There is no doubt that the family of the Prophet, referred to as the Ahl al-Bayt, hold a special and distinctive station for all Muslims. There are however differences amongst Sunnis and Shias regarding this special station, and differences of opinion regarding precisely who falls into this category of honoured individuals. It was the latter of these two questions that was the focus for discussion at the CIMS gathering of where Mufti Faruq Alawi presented a Sunni perspective on the question “Who are the Ahl al-Bayt?”.

Mufti Faruq argued that the most preferable, or strongest, opinion amongst Sunni Scholars is that the Ahl al-Bayt of the Prophet Muhammad, i.e., those who hold a special status in Islam, are specifically the wives of the Prophet, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, Fatima al-Zahra and their sons al-Hasan and al-Hussain. The Mufti acknowledged that there are other opinions amongst Sunni Scholars, yet the above view is the most preferable in light of the arguments he outlined form the Quran, hadith literature, the dominant view of past Sunni scholars and further historical evidence.

The Muftis detailed treatment was contextualised through an analysis of different uses of the terms ‘Ahl’ and ‘Bayt’ in the Arabic language and in the Quran and Sunna. Central to his core argument was to establish that the Quran’s recognition of the special status of the Ahl al-Bayt of the Prophet in Quran 33:33 presumed inclusion of the wives of Prophet and
should be read as a single verse in its entirety. The fact that the pronouns in the verse shift from feminine plural, at the beginning of the verse, to masculine plural subsequently is not problematic, and is a style that can be seen elsewhere in the Quran. The example offered was Quran 11:73, which addresses the wife of the Prophet Ibrahim. Just like 33:33, the verse commences with a female plural pronoun, before invoking the mercy and blessings of Allah upon his family (Ahl al-Bayt) using male plural pronouns. Quoting from a range of different authoritative sources of Sunni hadith, regarding a variety of events, he then went on to detail how reports of the Sunna explicitly and unequivocally identified Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Hussain as being the Ahl al-Bayt of the Prophet Muhammad. For Mufti Faruq, this clear emphasis in the Sunna on the special status of the four individuals was to show that they are included alongside the wives who were otherwise presumed to be amongst the Ahl al-Bayt based on the linguistic and Quranic evidence.

Mufti Faruq’s paper, which can be read in full here, prompted further deliberation and discussion on a number of issues. The session closed with comments from the chair and resulted in a joint statement of similarities and differences between the Sunni and Shi’i views on the topic, these can be read here. This discussion preceded a fuller event focussing on Shia perspectives regarding the same question, details of which can be found here.

1 “وَ𝑞َرْنَ ﻓِﻲ ﺑُﯾُوَﺗِﻛُنﱠ وَﻻَ ﺗَﺑَرﱠﺟْنَ ﺗَﺑَرﱡﺟَ اﻟْﺟَﺎھِﻠِﯾﱠﺔِ اﻷُْوَﻰٰ ۖ وَأَﻗِﻣْنَ اﻟﺻﱠﻼَةَ وَآﺗِﯾنَ اﻟزﱠﻛَﺎةَ وَأَطِﻌْنَ اﻟﻠﱠـﮫَ وَرَﺳُوﻟَﮫُ ۚ إِﻧﱠﻣَﺎ ﯾُرِﯾدُ اﻟﻠﱠ ـﮫُ ﻟِﯾُذْھِبَ ﻋَﻧﻛُمُ اﻟرِّﺟْسَ أَھْلَ اﻟْﺑَﯾْتِ وَﯾُطَﮭِّرَﻛُمْ”

Stay (Feminine Plural - ﻓِﻲ ﺑُﯾُوَﺗِﻛُنْ) in your houses and do not flaunt (f. plural - ﺗَﺑَرﱠﺟْنَ) your finery like the former [days of pagan] ignorance. Maintain (f. pl. - وأَﻗِﻣْنَ) the prayer and pay (f. pl. - وأَﺗِﯾنَ) the zakat, and obey (f. pl. - وأَطِﻌْنَ) Allah and His Apostle. Indeed Allah desires to repel all impurity from you (Masculine plural - ﻋَﻠِيكُم), O People of the Household, and purify you (m. pl. - وَﯾُطَﮭِّرُكُمْ) with a thorough purification.

2 “They said, ‘Are you (female singular – أَﺗﻌَﺟَّبِينَ) amazed at Allah’s dispensation? [That is] Allah’s mercy and His blessings upon you (masculine plural - ﻋَﻠِيكُم), members of the household. Indeed He is all-laudable, all-glorious.’”

Indeed many such verses have been cited by Sunni scholars in showing the precedent of the Quran changing in pronouns such as Musa telling his wife in 20:10 “Maybe I will bring you (pl. Masculine - آَﻟِيَكمْ) brand from it.”