Seeing Clearly: The Veil's Power

The use of head covers among women has always been driven by shifting political and social forces.

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Aside from the flag, no piece of cloth in history has been imbued with as much power to liberate and oppress, rally and divide as the veil. Throughout the Muslim world, women have donned the veil as a form of modesty, piousness and defiance, and thrown it off to express freedom, strength and protest. Muslim governments have legislated head covering as a sign of religiosity and banned it as an obstacle to secularism. For liberal Western societies, the debate over the higab—a scarf that covers the head but not the face—crystallizes a key modern dilemma: how to reconcile the commitment to protecting freedom of expression with the ideal of integration and social cohesion?

As traditional as it seems, the veil has gone through perhaps more radical changes in use than any other item of apparel. It has been embraced, banned, enforced and made optional, often in the same country within a matter of years. Indeed, throughout history its meaning has been shaped by the political and social forces at work. The only unchanging characteristic of the veil is that it serves as a universal sign of Islamic heritage—and that women resent being told what to do with it, either way. "When women are pressured to veil, they protest, and when they are forced to unveil, they protest," says Fadwa el-Guindi, an anthropology professor at the University of Qatar. "The veil becomes the symbol of liberation par excellence."

The veil did not always have religious connotations. Pre-Islam, it was worn by upper-class Arab women in the Byzantine and Persian empires, who covered their hair as a symbol of status. More and more elite women began adopting the veil in the seventh century as a way to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. As the Islamic empire spread, the value of modesty—stipulated in the Qur'an for men as well as women—merged with the social customs of the upper class, creating a correlation between the veil and Islamic faith. While the Qur'an does not mandate veiling for women, it does encourage the Prophet Muhammad's wives to cover their heads to separate themselves from the rest of the religious community. "When Islam became imperial, a lot of cultural baggage infiltrated Islamic society," says Haifaa Jawad, a senior lecturer in Middle Eastern studies at the University of Birmingham in England.

It wasn't until the 18th century that the veil became entrenched in what is today Saudi Arabia. The al-Saud family began its rule in the region then, under the spiritual guidance of Sheik Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab. Together they instituted the austere form of Islam known as Wahhabism, based on a literal interpretation of the Qur'an. They believed that the head covering stipulated for Muhammad's wives applied to all Muslim women and should extend to the entire body. Today, Saudi Arabia's religious police harass women who are not dressed modestly.

Islam's colonial encounter with the West turned the veil into a charged political symbol. Algerian women routinely wore the veil until the French arrived in 1830, banning the study of Arabic and encouraging women to uncover their heads. Still, women couldn't win; the French looked down on those who did adopt Western dress as "loose." During the Algerian war of independence from 1954 to 1962, women adopted the veil again to assert their national pride—and occasionally hide explosives. In Egypt, British colonial administrator Lord Cromer argued that veiling was "the fatal obstacle" to the country's ability to form the foundations for Western civilization.

Some Middle Eastern nationalists agreed. By the end of the 19th century, progressive Muslim intellectuals, too, began to speak out against the veil. In 1899, French-educated Egyptian jurist Qasim Amin published "The Emancipation of Women," which argued that Islam did not require head covering. In 1923, Egyptian women's rights activist Huda Shaarawy—just back from a feminist conference in Rome—famously removed her face veil at the Cairo train station to widespread applause from supporters.

During the 20th century, some Middle Eastern leaders began to reject the veil to signify their embrace of Western culture. Turkey's founder, Kemal Ataturk, banned the head covering in government offices and enforced European dress to promote secular values. For a brief period in the mid-1990s, the Islamist Welfare Party came to power and eased the veil ban, allowing devout students to parade through Istanbul's streets in black chadors. But after the Turkish Army staged a coup in 1997 and removed the Islamists, the government reinstated the anti-scarf laws. Even today, the debate rages on: Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose Islamic party dominates the government, has pushed several times to repeal the ban.

In Iran, the Westernizing leader Reza Shah Pahlavi banned the veil in 1936, ordering women to give up their traditional chadors for bare heads or West-

ern-style hats. Police routinely tore chadors from women who continued to wear them, prompting many to stay home. During one demonstration against the new dress laws, the shah's Army shot and killed dozens of protesters. In the run-up to the 1979 revolution, women began donning the veil again to express their disapproval of the "Westoxification" of the Pahlavi regime. Those very same women were shocked in 1983 when Ayatollah Khomeini's new Islamic government amended the Iranian Constitution to require them to wear the higab in public—or risk receiving up to 74 lashes. Groups of religious police patrolled the streets in search of transgressors.

More recently the veil has come to define a muscular new brand of Islamic nationalism. "It represents reclaiming one's own cultural identity, and the rejection of imposed, imported consumerist commodities and unwanted foreign values and ideas," says el-Guindi. When the academic Margo Badran interviewed Kuwaiti activists fighting the Iraqi Army's occupation during the first gulf war, she found that some of the women who had burned their abayas during the 1960s had donned the caftanlike garments again as a form of wartime resistance. "We didn't want the Iraqis to see us," activist Raida al-Fodari told her. "So we dressed in black abayas and sunglasses." In addition to affording disguises, the abayas allowed them to hide ammunition.

The veil can evoke drastically disparate responses even among women in the same country. Under Soviet rule, Afghan women in Kabul embraced the reforms that encouraged them to unveil and go to school, while those in rural areas rejected them. When the Taliban took power in 1996, they forced women to wear burqas. Forbidden to attend work or school, many were housebound. After the Taliban fell following the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, Westerners expected Afghan women to throw off their burqas; some did, but plenty more have continued to wear them, whether out of tradition or fear of attack.

For the increasing numbers of women seeking new opportunities in Muslim countries, the veil is often not a barrier—quite the opposite. In Cairo, female office workers have found the veil can safeguard their growing presence in public spaces. "Many of these veiled women work and study outside the home and interact with both men and women," says Asma Afsaruddin, who teaches Islamic studies at the University of Notre Dame. "For them, veiling is not meant to restrict their access to the public sphere but to enhance it." It may not sound like progress. But if the history of the veil has taught us anything, it's that liberation comes in many different forms.

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