

6. Women and the Vote in Syria: A Parliamentary Debate About the Relationship Between Gender and Citizenship in the Proposed State, April 25, 1920

This document is a transcription of the proceedings of a Syrian parliamentary session during which delegates to the Greater Syria Conference were attempting to compile a constitution. Their purpose for doing so was to thwart European (French and British) efforts to claim political control over the region. In the course of the discussions, delegates posed questions about the meaning of the Syrian "nation" and its implications. Notice that a multitude of opinions were being presented from various parts of "Greater Syria"—Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria.

Discussion Questions

- i. What are the arguments, in this parliamentary discussion, against giving women the right to vote?
- ii. What are the arguments that supported women's suffrage?
- iii. In addition to the religious and social arguments surrounding this issue, Rashid Rida noted that there is a third matter that needed to be taken into consideration. What was it?

On the 25th of April, 1920, Article 79—which specifies the characteristics of the voter—of the Basic Constitution was to be discussed. Lebanon's delegate (District of al-Kharoub-Sheheem), Mr. Ibrahim al-Khanib, stood up and suggested giving the right to vote to women who had come of age and who had finished their secondary education. Subsequently, a clamor and uproar went through the hall which was interrupted by an impromptu and eloquent speech by the legal scholar Shaykh Sa'id Murad al-Ghazi (delegate of Gaza). [He spoke] about the right of the woman to vote, and the fact that the Islamic Shari'a has specified that the woman should govern, work, be knowledgeable and eloquent. [He concluded] by asking, then how could she not be a voter? At this point, the Secretary of the Conference invited Mr. Izzat Druza (Nablus) to debate Ibrahim al-Khanib's suggestion.

Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Kilani (Hama) spoke to the young men of the Conference saying, "The Europeans have walked the path of modernization for 300 years, and their traditions do not prohibit the woman from participating in any activity, yet show me one country of the countries of Europe which has given women that right [voting right]?"

VOICE: (*from the floor of the Conference*) England, Sweden.

So he responded to them, "If you want the uplifting of women then open schools for them. Giving the woman the right to vote means her right to be a delegate, so do you want amongst you female delegates?"

SA'ADALLAH AL-JABURI: Why not? She already goes to the market and buys . . . AL-KILANI: The presence of the woman as voter or delegate with this ignorance and immorality is harmful, but when the good morals are developed then we can look into the matter [of voting rights for women].

SA'ADALLAH AL-JABURI: I note the words of the gentleman, that he sees no reason in the end that should keep her from voting.

al-Hamadiyya, 25 April 1920, pp. 47–53. Translated by Akram Khater.

AL-KILANI: Yes, yes then we will look into the matter positively, the *hijab* is indeed an innovation, but when some demanded that it be removed the ignorant rabble began to follow the [unveiled] women mocking them. We are afraid that this decision [about voting?] will cause social and political unrest. This idea [women's right to vote] is too premature, and I request that we reject it.

DA'AS AL-JURJIS (HOSN AL-AKRAD): We do not want to remain in the state of a man who has suffered from a stroke that left one half of him healthy and the other paralyzed. The nation is made up of the man and the woman.

Therefore, we must reflect on this suggestion [women's right to vote] with honesty and sincerity. I would like to thank Mr. Al-Kilani because I understood from him that he supports the suggestion even though he does not think it appropriate for this moment in time! It is true that 98% of our women are ignorant, which is why he [al-Kilani] made education a requirement and that is correct! Therefore, if we give only the educated woman the right to vote then he would approve of that. Turkey has given the woman the right to vote and the author Khalida Adib is about to enter the parliament. What you observed during the war (WWI) of the service of women in the army is evidence of the importance of the help of the gender sex. And the presence of the lady in the armed services is far more important than the process of voting. And the danger that some of the present brothers see [in giving such a right to women] can be removed because a woman has the right not to give an opinion, and the lady who is careful to avoid having the pen touch her fingertips has the right to not vote.

AHMAD AL-QADAMANI (DAMASCUS): Allah has made her with half a brain. DA'AS AL-JURJIS: It is very important to place this principle [woman's right to vote] in our Basic Law, especially given our current political situation, therefore I demand the acceptance of the suggestion and to move it to committee (*applause from the right and the middle*).

'ADEL ZU'AYTER (NABLUS): There is no doubt that each and every one of us want[s], desires, and must work to make the woman arrive at a level of advancement where she can take her right. And despite what has been said about the benefit of giving women the right to vote, I still see its approval at this moment does not coincide with the welfare of the nation. Some of the European nations have not taken this step except after it had undergone developments that lasted hundreds of years, while we are now only at the beginning of our societal life. Every nation has traditions and wise mores, and if the laws are not based upon these then it is to be feared that revolutions and unrest will break out (*applause from the middle*). Yes, it is true that the *Shari'a* [Islamic jurisprudence] may give the woman the right to vote, but it does not say that the nation is obliged to pass legislation that give the woman the right to participate in it [the electoral process]. Permission is one thing, and obligation is another. We are now in a difficult situation. We came to this place to express the opinion of the nation, and if we pass legislation that it [the nation] does not accept, and we are in our current situation, then will we have kept that trust?

VOICES: No, No . . .

'ABD AL-QADIR AL-KHATIB (DAMASCUS): I request that we table this article for discussion, until the nation can look at it, and if it supported it then it [the nation] has the final say, and if it did not support it then it has the final say as well. Educated women are far and few in between, and we cannot take the exceptions to be the basis of the law, and I beg of you not to undertake a matter that will do greater harm than good.

SUBHI AL-TAWIL (LATAKIA): The matter is purely societal and does not effect the *hijab*. And the woman if she is selected is not required to unveil herself (*appliance*). Even if this election [of a woman into the Parliament] does nothing but prove a woman's right [to be elected] then it is sufficient.

AHMAD AL-QADAMANI (DAMASCUS): And from where did you get this right and from which *Shari'a*?

SUBHI AL-TAWIL (LATAKIA): An educated woman is better than a thousand ignorant men, so why would we give men the right to vote and yet deprive educated women from that same right?

AHMAD AL-QADAMANI (DAMASCUS): How many men like you are there in Latakia?

SUBHI AL-TAWIL (LATAKIA): If you have something to say then please come to the podium, and do not speak from the floor. Yes, there are very few educated girls, but it is not obligatory for them to vote. Some of the speakers have said that Europe is now trying to give women the right to vote. What is meant by that is to give them the right to sit in the seats of the Parliament. But the right to vote had been given to them hundreds of years ago.

AHMAD AL-QADAMANI (DAMASCUS): We in Damascus do not want that [women voting] to be the case, so just make it so in Latakia!

SUBHI AL-TAWIL (LATAKIA): I request that an open-ballot vote be taken on the suggestion of brother Ibrahim al-Khatib.

At this point Shaykh Sa'id Murad (Gaza), the champion of women's rights, stood up, and he was received with applause. And a commotion arose that was interrupted by Riyad al-Sulh (Beirut) saying: "Before Shaykh Sa'id speaks, [let me say that] it is possible that a group of the members [of parliament] may be of different views than his, but honoring knowledge is a must therefore, gentlemen, I ask you to applaud" (*loud applause*).

SHAYKH SA'ID MURAD (GAZA): This is a very important subject that I do not deny disagreement over it. Disagreement is the *summa* [law] of the universe. But what I would like for this matter is for you to consider to look [at it] rationally rather than with emotions. I request that we do not mix up the matter of the *hijab* with this subject at hand. What prompts me to speak about this subject is what I have read in the writings of the Westerners and their newspapers, for they have said: The East needs the West to be its guardian, because it [the East] has decreed upon itself the ignorance of its half (*apocryphal*). I am speaking in colloquial Arabic that everyone can understand; the Westerners say: We must be the guardians over the East, whose one half of society has been decreed to be ignorant. Therefore, I say that there is no . . . (at

this point the following members withdrew from the session: 'Abd al-Qadir al-Khatib, Muhammad al-Majtahid, Ahmed al-Qadamani, Ibrahim al-Shaykh Hussein, Ahmad al-'Ayyash, Khalil al-Talibani).

THE PRESIDENT: We have lost the quorum.

SA'ADALLAH AL-JABRI: Even though the quorum is lost we particularly want to hear the words of the gentleman.

IZZAT DRUZA (SECRETARY): There is a quorum.

SHAYKH SA'ID MURAD, *continued*: We say to the Westerners from this podium words that will reach their parliaments. There are no traditions in the East that decree the ignorance of half of its people. We are also ready at every opportunity to remove this ignorance from men and women alike. Islamic jurisprudence had decided to accept the testimony of a woman, and to accept references of *hadiths* to her, and to accept her as teacher and judge in legal matters except the criminal cases. I am not speaking here of the *hijab* for it is a secondary matter. And it is as if my brothers would have me confuse the issue of voting with that of the *hijab* when the subject is clearly about a woman's right. And those who gave us the right to legislate in this parliament have given her also the right to vote. Yes, I do not deny that all laws should be in step with the spirit of the nation, and a legislation cannot be enforced unless it is distilled from the spirit of the nation. [However,] what makes this subject a problem for some of the brothers—despite my belief in their honesty, sincerity and patriotism—is that they are confusing the matter of the *hijab* with the matter of education which is the means for election. So, if you want to discuss the *hijab* then discuss it without me being a member in this session. However, the subject of women's education was discussed half a century ago and the proponents have won. And now you can see the capitals and the countries full of girls' schools. And since we are in agreement about the education of the woman, then I wanted at this point to advance the subject of election after the matter of education hoping that it will be as successful as the latter. And this we progress till we arrive at the desired goal. First, we must acknowledge the right of the woman to elect a member of the parliament. And this is similar to a woman testifying, for the judge accepts the testimony of women according to their class and traditions. Similarly, we can allow women to vote in a manner that does not force her to remove the *hijab*. And all I want for Europe to understand is that—while it maybe more advanced than us in manufacture and material things—we are more civilized than it in our civil code. And if Europe wants to progress and complete its civil code, then it must turn to the East and adopt from it. And just as we do not want to deny its [Europe's] unique characteristics, it must not deny ours. I want for every citizen to be proud of his "Syrianness," in the same manner that the greatest minister in the West is proud of his patriotism. The only link of the woman's subject [with regard to the vote] is to the matter of education, and we must acknowledge that Allah has given her the same rights as he has given you. So be kind to those on

earth and He who is in the heavens will be merciful to you. This is one of the pure social issues that benefits greatly from the Qur'anic text.

RAFIQ AL-TAMIMI (AL-KHALIL-HEBRON): Mr. Sa'id Murad has spoken eloquently about this subject, but despite that [I must insist] that this matter is not a religious one, but a civil one relating to social relations more than spiritual issues. In the past the woman in the West did not have a separate individuality, rather right after marriage her person was mixed with that of her husband. Thus, she had no right to buy or sell. But the West has progressed, and the civilized nations have given the woman control over of her legal rights. Europe that has been late in giving this right [voting right] must not be better than us, especially since Islam has given the woman this right 1,200 years ago. However, we can harmonize between the old and new ideologies. The right to vote is a duty that covers all the citizens. But it is deaf for every citizen should vote, but he is not penalized if he does not cast his vote. In other words, the woman has the liberty to use or refuse this right. And we say unto the men who do not accept to give women the right to vote, that you can influence your women. However, if there exists even the smallest group of people in the country who demand the granting of such a right then we must pave the way for it. If we give women this right then this does not mean that they must go to the city hall to vote, but rather they can meet in a designated place and vote. And for this reason I agree with the suggestion of Shaykh Ibrahim al-Khatib. I congratulate this conference which has defended the woman in the previous session, and has uplifted her status, when the rabble and the insolent fools in the capital had taken a stand against the gentler sex. I congratulate this conference because it knows that a nation whose half is ignorant cannot guarantee personal liberty. If the conference, which represents the nation, cannot put a stop to the attacks of the insolent against veiled women in the streets then we can kiss freedom goodbye.

IBRAHIM AL-KHATIB: If I had known that the minds [here] were ready to accept my suggestion to this degree then I would have suggested giving the woman more than this right (*murmurs from the seats of the Free Party, to which this member belongs*) . . . Mr. President, I declare that I have withdrawn from the Free Party because of what it contains of ignoramus.

TAWFIQ MUFARJ (KOURA): Withdraw your comment, Withdraw your comment!!

IBRAHIM AL-KHATIB: I withdraw it. If voting was a job then we would have obliged the woman to do it, but it is right that she has a choice in using it. We have limited this right to those women who are educated, who hold secondary degrees, and we have said that they have the right to give their opinion in writing!! I insist upon my suggestion, and I request that it should be accepted . . .

MR. RASHID RIDA (PRESIDENT OF THE CONFERENCE, LEBANON): (*Long storm of applause*): This matter has been discussed from a religious and social angle. But there are more than these two perspectives, and that is the feelings and

sentiments of the nation. Had we been deciding upon a lesson then it would have been necessary for every person to give their opinion. However, he who wants to pass a practical legislation in the name of the nation must pay attention to its sentiments. Many speakers have spoken about this subject [women's right to vote] from the perspective of the Shari'a, but they did not give its due. The Shari'a is a very wide topic, and while pure religious matters are based on the text, matters relating to the world are based on consideration of public interests that change according to time and place. For, if we suppose that the leaders decide that it is in the interest of the nation to give women the right to vote, then we can find a precedent for it in the Shari'a, but until now this has not occurred. . . . Then there is another matter that is worthy of consideration. For voting pre-supposes individual freedom, and here I wonder: can a woman, living under the guardianship of her husband, use the right to vote if her husband forbids her from that?

SA'ADALLAH AL-JABIRI (ALEPPO): And does he have the right to forbid her from giving testimony in the courts?

RASHID RIDA: Yes. But I am not saying that I have decided on this matter, because I have not examined it very carefully. Do you suppose that that which the woman has learned in secondary school is sufficient to allow her to gain the right to vote? The Shari'a is quite open, so that if it can be proven that giving this right will be of benefit to the nation then the Shari'a allows it. However, the nation has sent for a particular reason . . . but we must maintain our status with the nation in whose name we speak, and to know the extent of the influence of our laws on her. The ratio of educated women amongst us is less than two percent, that is less than the percentage mentioned by Mr. Al-Kilani!! I have read in many magazines that when they, in Europe, have used women in many different tasks they have discovered that she has half the strength of the man. I submit that we must fight those reactionaries who desire for the woman to remain ignorant, however no benefit can come at this time from the issue of voting. . . . You know that the general public or public opinion will not accept the establishment of that [voting rights for women]. One shout at this critical time is sufficient to cause a public uprising. Despite my respect for the opinion of the "sugester" and my belief in his patriotism and sincerity, I request that we table the issue of the woman's right to vote and not include it within the law.

MOUNAH HAROUN (LATAKIA): I reply to the gentleman, and support the opinion of Shaykh Sa'id Murad saying: I have read in the religious interpretation that Mr. Rashid Rida himself publishes the following Qur'anic verse: "And they [the women] have the same [rights] as responsibilities." This means that the rights of the woman are the same as those of the man. And in the same interpretation [we read]: "Men are the guardians of the women," and that is by one degree. Beyond that then equality is an obligation. Therefore, I say that giving the right to vote to the woman is not contrary to the Shari'a.

RASHID RIDA: It appears that I have opened for you doors to matters that have not been clarified. Mr. Mounah Haroun has taken parts of my statement so that it appears as proof for his point, when it [my statement] is proof against him. For the degree which separates men from women is the degree of guardianship. But we do not want to enter here into interpretation. Rather we say, there is not benefit in this matter, and that we do not have the time to open the door of the people for the fanatics. Ten years ago I came to Damascus [from Egypt] and gave a lecture on the issue of *Tawhid* [monotheism] and the world was turned upside down against me. Now you oblige me to say quite frankly that in taking this decision [you will cause for] speeches to be made in the mosques and in societies against the Conference, and you will open matters that are of no practical benefit to us. TAWFIQ MUFARJ (KOURA): If the matter was related to the Shari'a then I would not speak of it, but this matter has nothing to do with religion, and I find it strange that the debate has arrived to this stage.

'ADEL ZU'AYTER (NABLUS): You did not understand the words of Mr. Rashid. He has dealt with this issue from the perspective of public welfare and the circumstances of the country.

TAWFIQ MUFARJ (KOURA): All religions do not oppose this matter, and if Allah has given the woman a right then how can we forbid her from using it? DOCTOR SAÏD TAL' (LEBANON): How sad the woman is . . . you are discussing her rights in the Parliament while she is being insulted on the streets!! It is nice to be talking about the rights of the woman, and we all support that but I would like to remind you of a historical incident. When Japan wanted to craft a constitution for itself it called upon specialists from all the countries, and amongst those was an expert that was applauded by the attendees [of the constitutional session]. So he went to the Prime Minister and said to him: "My legal opinions have garnered the trust of all, so I hope that you will use as basis for your constitution. So he [the Prime Minister] replied to him: "We will take that which suits our country and leave aside that which does not." If I was in Europe I would have agreed to give this right to the woman all the while supporting my opinion with proofs and evidence, but since we are in Syria then I cannot do so. Here we are enacting legislation for the whole Syrian nation, and every law that does not correspond to the spirit of the nation is useless. . . . Syria cannot bear this law [woman's right to vote] now!

RIFAD AL-SULH: When I stand at this podium I do not ask about coffee-houses and homes, and whether it is with me or against me. Principally, I submit that we should give this right to the woman, and if the cafés of Damascus do not accept this, then the other districts will accept it with pleasure. And for me the greatest thing that this Conference has done is to leave the podium free [of interference] . . . Please know, gentlemen, that the departure of six or seven members from this hall is of no consequence to me. Rather it proves their inability to defeat the truth. Still, I see that what the brothers have propose[d] is a compromise for the two ideas . . . it is a suggestion that we temporarily table this matter for now. . . .

GEORGE HARFOUSH (BEIRUT): I would like to say to you that the misbehavior which occurred amidst the general public in Damascus because of this debate had also occurred in Europe. . . . But this Conference has proven through its work that it walks in step with the free city. . . . Tomorrow Europe will read in its newspapers that the members of the Syrian Conference have suggested giving the woman the right to vote. . . . And rest assured that with that we will have had greater impact than twenty delegations, and accordingly I support the opinion of those demanding the need to give the woman her right. THE PRESIDENT: Do you not find that we have had enough debate?

VOICES: Enough.

THE PRESIDENT: We have the following suggestion from Uthman Sultan and Theodore Antaki and fifteen members: "We suggest not dealing with the subject of giving the woman the right to vote, and recording the suggestion in the minutes of the Conference, and leaving the legal paragraph as it currently is." Whomsoever accepts this let him raise his hand (and here many hands were raised in support of this suggestion . . . and the session was concluded).

7. The Contest for Alexandretta Between Syria and Turkey, May 1938

For much of its premodern history, Alexandretta, with its capital city Antioch, was considered as part of Bilad al-Sham, the area known today as Syria. In 1920 the sanjak (province) of Alexandretta was awarded to Syria by the League of Nations in the guise of a French mandate. In 1936 Alexandretta became the subject of a complaint to the League of Nations by Turkey, which claimed that the privileges of the Turkish minority in the sanjak were being infringed. (In 1921 there were only 87,000 Turks amid a population of 220,000 that was primarily Arab). In 1937 the sanjak was given autonomous status by an agreement, arranged by the League, between France (the mandatory power in Syria) and Turkey. Riots broke out between the various "national" and "ethnic" groups (primarily Arabs and Turks but also Kurds and Armenians). The result, in 1938, was the establishment of joint French and Turkish military control. In 1939, France transferred the sanjak to Turkey, and it became Hatay province. The transfer was the outcome of a highly contested and suspect referendum. Turkish peasants had been tricked into Antioch to vote, and Arabs had boycotted the election because they said it was fraudulent. After the votes were counted, close to fourteen thousand Armenians, who had fled Turkey because of the anti-Armenian genocide of 1914, left Hatay province and moved to Lebanon. Most historians agree that France's motivation for ceding the province to Turkey, despite Hatay's Arab majority, was to persuade Turkey to side with the Allies against Germany in the event of war.

The letter and deposition included here refer to the 1938 rioting and indicate the complexity of the subject of national identity.

League of Nations Archives, Geneva, Switzerland. Translated by Akram Khater.