

The Islamist Mask Slips

by Jenna Wright



As churches, synagogues, and mosques across the country begin cautious efforts to reopen their doors to masked, socially distant worshippers, the primacy of some congregants over others has become apparent at some Islamic institutions with Islamist ties. Specifically, COVID-19 seems to have exposed some radical mosques' duplicity on the question of women's rights.

The majority of the published restrictions for religious practice discovered by the Middle East Forum pertain to the *jumu'ah* [Friday prayer]. The [Muslim Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh](#) (MCCGP) offers a compelling example. The mosque [declared](#) in early June that, despite opening its doors once again, "sisters are encouraged to stay home at this time ... to protect [their] health and safety." It justified this decision by claiming that women are not religiously obligated to attend *jumu'ah*.

However, many other mosques around the country have not implemented such policies. Is Islamist influence behind the MCCGP's decision?

The MCCGP certainly does have some extremist ties. On his Facebook profile, the mosque's public relations secretary Salah Al Moukamal proudly displays a [picture of the R4BIA hand gesture](#), an insignia of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The MCCGP has also repeatedly [partnered](#) with the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), an organization so entrenched in extremism that the Federal Bureau of Investigation [blacklisted it](#) after federal prosecutors named it as an unindicted coconspirator in a 2008 terror finance case.

The MCCGP is far from the only mosque to implement such a policy. The Islamic Center of Hawthorne in California, which also [works closely](#) with CAIR, has also [posted](#) strict rules for attendance, prohibiting children under 15 and requesting that women not attend, also because "the Jumu'ah salah is not mandatory upon them."

In Houston, the [MAS Katy Center](#) has, without explanation, [forbidden women and children](#) under thirteen from attending. This mosque is known for its radical positions and interpretation of Islamic law, particularly concerning its leadership and speakers. For example, this past May, the mosque [hosted](#) Waleed Basyouni from the AlMaghrib Institute, who has [defended Hamas](#) and argued that the reason the former president of Egypt Hosni Mubarak lost control of Egypt was because he [strayed from pure sharia](#), "ruling Egypt with secularism that came from the west."

In Colorado, both the [Colorado Muslim Society](#) and the [Denver Islamic Society](#) declared in June that they would not admit women and children.

Speaking to the Middle East Forum, a spokesman for the Denver

Islamic Society explained the mosque's position as an effort to "minimize exposure to as many people as we can." He stated that the policy only applies to Friday prayers, as the "mosque is open to women and children" at all other times.

One [former preacher](#) at the Denver Islamic Society is Anwar Al-Awlaki, who later became a senior Al Qaeda leader in Yemen before his death in a 2011 drone strike.

The Colorado Muslim Society has since [rescinded](#) its ban on women, restricting only those younger than 13 and older than 65 – a policy that arguably makes more sense, if considering the threat of coronavirus. This mosque, too, has Islamist ties. Earlier this year, it hosted an event with notorious Islamist activist Linda Sarsour, in collaboration with the Muslim Legal Fund of America, which has [funded](#) the legal defense of several high-profile Islamist terrorists and terror financiers. The mosque's former imam Karim Abuzaid, a notorious Salafi preacher, recently proclaimed "sharia" as the answer to questions of racism in American society and has [argued](#) that coronavirus is divine punishment for homosexuality and adultery.

In contrast to the vague reasons for barring women from other mosques, the Muslim Unity Center in Michigan at least provides a substantive explanation for the policy in its [reopening guidelines](#). It specifies that the women's prayer area is smaller and will hold fewer people if "social distancing" is implemented.

Except for the excuse offered by the Muslim Unity Center, the decisions to restrict women are noteworthy, given that each of these mosques has previously allowed women and children to attend. The logic behind the policies appears to be Islamist-driven misogyny, as there is certainly no evidence that women are more susceptible to catching or spreading COVID-19.

Some Muslim critics argue that the scriptural reasoning for

excluding women from *jumu'ah* is an extremist fantasy. In an [article](#) on *Medium*, journalist Beenish Ahmed writes that the exclusion of women at the *jumu'ah* is a radical position based not on Islamic doctrine but instead on the biases of particular Islamic scholars and religious leaders that consider the presence of women in a mosque to be a “sexual distraction.” She explains that Islamic leaders initially waived mosque attendance for daily prayers for women consumed with “familial responsibilities,” but this provision of assurance has since “been vastly misconstrued to meet a misogynistic end.”

Indeed, leading contemporary Salafi scholars have [ruled](#) that the *jumu'ah* prayer at a mosque is not obligatory for four types of congregants: “a slave, a woman, a child or one who is sick.” If women want to attend the mosque, one Salafi scholar writes, they must not beautify themselves with “adornments and perfumes,” lest doing so lead to sexual immorality. Beenish Ahmed argues that this reasoning reduces women to mere sexual objects and prevents them from fully participating in their religion.

Despite Ahmed’s claims, however, there does appear to be at least some consensus across Sunni Islamic schools of jurisprudence that women are not required to attend *jumu'ah*. However, if indeed the exclusion of women is considered inconsequential, then these mosques’ former willingness to admit women was apparently nothing more than a token gesture. There is a clear difference between indifference to women attending certain mosque services, and a policy banning them entirely. This pandemic may have masked mosque congregants; but it has unmasked their radical officials.

Jenna Wright is a writer for [Islamist Watch](#), a project of the Middle East Forum.