

Why the Headscarf Ban is Wrong for France

By Aaron Kiersh

European governments are currently attempting to integrate disaffected Muslims into mainstream society. Fearing the instability and security threats associated with radical Islam, Europeans have recently tried to develop healthy relations among various religious and ethnic groups. But the 2004 French law forbidding students to wear religious articles—including the Sikh turban and the headscarf worn by observant Muslim girls—in public schools is a misguided approach to managing multiculturalism.

Some have argued that the headscarf ban is a victory for young Muslim women who are forced to wear the *hijab* as a sign of submission to an oppressive, male-dominated culture. Others have explained that the law compels even the most conservative Muslims to adjust to Western social norms of church and state separation as well as gender equality. Secularism is a particularly pertinent force in France, a nation that bitterly resented the power of the Catholic Church after centuries of religious warfare.

“Secularism is the closest thing the French have to a state religion,” wrote Henri Astier in 2004. “It underpinned the French Revolution and has been a basic tenet of the country's progressive thought since the 18th Century” (BBC).

Empowering young women and fostering a secular culture are certainly noble and worthwhile goals ideal for a modern tolerant society. But nothing can be accomplished with such restrictive policies as the headscarf ban, which was condemned by the global organization Human Rights Watch as a violation of international law that states religious freedom can only be infringed in response to a public safety risk.

The overwhelming majority of the French parliament which supported the measure contended that the ban would make the students feel as if they were stakeholders in the secular French system, rather than members of a separate community. But instead of drawing these disaffected, generally poor Muslims into the mainstream, the law unnecessarily alienates them. A majority of French Muslim women opposed the ban (BBC) and young Muslim women were pictured at the forefront of large demonstrations protesting the law. For those reasons, it seems as if the lawmakers were actually imposing their own interests on the citizens they claimed to be defending.

Muslims certainly should adopt freethinking, cosmopolitan values if they wish to remain in Western Europe. But forcing them to go against religious practice, rather than developing a comprehensive long-term strategy to incorporate Muslims into an environment they see as unfriendly, is counterproductive.

Many of Europe's Muslims feel trapped between two conflicting cultures. For decades, minority Muslim populations have existed in a ghettoized urban underclass that developed after waves of immigration from former colonies in the Middle East and North Africa. Muslims constituted a major source of cheap industrial labor that propelled Western Europe after the destruction caused by World War II.

But over the past 10-15 years, as factory jobs moved overseas and Islamic communities throughout the world became more self-aware, religious, and militant, a large generation of poorly educated, disillusioned Muslim youths grew up in the slums of Munich, Toulouse, and Brussels seeing little hope for the future and resenting their low status in a foreign land. In turn, white Christian Europeans—who once welcomed these victims of their colonialism with open arms—came to view the Muslim minority as a

source of instability and a threat to secularism. The attacks of 9/11 only exacerbated the situation by demonstrating the dangers of radical Islam. The discovery that the hijackers were linked to a mosque in Hamburg, Germany coincided with Jean Marie Le-Pen's extremist right wing party capturing sizeable support in a 2002 French election.

The 2004 proposal to ban headscarves in French public schools was a half-hearted response by the conservative Chirac government to the challenges posed by incorporating Muslims into a highly secular society. It falls well short of the mark. Instead of penalizing observant girls with expulsion, the French government should develop new, comprehensive measures to include Muslims in all aspects of French society. That approach would require punishing police prejudice against young North African and Arab men as well as reducing housing and job discrimination.

The Centre for Global Research reports that the riots that occurred in "les cites," ghettos for North Africans and Arabs clustered around the major French cities, in 2005 are understandable expressions of "anger and frustration at the French political establishment" which allows French police to conduct random identity checks of minority youth (Hassan). Those riots were prompted by the deaths of two Muslim teenagers accidentally electrocuted in a power substation after being chased by police. The Christian Science Monitor reported that "frustration and despair [were] simmering in heavily ethnic neighborhoods plagued by unemployment, poverty, and crime" and that the riots were rooted in genuine discrimination evident in the job market (Ford).

Such feelings of disenfranchisement could have disastrous consequences. Young Muslims are reacting to their perceived second-class status in France by turning to radical voices. As described by Shada Islam in the online journal Yale Global, "Neither France

nor its neighbors have done much to engage their Muslim minorities, allowing a more militant version of Islam to gain favor among...Younger Muslims [who] are now much...more likely to fall under the sway of largely foreign-trained imams espousing the strict Islamic traditions of Saudi Arabia and other Islamic nations which are far from the realities of life in Europe.” Americans have already suffered the effects of young Muslims radicalized by the teachings of conservative European imams. The French government and public should stop pushing their Muslim minority toward extremism by addressing the fundamental problem end of the spectrum and encourage moderates before they encounter violence even more deadly than those nationwide riots.

The current administration of Nicholas Sarkozy might be aware of the potential dangers posed by two separate societies—one French, one Muslim—that are unable to coexist peacefully. But his government might be further encouraged to take significant action if he is encouraged by other nations who have an interest in ensuring social stability, especially if it involves dissatisfied Muslim minorities that have been linked to terrorist incidents in Madrid and London.. The British, Spanish, and German governments would all be natural partners in a broad effort to break the entrenched cultural and economic barriers separating Muslims and mainstream society in all three nations. Each has a shared interest in addressing this issue. Each possesses enough resources to improve schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods, pressure employers to consider minority candidates for job openings, and discipline police officers who engage in prejudiced behavior against Arabs and North Africans.

The U.S. government can also play a major role in addressing this potentially catastrophic situation. With a new administration in Washington next year that will

undoubtedly enjoy more credibility in Europe than the outgoing Bush team, the White House can prioritize Muslim integration into mainstream Europe as a major component of its efforts against violent Islamic extremism. Paris, London, Madrid, and Berlin would certainly be much more willing to participate in this aspect of the “War on Terror” than military intervention in the Middle East. Though this proposal would require careful study and nuanced policy plans, it would be a far more effective means of integrating Muslims than banning headscarves in public schools.

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