (and thus separate from non-related men) to all Muslim women.<sup>28</sup>

Another important verse in relation to the question of *ikhṭilāt* is Q. 33: 53, which again appears to deal with Muhammad’s wives. Believing men are told that “when you ask his wives [while visiting the Prophet at his home] for any object, ask them from behind a curtain (*hijab*).” To some scholars, the presence of a physical separation between the Prophet’s wives and unrelated men inside Muhammad’s home in this verse is more proof that gender-mixing is wrong.<sup>29</sup> Saudi Salafi scholars and authors again do not seem to take into account that such verses appear to refer to the wives of the Prophet only, but treat them as general statements on the impermissibility of *ikhṭilāt*.

Most proof texts used by Saudi Salafi scholars and authors against the practice of gender-mixing are not taken from the Qur’an, however, but from the Sunna.<sup>30</sup> One of these is a *hadīth* stating that during Friday prayers in a mosque attended by both men and women, “the best of the men’s rows (*khayr sufuf al-rijal*) [in which they pray] is the first, while the worst is the last one. The best of the women’s rows is the last one, while the worst is the first one”.<sup>31</sup> The idea behind this seems to be that if men and women pray in rows, with the men forming the front rows and women the ones at the back, the last row of men and the first composed of women will be closest to each other, which is why the Prophet refers to these two rows as “the worst (*sharruha*)”. Saudi Salafi scholars claim that this is because these two rows allow for greater distraction and temptation between men and women. As such, they claim that this *hadīth* is direct evidence of the illegitimacy of *ikhṭilāt*.<sup>32</sup>

The impression that women may be a distraction or a temptation to men in mosques is seemingly confirmed in other *hadīths*, such as one on women wearing perfume. Through this, they are said to have greater power to distract men from praying. Citing a *hadīth* in which the Prophet states to women that “if one of you (*ihdakunna*) is present at the mosque, do not wear perfume (*tiban*)”,<sup>33</sup> several scholars claim this is further proof against gender-mixing.<sup>34</sup> Another *hadīth* states that after prayer, the Prophet would remain in his place and would let women get up first before getting up himself. Muhammad is said to have done this to allow women to leave the mosque

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<sup>28</sup> Al al-Shaykh, *Risala*, n.d.; Al-Azraq, *Al-Ikhtilat*, n.d.; Ibn Baz, *Hukm*, 1414/1993-1994, 192; id., *Amal*, 1414/1993-1994, 195.

<sup>29</sup> Abu Sara, *Hadatha*, n.d.; Ibn Baz, *Hukm*, 1414/1993-1994, 192-4; id., *Amal*, 1414/1993-1994, 194-6. Yet see also Al-Lajna al-Da’ima, *Sawt al-Mar’a*, 1414/1993-1994, 209; al-‘Urayfi, ‘*Ashruna*, n.d.

<sup>30</sup> I only refer to *hadīths* taken from the canonical *hadīth*-collections by al-Bukhari and Muslim for reasons of space and because the authenticity of other traditions used in this debate is often contested by opponents of gender-segregation. Since the authenticity of *hadīths* is quite a different issue than the one dealt with now, I will not go into that subject here.

<sup>31</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, book 4 (“Kitab al-Salat”), *bab* 28 (“Bab Taswiyat al-Sufuf [...]”), no. 440.

<sup>32</sup> Al al-Shaykh, *Risala*, n.d.; al-Majid, *Al-Waqi’iyya*, n.d.; al-‘Umari, *Akthar*, n.d.; al-‘Urayfi, ‘*Ashruna*, n.d.

<sup>33</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, book 4 (“Kitab al-Salat”), *bab* 30 (“Bab Khuruj al-Nisa’ [...]”), no. 443. See also no. 444, which only tells women not to come to evening prayer.

<sup>34</sup> Al al-Shaykh, *Risala*, n.d.; al-‘Umari, *Akthar*, n.d.; al-‘Urayfi, ‘*Ashruna*, n.d.

before men finished their prayers.<sup>35</sup> Several Saudi Salafi scholars, again, see this as proof that men and women should not mingle at all.<sup>36</sup>

Other, less frequently used *hadīths* include one that has the Prophet warning men to “be careful not to enter upon the women (*iyyakum wa-l-dukhl ‘ala l-nisa’*) [in their houses]”.<sup>37</sup> Another tradition holds that ‘A’īsha, one of Muhammad’s wives, related that “[the Prophet’s] hand would never touch the hand of a woman (*ma massat yaduhu yad imra’a qatta*) in [accepting] the oath of fealty (*mubaya’a*) [that people would pledge to him]”.<sup>38</sup> Still another *hadīth* mentioned refers to (what may be an incident of) the Prophet’s preaching, advising and ordering women to pay alms separately from the men.<sup>39</sup> All these and other traditions are presented by Saudi Salafi scholars as proof from Muhammad’s life that gender-mixing should be prohibited.<sup>40</sup>

### IV.3 Opposing Gender-Mixing during the Circumambulation of the Ka’ba

One specific sub-topic that is repeatedly mentioned in texts related to *ikhtilāt* is gender-mixing during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca or, to be more specific, during the circumambulation (*ṭawāf*) of the Ka’ba in that same city. Precisely because this is an important ritual inside a mosque that involves many people who are sometimes in close physical contact with each other, it is perhaps not surprising that it occupies a special place in writings on *ikhtilāt*. One *hadīth* quoted<sup>41</sup> states that women were forbidden to perform this ritual with men and one man is cited as stating that the wives of the Prophet never did the *ṭawāf* among men either. The example of ‘A’īsha is given, who used to perform the circumambulation separately and once refused to step inside the Ka’ba to touch the black stone together with another woman, although she did allow the other woman to do so. It is further related in this tradition that the wives of the Prophet, “when they went into the Ka’ba, they used to stay [outside] until they went in when the men had come out”.<sup>42</sup>

Another *hadīth* cited by a Saudi Salafi scholar<sup>43</sup> states that one time ‘A’īsha was told by Muhammad to perform the *ṭawāf* separately while other people were praying.<sup>44</sup> A closely related tradition mentioned by several authors<sup>45</sup> states that Umm Salama, another one of the Prophet’s wives, complained to her husband about not feeling well and was told to “perform the circumambulation behind the people, riding”, thus also suggesting a separation between her and others.<sup>46</sup> Scholars point out that all these examples show that *ikhtilāt* during the *ṭawāf* is forbidden<sup>47</sup> and that gender-mixing in much smaller and more closed spaces such as classrooms would be even worse.<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, however, I have again not come across any anti-*ikhtilāt* scholars distinguishing between ‘A’īsha and Umm Salama – as the Prophet’s wives – on the one hand and women in general on the other.

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<sup>35</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 12 (“Abwab Sifat al-Salat”), *bab* 70 (“Bab al-Taslim”), no. 799.

<sup>36</sup> Al al-Shaykh, *Risala*, n.d.; al-Shayī, *Al-Ikhtilat*, n.d.; al-‘Urayfi, *Ashruna*, n.d.

<sup>37</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 62 (“Kitab al-Nikah”), *bab* 112 (“Bab La Yakhluwanna [...]”), no. 159.

<sup>38</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 50 (“Kitab al-Shurut”), *bab* 1 (“Bab Ma Yajuzu min al-Shurut [...]”), no. 874.

<sup>39</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 15 (“Kitab al-Idayn”), *bab* 16 (“Bab Khuruj al-Sibyan [...]”), no. 92.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Majid, *Al-Waqi’iyya*, n.d.; al-‘Umari, *Akthar*, n.d.; al-‘Urayfi, *Ashruna*, n.d.

<sup>41</sup> Al-‘Anqari, *La Jadid*, n.d.; al-‘Urayfi, *Ashruna*, n.d.

<sup>42</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 26 (“Kitab al-Hajj”), *bab* 63 (“Bab Tawaf al-Nisa’ [...]”).

<sup>43</sup> Al-‘Ajami, *Al-Ikhtilat*, n.d.

<sup>44</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 26 (“Kitab al-Hajj”), *bab* 70 (“Bab Man Salla Rak’atay [...]”), no. 692.

<sup>45</sup> Al-‘Ajami, *Al-Ikhtilat*, n.d.; al-‘Urayfi, *Ashruna*, n.d.

<sup>46</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 60 (“Kitab al-Tafsir”), “Surat al-Tur”, no. 376; *Sahih Muslim*, book 15 (“Kitab al-Hajj”), *bab* 42 (“Bab Jawaz al-Tawaf [...]”), no. 1276.

<sup>47</sup> Abu Sara, *Hadatha*, n.d.; al-‘Ajami, *Al-Ikhtilat*, n.d.; al-‘Anqari, *La Jadid*, n.d.

<sup>48</sup> Al-‘Ajami, *Al-Ikhtilat*, n.d.

## V. Supporting Gender-Mixing on Religious Grounds

As both Roel Meijer and Madawi al-Rasheed have pointed out, the issue of *ikhtilāṭ* is no longer the prerogative of conservative Salafi scholars in Saudi Arabia and – especially since the terrorist attacks of 11 September, 2001 – the Saudi regime has allowed other voices to be heard in public debates about this topic.<sup>49</sup> One of these belongs to Halima Muzaffar, a Saudi author and columnist for the newspaper *Al-Watan*. Though not a scholar herself, she questions the religious arguments of those who are in order to make her case for more equality in gender relations. In two of her articles, she questions the position that “the woman is an enjoyment (*naʿma*) subjected to men (*sukhkhirat li-l-rijal*) in [this] world and the hereafter”. Muzaffar doubts that this is truly Islamic and claims that “the husband lives for his wife, just as she lives for him. They need each other to complement each other’s lives.”<sup>50</sup> She also questions whether women are a temptation to men and believes that Q. 64: 14 (“Oh believers, among your wives and children there is an enemy to you; so beware of them”), used by some to claim women are a *fitna* to men, is really directed at both men and women. Indeed, she wonders: “Is an impious man not also a *fitna* to his wife when he orders her to be disobedient [to God] and to abandon what is good[?] [I]n fact, his *fitna* is more serious [than hers] if he exploits his power in imposing that on her”.<sup>51</sup>

A more specific rebuttal of Salafi opposition to *ikhtilāṭ* is given by Yusuf Aba l-Khayl, a writer for the Saudi *Al-Riyadh* newspaper, who frequently uses the Qur’an and the Sunna to make his case in favour of gender-mixing. On the basis of, for instance, Q. 2: 282 (“And call in to witness two witnesses, men (*shahidayn min rijalikum*); or if the two be not men, then one man and two women, such witnesses as you approve of”), Aba l-Khayl states that the sources “do not just confirm the permissibility of *ikhtilāṭ* as something considered natural, but even its necessity in some places”. Another example he provides is Q. 28: 23, 25, which relates the story of Mūsā (Moses) helping two women draw water in Midian. Aba l-Khayl even believes men and women who want to marry each other – and thus presumably have mutually amorous feelings – but have not done so yet are allowed to meet. Quoting Q. 2: 235 (“There is no fault in you touching [upon] the proposal [of marriage] to women, or hide [it] in your hearts; God knows that you will be mindful of them; but do not make troth with them secretly (*la tuwaʿiduhunna sirran*) without you speak[ing] honourable words”), the author claims that even in such situations, men and women can meet.<sup>52</sup> Aba l-Khayl also cites several *hadīths* that seemingly allow men and women to be in the same room together,<sup>53</sup> that indicate that both sexes used to perform the ritual ablution (*wuḍūʿ*) before prayers together<sup>54</sup> and that women sometimes served unrelated men<sup>55</sup> food and drinks.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting high-profile proponent of *ikhtilāṭ* in these debates is Shaykh Ahmad al-Ghamidi, the head of the Meccan branch of the Organisation for the Commanding of Right and the Forbidding of Wrong. Given his job as a leading member of the organisation that sees to it that religious cus-

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<sup>49</sup> Meijer, *Reform*, 2010, 81-93; al-Rasheed, *Most*, 2013, 159-66.

<sup>50</sup> Muzaffar, *Al-Takamul*, October 14, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Muzaffar, *Hal Khuliqat*, October 18, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Aba l-Khayl, *Al-Ikhtilat*, October 3, 2009.

<sup>53</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, book 39 (“Kitab al-Salam”), *bab* 8 (“Bab Tahrim al-Khalwa [...]”), no. 2173.

<sup>54</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 4 (“Kitab al-Wudu”), *bab* 45 (“Bab Wudu’ al-Rajul [...]”).

<sup>55</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 58 (“Kitab Manaḡib al-Ansar”), *bab* 17 (“Bab Manaḡib Abi Talha [...]”), no. 156; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 62 (“Kitab al-Nikah”), *bab* 78 (“Qiyam al-Mar’a [...]”), no. 111; *Sahih Muslim*, book 36 (“Kitab al-Ashriba”), *bab* 9 (“Bab Ibahat al-Nabidh [...]”), no. 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Aba l-Khayl, *Al-Ikhtilat*, 2009.

toms are strictly observed in Saudi society, one might expect al-Ghamidi to be a staunch opponent of gender-mixing. Instead, however, he has been a powerful supporter of the practice, as others have pointed out elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> Apart from the proof texts that have already been referred to by other proponents of *ikhṭilāt*, al-Ghamidi offers plenty of *hadīths* that allegedly show that gender-mixing existed among early Muslims and should thus be allowed in modern-day Saudi society as well. He mentions traditions of a woman relieving herself outside the house without a *hijāb* (with the Prophet's permission),<sup>58</sup> women serving food to unrelated men<sup>59</sup> or visiting the latter during periods of ill-health,<sup>60</sup> unrelated girls making music in Muhammad's presence<sup>61</sup> and unrelated men and women being in the same room.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps more private than these examples<sup>63</sup> are instances of men (including the Prophet) being deloused by women<sup>64</sup> and of Muhammad taking a woman he was not married to for a camel ride,<sup>65</sup> all of which al-Ghamidi claims prove that *ikhṭilāt* was allowed during the life of the Prophet.<sup>66</sup>

More interesting perhaps than the new evidence al-Ghamidi presents, however, is his interpretation of the proof texts used by opponents of *ikhṭilāt*. For example, the aforementioned *hadīth* about the Prophet remaining in his place after prayers in a mosque, allegedly to allow women to leave before the men got up, is seen by al-Ghamidi as proof that men and women did pray in the same room, thus constituting *ikhṭilāt*. Similarly, while the Prophet is said to have remarked that the rows in which praying men and women are closest to each other are the worst, al-Ghamidi states that this *hadīth* again shows that men and women mingled in one room of a mosque. He even actively refutes the *hadīths* on the *ṭawāf* that opponents of *ikhṭilāt* use to denounce gender-mixing. He points out that the *hadīths* about Umm Salama's *ṭawāf* while riding, used above to argue against *ikhṭilāt*, actually show that men and women did perform the circumambulation together in the days of the Prophet. Moreover, he states that 'A'īsha's unwillingness to enter the Ka'ba when there were men inside was not a rejection of gender-mixing at all, but simply indicates that "[the Prophet's] wives [...] did not jostle with men, because jostling is not allowed". As such, al-Ghamidi claims, it was 'A'īsha's unwillingness to be in close physical contact, not her rejection of *ikhṭilāt*, that kept her from entering the Ka'ba while men were in there.<sup>67</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

Salafis often have views on gender relations that most people would probably find quite

<sup>57</sup> Meijer, *Reform*, 87-9; al-Rasheed, *Most*, 164-5.

<sup>58</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 4 ("Kitab al-Wudu"), *bab* 12 ("Bab Khuruj al-Nisa' [...]"), no. 148; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 74 ("Kitab al-Isti'dhan"), *bab* 10 ("Bab Ayat al-Hijab"), no. 257; *Sahih Muslim*, book 39 ("Kitab al-Salam"), *bab* 7 ("Bab Ibahat al-Khuruj [...]"), no. 2170.

<sup>59</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 13 ("Kitab al-Jum'a"), *bab* 38 ("Bab Qawl Allah Ta'ala [Q. 62: 10]"), no. 60; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 58 ("Kitab Mana'iq al-Ansar"), *bab* 10 ("Bab Qawl Allah 'Azza wa-Jalla [Q. 59: 9]"), no. 142.

<sup>60</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 30 ("Kitab Fada'il al-Madina"), *bab* 13, no. 113; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 58 ("Kitab Mana'iq al-Ansar"), *bab* 45 ("Bab Maqdam al-Nabi [...] wa-Ashabihi l-Madina"), no. 263; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 70 ("Kitab al-Marda"), *bab* 8 ("Bab 'Iyadat al-Nisa' [...]"), no. 558; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 70 ("Kitab al-Marda"), *bab* 21 ("Bab Wudu' al-'A'id [...]"), no. 581.

<sup>61</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 15 ("Kitab al-'Idayn"), *bab* 2 ("Bab al-Hirab [...]"), no. 70; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 59 ("Kitab al-Maghazi"), *bab* 11, no. 36.

<sup>62</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 62 ("Kitab al-Nikah"), *bab* 113 ("Bab Ma Yajuzu an Yakhalu [...]"), no. 161; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 92 ("Kitab al-I'tisam [...]"), *bab* 26 ("Bab Qawl Allah Ta'ala [Q. 42: 38 and Q. 3: 159]"); *Sahih Muslim*, book 52 ("Kitab al-Fitan [...]"), *bab* 24 ("Bab Qissat al-Jassasa"), no. 2942.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Mufaddali, *Al-Ikhtilat*, 2009.

<sup>64</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 26 ("Kitab al-Hajj"), *bab* 125 ("Bab al-Dhabh [...]"), no. 782; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 87 ("Kitab al-Ta'bir"), *bab* 12 ("Bab Ru'ya l-Nahar"), no. 130.

<sup>65</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, book 39 ("Kitab al-Salam"), *bab* 14 ("Bab Jawaz Irdaf [...]"), no. 2182.

<sup>66</sup> Al-Mufaddali, *Al-Qawl*, 2009.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*



strict indeed. Based on their religious beliefs and their wish to keep Islam “pure” from non-Islamic influences, Salafis often accord women positions that are distinctly different from those of men. Yet the Saudi political and social context has also had a great impact on how Salafis in the kingdom express their views on gender relations, including *ikhtilāṭ*. Not only has the focus on gender-mixing in Saudi Arabia been shaped by the country’s history, but the proof texts used by scholars in this debate are sometimes interpreted with this society’s wishes in mind. This not only shows that discussions on gender-mixing in the kingdom are less uniform and doctrinaire than some would believe, but also cast a different light on the sources used in this debate, which – even in the hands of supposedly “literalist” Salafis – appear to be more dynamic and less clear-cut than many would expect.

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