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Saudis Consider Banning Women From Mecca

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JIDDAH, Saudi Arabia -- Officials are considering an unprecedented proposal to ban women from performing the five Muslim prayers in the immediate vicinity of Islam's most sacred shrine in Mecca. Some say women are already being kept away.

The issue has raised a storm of protest across the kingdom, with some women saying they fear the move is meant to restrict women's roles in Saudi society even further. But the religious authorities behind the proposal insist its real purpose is to lessen the chronic problem of overcrowding, which has led to deadly riots during pilgrimages at Mecca in the past.

It was unclear why the step was being considered now, but officials say they have growing concerns about overcrowding, particularly at Mecca's Grand Mosque. The mosque contains the Kaaba, a large stone structure that Muslims around the world face during their daily prayers.

The chief of the King Fahd Institute for Hajj Research, which came up with the plan, told The Associated Press Thursday that the new restrictions are already in place. There have been word-of-mouth reports of women being asked to pray at new locations away from the white-marbled area surrounding the Kaaba in recent weeks.

But Sheik Youssef Khzeim, deputy chief of the Presidency of the Two Holy Mosques Affairs, a Saudi government organization in charge of implementing the proposal, denied the reports, saying the old arrangements that allow women to pray in the Kaaba's vicinity are still in effect. He said if any woman were asked to move to the back "it's only to maintain order."

"This is still a study and nothing has been implemented," Khzeim told the AP.

Such discrepancies are not unusual in Saudi Arabia and could signal an attempt to introduce the controversial arrangements slowly.

Many Saudis say the proposal, released two weeks ago in the form of a study, violates the spirit of Islam.

"The prophet, who is the first leader of Muslims, didn't do it," said Mohsen al-Awajy, an Islamist lawyer and cleric. "Those who are proposing the change after him have to come up with legal justification for it."

Al-Awajy urged the Saudi government to put an end to "such a rigid and austere mind-set that could become the core of a violent trend in the future."

Prominent Saudi female writers have written angry editorials denouncing the plan as discriminatory and urging authorities not to adopt it. Some have questioned the reason for changing a tradition that goes back to the dawn of Islam. Others say it further sets back women in the country.

Women in Saudi Arabia lead strict lives. They are banned from driving and need permission from a male guardian to go to school, get a job, travel or stay at a hotel.

"Women are not all young beauties that rush to the mosque with an aim of seducing men," wrote one woman, Aziza al-Manie, in the country's Okaz daily.

"Among female visitors are the ill, the old, tormented widows, the handicapped and disabled, and the ones with problems desperately wanting God's help and mercy," she wrote, according to a translation in Arab News.

Al-Manie said there are no laws that allow men the exclusive possession of the area and warned that if the government adopts the plan, it will live up to "the assumption that Saudi Arabia is an extremist country that deprives women of their given rights."

Osama al-Barr, head of the hajj institute, said the fuss was unwarranted because the study was meant simply to find a solution to the problem of overcrowding at the Grand Mosque. Muslims believe the original Kaaba was built by Adam and that it was rebuilt by the prophet Abraham, who initiated the call for people to make a pilgrimage to Mecca.

"The study was made for safety and technical reasons, and it doesn't have any religious dimensions," al-Barr said.

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He said the restrictions apply only to the five daily Muslim prayers and that women would be free to roam the premises at will after the prayers and to circle it during the main annual hajj pilgrimage.

Overcrowding in the Grand Mosque, one of the few places where Muslim male and female worshippers can pray together, has become a chronic problem since the government began issuing open-ended visas several years ago for the minor pilgrimage called omra in Mecca. Mecca is the birthplace of the 7th century Prophet Muhammad.

That has allowed worshippers to perform the minor pilgrimage throughout the year instead of only at religious occasions. During the main annual hajj pilgrimage in Mecca, more than 2 million Muslims pour into the holy city, and stampedes at various points of the hajj have killed hundreds of people over the years.

Al-Barr said the proposed prayer areas for women would be 210 times larger and have a better view of the shrine.

But historian Hatoon al-Fassi wondered why the study did not restrict men. Plus, she said, such a decision should be made by all the Muslim world, not simply by Saudi authorities.

"I'm sure the proposal won't be implemented because this is a matter that's of concern to all the Islamic world and not only Saudi Arabia," said al-Fassi.

The plan has started causing ripples outside the kingdom.

The Washington-based Muslimah Writers Alliance, an organization of Muslim women writers, is sponsoring an online petition drive against the study.

"At no other time in history, either before or after the time of the Prophet Muhammad, have women been relegated to lesser advantageous positions within the (mosque)," Aishah Schwartz, the group's director, said in a statement.

"The proposed plan is no more acceptable today than it would have been when the teachings of Islam began to be delivered over 1400 years ago," she added.

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