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Muslim women from U.S., overseas to form council on women's rights in Islam

By RACHEL ZOLL, AP Religion Writer

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Muslim women from the United States and around the world are meeting this weekend on forming the first international Islamic advisory council for women.

The American Society for Muslim Advancement, the lead organizer of the event, said the goal of the council is to promote women's rights that advocates say are part of Islamic teaching.

"Women's rights often get debated in the press or they get debated among scholars who are not women," said Daisy Khan, executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement, which is based in New York. "We feel there are many Muslim women who are coming of age who have the scholarly background to be able to step up to the plate to speak authoritatively about it."

The 120 expected participants in the gathering, which starts Friday, include the Baroness Uddin, the first Muslim woman to enter Britain's House of Lords; Ingrid Mattson, an Islamic scholar recently named the first woman president of the Islamic Society of North America; and Dr. Massouda Jalal, a pediatrician and political activist in Afghanistan.

Over the next year, organizers will move toward forming an International Shura Council of Muslim Women. "Shura" is Arabic for "consultation." Muslim communities around the world form shura councils, which play different roles depending partly on the country where they are active. The many U.S. shura councils advise and try to unify their local communities.

Khan said the goal of the women's council is to bring a religious dimension to the Muslim women's advocacy already occurring internationally.

"Most of arguments are couched in human rights arguments. What we are saying is that there are human rights in Islam, that human rights are embedded in Islam," Khan said. "That's the missing piece."

Khan said most of the reaction to the initiative has been positive so far, but "it would be naive to say that somebody wouldn't question this and somebody wouldn't wonder what

we were up to."

The meeting in Manhattan is scheduled to run through Sunday.

On the Net:

American Society for Muslim Advancement: <http://www.asmasociety.org/home/>

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