

A Brief History of the Veil in Islam

To this day, head coverings play a significant role in many religions, including Orthodox Judaism and Catholicism.

Islam began as a small faith community in the Arabian Peninsula. The community was established in Medina by the prophet Mohammed (c. 570–632 CE). From there it spread through the Middle East to Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa, to Central Asia, and to many societies around the Arabian Sea. After Islam was established in the Middle East and North Africa, it made significant inroads into Europe, as well.

Scarves and veils of different colors and shapes were customary in countless cultures long before Islam came into being in the seventh century in the Arabian Peninsula (which includes present-day Saudi Arabia). To this day, head coverings play a significant role in many religions, including Orthodox Judaism and Catholicism.

Since the seventh century, Islam has grown to be one of the major world religions. As it spread through the Middle East to Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa, to Central Asia, and to many different societies around the Arabian Sea, it incorporated some local veiling customs and influenced others. But it is only recently that some Islamic states, such as Iran, have begun to require all women to wear the veil (in Iran it is called the *chador*, which covers the entire body).

Critics of the Muslim veiling tradition argue that women do not wear the veil by choice, and they are often forced to cover their heads and bodies. In contrast, many daughters of Muslim immigrants in the West argue that the veil symbolizes devotion and piety and that veiling is their own choice. To them it is a question of religious identity and self-expression.

Types of headscarves:

- The **hijab** is one name for a variety of similar headscarves. It is the most popular veil worn in the West. These veils consist of one or two scarves that cover the head and neck. Outside the West, this traditional veil is worn by many Muslim women in the Arab world and beyond.
- The **niqab** covers the entire body, head and face; however, an opening is left for the eyes. The two main styles of niqab are the half-niqab that consists of a headscarf and facial veil that leaves the

eyes and part of the forehead visible and the full, or Gulf, niqab that leaves only a narrow slit for the eyes. Although these veils are popular across the Muslim world, they are most common in the Gulf States. The niqab is responsible for creating much debate within Europe. Some politicians have argued for its ban, while others feel that it interferes with communication or creates security concerns.

- The **chador** is a full-body-length shawl held closed at the neck by hand or pin. It covers the head and the body but leaves the face completely visible. Chadors are most often black and are most common in the Middle East, specifically in Iran.
- The **burqa** is a full-body veil. The wearer's entire face and body are covered, and one sees through a mesh screen over the eyes. It is most commonly worn in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (1996–2001), its use was mandated by law.

What are the origins of the obligation to wear the Islamic veil (or *hijabin* Arabic)? Do all Muslim women wear the veil? Do they have to? Also, are all veils the same, or do they take different forms and shapes? And, finally, what objections does the veil raise in some countries in the West? Sociologist Caitlin Killian explains that, in the past as in the present, the tradition of veiling has been influenced by different religious interpretations as well as by politics.

Muslim religious writings are not entirely clear on the question of women veiling. Various statements in the [Quran](#) and the [Hadith](#) (statements attributed to the prophet Mohammed) make reference to Mohammed's wives veiling, but it is debatable whether these statements apply only to the Prophet's wives or to all Muslim women.

While the need for women to be modest is mentioned, the area women must cover depends on the source and ranges from "the bosom" to the whole body except the face and hands. The veil is a vehicle for distinguishing between women and men and a means of controlling male sexual desire....Muslim men are also urged to be modest and to cover themselves between the waist and the knees....[In some Islamic societies] an immodest woman brings dishonor not only on herself but also on her male family members....The veil itself, however, predated Islam and was practiced by women of several religions. It also was largely linked to class position: Wealthy women could afford to veil their bodies completely, whereas

poor women who had to work [in the field] either modified their veils or did not wear them at all.

The numerous styles of Islamic dress throughout the world today reflect local traditions and different interpretations of Islamic requirements. Muslim women in France, therefore, exhibit a wide range of dress and head coverings. Many wear nothing that distinguishes them as Muslims. A number of immigrant women practice modesty, not by donning traditional dress (i.e., the North African *djellaba*), but rather by wearing long-sleeved shirts and skirts that reach the ankles. For those who do veil, some simply wear brightly colored scarves on their heads, sometimes even allowing hair to show; others pin unicolor veils tightly around the face; and still others adopt long, flowing Islamic dress and occasionally cover the entire face except for the eyes. The girls at the center of the controversy usually wear Western clothing with a veil pinned around the face to cover their hair.

The struggle over Maghrebian women's dress began long before their immigration to France in the 1970s. French and British colonizers encouraged Muslim women to remove the veil and emulate European women. Consequently, in Algeria and other North African and Middle Eastern countries, the veil became a symbol of national identity and opposition to the West during independence and nationalist movements.¹

Excerpted from "The Other Side of the Veil: North African Women in France Respond to the Headscarf Affair." Copyright © 2003 by *Gender and Society*. Reprinted with permission.

Citations

Quran : The holy book of the Islamic faith.

Hadith : Reports by eyewitnesses, experts, and companions of the prophet Muhammad. Originally part of an oral tradition, these reports help different Islamic schools interpret the words, intentions, and actions of the founder of Islam.

djellaba : A Moroccan Arabic word for a traditional garment that is worn widely in many Arab regions. It has loose, long sleeves and a long skirt that can be worn by either sex.

1: We removed all citations from this excerpt. For the full text, see Caitlin Killian, “The Other Side of the Veil: North African Women in France Respond to the Headscarf Affair,” *Gender and Society*, 17, no. 4 (August 2003): 569–70.

Maghrebian : Maghreb is a region of North Africa where three former French colonies are located—Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Maghrebian immigrants and their sons and daughters form a growing minority in France. In some urban centers, they make up the majority of the current population. These immigrants speak various dialects of the Arabic language and Kabyle, the language of the Berber or Kabyle people.

nationalist : subscribing to a political ideology that emphasizes national culture or interests above those of minorities and other sub-national groups.

Connection Questions

1. What religious or cultural symbols are important to you or your family? How important do you think they are for others? How would you feel if people pressured you not to display them?
2. How do you explain the fact that there are so many different interpretations of whether or not Muslims choose to wear the veil?
3. Why has the veil become such an important symbol and thus the focus of controversy? What everyday objects in your life have become political symbols? Why? What do you think the veil represents in the eyes of non-Muslims?
4. When do clothes become political? Why did the veil become a political symbol for Muslims who fought against European colonialism? How do people in your community use clothes to express their political views and identities?

Related Content

Image
Global Immigration

Hijab

The hijab is one name for a variety of similar headscarves. It is the most popular veil worn in the West. These veils consist of one or two scarves that cover the head and neck. Outside the West, this traditional veil is worn by many Muslim women in the Arab world and beyond.

[Add or Edit Playlist](#)

Image

Global Immigration

Niqab

The niqab covers the entire body, head and face; however, an opening is left for the eyes. The two main styles of niqab are the half-niqab that consists of a headscarf and facial veil that leaves the eyes and part of the forehead visible and the full, or Gulf, niqab that leaves only a narrow slit for the eyes. Although these veils are popular across the Muslim world, they are most common in the Gulf States.

[Add or Edit Playlist](#)

<https://www.facinghistory.org/civic-dilemmas/brief-history-veil-islam>

Copyright © 2017 Facing History and Ourselves. We are a registered 501 (c) (3) charity. [Privacy Policy](#)