

Belgium to be first country to post a female ambassador to Saudi Arabia

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Belgium will become the first nation to send a female ambassador to Saudi Arabia next year, with the government telling public broadcaster VRT that appointing a woman to be its top diplomatic representative in the conservative country will send a "clear signal" about its ideals.

Women walk at a market in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Dec. 13. (Faisal Al Nasser/Reuters)

Dominique Mineur, currently the Belgian ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, will move to Riyadh in the summer of 2018 to take over the position there, local media reports.

Saudi Arabia, which follows a conservative form of Islam, is considered to be one of the least gender equal countries on Earth; the country was ranked 138 in the 2017 World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report. Though numerous restrictions on women in the country remain, Riyadh has announced some reforms recently, including plans to allow women to acquire driving licenses in 2018.

Saudi Arabia also appointed a spokeswoman to its embassy in the United States this year.

Mineur will be the first female ambassador to be based in Riyadh. In 2010, Georgia appointed a female ambassador to Kuwait who also represented her country in Saudi Arabia, but when an embassy was later opened in Riyadh a male ambassador took over that responsibility.

According to De Morgan newspaper, Mineur's appointment is seen as a response to criticism of Belgium allowing Saudi Arabia to ascend to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women earlier this year "a move that was widely criticized by human rights advocates. After that vote, Belgium's foreign ministry said it had been surprised by the move and the diplomat who supported the Saudi bid had made a "hasty decision" without proper consultation.

In the past, activists have called for foreign nations to send female ambassadors to Saudi Arabia and other countries where woman's rights were restricted.

"In this way, the Saudi King will be obliged to speak to these ambassadors," Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi said in 2013. "Similarly, imagine 20 woman ambassadors in front of the Iran President. It will be a beautiful sight. Please help us."

Some experts have expressed doubts, however, that the impact would be any more than symbolic: A number of female diplomats already work in Riyadh and Saudi Arabia is often eager receive high-profile foreign guests and skirt the kingdom's strict rules on attire and other restrictions.

Belgium will also send a female ambassador, Veronique Petit, to Tehran, De Morgan reports. Although Iran itself appointed a female ambassador just two years ago, the country's restrictions on women have made it a complicated place for foreign diplomats to operate. In February, female members of Sweden's government were criticized for wearing headscarves while on a trip to Tehran.

The United States has not sent a female ambassador to either Saudi Arabia or Iran. Studies suggest this is because fewer female ambassadors are appointed, and they tend to be sent to countries less important to U.S. foreign policy.

- The Washington Post