

# UNVEILING EUROPE

Bans on Muslim veils raise tough questions about religion and assimilation across the Continent

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**H**ind Ahmas, 33, has broken the law more times than she can count.

By going out in public in a *niqab*—a head-to-toe veil worn by some Muslim women that allows just a slit for the eyes—the divorced mother of a 5-year-old girl has been violating France's "burqa ban" since it went into effect in April 2011.

The law, which forbids covering one's face in public, for religious or secular reasons, affects an estimated 2,000 French Muslim women. Violators face fines of about \$200, and some are required to take classes on French "values."

"This law has made my life miserable," says Ahmas, who says she's been wearing the *niqab* (see chart) by choice for eight years. "I feel like France has decided to boycott some human rights."

Defenders of the law, which is widely supported in France, say that allowing people to hide their faces in public prevents them from fully participating in French society, and could enable crime, or even terrorism. They say the law liberates women from oppression.

But critics say the law stems from growing anti-Muslim sentiment in France and across Europe.

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A History of Muslim Veils



Hind Ahmas in front of the French National Assembly in 2011

The debate over Muslim veils raises tough questions: First, should a government be able to decide what constitutes female oppression, or should that choice be left to individuals? And second, where should society draw the line between tolerating religion and culture and encouraging—or even forcing—assimilation.

## Bans Across Europe

Since the Revolution in 1789, France has embraced **secularism**—the idea that religion should be kept out of public life. That idea has been tested with the large influx of Muslim immigrants in the past decade. Many emigrated to France from former colonies like Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria.

Today, about 20 million of the European Union's 500 million people—about 4 percent—are Muslim, and the number is expected to rise sharply in the coming decades. Many are poor and poorly integrated into mainstream European society, widening **riffs** between Muslims and non-Muslims on a variety of issues, including religious attire.

France is the first nation to outlaw full-face veils in all public places, but other European countries have passed similar laws or considered them.

In Italy and Spain, there are a number of local prohibitions on veils. And Austria, Switzerland, Great Britain, and Denmark have debated restrictions.

Amnesty International, a human





## A GUIDE TO MUSLIM VEILS



### HIJAB

The *hijab* is a headscarf that covers a woman's hair but not her face. It's the most common veil in the West and in less conservative Muslim countries.



### CHADOR

The *chador* is a full-body cloak that covers a woman's hair, but not her face. They're worn by many Iranian women.



### ABAYA

A head-to-toe black cloak that women in conservative Saudi Arabia are required to wear in public, the *abaya* can be worn with or without a face veil.



### NIQAB

The *niqab* is a head-to-toe veil that cloaks the body and covers the face, leaving just a slit for the eyes. It's usually worn by more conservative Muslims.



### BURQA

The most concealing veil, the *burqa* covers the entire face and body, leaving just a mesh screen to see through. It's most common in Afghanistan.

rights organization, opposes such bans on a number of grounds.

"This is an issue relating to the right of freedom of expression in general," says Marco Perolini, at Amnesty's London office. He says the ban also infringes on women's freedoms of speech and belief.

### Women's Rights?

But in France, many see the ban as liberation from ancient and sexist religious restrictions on women. Under the law, anyone forcing a woman to wear a religious veil faces up to a year in prison or a \$40,000 fine.

"The burqa is not welcome on French territory," former French President Nicolas Sarkozy told Parliament in 2009, when

the law was being considered. "In our country, we cannot accept that women be prisoners behind a screen, cut off from all social life, deprived of all identity."

Some critics say that the ban has had exactly the opposite effect that was intended: oppressing observant Muslim women by, in effect, forcing them to stay

close to home rather than face confrontations over the niqab.

"The law was meant to protect women but it has imprisoned them instead," says Rachid Nekkaz, a French businessman of Algerian descent, who has offered to compensate women for any fines incurred for wearing the niqab. So far he has paid more than 400 fines and legal fees totaling more than \$75,000.

### Veils in the U.S.

The issue of Islamic dress has also come up in the U.S., where a Florida judge ruled in 2003 that a Muslim woman had to remove her niqab for a driver's license photo. But in general, the U.S. takes a different approach than most European nations when it comes to religious expression in public.

The First Amendment forbids government from endorsing a particular religion, but it also protects religious expression: It's hard to imagine a public school in the U.S. imposing a ban on a particular kind of religious clothing.

France, on the other hand, with its tradition of secularism, tries to keep religious symbols out of public institutions. A 2004 law banned students from wearing any religious **garb**—including crosses, yarmulkes, and Muslim veils—in the nation's public schools. The 2011 law banning full-face veils in all public places goes a step further.

What effect the burqa ban will ultimately have on French society—and how strictly it will be enforced—remains to be seen. Kenza Drider, a mother of four and an outspoken critic of the law, continues to wear the niqab around her hometown of Avignon. She says the police know her and at this point usually wave at her instead of arresting and fining her.

Still, she says, the law has left her and her family deeply conflicted about their place in French society.

"I hate this law from the bottom of my heart," she says, "because of the way my children look at France now." ●

*With reporting from France by Steven Erlanger and Elvire Camus of The Times.*