

**MUSTAFA AKYOL's REMARKS AT THE UNGA 2025 OFFICIAL SIDE EVENT,
"WEAPONIZATION OF RELIGION BY THE TALIBAN"**

Abstract:

By depriving women of their right to education, the Taliban regime is reversing a step forward that the Islamic civilization already took some 150 years ago, when the Ottoman Caliphate opened many modern schools for females and advanced their rights.

By dictating their own narrow interpretation of Islam on all, they are also depriving Muslims of the freedom to practice their religion as they sincerely believe in it. They are violating the Qur'anic principle, *La ikraha fid-din*, or "There is no compulsion in religion."

As we all know, the Taliban call their regime in Afghanistan an "**emirate**." But as they would also know, in the Islamic tradition, there is a higher authority than that, which is the **caliphate**. Therefore, I would like to remind you of a few things about how the last legitimate caliphate on earth — the Ottoman Empire — dealt with the important issue of women's rights and especially their education.

In the Ottoman Empire, until the 19th century, education was never banned, but it was also not widespread, especially for females. Yet challenges posed by European and Russian imperialism made the Ottoman elite see the need for political, administrative, and legal reforms, ushered in by the Tanzimat Edict of 1839. Ottoman statesmen and clergy also realized that to catch up with the industrialized powers, they needed a more skilled population, which required public education.

That is how many modern schools were opened across the empire, first for males, then for females. Here, you see the photos of two middle schools — one in the capital Istanbul, the other in the Balıkesir province — with their female students.

The legal basis for these schools was the Public Education Statute of 1869. It was announced by Ottoman Minister of Education **Mehmed Esad Saffet Pasha**, who referred to a hadith, or reported saying, of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh): "**The seeking of knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim male and Muslim female.**"

These developments continued under the long reign of Caliph/Sultan Abdulhamid II, who is still widely respected in the Muslim world for this defense of Muslim lands. He appointed the young and brilliant **Ayşe Sıdika Hanım** to spearhead female education. She directed the **Dârülmualimât**, which was a school to train female teachers. Their syllabus included religious sciences, as well as algebra, history, geography, physics, biology, and even music, with **piano** lessons — which may be important to note today, given the Taliban's eagerness to destroy all musical instruments.

The Dârülmua'llimât had male teachers as well, which was not seen as inappropriate, as you can see in this photo.

Also, several schools in the late Ottoman Empire, such as the **Necm-i Terakki** (“Star of Progress”) School in Istanbul, had both male and female students. Here you see them offering prayers together.

Why is this history important? It is because it shows that by depriving females of their right to education, the Taliban is reversing a step forward that Islamic civilization already took some 150 years ago. The irony, and the tragedy, cannot be overstated.

Besides this historical legacy, there is another point I would like to stress.

The Taliban call their regime an “**Islamic emirate**,” and they probably believe that they are enforcing “Islam” on Afghan society. But that is not true. What they are enforcing is their own narrow interpretation of Islam. Because on virtually every religious issue, including women’s rights, there is a wide range of opinions among Muslims, from the staunchly strict, to reasonably conservative, to progressive.

Given this diversity, dictating one particular view of Islam on all Muslims is always wrong, because it deprives Muslims of the freedom to practice their religion as they sincerely believe in it. It goes against that beautiful verse of the Qur’an, which proclaims, *La ’ikraha fi d-din*, or “**There is no compulsion in religion.**” (2:256)

Finally, the Taliban should be warned that “compulsion in religion” is not only wrong in principle, but also self-defeating: it does not help the faith; it undermines it. We have observed this in **Iran**, where another self-declared “Islamic” regime has dictated its own narrow view of religion on society — only to end up with a less religious society, where millions have lost their respect for Islam. Women who were forced to wear the hijab ended up burning it on the streets.

With such arguments, Muslim governments and Islamic scholars around the world should keep engaging with the Taliban, advising them against their oppressive policies. And if they may be open to hearing more about what the caliphate would do regarding women’s rights, I would be happy to share more with them.

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