



Akademik Eğitim ve Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi (AJESS Journal)

Sharia Councils And Family Mediation in Britain: A Sociological and Sharia-Based Approach to Marital Reconciliation

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Article History

Received: 14/05/2026; Accepted: 11/08/2026; Published: 13/09/2026

Abstract:

This study seeks to analyse the role of Sharia councils in Britain in the practice of family mediation and marital reconciliation, through an approach that combines a sociological perspective with a Sharia framework. The study is based on the premise that marital disputes and divorce are complex social phenomena shaped by an interplay of religious, familial, cultural and legal factors. It focuses on how Sharia councils employ mediation and reconciliation mechanisms to address marital disputes, and on reconciling Sharia rulings with the specific social realities of the British Muslim community. The study adopted a descriptive-analytical approach, drawing on the literature and relevant studies concerning the experiences of Sharia councils and family mediation. The study concludes that family mediation within Sharia councils serves a religious and social function in resolving marital disputes and promoting reconciliation and family stability, whilst emphasising the importance of developing its practices in a manner that takes into account the social, legal and cultural context of the Muslim community in Britain.

Keywords: Sharia councils; family mediation; marital reconciliation; sociological approach; Sharia approach.

01. Introduction:

The family is considered one of the most important social institutions, given the fundamental roles it plays in child-rearing and in achieving social stability and cohesion. However, the social, cultural and legal transformations experienced by contemporary societies have contributed to the emergence of growing challenges within married life, including family disputes and divorce, making the search for effective mechanisms for reconciliation and mediation a social and religious necessity. In this context, family mediation has emerged as one of the reconciliation mechanisms based on dialogue, bridging differences of opinion and helping spouses to overcome conflict, thereby creating opportunities for reconciliation and family stability. This form of mediation takes on particular significance in Muslim communities, where the social approach to marital conflict intersects with Islamic legal principles that urge reconciliation between spouses and call for disputes to be resolved before they escalate.

The experience of Sharia councils in Britain stands out as a model worthy of study, given their role in addressing certain family issues within the British Muslim community, and the interaction their practices generate between Islamic legal authority and the social, cultural and legal realities. Hence the importance of examining this experience through a sociological-Sharia approach aimed at understanding the nature of family mediation and its role in marital reconciliation, and at revealing the limits of the interaction between religion and society in the resolution of family disputes.

2. The Problem:

Marital disputes and divorce are among the most significant challenges threatening family stability and affecting its social functions, a situation which has led to growing interest in seeking alternative mechanisms for reconciliation and the resolution of family disputes. Family mediation stands out as a mechanism based on dialogue and bringing the parties to the dispute closer together, thereby providing opportunities for reconciliation free from the complexities associated with the judicial

process. This mechanism is of particular importance to Muslim minorities in Western societies, where religious, social, cultural and legal considerations intersect in the resolution of marital disputes. In this context, Sharia councils in Britain represent an experience worthy of study, given that some Muslims turn to them for Sharia advice and assistance in resolving marital disputes and issues of separation and religious divorce. Consequently, the central issue of this study revolves around how Sharia councils practise mediation and marital reconciliation, and the extent to which they are able to reconcile Sharia principles with the specific social and legal realities of the Muslim community in Britain.

In light of the above, family mediation emerges as a restorative mechanism that can be utilised to address marital disputes - particularly those leading to divorce - through dialogue and reconciliation between the parties to the dispute, in collaboration with relevant bodies. Accordingly, this study centres on the following main question: How do Sharia councils in Britain utilise family mediation in marital reconciliation, and how does the Sharia framework interact with the social and legal realities of the British Muslim community?

This question gives rise to a number of sub-questions, the most important of which are:

1. How is family mediation practised in addressing marital disputes and divorce cases?
2. What is the nature of the role of family mediation, and what methods and skills are employed to achieve marital reconciliation?
3. How do Sharia councils in Britain utilise Islamic legal authority in resolving marital disputes within a Western social and legal context?

To answer these questions, the research has been divided into four main sections, preceded by an introduction and a preface, and followed by a conclusion containing the key findings and recommendations, as well as a list of references.

Theme 1: The methodological and conceptual framework of the research:

01. The significance of this study:

The significance of this study stems from the importance of family mediation in resolving marital disputes and preventing them from escalating, particularly those that may lead to divorce. Its importance can be highlighted in the following points:

- Social significance: This is evident in highlighting the role of family mediation in supporting family stability and strengthening family and social cohesion, through the use of dialogue and reconciliation in resolving marital disputes.
- Religious importance: This lies in demonstrating the presence of Islamic legal authority in efforts to reconcile spouses, and in highlighting the potential for applying the principles of reconciliation and reform in resolving family disputes.
- Academic significance: This lies in studying the experience of Sharia councils in Britain as a model for the practice of marital mediation and reconciliation within a different social, cultural and legal context, thereby enabling an understanding of the relationship between religion and society in the resolution of family disputes.
- Practical significance: This lies in highlighting the methods and skills that can contribute to the development of family mediation practices, and in strengthening cooperation between Sharia Councils and bodies and institutions concerned with family affairs.

02. Research Objectives: This research aims to achieve a number of objectives, the most important of which are:

- To establish the concept of family mediation and clarify its nature and functions in resolving marital disputes, particularly those that may lead to divorce.
- To reveal the role of family mediation in marital reconciliation by identifying its key mechanisms, methods and skills in containing conflict and enhancing the prospects for reconciliation and family stability.
- To analyse the experience of Sharia councils in Britain in the field of marital reconciliation and family mediation, and to examine the nature of the roles they play in resolving marital disputes.
- To understand the interaction between Sharia authority and the social and legal reality in the practice of family mediation within the British Muslim community.
- To highlight the sociological and Sharia value of family mediation, and to demonstrate the potential for developing its practices in a way that strengthens its role in protecting the family and supporting social stability.

03. Methodology:

The researchers adopted a descriptive-analytical approach, given its suitability to the nature of the subject and its objectives, by describing the concept of family mediation and its mechanisms in resolving marital disputes, and analysing the role of Sharia councils in Britain in the field of reconciliation and family mediation. The study also drew on an analysis of the relevant literature and studies, with the aim of identifying the nature of mediation practice, understanding its social and Sharia dimensions, and revealing how Sharia authorities interact with the social and legal reality of the British Muslim community.

04. Conceptual grounding of research terminology:

The nature of the study requires the definition of the fundamental concepts underpinning the research topic, given the importance of this in clarifying the theoretical and procedural meanings of the terms used and avoiding the multiple interpretations that may arise from their use. Accordingly, four key concepts will be addressed: Sharia councils, family mediation, marital reconciliation, and the sociological-Sharia approach.

1. Sharia Councils in Britain

A. Sharia Councils: A Linguistic Analysis: The term consists of two words; 'council' (al-majlis) is linguistically derived

from the verb ‘to sit’ (jalasa), and refers to a place for sitting and meeting, as well as being used to denote a group that gathers to deliberate on a matter. (Ibn Manzur, 1410, p. 38)

As for ‘Sharia’, its linguistic root denotes a path or way; however, in Islamic terminology, it has come to be predominantly used to refer to the body of rulings and principles derived from revelation and governing the life of a Muslim. (Ibn Manzur, 1414, p. 175)

b. Sharia Councils in technical terms: In the British context, Sharia Councils are defined as voluntary community-based religious bodies to which some Muslims turn for advice and guidance on matters relating to Islamic law, particularly issues of marriage, divorce and family disputes. Recent studies have shown that Sharia councils do not represent a unified institutional model, but rather exist within a broader landscape of Islamic dispute resolution mechanisms in Britain, comprising various councils, imams, sheikhs and religious forums that engage, to varying degrees, in consultation, negotiation, mediation and arbitration. (Azzouz, F. 2023, pp. 199–216)

A recent study on Islamic dispute resolution mechanisms in Britain has also shown that religious actors may, in some cases, move between multiple roles, such as providing advice, negotiating, mediating and arbitrating, which underscores the need to treat Sharia councils as a diverse institutional and social phenomenon, rather than as a single body with a uniform practice. (Azzouz, F. 2023, pp. 199–216)

c. From a legal perspective: a clear distinction must be made between Sharia councils and the official courts in England and Wales; these councils do not possess state-derived judicial jurisdiction, nor do they form part of the British judicial system, and their decisions are not legally binding in the same sense as court judgements. An independent government review on the application of Sharia law in England and Wales concluded that Sharia councils have no legal jurisdiction within the state, and that domestic law remains the binding authority. (Home Office, 2018, pp. 8–9)

The British Government also confirmed in a recent parliamentary response in 2026 that the decisions of Sharia councils are not legally binding and that these councils are not part of the judicial system. (UK Parliament, 2026)

2. The concept of mediation:

A/. Language: Wasat: the middle of something; that which lies between its two ends; the middle of something and its centre: its most balanced point; a man of the middle and a mediator: one who is even better than that. To mediate between them: to act as a mediator. To mediate: to take the middle ground; a man who is a mediator, that is, one who is fair-minded amongst his people; ‘wasat’ in his judgement is mediation and moderation, and ‘wasat’ is mediation. ‘To honour him’: to treat him with respect. ‘The mediator’: the one who stands between disputing parties. (Ibn Manzur, 1410, p. 38)

B/. Mediator: the middleman between disputing parties, and the intermediary between buyers and sellers or business partners. The one who is moderate between two things. It is a mediating role. The plural is ‘wasita’ (mediators), and it is said of him that he is a mediator amongst them: the most central in lineage and the most honourable amongst them. Thus, ‘wasita’ conveys the meaning of mediating between two things, as well as justice, the best choice,

the finest, the best, that which lies between the good and the bad, moderation, and in the sense of lineage and honour.

C. Mediation in technical terminology: The term ‘mediation’ appears in the Holy Qur’an in more than one verse and in the Sunnah in more than one hadith, carrying the following meanings:

In the sense of justice, benevolence and moderation between excess and negligence; an example of this is the words of Allah:

{And thus We have made you a moderate community, that you may be witnesses over mankind} [Al-Baqarah: 143]

That is, just. It has been interpreted as meaning those who keep their distance from the extremes of excess and negligence in all matters. In the Sunnah, the term ‘moderation’ also carries the meanings of ‘the middle’ and ‘the highest’, as the Prophet, peace be upon him, described Al-Firdaws as: ‘the middle of Paradise and the highest part of Paradise’ (Al-Ja’fi, n.d., p. 16).

The Ahl al-Sunnah are the middle path in justice and fairness. Accordingly, ‘moderation’ and ‘balance’ are synonymous terms in both linguistic and Islamic legal terminology; they denote: justice, rectitude, benevolence, moderation, moderation, virtue and excellence. Moderation and the middle path are the way of truth and the way of the Prophets and their followers; this is embodied in Islam following the Prophethood of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and in the Sunnah and the way of the Salaf. From this perspective, we can offer a comprehensive definition of the intended meaning of the concept of moderation as follows:

D. Mediation: This is a method of alternative dispute resolution based on providing a forum for the disputing parties to meet, engage in dialogue and reconcile their viewpoints with the assistance of a neutral third party, with a view to mediating a resolution to the dispute. From this definition, it is clear that mediation is carried out by a neutral person and is one of the alternative dispute resolution methods, involving dialogue with the aim of resolving the dispute.

3. Family mediation: a process in which a person provides guidance to help a married couple resolve family problems, reach an agreement and settle family matters. (Jihan, 2021, p. 932).

It involves the efforts of a neutral party to bring disputing family members together with the aim of reconciling them. Family mediation is often a successful means of resolving disputes between spouses. Family mediation is often a successful means of resolving disputes between spouses, and three key elements must be present, namely:

4. The conciliator or mediator: This is the person or group appointed by the body overseeing the conciliation process. They conduct the mediation, reconcile the differing viewpoints of the disputing parties, make concerted efforts to mend the rift and narrow the gap between them, and reach an agreement with the disputing parties on the terms to be agreed upon, subsequently

drawing up the minutes of the settlement.

5. The disputing parties: These are the individuals or families between whom a dispute has arisen and who require someone to mediate on their behalf, as they are unable to resolve the matter amongst themselves. The existence of these disputing parties highlights the need for mediation and brings to the fore the parties involved in the mediation process.

6. The sponsor of the reconciliation: This is the party that endeavours to bring about reconciliation between the disputing parties, whether that party is an individual, a group or an institution. It is this party that seeks reconciliation between the disputing parties; however, it may not carry out the reconciliation itself, but may instead appoint or nominate someone to do so, namely the mediator.

The Family Counselling Centre acts as this mediator and also nominates a mediator specialising in a particular field to undertake a specific mediation process, such as a family dispute. It may also appoint a team of mediators to undertake a specific mediation process. (Doha International Family Institute, 2017, p. 16).

From the above, it is clear that family mediation involves a process of listening, negotiation and dialogue aimed at strengthening family bonds between individuals, with the involvement of a third party - the mediator - provided that they are qualified, impartial and neutral, and have no decision-making authority. This is achieved by organising confidential meetings, and managing the conflict with the aim of restoring communication and creating a climate of trust amongst individuals to reach an agreement on their family disputes, and addressing issues related to their personal conflicts whilst taking into account the genuine needs of all parties, including children. This is what we shall address in the next section of this study.

7. Marital reconciliation

A. Reform in linguistic terms: Reform derives from the word ‘salāh’ (righteousness), which is the opposite of corruption. It is said: ‘Repair the thing after it has been corrupted’, meaning to set it right and remove whatever fault it contains; just as ‘salāh’ (reconciliation) implies the removal of discord and the achievement of harmony between disputing parties (Ibn Manzūr, 1993, p. 516).

B. Marital reconciliation in technical terms: Marital reconciliation refers to the totality of efforts and measures aimed at resolving disputes between spouses, reconciling their differing viewpoints, and removing the causes of conflict, thereby enabling the restoration and continuation of the marital relationship wherever possible. This meaning is based on the principle of reconciliation between spouses in the Holy Qur’an, particularly in the words of Allah: ‘**And if you fear a rift between them, appoint an arbitrator from his family and an arbitrator from her family; if they wish to reconcile, Allah will bring about harmony between them.**’ [An-Nisa’: 35] Al-Tabari discussed this verse in the context of addressing discord between spouses and seeking reconciliation between them, explaining the role of the two arbitrators in attempting to reconcile and bring harmony between the spouses (Al-Tabari, 2001, Vol. 8, p. 321).

Accordingly, the concept of marital reconciliation is employed in this study to refer to efforts aimed at containing and resolving conflict between spouses through dialogue and conciliatory means, thereby enhancing the chances of reconciliation, the continuation of married life and family stability. This verse reveals an important principle in addressing marital conflict, namely the intervention of two parties to mediate between the spouses when the dispute intensifies; this makes the concept of reconciliation one of the cornerstones upon which to base the study of family mediation from an Islamic perspective.

8. The Sharia-based sociological approach

A. The Sociological Approach: The sociological approach views religious and family phenomena as social phenomena linked to cultural, value-based and institutional structures, as well as patterns of interaction within society (Evans & DePalma, 2019).

Consequently, the study of Sharia councils is not limited to the content of the rulings on which they are based, but extends to an understanding of the position of these councils within the British Muslim community and the nature of their interaction with individuals, families, and legal and social institutions (Azzouz, 2023, pp. 199–216).

b. The Sharia approach: The Sharia approach involves drawing upon Sharia concepts, rules and principles relevant to the family, reconciliation, mediation and marital disputes, whilst distinguishing between Sharia rulings on the one hand, and social and institutional practices on the other. This distinction is based on the fact that, in the Islamic conception, the resolution of marital conflict is founded on a set of conciliatory principles, foremost among which are the pursuit of reconciliation and the recourse to arbitrators in the event of discord (Al-Tabari, 2001, vol. 8, pp. 321–323).

Consequently, this study does not view Sharia councils merely as religious institutions, nor does it regard family mediation solely as a procedural technique; rather, it seeks to understand both within a network of social, religious and legal relationships that constitute the reality of Muslim family life in Britain. The importance of this distinction is particularly evident in the British context, where Sharia councils operate within the community and religious spheres without formal judicial jurisdiction, whilst family disputes remain subject to domestic law (Home Office, 2018, pp. 8–9).

9. The family according to sociologists: The family is the social institution that arises from the union of a man and a woman through a contract aimed at establishing the building block that contributes to the construction of society; its most important pillars are the husband, the wife and the children. (Al-Alaf, n.d., p. 03). The family is the vital institution that ensures the formation of social relationships; together with other institutions such as schools, groups of friends, etc., it makes society more social by establishing a social norm that permeates the majority of our actions. (Ferréol & Noreck, 7th ed., p. 120)

10. The concept of divorce:

A. Divorce: Linguistically: a she-camel whose halter is removed and is sent out to graze; or the release of a captive from his cell. Ibn Manzūr said: The divorce of women has two meanings: ‘One is the dissolution of the marriage contract, and the other

is in the sense of release and sending away; the divorced camel is one that is sent out into the pasture to graze in the vicinity of its herd, wherever it pleases; it is not tethered when it departs nor is it restrained in the enclosure; and the camel is released, and she is divorced - that is, her tether is loosened and she is set free ". (Ibn Manzur, 1410, p. 366)

b) Divorce in technical terms: the dissolution of the marriage contract by uttering the words of divorce or their equivalent. (Ibn Qudamah, 1412, p. 96).

05. Previous and comparable studies relevant to the subject of this research:

Based on the relevant literature and studies reviewed, it is evident that there are a number of studies that have addressed Sharia councils in Britain, family mediation and the resolution of marital disputes; however, most of them have focused on one of these aspects without combining them within a

sociological-Shari'ah perspective. Among the most notable of these studies, listed chronologically, are the following:

1. A study by the researcher Abdul Halim Jihan, entitled 'The Role of Family Mediation in Resolving Marital Disputes: A Jurisprudential Study', Journal of Sharia Sciences and Islamic Studies, Issue 85, Umm al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia, 2021, which was limited to certain jurisprudential fatwas in Sharia.

2- The study by Bano & Webley (2023), entitled 'Family Mediators and Family Mediation: When Norms Collide', examined family mediation practices within Sharia councils, focusing on the nature of mediation and the challenges that may arise from differences in values and standards, as well as power imbalances between the parties to the dispute. This study is relevant to the present research due to its direct connection to the variable of family mediation within Sharia councils; however, it focused primarily on the legal and social dimensions of mediation and the issue of conflicting norms, whereas the present research focuses on mediation as a mechanism for marital reconciliation within a sociological-Sharia approach. (Bano & Webley, 2023, pp. 162–177).

3. The study by Azzouz (2023): entitled 'Islamic ADR in Britain: Diversity, Hybridity, and Women's Experiences of Community Justice', examined the diversity of Islamic dispute resolution mechanisms in Britain, including Sharia councils, imams, sheikhs and religious forums, and demonstrated that religious actors may, in practice, move between counselling, negotiation, mediation and arbitration. The study also highlighted the importance of understanding these mechanisms within the context of the British Muslim community, drawing on field research involving both service users and providers. This study contributes to the current research on understanding the diverse nature of Sharia councils and their relationship with mediation and dispute resolution mechanisms; however, the present research focuses more specifically on family mediation and marital reconciliation by combining a sociological perspective with a Sharia framework (Azzouz, 2023, pp. 199–216).

4. Shahin's (2023) study, entitled 'The Islamic Legal and Cultural Influences on Britain's Shari'a Councils', this study examined the Islamic legal and cultural influences on the formation of Shari'a councils in Britain, focusing on the roles played by the scholars working within them and how they utilise jurisprudential sources in addressing the needs of Muslim families in the British context, particularly in matters of marriage and marital disputes. This study is useful in highlighting the relationship between Islamic jurisprudence and the British social and cultural context, a relationship which represents one of the key themes of the present research; however, the study did not make family mediation and marital reconciliation a central focus of its analysis, as the present study does. (Shahin, 2023).

5. Commentary on previous studies:

It is evident from previous studies that the subject of Sharia councils in Britain has attracted increasing attention, particularly from legal, social and cultural perspectives; some studies have also directly addressed the practices of family mediation and dispute resolution within these councils. However, despite their importance, these studies have not directly brought together Sharia councils, family mediation and marital reconciliation within an approach that combines sociological analysis with Sharia jurisprudence. Accordingly, the contribution of the present study lies in its focus on family mediation as a restorative practice within certain Sharia councils in Britain, and in analysing how it is utilised to address marital disputes and seek to prevent family breakdown, whilst examining the interaction between Sharia principles and the social, cultural and legal realities within which these councils operate. The study therefore seeks to bridge part of the existing gap in the literature by combining the sociological and Sharia dimensions in the study of marital reconciliation within the British context.

Section Two: Theoretical Framework of the Research Topic:

1.2. Introductory Overview of International Experiences in Family Mediation

Family mediation is considered one of the alternative means of resolving family disputes; it is regarded as a mechanism for resolving disputes amicably, and a stage

An advanced stage of negotiation that facilitates understanding, communication and dialogue between the disputing parties, with a view to reaching a settlement of the dispute. Given the support and conflict resolution required in family matters to ensure stability, the importance of family mediation - which stems from the parties' voluntary and chosen willingness to participate - is a positive reflection of this. The issue of family mediation and its role in guiding married couples on the verge of divorce towards reconciliation and stability - reconciliation between spouses through the appointment of arbitrators to mend their relationship, as directed by the Qur'an and stipulated by Islamic law - is evidence of the Sharia-based acceptance of mediation in family disputes. Consequently, family mediation has been defined within specific areas, and as an alternative to the courts; to preserve the family unit and resolve disputes. Islamic law has established provisions for the management of family disputes to achieve family stability, particularly family mediation, which is based on negotiation and involves a third party who facilitates dialogue between the disputing parties and assists them in reaching a settlement of their differences. The scope of

family mediation centres on resolving disputes between spouses; hence the importance of highlighting the contributions, roles and methods of family mediation.

The National Consultative Council for Family Mediation in France has defined family mediation as a process aimed at building or rebuilding family ties, based on the autonomy and responsibility of the individuals concerned in cases of separation or family breakdown, in which a neutral, independent and qualified family mediator, who has no decision-making authority, facilitates a confidential space for dialogue that helps the parties to re-establish communication and manage their family disputes. (Conseil National Consultatif de la Médiation Familiale, 2002, p. 110)

2.2. The Algerian experience as a model:

Historically, the resolution of family disputes in Algeria has been linked to a range of social and customary mechanisms based on the values of reconciliation, consensus and the preservation of family ties, as evidenced by certain traditional and social institutions, such as the *zawiyas* and the '*halqa al-azaba*' in the M'zab region and the '*tajma*'at' in the Kabylie region, which have played a mediatory role in resolving a number of disputes within the community. Some studies highlight these practices as social forms that predate the modern institutional organisation of family dispute resolution.

At the legal level, the Algerian legislature has adopted the principle of conciliation in disputes concerning the dissolution of the marital bond; Article 49 of the Family Code stipulates that a divorce is only finalised by a court ruling following several attempts at conciliation conducted by the judge, provided that the duration of these attempts does not exceed three months from the date the case was filed. Furthermore, the Code of Civil and Administrative Procedure regulates conciliation procedures in family disputes, whilst Articles 994 to 1005 designate judicial mediation as one of the alternative methods of dispute resolution, with family cases excluded from its scope as they are subject to special procedures (Qanif, 2022, pp. 2103–2124).

Despite the mandatory nature of judicial conciliation attempts in divorce cases, legal studies indicate that its effectiveness in achieving family reconciliation and reducing family breakdown is limited. This has led researchers to call for the activation of mechanisms to assist and complement conciliation, including family mediation and arbitration, thereby broadening the scope of remedial intervention before the marital bond is dissolved (Qanif, 2022, pp. 2103–2124).

However, the Algerian experience is characterised by the existence of an institutional framework relating to social mediation, namely the social mediator corps attached to the Ministry of National Solidarity, Executive Decree No. 09-353 of 8 November 2009, containing the Organic Law on staff belonging to the corps of the Ministry of National Solidarity, defined the nature and functions of this corps. The tasks entrusted to social mediators include preventive and social intervention with individuals and families facing difficulties, providing guidance and social support to families, and contributing to the preservation, strengthening and rebuilding of family and social ties, as well as helping families in difficulty to resolve their problems, restore trust and communication, and support parenting. (Executive Decree No. 09-353, 2009).

These tasks take on particular significance when considering family mediation in Algeria, as they reveal the existence of an institutionalised social practice that facilitates intervention in family problems before they escalate, although this does not mean that the aforementioned decree alone established an independent system of family mediation. This trend was subsequently reinforced by the inclusion of a social mediator within the Family and Social Mediation Office, as the regulations governing this office stipulate that its staff must include a social mediator, alongside a clinical psychologist and a social worker. It can therefore be said that the Algerian model combines judicial conciliation in disputes concerning the dissolution of marriage, on the one hand, with certain forms of social intervention and family and social mediation, on the other, making it a model worthy of comparison with Western models, particularly the British model on which this study focuses.

3.2. The Western experience in family mediation as a model:

Given the presence of significant Muslim communities abroad in Western countries, it is essential to consider the development of international family mediation, particularly where disputes arise within families as a result of mixed marriages. It can therefore be argued that the establishment of a family mediation institution must go hand in hand with the training and ongoing professional development of the staff who will work within it.

2. A brief overview of England's approach to family mediation, using the European Council for Fatwa and Research as a model:

England is considered one of the early pioneers in the development of family mediation as an alternative or supplementary mechanism for resolving family disputes outside the courts. Local family mediation services, initially known as conciliation services, began to emerge on a voluntary basis in 1978, and this practice expanded during the 1980s with the establishment of national organisations specialising in family mediation.

Family mediation in England and Wales involves the intervention of an independent, trained mediator who assists the parties – particularly separated or divorcing couples – in reaching agreements concerning children, finances, property and other family matters, without the mediator having the authority to impose a decision on the parties. Government guidance emphasises that mediation aims to help the parties reach a mutual agreement, whilst they remain the final decision-makers on the outcome of the process.

The professional regulation of family mediation has developed significantly, with the establishment in 2008 of the Family Mediation Council (Family Mediation Council – FMC) in 2008 as a body bringing together national organisations working in the field of family mediation in England and Wales, and it works to set standards for practice, training and professional accreditation of mediators. The Council comprises specialist national organisations and maintains a professional register of mediators who meet the required standards. Data published by the Family Mediation Council indicates the effectiveness of

this mechanism; a survey conducted in 2017 showed that a full or partial agreement was reached in around 70 per cent of cases, whilst other data relating to the Council's regulated practice in 2019 indicated that the rate of full or partial agreement reached 73 per cent. In the English context, family mediation takes on particular significance in cases of separation and divorce, not as a means of forcing the couple to continue their marital relationship, but rather as a mechanism to help them manage the consequences of separation in a more amicable manner, particularly with regard to child care and arrangements, reducing the intensity of the dispute, and minimising recourse to litigation wherever possible. Consequently, the English experience offers a sophisticated institutional model for family mediation that can be utilised in studying the relationship between mediation, family reconciliation and dispute resolution.

03. Introduction to the European Council for Fatwa and Research.

1. Name and status: The European Council for Fatwa and Research is a specialised and independent Islamic scholarly body comprising a group of scholars; its current headquarters are in Dublin, Republic of Ireland (European Council for Fatwa and Research, n.d.).

2. Establishment: The Council was founded in 1997, when its inaugural meeting was held in London at the invitation of the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe, attended by a number of scholars; during the meeting, the Council's Articles of Association were adopted (European Council for Fatwa and Research, n.d.).

3. Objectives of Establishment: The Council was established in response to the need for a collective jurisprudential authority to address the issues facing Muslims in Europe, to issue fatwas and studies that take into account the specific realities of their situation in Europe, and to contribute to unifying jurisprudential perspectives on common issues and regulating Muslims' interaction with European societies in the light of the provisions and objectives of Sharia (European Council for Fatwa and Research, n.d.).

4. Key characteristics and methodology: The Council is characterised by its independence and specialisation, its focus on the issues facing Muslims in Europe, its adoption of collective ijtiḥād, and its drawing upon various schools of jurisprudence, whilst taking into account the evidence of Sharia, the objectives of Sharia, an understanding of the European context, and the principle of facilitating fatwas, without bias towards any single school of jurisprudence (European Council for Fatwa and Research, n.d.).

The Council thus represents one of the jurisprudential institutions that has sought to provide a collective approach to emerging issues facing Muslims in the European context, by combining Islamic legal authority with consideration of the specific social, legal and cultural realities of European societies (European Council for Fatwa and Research, n.d.).

05. Objectives: The primary objectives of establishing the European Council for Fatwa and Research are to foster closer ties amongst scholars in Europe, to publish Islamic legal studies and research addressing the issues and emerging developments facing Muslims in Europe, to guide them through the dissemination of Islamic concepts and legal rulings, and to strive to provide a collective Islamic reference for Muslims in the West. The Council is also concerned with defending the rights of Muslims as a minority and guiding them on how to interact with European societies in a way that fosters engagement without assimilation, whilst preserving religious and cultural identity without isolation (European Council for Fatwa and Research, n.d.).

To achieve these objectives, the Council employs a number of methods, including the formation of specialised committees, reliance on reliable scholarly sources, the organisation of courses and seminars, the publication of bulletins, and the translation of research, resolutions and fatwas into various languages, as well as endeavouring to strengthen the Council's presence as a scholarly authority on issues affecting Muslims in Europe (European Council for Fatwa and Research, n.d.).

06. Membership of the Council: The Council's constitution stipulates that each member must meet the following conditions: .

They must hold a recognised Islamic qualification; be known for good character and conduct; be resident in Europe; combine knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence with an understanding of contemporary realities; and be approved by an absolute majority of the members.

To date, the Council comprises 35 members from eighteen countries and is currently chaired by Dr Yusuf bin Abdullah al-Jadai' (al-Jadai', 2013, p. 6).

The following is a list of members by country (Al-Harbi, n.d., p. 264).

Members of the European Council for Fatwa and Research by country

Country	Names of members of the European Council
United Kingdom	Salem Al-Sheikhi, Ahmed Kazim Al-Rawi, Ismail Kashouli, Rashid Al-Ghannouchi, Suhaib Hassan Ahmed, Abdullah bin Yusuf Al-Jadie, Mohammed Ali Al-Mansouri.
France	Abdulmajeed al-Najjar (Assistant Secretary-General), Ahmed Ja'a Allah, Anis Qarqah, al-Arabi al-Bashri, Taher Mahdi.
Germany	Mohammed Al-Hawari, Mohammed Siddiq, Nihad Abdulqadous Jaftigi.
Saudi Arabia	Hamza bin Hussein al-Fa'ar al-Sharif, Abdul-Sattar Abu Ghada, Abdullah bin Bayya, Salman bin Fahd al-Awda.

Qatar	Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Chairman of the Council), Ali Muhyiddin al-Qaradaghi.
Sudan	Ahmed Ali al-Imam, Essam al-Bashir.
Ireland	Hussein Mohammed Halawa (Secretary-General)
Norway	Mahboub al-Rahman
Bosnia	Mustafa Tseric
Switzerland	Yusuf Ibram
Netherlands	Al-Bakkali Al-Khamar
Austria	Mustafa Mulla Aglu
United States	Salah al-Din Sultan
Canada	Jamal Badawi
Mauritania	Abdullah bin Ali Salem
Lebanon	Faisal Mawlawi (Deputy Chair of the Council)
Egypt	Hussein Hamed Hassan
Kuwait	Ajil al-Nashmi

Source: Al-Harbi (n.d., p. 264).

07. The European Council for Fatwa and Research's Vision and Mission:

The European Council for Fatwa and Research has sought to outline a general approach to achieving the objectives for which it was established, including its endeavour, through its numerous fatwas - numbering over a hundred - to provide Muslim minorities with sound and balanced guidance in their daily lives, in a way that preserves their identity, contributes to the development of their relations and coexistence with the societies in which they live, and enables them to make informed decisions regarding the challenges and events they face. He also took an interest in organising Islamic studies courses to train scholars, preachers and muftis in those regions, held at cultural centres, institutes, mosques and Islamic centres, whilst also building bridges with official bodies and civil society organisations, opening channels of dialogue, and showcasing the virtues of Islam and its tolerant image, and seeking official recognition of the Council as a fatwa authority for Muslims in the West. (Bin al-Shali, Muraji, 2019, p. 1255).

Indeed, in accordance with this clear and far-sighted approach, the Council seeks to guide and advise Muslims on the various issues they face, and has helped to alleviate their difficulties regarding many emerging and complex matters. In this context, we highlight some of its tasks relating to the field of family mediation, particularly the courses on reconciliation and family mediation skills and their application within the reality of European family life. , the European Council of Imams, in collaboration with the Imams' Associations, has contributed to the delivery of a course on reconciliation and family mediation skills and their application within the European family context. The course was delivered by His Eminence Sheikh Salim Al-Sheikhi, a member of the European Council for Fatwa and Research and a certified trainer from the British Academy for Human Resource Development. In light of the above, the European Council for Fatwa and Research – given its scholarly standing, the research it produces, and the scholarly expertise of its members – is expected to contribute to serving Muslims in Europe and to the process of renewing Islamic jurisprudence and ijtihad in general.

The Third Theme: Sharia Authority and Family Reform in the British Muslim Community

1.3. The European Council for Fatwa and Research's approach to divorce issues through its contribution to family mediation and reconciliation programmes

2.3. The experience of family mediation and reconciliation by Sharia councils in Britain

Undoubtedly, the first thing that springs to mind is the fundamental question: what is the most significant reason that might explain the failure of the process of reconciliation and mediation between spouses, in the light of experience and practice? Most practitioners of family mediation worldwide have attempted to develop specific methodologies and operational frameworks to organise the mediation process; however, one of the most notable shortcomings of these approaches is the absence of a clear benchmark, or a yardstick that enables the mediator to gauge their success and how close they are to achieving the desired model family. Furthermore, the criteria adopted in some of these approaches are not directly linked to the fundamental elements of the family as conceived in the Islamic tradition. This paper therefore seeks to establish this criterion in its proper context within the framework of family reform and mediation. This is what we present through our participation in the course on family mediation and reform, and we outline it as follows:

Section One: An Introduction to Family Mediation: Preliminary Concepts

Firstly: The concept of family mediation, guidance and counselling.

Second: The Benefits of Family Reconciliation and Mediation.

Third: Types of family mediation and areas of practice.

Fourth: The distinction between reconciliation and the judiciary.

First: The Concept of Family Mediation, Guidance and Counselling

The general, overarching meaning of all terms relating to family mediation is reconciliation, defined as: bringing about harmony between disputing parties through goodwill if they have fallen out, without the mediator overstepping the bounds of Sharia law.

01. Definition of mediation: the intervention of a third party between two disputing parties to bring their dispute to an amicable resolution.

02. The concept of guidance: The mediator takes full responsibility for and oversees the process of reconciliation and follow-up, whilst the couple commit to the practical plan proposed by the mediator and implement it in full.

03. The concept of counselling: the mediator is responsible for providing advice and guidance, whilst leaving the implementation, follow-up and evaluation entirely to the couple or in equal partnership with the couple. The choice between counselling and consultation. (Al-Sheikhi, training course, 15–24 February 2021)

Secondly: The Virtue of Reconciliation and Family Mediation

Reconciliation between spouses, in all its forms, has great merit; it is included in the general texts indicating the virtue of reconciliation amongst Muslims, such as the words of Allah, the Exalted: { **So fear Allah and make peace amongst yourselves** } [Al-Anfal: Verse 1]. **And** the words of the Prophet, peace be upon him: ‘The best form of charity is to make peace amongst yourselves,’ which is what He has guided us to, as stated in the words of the Most High: { **If a woman fears ill-treatment or indifference from her husband, there is no sin on them both if they make terms of reconciliation between themselves; and reconciliation is best** } [An-Nisa’: 128]. The practical Sunnah and the actions of the Companions have demonstrated its virtue, and the Muslim community and the wise people of the world are unanimous on this point.

Thirdly: Types of family mediation and areas of practice:

Family mediation is divided into:

-1 Voluntary contractual mediation: This is initiated at the discretion of the parties to the dispute, agreed upon by the spouses of their own free will and choice, and is often governed by specific legislation.

2. Judicial mediation: This is initiated at the judge’s request and is compulsory; it is divided into two types: guidance and counselling mediation, aimed at understanding the nature of the dispute; and arbitration mediation, governed by the provisions of judicial arbitration.

Fourth: Between conciliation and the courts

-1 The cry of Ibn al-‘Arabi – may God have mercy on him –.

-2 Why do people prefer mediation and arbitration to family litigation?

The cry of Ibn al-‘Arabi – may God have mercy on him. Dr Salim Muhammad al-Sheikhi points out, based on my own experience and practice in the field of family mediation, that the judicial sphere of family matters has lost a great pillar, namely that of arbitration and family reconciliation. Ibn al-‘Arabi – may God have mercy on him – said, referring to **the verse in which God says: ‘And if you fear’** [An-Nisa’: 128], which is one of the foundational verses of Islamic law, yet we find no trace of it in our country...

2. Why do people prefer mediation and arbitration to litigation in family matters? Mediation, followed by arbitration between spouses, is characterised by the following:

- **Voluntary:** the spouses resort to them of their own free will.
- **Confidentiality:** to encourage the parties to engage in dialogue with complete peace of mind.
- **Speed of resolution:** unlike the lengthy proceedings in the courts.
- **Flexibility:** there are no restrictions or formal rules.
- Preservation of the extended family. (Al-Sheikhi, training course, 15–24 February 2021)

Section Two: Requirements for mediators in Sharia councils in Britain:

- 1. Sharia eligibility relating to family matters – family jurisprudence –
- 2 Understanding the country’s laws governing family mediation.
- 3 The minimum personal requirements for a social worker.
- 4 Knowledge of gender differences.
- 5 Adherence to the mediators’ code of conduct and ethics.
- 6 Practical training under the guidance of experts.

The third challenge: utilising Sharia authority in resolving marital disputes within the British context

Sharia councils in Britain utilise Islamic legal authority in resolving marital disputes by drawing on the principles of reform, reconciliation, arbitration and family counselling, whilst seeking to understand the dispute in light of the specific nature of Muslim families and their social and cultural context. This practice is not limited to issuing a Sharia ruling; rather, it may involve listening to the parties to the dispute, understanding the causes of the disagreement, reconciling differing viewpoints, offering advice and guidance, and seeking to restore communication between the spouses whenever the continuation of the relationship is possible (Azzouz, 2023, pp. 199–216).

The distinctive nature of this experience lies in the fact that the Sharia authority operates within a positive legal context that does not grant Sharia councils formal judicial jurisdiction; the British government review made it clear that these councils do not have the status of courts nor binding legal authority, and that domestic law remains the supreme authority in the state. Consequently, the conciliatory role performed by Sharia councils should be understood as a voluntary religious and community function, not as a substitute for the formal judiciary or for British law (Home Office, 2018).

From a sociological perspective, this situation reveals a form of interaction between religious authority, social institutions and the legal system; Sharia councils derive part of their legitimacy from their acceptance by the Muslim community, whilst

operating within a legal framework governed by state regulations. Mediation within these councils therefore involves striking a balance between upholding Islamic authority on the one hand, and taking into account the social and legal realities of Britain on the other. Furthermore, this interaction does not necessarily imply a conflict between Sharia authority and positive law; rather, Sharia authority can become a source of reformist values and principles, such as reconciliation, the preservation of the family, the prevention of harm, and the realisation of justice, whilst the implementation of the legal consequences of divorce, financial rights, child custody and other matters remains the remit of official legal institutions. Family mediation in Sharia councils can thus be viewed as mediation with a religious and social dimension, operating within the community alongside the formal legal system rather than in place of it.

Fourth pillar: Stages of the family mediation process – the working methodology

Stage One: Gaining a general understanding of the situation and distinguishing between a lack of proper understanding and a lack of appropriate behaviour (bad habits).

All too often, the mediator confuses the problem arising from misunderstandings and confusion over family concepts with the problem arising from the couple's bad habits; If the mediator attempts to resolve the issue of these unhealthy habits merely through intellectual dialogue – a conceptual workshop – or through advice and preaching, they are making a major mistake from the outset, which will ultimately lead to the failure of family mediation. They therefore need to employ all the techniques designed to ensure a correct understanding of the overall context of the problem, including the following:

01 – Preliminary procedures for commencing mediation:

- Reception procedures and etiquette.
- Selection of the venue and its physical and psychological conditions.
- The appropriate time (time of the meeting / time convenient for the couple).
- Basic information about the couple (registration form).
- Statement of the terms of mediation and the obligations of the parties concerned (special form).

02- Procedures designed to ensure a correct understanding of the context of the problem:

- The art of listening and hearing
- Standard questions and the art of rephrasing answers.
- An atmosphere of trust and comfort.
- Helping the couple to communicate their ideas effectively.
- Mental presence and the art of concentration.

Stage Two: Accurately identifying the source of the dispute using the Marital Life Charter framework

At this stage, the mediator uses the Marital Life Charter template, together with the accompanying questionnaires, to identify the nature, extent and causes of the dispute in order to answer specific questions.

- 1 What is the cause of the dispute?
- 2 What is the scale of the problem?
- 3 What is the cause of the problem?
- 4 Consider a solution and estimate the time required for resolution.

Stage Three: Distinguishing between gender-specific traits and situational behaviours.

At this stage, the mediator and conciliator focus on the findings of the assessment against the charter, and categorises the causes of the conflict between the spouses into those stemming from each party's understanding of the nature of the sexes – the remedy for which is not a problem but rather an innate trait of the affected party that is difficult to comprehend – and those that are not. This requires an examination of the differences between the sexes and a clear articulation of these differences; specialist training courses on this matter may be necessary.

Stage 4: The reform plan and the monitoring and evaluation guide. At this stage, the mediator needs the following:

- To distinguish between what requires conceptual, behavioural or skills-based intervention.
- To translate solutions into practical steps and tasks with measurable outcomes.
- Agree on an action plan and select the optimal, most appropriate and realistic solution.
- Define the mediator's role in the action plan (guidance – counselling).
- Capitalising on any positive changes that can be built upon in the treatment.
- Develop a programme for monitoring and evaluation.

Module 5: The Constitution and Charter of Family Mediation and its Skills (Al-Sheikhi, training course, 15–24 February 2021)

First: The ethical values governing family mediation

The ethical values governing family mediation are universally recognised and constitute the ethical code of conduct for mediators. These values can be summarised as follows:

- 1 **Integrity** (towards the role – towards the couple – ensuring all necessary tools are in place – in conveying ideas and positions between the parties).
- 2 **Confidentiality and discretion**
- 3 **Integrity**: (refraining from any personal gain – avoiding any grounds for suspicion).
- 4. **Impartiality**: (refraining from bias and favouritism – avoiding favouring one side on religious, political or regional grounds).

5- Objectivity: (adherence to a scientific approach based on academic and technical expertise – avoiding dogmatism – setting aside preconceptions).

6- Patience and deliberation: (the art of listening – defusing conflict and debate).

7. Legality: Adherence to all legal requirements governing the mediation process.

Secondly: The mediator's commitment to professional conduct, for which international standards have been established; the key points of which are as follows:

- Presenting a positive image of family mediation.
- Adherence to standards of quality and professionalism.
- Distinguishing between personal impressions and the positions of the parties to the dispute.
- Keeping the relationship with the parties to the dispute within the bounds of the concept of mediation.
- Commit to respecting all parties and refraining from insults, disparagement and mockery.
- Emphasising that the mediator is committed to resolving the dispute in a scientifically sound and professional manner.
- Not imposing any personal beliefs on the parties whilst adhering to the provisions of Sharia law, and allowing them the freedom to continue or terminate the mediation.
- Knowing when to suspend mediation sessions and when to terminate the mediation process entirely.

Thirdly: Mediation and family reconciliation skills. These skills can be summarised as what are known as effective communication skills, in addition to analytical and deductive skills and the like. The skills can be summarised as follows: (Al-Sheikhi, training course, 15–24 February 2021)

1. Effective communication skills.
2. Observation, reasoning and analytical skills.
3. Body language skills.
4. Skills in asking questions and rephrasing answers.
5. Dialogue skills.

06. Key findings of the research:

In conclusion to this study, and based on the discussion of family mediation and the experience of the European Council for Fatwa and Research and its role in helping to reduce the incidence of divorce, we have reached a number of conclusions, the most important of which are:

- Divorce is a complex social phenomenon, which necessitates addressing it through a comprehensive and integrated approach; one that is not limited to tackling the phenomenon itself, but extends to studying its causes and the factors governing its existence and prevalence.
- Preventing divorce remains more effective than merely addressing its consequences, by tackling the social, familial, economic and cultural causes that give rise to the phenomenon, whilst acknowledging that the complete elimination of divorce is not possible, as it is a phenomenon present in various societies, albeit with varying rates and causes.
- The study showed that the Sharia councils in the UK fulfil a religious, reformatory and social function in resolving marital disputes, without these councils acquiring the status of formal courts; they operate within the Muslim community, whilst the legal consequences of marital disputes are subject to British law and the official judicial institutions.
- There is a need to adopt a preventive and educational approach based on family education and awareness-raising through various socialisation institutions, particularly the family, schools, mosques and the media, whilst raising awareness of the seriousness of divorce and its effects on the family and society.
- The need to develop and verify statistics relating to divorce so as to determine its prevalence and areas of concentration, and to analyse its relationship with socio-demographic, economic and family variables, thereby helping to formulate more accurate policies for prevention and intervention.
- Reviewing the roles of socialisation institutions, particularly the family, school and mosque, and strengthening their capacity to fulfil their educational and social functions, whilst also enhancing training and awareness programmes in the field of family reconciliation and mediation.
- Strengthen psychological and social support for divorcees and family members affected by divorce, thereby helping them to overcome the consequences of divorce and achieve greater social integration and stability.
- The need for coordination amongst the bodies and institutions responsible for collecting data and statistics, including judicial authorities and relevant institutions, in order to obtain more accurate and realistic data that will assist researchers and policy-makers in understanding and addressing the phenomenon.
- The importance of activating mechanisms for reconciliation and family mediation before the matter reaches the stage of litigation and divorce, by training qualified mediators and conciliators who combine knowledge of Islamic law with social, psychological and legal expertise.
- The need to review certain educational and awareness-raising curricula and programmes in order to foster a culture of dialogue, marital responsibility and peaceful conflict resolution, and to curb the hasty resort to divorce.
- Addressing the phenomenon of divorce should not be based solely on stricter legal measures, but rather on an integrated system combining prevention, education, awareness-raising, reconciliation, mediation and family rehabilitation, alongside legal mechanisms where necessary.

07. Conclusion:

There is no doubt that family mediation has become an important means of resolving family disputes, through the intervention of a neutral party seeking to create a suitable atmosphere for communication and harmony amongst family members. Despite the importance of the institution of family reconciliation in preventing family disputes from escalating, fulfilling its role requires expanding the scope of its intervention, codifying its operating mechanisms, and defining the procedures necessary for its implementation. This would allow recourse to family mediation before, during or after a dispute is brought before the courts, and in various situations where disputes may lead to the breakdown and disintegration of family ties. It is also important to define the roles of the various stakeholders involved in resolving family disputes, such as the family court judge, the family mediator or conciliator, the social worker, and other relevant actors, in a way that ensures coordination amongst them and enhances the prospects for reconciliation and the preservation of family stability. In light of the research findings regarding the importance of mediation and family reconciliation, and the insights provided by the case studies examined - particularly the British experience - the following recommendations can be made:

- Conduct comprehensive field studies and surveys to build a database on the reality of family mediation and its relationship to the phenomenon of divorce in Algerian society, thereby helping to understand the causes of family breakdown and develop appropriate intervention mechanisms.
- Raise awareness of family mediation and reconciliation programmes and the roles of those involved, and utilise the media and social media to promote a culture of family reconciliation and mediation.
- Draw on European experiences, particularly the British experience in the field of family mediation and reconciliation, by reviewing the findings of relevant studies and practices and exchanging expertise.
- Develop research and evaluation tools for future studies, enabling the identification of the needs of beneficiaries of family mediation, counselling and rehabilitation programmes and courses, and the assessment of their effectiveness.
- Strengthen cooperation between relevant institutions, particularly educational, media, religious and social organisations, to promote a culture of dialogue and family reconciliation, and to establish clear standards for the training of those responsible for mediation programmes and preparation for married life.

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