

Kuwaiti Women in the Armed Forces

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A decision by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Defense to integrate women into the armed forces was met with an intense ideological backlash, including in the National Assembly.

In October 2021, it was [reported globally](#) that Kuwaiti women would be permitted to serve in the Kuwaiti Armed Forces, and in combat roles, having been previously restricted to civilian roles within the Ministry of Defence. The landmark decision was contained in a ministerial resolution championed by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, Sheikh Hamad Jaber al-Ali al-Sabah. “We need brains more than muscles,” the minister [reasoned](#). Consequently, for the defence of the nation, the armed forces ought to tap into the talents of “the other half of society.”

However, it seems that Sheikh Hamad did not mean to suggest that Kuwaiti women would now serve on the frontlines – rather, the roughly [466 women](#) currently working in support services and hospitals, and subsequent female recruits, would be transformed from civilian to military personnel. They would [become](#) part of the military hierarchy, as specialist and non-commissioned officers. He [singled out](#) the realm of defence technology and cyberspace and invited more women to come forward to maintain Kuwait’s “security and stability from any external danger.”

The move was welcomed in many quarters. Activists even [urged](#) the Ministry of Defence to go further and open up all opportunities in both combat and non-combat units to women. Guidance was issued, singling out women between the ages of 18

and 26 who are physically fit and have a university degree, diploma or secondary school certificate. When official registration was opened on 21 December 2021, 137 Kuwaiti women [signed up](#) on the first day alone. A military training programme was prepared.

However, just as training was due to commence, Sheikh Hamad announced a sudden pause for permissions to be sought from religious clerics. His plans had come under sustained attack in the Kuwaiti National Assembly, most especially by MP Hamdan al-Azmi, who led a group of ten lawmakers in [submitting](#) a no-confidence motion against the minister (which ultimately failed) and subjected him to a lengthy and emotive [interrogation](#) in the chamber. Other MPs argued that military women may be required to “[sleep outside the home](#),” and this is in violation of Islamic law, as well as Kuwaiti customs and traditions.

Indeed, when the Kuwaiti Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs finally issued its fatwa on 26 January 2022, the clerics were unanimous in their decision to [bar](#) Kuwaiti women from joining the military and from wearing military uniforms – the original text of which has not been made available to the public.

On the heels of the prohibitive fatwa, and perhaps in a quest for common ground, Sheikh Hamad immediately [issued](#) six new regulations to govern female service in the military: consent of the guardian or husband; commitment to wearing the hijab; restriction of areas of work to the medical, technical and support services; a ban on participation in field and tactical exercises; a ban on carrying weapons; and there being a vacancy which actively needs filling. In a departure from the spirit of his original arguments which had [proclaimed](#) that the Kuwaiti Armed Forces were “in front of a new era,” Sheikh Hamad also [insisted](#) that his plans “did not bring anything new” as military women “will be limited to working in the medical, administrative and support services units, which are the specialities that women currently work in within the Ministry of Defence.”

The matter is now with the constitutional court, with many activists [arguing](#) that the imposition of the hijab most especially is discriminatory and therefore unconstitutional. For his part, Sheikh Hamad suddenly resigned his post on 17 February 2022, together with the interior minister, in protest against the lengthy and [politicized](#) grillings of ministers by parliamentarians and “the abuse of constitutional tools,” which are aimed at placing undue pressure on the government. The foreign minister is now acting defence minister.

The furore over integrating Kuwaiti women into the military, and the fetishizing of their bodies and clothing in particular, comes at a time when a groundswell of female activism has brought long-standing abuses into the public space. This includes the once taboo subjects of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. On the streets and on social media, Kuwaiti women have demanded that police take reports of abuse more seriously, as well as reform of the legal system. The penal code in particular allows for “[structural violence against women](#),” as it confers on men the right to physically “discipline” women and permits male kidnappers to marry their abductees and for male relatives to kill women caught in adulterous acts.

The current protest movement was galvanized by one (of many) tragic femicides in 2020, when security guard Sheikha al-Ajmi, who worked at Kuwait's parliament building, was stabbed to death by a teenaged younger brother who disapproved of her job and its uniform. Kuwait's 2020 elections had returned no women to parliament, despite a [record](#) number contesting the race, and thus the all-male "[chamber offered no condolences](#)" for al-Ajmi. An equally shocking crime was committed in April 2021, when Farah Hamza Akbar was murdered in front of her young child by her stalker, after rejecting his marriage proposal, and while he was released on bail for harassing her. Kuwaiti women are also fighting hard to move the needle on smaller yet symbolic issues: this month, they were forced to demonstrate against a ban by the Ministry of Interior on a women's yoga retreat. "Kuwait is a civil state" and "The rule in Kuwait is constitutional," [declared](#) two banners.

It is unclear when a decision from the constitutional court on the status of women in the Kuwaiti military can be expected. But the intensity of the backlash, particularly from male MPs who subscribe strongly to conservative gender ideologies, demonstrates how formal democratic institutions like the Kuwaiti National Assembly – which is the only chamber in the Gulf to enjoy wide legislative powers and to openly challenge the government and royal family – can be mobilized in service of values which flagrantly contravene the spirit of democracy.

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