

Ban the Burqa?

The Argument in Favor

by Phyllis Chesler

Should other Western states follow the Belgian and French examples and ban the full Islamic body and face-covering veil—or more specifically, the *burqa* and the *niqab*? In other words, should the West ban any and all clothing which obliterates one's identity? Most Europeans, according to recent surveys, seem to think so.¹ Still, significant numbers, especially in the United States,² and including quite a few feminists,³ have viewed such a ban as religiously intolerant, anti-woman, and anti-Western. They maintain that the state has no place in deciding what a woman can and cannot wear—it is her body, not public property;⁴ that given the worldwide exploitation of women as pornographic sex objects, wearing loose, comfortable, modest clothing, or actually covering up, might be both convenient and more dignified;⁵ that because of the West's tolerance toward religions, the state cannot come between a woman and her conscience for that would betray Western values;⁶ and that women are freely choosing to wear the burqa.⁷ Some Western intellectuals oppose banning the burqa although they understand the harm it may do and the way in which it may “mutilate personhood.”⁸

Algerian-American academic Marnia Lazreg, for example, implores Muslim women to voluntarily, freely refuse to cover their faces fully—to spurn even the headscarf; however, she does not want the state involved.⁹

It is arguable that the full body and face cover is not a religious requirement

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1 “Widespread Support for Banning Full Islamic Veil in Western Europe,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, Washington, D.C., July 8, 2010; United Press International, July 17, 2010; *The Toronto Sun*, July 28, 2010.

2 *New Atlanticist* (Washington, D.C.), Mar. 1, 2010; *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 2010.

3 Martha Nussbaum, “Veiled Threats?” *The New York Times*, July 11, 2010; Naomi Wolf, “Behind the Veil Lives a Thriving Muslim Sexuality,” *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), Aug. 30, 2008; Joan Wallach, “France Has the Burqa All Wrong,” *Salon*, Apr. 12, 2010; Joan Wallach, “Don't Ban Burqas—Or Censor South Park,” BigThink.com, May 21, 2010; Yvonne Ridley, “How I Came to Love the Veil,” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 22, 2006.

4 Marnia Lazreg, *Questioning the Veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 62.

5 Wolf, “Behind the Veil Lives a Thriving Muslim Sexuality.”

6 Nussbaum, “Veiled Threats?”; Leon Wieseltier, “Faces and Faiths,” *The New Republic*, July 27, 2010.

7 Nussbaum, “Veiled Threats?”; Wolf, “Behind the Veil Lives a Thriving Muslim Sexuality.”

8 Wieseltier, “Faces and Faiths.”

9 Lazreg, *Questioning the Veil*, pp. 62-3.



The phrase “the Islamic veil” refers to a variety of female clothing that differs from country to country and from century to century. The Afghan burqa, for example, covers the entire head, face, and body and has webbing or grille work over the eyes that allows the wearer no peripheral vision. Another version of the burqa, which covers the mouth, part of the forehead and lower jaw, and the head, exists (or existed) among Arabs in southern Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.

the Western state does have an interest in public appearances and, therefore, does not permit public nudity or masked people in public buildings; and that it is strange that the very feminists (or their descendents) who once objected to the sexual commodification of women “can explain to you with the most exquisitely twisted logic why miniskirts and lip gloss make women into sexual objects, but when it comes to a cultural practice, enforced by terror, that makes women into social nonentities, [they] feel that it is beneath [their] liberal dignity to support a ban on the practice.”¹¹ To this may be added that face-veil wearers (“good” girls) endanger all those who do not wear a face veil (“bad” girls). But before addressing these arguments at greater length, it is instructive to see what political and religious leaders in the Muslim world, as well as Muslim women, have to say about the issue.

THE HOUSE OF ISLAM UNVEILS ITS WOMEN

The forced veiling and unveiling of Muslim women, both in terms of the headscarf and the face veil, ebbed and flowed for about a century as Muslim elites strove to come to terms with the demise of the Islamic political order that had dominated the Middle East (and substantial parts of Asia and Europe) for over a millennium. Turkey’s founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, for example, generated a new and vibrant brand of nationalism that sought to extricate Turkey from its imperial past—and its Islamic legacy—and to reconstitute it as a modern nation state. Iran’s Reza Shah distanced his country from Islam for the opposite reason, namely, as a means to link his family to Persia’s pre-Islamic imperial legacy,

in Islam but represents a minority tradition among a small Islamist minority; that it is not a matter of free choice but a highly forced choice and a visual Islamist symbol—one that is ostentatiously anti-secularist and misogynist;¹⁰ that

The Huffington Post, Feb. 15, 2010; Samia Labidi, “Faces of Janus: The Arab-Muslim Community in France and the Battle for Its Future,” in Zeyno Baran, ed., *The Other Muslims: Moderate and Secular* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 116-9; Melanie Philips, in “Should France Ban the Burqa?” *National Review Online*, July 23, 2010; Elham Manea, in Valentina Colombo, “Europe: Behind the Burqa Debate,” Hudson Institute, New York, Mar. 12, 2010.

10 Bernard-Henri Levy, “Why I Support a Ban on Burqas,”

11 Stuart Schneiderman blog, “Burqaphilia,” July 17, 2010.



The niqab can cover the entire face with a small space cut out for the eyes. It can also cover the lower face, but leave more room for the eyes. In Saudi Arabia, women wear the burqa and the niqab in a variety of forms.

which is vividly illustrated by his adoption of the surname Pahlavi, of ancient Persian origins,¹² and the name Iran, or “[the land] of the Aryans,” as the country’s official title in all formal correspondence.¹³

During the 1920s and 1930s, in this new international environment, kings, shahs, and presidents unveiled their female citizens, and Muslim feminists campaigned hard for open faces in public. They were successful in Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran, to name but a few countries.

As early as 1899, the Egyptian intellectual Qasim Amin published his landmark book *The Liberation of Women*, which argued that the face veil was not commensurate with the tenets of Islam and called for its removal.¹⁴ According to photographs taken by Annie Lady Brassey in Egypt in the 1870s, Egyptian women wore heavy,

dark coverings with full niqab (face covering) or partial niqab when possible.¹⁵ In 1923, the feminist Hoda Hanim Shaarawi, who established the first feminist association that called for uncovering the face and hair, became the first Egyptian woman to remove her face veil or niqab.¹⁶ In the following decades, the veil gradually disappeared in Egypt, so much so that in 1958, a foreign journalist wrote that “the veil is unknown here.”¹⁷

In Afghanistan, Shah Amanullah Khan (r. 1919-29) “scandalized the Persians by permitting his wife to go unveiled.” In 1928, he urged Afghan women to uncover their faces and advocated the shooting of interfering husbands. He said that he “would himself supply the weapons” for this and that “no inquiries would be instituted against the women.” Once, when he

12 Farvardyn Project, “Pahlavi Literature,” accessed Aug. 25, 2010.

13 M. Sadeq Nazmi-Afshar, “The People of Iran, The Origins of Aryan People,” Iran Chamber Society, accessed Aug. 25, 2010.

14 Amin Qasim, *The Liberation of Women and The New Woman: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism*, trans. Samiha Sidhom Peterson (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2000).

15 Reina Lewis and Nancy Micklenwright, eds., *Gender, Modernity and Liberty: Middle Eastern and Western Women’s Writings: A Critical Sourcebook* (New York: I.B. Tauris and Co., 2006), pp. 36-7; Afaf Lufti al-Sayyid Marsot, “The Revolutionary Gentlewomen in Egypt,” in Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie, eds., *Women in the Muslim World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 261-76.

16 Colombo, “Europe: Behind the Burqa Debate.”

17 *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, Jan. 26, 1958.



The hijab (left), or headscarf, does not cover the face and is not the subject of this article. The abaya (right) in Saudi Arabia is also not synonymous with a face-covering although add-ons to the garment may cover the face.

saw a woman wearing a burqa in a Kabul garden, he tore it off and burned it.¹⁸ However, Amanullah was exiled, and the country plunged back into the past.¹⁹ Turkey banned the Islamic face veil and the turban in 1934, and this prohibition has been maintained ever since by a long succession of governments that adhered to Atatürk's secularist and modernist revolution. Moreover, from the 1980s onward, Turkish women have been prohibited from wearing headscarves in parliament and in public buildings, and this law was even more strictly enforced after a 1997 coup by the secular military. In recent years, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), which has ruled Turkey since 2002, has tried to relax this restriction, only to be dealt a humiliat-

ing blow on June 15, 2008, when the country's Constitutional Court annulled a government reform allowing students to wear Muslim headscarves at university on the grounds that it contravened Turkey's secular system.²⁰ In recent years, women wearing both hijabs and burqas have been seen on the streets of Istanbul.

As early as 1926 in Iran, Reza Shah provided police protection for Iranian women who chose to dispense with the traditional scarf.²¹ Ten years later, on January 7, 1936, the shah ordered all female teachers and the wives of ministers, high military officers, and government officials "to appear in European clothes and hats, rather than chadors"; and by way of "serving as an example for other Persian women," the shah asked his wife and daughters to appear without face veils in public. Ranking male officials were dismissed from their jobs if their wives appeared with face veils in public, and the police began breaking into private homes to arrest women wearing chadors there. A report from the city of Tabriz stated that only unveiled girls could receive diplomas.²² These and other secularizing reforms were sustained by Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, who in September 1941 succeeded his

18 Rhea Talley Stewart, *Fire in Afghanistan 1914-1929: Faith, Hope, and the British Empire* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), pp. 127, 376-8.

19 Rosanne Klass, *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited* (New York: Freedom House, 1987), p. 39; idem, *Land of the High Flags* (New York: Odyssey Books, 1964), pp. 202-3.

20 *The Muslim Observer* (Farmington, Mich.), Jan. 31, June 19, 2008.

21 Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 85.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 85-7.

father on the throne and instituted a ban on veiled women in public.

Lebanon has always been the most Westernized Arab society, owing to its substantial Christian population with its close affinity to Europe, France in particular. A Palestinian-Lebanese-Syrian woman visiting the United States said, "In the 1920s, my mother, a university professor, was the first woman to take off her veil in Beirut. She had to remain at home under house arrest for one year due to the violence threatened by street mobs. Then, things changed for the better."²³

Since 1981, women in Tunisia have been prohibited from wearing Islamic dress, including headscarves, in schools or government offices. In 2006, since this ban was increasingly ignored, the Tunisian government launched a sustained campaign against the hijab. The police stopped women in the streets and asked them to remove their headscarves; the president described the headscarf as a "sectarian form of dress which had come into Tunisia uninvited." Other officials explained that Islamic dress was being promoted by extremists who exploited religion for political aims.²⁴

In 2006, in neighboring Morocco, a picture of a mother and daughter wearing headscarves was removed from a textbook. The education minister explained, "This issue isn't really about religion, it's about politics ... the headscarf for women is a political symbol in the same way as the beard is for men."²⁵ However, the government could only go so far in its ability to restrict the face veil or headscarf. In 1975, Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi described the lives of Moroccan women as circumscribed by Ghazali's view of women, including women's eyes, as erotically irresistible, and as such, dangerous to men.²⁶ In 1987, Mernissi analyzed the Islamic

veil in both theological and historical terms.²⁷ Clearly, as fundamentalism or political Islam returned to the historical stage, "roots" or Islamic identity, both in Morocco and elsewhere, was increasingly equated with seventh century customs that were specific to women and to the Prophet Muhammad's own life.

Public servants in Malaysia are prohibited from wearing the niqab. In 1994, the Supreme Court ruled that the niqab "has nothing to do with [a woman's] constitutional rights to profess and practice her Muslim religion" because it is not required by Islamic law.²⁸ On July 18, 2010, Syria became the latest Muslim state to ban full face veils in some public places, barring female students from wearing the full face cover on Syrian university campuses. The Syrian minister of higher education indicated that the face veil ran counter to Syrian academic values and traditions.²⁹

In October 2009, Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, perhaps the foremost, formal spiritual authority in Sunni Islam and grand sheikh of al-Azhar University, Sunni Islam's highest institution of religious learning, was reportedly "angered" when he toured a school in Cairo and saw a teenage girl wearing niqab. Asking the girl to remove her face veil, he said, "The niqab is a tradition; it has no connection with religion." He then instructed the girl never to wear the niqab again and issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) against its use in schools.³⁰

In 2010, at a time when Britain's department of health relaxed the strict National Health Service dress code by allowing Muslim nurses and

**“The niqab is a tradition; it has no connection with religion.”
—Grand Sheikh,
al-Azhar University**

23 Author interview with the wife of an Arab ambassador to the United Nations, New York, 1980.

24 *BBC News*, Sept. 26, 2006.

25 *Ibid.*, Oct. 6, 2006.

26 Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., 1975).

27 *Ibid.*

28 Nurjaanah Abdullah and Chew Li Hua, "Legislating Faith in Malaysia," *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies*, 2007, pp. 264-89.

29 *BBC News*, July 19, 2010.

30 *The Daily Telegraph* (London), Oct. 5, 2009.

doctors to wear long sleeves for religious reasons—despite the high risk of spreading deadly superbugs—the Egyptian ministry of health outlawed the niqab (which often included glove-wearing) for hospital nurses, threatening those who failed to comply with dismissal or legal prosecution. The Iraqi religious authority, Sheikh Ahmad al-Qubaisi, supported this Egyptian decision and issued a fatwa which stated, “People have the right to know the identity of the person they are in front of in order not to feel deceived. The obligation of niqab was only for the Prophet’s wives as they were the mothers of all believers.”³¹

FREE CHOICE OR FORCED CHOICE?

These examples challenge the increasing number of Muslim women in the West, including converts and educated women, who claim to be freely choosing to wear the burqa and the niqab. They are doing so in stark contrast to the

ethos and values of their adopted societies at a time when governments in the part of the world where this custom originated have been progressively unveiling their women.

These supposed defenders of women’s rights appear oblivious

to what is implied by the phrase “to cover,” namely, that women are born shamed—they are nothing beyond their genitalia, which can shame or dishonor an entire family—and it is this shame which they must cover or for which they must atone. Qur’anic verse (7:26) states, “We have sent down clothing to cover your shame.” Certainly, this applies to both men and women, but patriarchal customs have almost exclusively targeted women. Ironically, this verse also says

that “the clothing of righteousness is the best”—a point lost on Islamists and their unwitting sympathizers in the West.

The fact is that Muslim women are increasingly not given a free choice about wearing the veil, and those who resist are beaten, threatened with death, arrested, flogged, jailed, or murdered for honor by their own families, by vigilante groups, or by the state.³² Being fully covered does not save a Muslim woman from being harassed, stalked, raped, and battered in public places, or raped or beaten at home by her husband. Nor does it stop her husband from taking multiple wives and girlfriends, frequenting brothels, divorcing her against her will, and legally seizing custody of their children.³³ A fully covered female child, as young as ten, may still be forced into an arranged marriage, perhaps to a man old enough to be her grandfather, and is not allowed to leave him, not even if he beats her every day.³⁴

Moreover, after decades of attempted modernization in Muslim countries, the battle to impose the veil was launched again by resurgent Islamists. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran sent shock waves throughout the region and set in motion a string of violent eruptions. These included the 1979-80 riots in the Shiite towns of the oil-rich Saudi province of Hasa, the Muslim Brotherhood’s attempt to topple the secularist Syrian Baath regime in the early 1980s, the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, the ascendance of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank, and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. All these developments placed substantial areas under Islamist control and influence with dire consequences for women. As one Egyptian man lamented, “My grandmother would not recognize the streets of Cairo and Port Said. The women are covered from head to toe; the mosques blare hatred all day long.”³⁵

The battle to impose the veil was launched again by resurgent Islamists.

31 Colombo, “Europe: Behind the Burqa Debate.”

32 Phyllis Chesler, “Worldwide Trends in Honor Killings,” *Middle East Quarterly* Spring 2010, pp. 3-11.

33 Phyllis Chesler, *The Death of Feminism: What’s Next in the Struggle for Women’s Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), chap. 6, 7.

34 David Ghanim, *Gender and Violence in the Middle East* (Wesport: Praeger, 2009), chap. 2, 4.

35 Author interview, New York, 2008.

And this in a country where the authorities go to great lengths to fight Islamist influences.

The Taliban, for example, flogged women on the street if their burqas showed too much ankle while Islamist vigilantes poured acid on the faces of Afghan and Pakistani schoolgirls who were not sufficiently covered.³⁶ As an Afghan woman noted, “For nearly two decades, we wore no chadors and dressed in modern ways. As the war against the Soviet occupation intensified, women were again forced to wear chadors. Now, even under an American occupation, they are again fully covered.”³⁷

In Algeria, a leading Islamist group proclaimed that all unveiled women are military targets and, in 1994, gunned down a 17-year-old unveiled girl.³⁸ In 2010 in Chechnya, roving vigilante bands of men harassed and threatened women for not wearing headscarves. They punched women and taunted them with automatic rifles and paintballs. The vigilante groups have the backing of Chechnyan president Ramzan Kadyrov’s government, which also encourages polygamy.³⁹

In 1983, four years after the Iranian revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini instituted a ban on women showing their hair and the shape of their bodies. The chador, which does not cover the face, is, nevertheless, a severe, dark, heavy, and shapeless garment that has demoralized and enraged what was an essentially Westernized and modern upper and middle class.⁴⁰ Thereafter, the Iranian government beat, arrested, and jailed women if they were improperly garbed and has recently warned that sun-tanned women and girls who looked like “walking mannequins” will be arrested as part of a

In Iran, women do go in public with their faces unveiled in chadors which are similar to a cloak held closed with the hands. Here, too, add-ons may cover the face.

new drive to enforce the Islamic dress code.⁴¹ Saudi Arabia does not have to resort to such violence. No Saudi woman dares appear open-faced in public. In 2002, when teenage Saudi schoolgirls tried to escape from a burning school without their headscarves and abayas (black robes), the Mutawa, or religious police, beat them back. Fifteen girls were burned alive.⁴² According to Tunisian-French feminist Samia Labidi, an increasing number of Islamist husbands force or pressure their wives—whose own mothers went about with uncovered faces—to cover.⁴³ Then, they pressure their new sisters-in-law to

36 “Women’s Lives under the Taliban: A Background Report.” National Organization of Women, Washington, D.C., accessed Aug. 25, 2010; *The Daily Telegraph*, Nov. 12, 2008.

37 Author interview, New York, 2005.

38 “Equality Now Submission to the UN Human Rights Committee: Algeria,” United Nations, New York, July 1998.

39 Reuters, Aug. 21, 2010.

40 See, for example, Roya Hakakian, *Journey from the Land of No* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004); Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House, 2003).

41 Associated Press, Apr. 23, 2007; *The Daily Telegraph*, Apr. 27, 2010.

42 *BBC News*, Mar. 15, 2002.

43 Labidi, “Faces of Janus,” pp. 117-8.

do likewise. In the West, some families have honor-killed their daughters for refusing to wear hijab.⁴⁴

A man from Istanbul remembered that his grandmother had fully veiled but not his mother. But, he explained, “It is mainly peer pressure that makes things happen in Turkey. Neighbors tell you to go to mosque; they watch how young girls and women look and behave very closely. The pressure to conform is tremendous.”⁴⁵

Westerners do not understand how pervasive such pressure can be. On July 17, 2010, for example, the newspaper *Roz Al-Yousuf* addressed the coercive nature of hijab in Egypt. Wael Lutfi, assistant chief editor writes in the first person feminine:

Society persecutes women who do not wear a hijab. Of course, I wear a hijab. If I want

to be practical and interact with this society while [sustaining] minimal damage, I must wear a hijab. A woman who does not wear a hijab is guilty until proven [innocent]. Why should I waste my time proving that I am a respectable and educated girl?

Lutfi tells “Suha’s” story. She comes from a prominent Egyptian family and does not wear a hijab. At work, she is cajoled and harassed by hijab-wearing women who bombard her in person and via e-mail; they give her pro-hijab audio cassettes and invite her to hear a popular preacher whom hijab-wearers follow. Suha loses one marriage proposal after another when she refuses to promise that she will wear the hijab and stop working after marriage. Finally, Suha’s married male boss questions her closely, agrees with her anti-hijab position—and then asks her to secretly become his common law wife. He views her as a prostitute because she is not wearing the hijab.

Likewise, Walaa was verbally insulted and her brothers were assaulted by neighborhood boys because she was not wearing a hijab. Now, she dons one when she leaves home, removes it elsewhere, returns home wearing it again. Another young girl wears the hijab because her father has asked her to do so and because her beloved younger brother said that his friends were judging him harshly because she did not do so. She says:

I wear a hijab because we live in a society that allows the preacher Safwat Hijazi to call women who do not wear a hijab “prostitutes,” and I do not want to be called a prostitute.⁴⁶

Thus, one can hardly view the covering of one’s face as a free choice but rather as a forced choice. One must also realize that non-veiled women, including non-Muslims, who do not veil are then seen by Islamists as “fair game” or “uncovered meat that draws predators,” to use the words of a prominent Australian sheikh.⁴⁷

To be sure, some religious women dress modestly, not “provocatively,” because they view this as a religious virtue. Yet only Muslims engage in full face covering to satisfy the demand for modesty, and there is a crucial difference between a free choice and a forced choice. A forced choice is not really a choice at all. One either submits or is punished, shunned, exiled, jailed, even killed. A free choice means that one has many options and freely chooses one of two or one of ten such options.

Many children who are brought up within fundamentalist religions or in cults are trained, by a system of reward and punishment, to obey their parents, teachers, and religious leaders. As adults, if they wish to remain within the community (and the opportunity for leaving did not and still does not exist for most Muslim women), they must continue to conform to its norms. Most are already socialized to do so and thus,

Face and body covering can facilitate acts of violence from petty crime to terrorism.

44 Chesler, “Worldwide Trends in Honor Killings.”

45 Author interview, New York, 2010.

46 “Egyptian Newspaper *Roz Al-Yousuf* Criticizes Phenomenon of Compelling Egyptian Women to Wear a Hijab,” The Middle East Media Research Institute, Washington, D.C., Sept. 6, 2010.

47 *The Times* (London), Oct. 28, 2006.

some Muslim women will say that they do not feel that anyone is forcing them to wear the headscarf; they will, in a private conversation, denounce the face veil, the burqa, the chador, and the Saudi abaya.

In the West, young Muslim women may feel they are responding to perceived racist “Islamophobia” by donning the headscarf or the face veil as a revolutionary act,⁴⁸ one in solidarity with Islamists whom they may fear, wish to please, or marry.

EUROPE DEBATES THE VEIL

The Islamist resurgence throughout the Middle East and the Muslim world has triggered a mass migration to the West; Muslim and ex-Muslim dissidents and feminists as well as Christians have exited Muslim lands.⁴⁹ Still, it has taken Westerners decades to understand that the battle for Muslim women’s freedom as well as for Western Enlightenment values also has to be fought in the West.

Thus, in 2004, France became the first European country to legally restrict Islamic dress by passing an ethnicity-neutral law that forbade the wearing of religious clothing in public schools. Veils, visible Christian crosses, Jewish skullcaps, and the hijab were all forbidden. Also in 2004, eight of Germany’s sixteen states enacted restrictions on wearing hair-covering veils, particularly in public schools.⁵⁰ Since then, many European governments have debated whether or not to ban the face veil.

In February 2010, the French government refused to grant citizenship to a Moroccan man



House Speaker Nancy Pelosi covers herself with a scarf before attending a dinner with Afghan president Hamid Karzai at the official residence of Vice President Joe Biden on the grounds of the U.S. Naval Observatory, Washington, D.C.

who forced his wife to wear a burqa;⁵¹ later that year, three women actually engaged in a physical fight after a burqa-clad woman supposedly overheard another woman making snide remarks about her choice of dress.⁵² In Norway, adult neighbors and their children came to blows over the question of whether Muslim women should wear the headscarf,⁵³ and in March 2010, a ban on the burqa in public places was proposed although defeated in the Norwegian parliament.⁵⁴ On April, 29, 2010, the lower house of the Belgian parliament approved a bill banning the burqa and imposing a fine or jail time on violators;⁵⁵

48 *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 12, 2005; Al-Jazeera TV (Doha), Sept. 17, 2008.

49 See, for example, *CBN News*, Oct. 15, 2009; David Raab, “The Beleaguered Christians of the Palestinian-Controlled Areas,” *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Jan. 1-15, 2003.

50 “Discrimination in the Name of Neutrality,” Human Rights Watch, New York, Feb. 26, 2009.

51 *The Guardian* (London), Feb. 2, 2010.

52 *The Daily Telegraph*, May 18, 2010.

53 *Islam in Europe Blog*, Aug. 4, 2010.

54 *The Foreigner* (Raege, Norway), Sept. 7, 2010.

55 *BBC News*, Apr. 30, 2010.

three months later, Spanish lawmakers debated banning the burqa in public although they ultimately decided against it.⁵⁶ In August 2010, Sweden's education minister announced his intention to make it easier for Swedish schools to ban the burqa.⁵⁷ In July 2010, by a majority of 336 to 1, the lower house of the French parliament approved a government bill that bans face-covering in public, and the bill was approved by the French senate on September 14. (For France's road to the bill, see Benjamin Ismail's article, "Ban the Burqa? France Votes Yes," page 47.)

While these bills await ratification, local European officials have already taken concrete steps against the burqa. Since January 2010, the Netherlands has limited the wearing of burqas in public spaces.⁵⁸ In May 2010, a local council in north Switzerland voted to introduce an initiative to ban the burqa in public places while, in 2005, the Belgian town of Maaseik passed a law mandating a fine for anyone wearing a face veil.⁵⁹ In April 2010, a French woman was fined for wearing a burqa while driving,⁶⁰ and in the same

month, a girl wearing hijab was sent home from her school in Madrid.⁶¹

Britain, by contrast, has conspicuously refused to consider banning the burqa. There has, of course, been the odd case when a radical

Islamist has been taken to task for unlawful insistence on the Muslim dress code, such as the Manchester dentist who refused to treat Muslim patients unless they wore traditional Islamic dress,⁶² but efforts at a ban have gone nowhere in parliament.

**The burqa
visually signals
the subordination
of women.**

56 Associated Press July 20, 2010.

57 *The Swedish Wire*, Aug. 5, 2010.

58 Benjamin Ismail, "Ban the Burqa? France Votes Yes," *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2010, pp. 47-55.

59 Associated Press, May 6, 2010; "Brussels Burqa Ban Backfires When City Ends up Paying Fines for Muslim Women on Welfare," *Militant Islam Monitor*, Aug. 26, 2005.

60 *The Daily Telegraph*, June 3, 2010.

61 *Ibid.*, Apr. 16, 2010.

62 *The Daily Mail* (London), July 2, 2009.

In response to the French parliamentary vote of July 2010, Britain's immigration minister, Damian Green, stated that "forbidding women in the U.K. from wearing certain clothing would be 'rather un-British'" and would run contrary to the conventions of a "tolerant and mutually respectful society."⁶³ The following month, Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, the first Muslim cabinet minister in the U.K., defended the right of women to choose whether or not to wear the burqa, claiming, "Just because a woman wears the burqa, it doesn't mean she can't engage in everyday life."⁶⁴

Many non-Muslim, Western, female politicians have been cowed by doctrines of political correctness, cultural relativism, misguided beliefs about religious tolerance, and by the fear that if they oppose the burqa, they will be condemned as "Islamophobes" or racists. Ignorance about Muslim jurists' rulings that the full-face covering is not religiously mandated and about the history of the Islamic veil in Muslim lands has led to a curious Western and feminist abandonment of universal human values as they bear on the Islamic veil.

Ironically, powerful Western women, while claiming to represent an anti-colonialist or post-colonialist point of view, are reminiscent of Victorian-era and early twentieth century British colonial administrators who believed that the needs of empire would not be well served by interfering with local customs. This British position was very different from the position of American, Christian missionary women who tried to help, teach, and sometimes save Muslim women from their plight.⁶⁵

Thus, both U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have donned the hijab when visiting Arab and Muslim countries whereas Arab and Muslim female dignitaries and spouses do not remove the hijab or the niqab while visiting the West. On July 18,

63 *ABC News*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, July 19, 2010.

64 *The Guardian*, Aug. 1, 2010.

65 Penelope Tuson, *Playing the Game: The Story of Western Women in Arabia* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), pp. 149-50.

2010, British Minister Caroline Spelman, the environment secretary and second most powerful woman in the cabinet, described the burqa as “empowering.” She said, “I don’t, living in this country as a woman, want to be told what I can and can’t wear. One of the things we pride ourselves on ... is being free to choose what you wear ... so banning the burka is absolutely contrary to what this country is about.”⁶⁶

On July 2, 2009, as Muslims demonstrated in Antwerp to oppose the banning of headscarves in two schools⁶⁷—then-Swedish head of the European Union, Justice Minister Beatrice Ask, stated that the “twenty-seven-member European Union must not dictate an Islamic dress code ... the European Union is a union of freedom.”⁶⁸

THE GROUNDS FOR A BURQA BAN

There are a multitude of specific problems associated with the burqa and niqab. To begin, full-body and face-covering attire hides the wearer’s gender. In October 1937, Hajj Amin Husseini, mufti of Jerusalem and Adolf Hitler’s future ally, fled Palestine donning a niqab as did one of the July 2005 London bombers.⁶⁹ From a security point of view, face and body covering can facilitate various acts of violence and lawlessness from petty crime and cheating to terrorism. This danger, which has been highlighted by a number of experts, notably Daniel Pipes,⁷⁰ has been taken very seriously by Muslim authorities, who have banned the burqa on precisely these grounds.

In Bangladesh, the largest state-run hospital banned staff from wearing full-face burqas after an increase in thefts of mobile phones and

wallets from hospital wards.⁷¹ In a number of Egyptian universities, women were barred from covering their faces during midterm exams and were prohibited from wearing niqabs in female dormitories after it transpired that men had snuck in disguised as women.⁷² Abu Dhabi, meanwhile, has banned the niqab in all public offices to fight “unrestricted absenteeism.”⁷³

There are also numerous cases of bans for security. In Kuwait, for example, female drivers are barred from wearing the niqab for “security reasons.” The regulation came into effect about ten years ago when the authorities were pursuing sleeper terrorist cells and feared that individual cell members could use the niqab to slip through checkpoints unnoticed.⁷⁴ Saudi Arabia’s antiterrorism forces have begun a battle against the niqab after discovering that many “Islamic terrorists have used it to hide in order to commit terror attacks.”⁷⁵ These concerns are not difficult to understand given the widespread use of the burqa and niqab for weapons smuggling and terror attacks, including suicide bombings in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Palestinian territories, among other places.⁷⁶

Beyond these abiding security considerations are equally compelling humanitarian considerations. André Gerin, a French parliamentarian, has described the burqa as a “moving prison.”⁷⁷ This is an apt definition: In a burqa, the wearer has no peripheral and only limited forward vision; hearing and speech are muffled; facial expressions remain hidden; movement is severely constrained. Often, no eye contact is

A burqa wearer is being conditioned to endure isolation and sensory deprivation.

66 *The Daily Telegraph*, July 18, 2010.

67 *Islam in Europe Blog*, July 2, 2010.

68 *The Jerusalem Post*, June 20, 2009.

69 *BBC News*, Feb. 20, 2007.

70 Daniel Pipes, “Niqabs and Burqas as Security Threats,” *Lion’s Den: Daniel Pipes Blog*, Nov. 4, 2006.

71 *The Daily Times* (Lahore), Mar. 22, 2010.

72 *The Daily News Egypt* (Giza), June 7, July 27, 2010.

73 Colombo, “Europe: Behind the Burqa Debate.”

74 *Kuwait Times* (Kuwait City), Oct. 9, 2009.

75 Colombo, “Europe: Behind the Burqa Debate.”

76 Pipes, “Niqabs and Burqas as Security Threats.”

77 *The Daily Telegraph*, June 22, 2009.

possible; niqab wearers sometimes wear dark glasses, so that their eyes cannot be seen.

A burqa wearer may feel that she cannot breathe, that she might slowly be suffocating. She may feel buried alive and may become anx-

The burqa is not a religious requirement but rather a political statement.

ious or claustrophobic.⁷⁸ Just imagine the consequences of getting used to this as a way of life. But perhaps one never gets used to it. Many Saudi and Afghan women toss their coverings the moment they leave the country or enter

their own courtyards.⁷⁹ For example, an unnamed Saudi princess describes her experience of the Saudi abaya as follows:

When we walked out of the cool *souq* area into the blazing hot sun, I gasped for breath and sucked furiously through the sheer black fabric. The air tasted stale and dry as it filtered through the thin gauzy cloth. I had purchased the sheerest veil available, yet I felt I was seeing life through a thick screen. How could women see through veils made of a thicker fabric? The sky was no longer blue, the glow of the sun had dimmed; my heart plunged to my stomach when I realized that from that moment, outside my own home I would not experience life as it really is in all its color. The world suddenly seemed a dull place. And dangerous, too! I groped and stumbled along the pitted, cracked sidewalk, fearful of breaking an ankle or leg.⁸⁰

The burqa is harmful not only to the wearer but to others as well. The sight of women in burqas can be demoralizing and frightening to Westerners of all faiths, including Muslims, not to mention secularists. Their presence visually signals the subordination of women. Addition-

ally, the social isolation intrinsically imposed by the burqa may also be further magnified by the awkward responses of Westerners. Several Ivy League college students mentioned that classmates in burqas and dark, thick gloves make them feel “very sad,” “pushed away,” “uneasy about talking to them.” “When one woman is asked to read aloud, she does so but her heavy gloves make turning the pages slow and difficult.” The students feel sorry for her and do not know how to relate to her.⁸¹

A burqa wearer, who can be as young as ten years old, is being conditioned to endure isolation and sensory deprivation. Her five senses are blocked, muted. Sensory deprivation and isolation are considered forms of torture and are used to break prisoners. Such abuse can lead to low self-esteem, generalized fearfulness, dependence, suggestibility, depression, anxiety, rage, aggression toward other women and female children, or to a complete psychological breakdown.

Wearing the burqa is also hazardous to the health in other ways. Lifetime burqa wearers may suffer eye damage and may be prone to a host of diseases that are also related to vitamin D deficiency from sunlight deprivation, including osteoporosis, heart disease, hypertension, autoimmune diseases, certain cancers, depression, chronic fatigue, and chronic pain. It is ironic that women in the Middle East, one of the world’s sunniest regions, have been found in need of high levels of vitamin D supplementation owing to their total covering.⁸²

CONCLUSION

The same Islamists who subordinate women also publicly whip, cross-amputate, hang, stone, and behead human beings. Iran continues to execute women and men by stoning for adultery.⁸³ The burqa reminds us of such practices. Many Westerners, including Muslims, ex-Mus-

78 See, for example, Reuters, July 7, 2009.

79 Edward Hunter, *The Past Present: A Year in Afghanistan* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1959), chap. 4, 5.

80 Jean Sasson, *Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (Georgia: Windsor-Brooke Books, 2010), pp. 94-5.

81 Author interview, New York, 2009.

82 Reuters, June 25, 2007.

83 *The Christian Science Monitor*, Aug. 13, 2010; “Iran: End Executions by Stoning,” Amnesty International, Jan. 15, 2008.

lms, and Christians, Jews, and Hindus who have fled Muslim lands, may feel haunted or followed when they see burqas on Western streets. Does their presence herald the arrival of Islamist supremacism?

Many Muslim governments know something that their Western counterparts are just learning. Covered women signify Islamist designs on state power and control of political, military, social, personal, and family life. Were these designs to be extended to the West, it will spell out the end of modernity, human rights, and the separation of state and church, among other things; in short, the end of liberal democracy and freedoms as now practiced.

Apart from being an Islamist act of assertion that involves clear security dangers and creating mental and physical health hazards, the burqa is a flagrant violation of women's most basic human rights. However, were the government to attempt to ban the burqa in the United States, a team of constitutional legal scholars would have to decide whether to follow the French ethnicity- and religion-neutral approach

of no "face coverings," "face masks," etc., or whether to ban outright the public disappearance of women's faces and their subordination in the name of Islam as a violation of their civil rights.

It is impossible for Western governments and international organizations to prevent the acid attacks or honor killings of women in Muslim countries who refuse to cover their faces, but why tie society's hands on Western soil? Why would Western countries prize the subordination of women and protect it as a religious right at a time when many Muslim states refuse to do so? When it is understood that the burqa is not a religious requirement but rather a political statement—at best merely an ethnic and misogynistic custom—there is no reason whatsoever for Western traditions of religious tolerance to misconstrue the covering of women as a religious duty at a time when the vast majority of Muslims do not see it as such.



Gazan Healer Murdered for Witchcraft

GAZA CITY—Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights condemned the murder of a 62-year-old woman, accused by locals of witchcraft, in Gaza City, Tuesday.

An investigation by the rights group confirmed earlier reports that unidentified men fired at Jabriyeh Abu Kanas as she sat in front of her house with her 75-year-old husband. She was pronounced dead on arrival at Ash-Shifa hospital.

In a sworn statement to Al Mezan, one of Abu Kanas' relatives said he witnessed the shooting. He told the rights group he was returning from buying Jabriyeh groceries and saw a silver Hyundai car, with blacked-out windows and no number plates, stop outside Jabriyeh's house. He heard what he believed to be muted gunfire, and then the car sped away, leaving his aunt bleeding from her chest.

Abu Kanas' relatives added that a fortnight ago two cars, a Mercedes and a Skoda, tried to approach Jabriyeh but fled when her family appeared.

Locals had accused the woman of practicing witchcraft and voodoo, officials said Tuesday. Her relatives told Al Mezan that she cured people using traditional methods.

Al Mezan called for a prompt, serious investigation into the murder.

Ma'an News Agency, Aug. 8, 2010