

Uncovering the Meaning of the Veil in Islam

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The Islamic veil, head scarf, or *hijab*, has come to symbolize in the Western mind, and especially in the popular imagination, an entire world religion, in fact one of the fastest growing religions in the world, a faith that affects over one thousand million people in the world, namely Islam. In many cases, the *hijab* has also even come to mean terrorism, repressive attitudes towards women, lack of democracy, fear, fundamentalism, etc. In France today, the veil and the debate surrounding it in public high schools crystallize all the problems France has to deal with in terms of postcolonialism, national identity and the Maghrebian immigrant situation. Equally important and deplorable is the focus and obsession of the French media ([see chart 1A at end of text](#)) on Muslim women and girls caught between their religious and cultural traditions and the Western way of life offered by the immigrant land they now live in (by choice or more often by necessity).

What is the veil? What is this *hijab* that is so often invoked in the French press as symbol of, and threat to, the civic ideal of *laïcité*? If in the Western, but also oftentimes in the Islamic mind, the *hijab* has come to stand for Islam, what does Islam say about the veil, and where does it prescribe that it must be worn by all Muslim women? The following is precisely an attempt at uncovering the meaning of the veil in Islam.¹

Before embarking into an overview of the teachings of Islam on the "proper" dress code for Muslim women, it is crucial to distinguish from the outset between what Islam, or the sacred texts of Islam, preach and the practices of Islam which, more often than not, are culture and country specific. Therefore, when one remembers that Muslims are found on all continents (except in Antarctica), one may safely say that in each case, Islam is practiced slightly differently. Most importantly for our purposes is that in each of these countries, the notion of the veil is understood differently. This situation results in great variations in the ways women wear the *hijab*. This may be seen by going to the following web site (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/europe/conferences/Veil2000/images.htm>)

Each of the women seen in these pictures earnestly claims (or is forced) to wear the prescribed "true Islamic veil." And yet each of these veils looks different, in colours, in fabrics (from sheer to black and everything in between) and in the extent to which it covers the hair, the face, or the rest of the body. Evidently, the cultural practices of Islam, evident in the ways the veil is understood to mean and therefore to be worn, differ widely. These cultural practices all claim to put into practice the teachings of Islam, as delineated in the following sacred texts: the *Quran*, the *Sunnah* and the *Shari'a*.

¹ This piece is heavily indebted to Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*. Trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (NY: Adison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991).

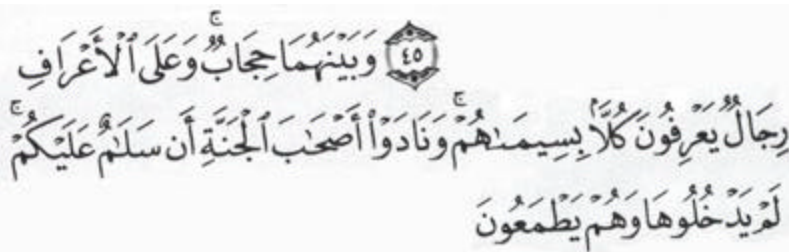
The Quran: is believed to be the exact words of God revealed to the Prophet of Islam, the Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon Him), by the intermediary of the archangel Gabriel in the 7th century (the first revelation dates from 610 AD). It is believed to be the 3rd revelation from God to humankind, after that sent to Moses (Torah), and that sent to Jesus-Christ (Bible). For Muslims therefore, both Judaism and Christianity are believed to be true revelations made by the same God who has sent yet a third revelation (Islam) to His people. For this reason, Jews and Christians are considered to be the "People of the Book" since they partake in the same true series of written revelations. Transmitted orally to the Prophet Mohammed, the Quran will be written down only after the Prophet's death (in 632), under the 3rd Caliph of Islam Uthman (644-655). The Quran is made up of 114 suras (chapters), each of them subdivided into various sections, called ayat. Some of the suras were revealed while the Prophet was in Mecca, others after he moved to Medina in 622 (this date has been taken to symbolically represent the beginning of the Islamic calendar).

The Sunnah: are the sayings of the Prophet. These sayings are communicated through a chain of transmission from the Prophet's time to that when the actual saying is written down. It is the text that tells of the actual practices of the Prophet Mohammed.

The Shari'a: Islamic law, deduced from the teachings of both the Quran and the Sunnah by the *'ulamas*, or Muslim theologians.

The Quran is undoubtedly considered the most important source of information on the laws and practices of Islam. The question is therefore: Where does the Quran prescribe the wearing of the *hijab* by Muslim women? A linguistic search for the word *hijab* throughout the Quran uncovers the following 5 passages (the word that translates the Arabic *hijab* is in bold):²

I. Sura 7: 46 (Meccan revelation):



"There will be a **veil** between them [the inmates of Paradise and the residents of Hell]"

"Entre les deux [entre les Hôtes du Jardin et ceux du Feu, ou ceux qui sont au Paradis et ceux qui sont en Enfer) est **un voile**."

² English translation of the Quran is by Ahmed Ali (Princeton UP, 1984). French translation by Régis Blachère.

II. Sura 19: 16-17 (Meccan revelation):

فَاتَّخَذَتْ مِنْ دُونِهِمْ حِجَابًا ﴿١٦﴾
فَأَرْسَلْنَا إِلَيْهَا رُوحَنَا فَتَمَثَّلَ لَهَا بَشَرًا سَوِيًّا

"Commemorate Mary in the Book. When she withdrew from her family to a place in the East/ And took **cover** from them."

"Et, dans l'écriture, mentionne Marie quand elle se retira de sa famille en un lieu oriental/ et qu'elle disposa **un voile** en deçà d'eux [sa famille]."

III. Sura 41: 5 (Mecca revelation):

وَقَالُوا قُلُوبُنَا فِي أَكِنَّةٍ ﴿٥﴾
مِمَّا نَدْعُونَكَ إِلَيْهِ وَفِي آذَانِنَا وَقْرٌ وَمِنْ بَيْنِنَا وَبَيْنِكَ حِجَابٌ
فَاعْمَلْ إِنَّا عَامِلُونَ

"And [those who do not listen] say: 'Our hearts are immured against what you call us to. There is a deafness in our ears, and a **veil** lies between us and you. So act (your way), we are acting (ours).'"

"Ils [les impies] ont dit: "Nos coeurs sont dans des enveloppes [qui les isolent] de ce vers quoi vous nous appelez. En nos oreilles est une fissure. Entre vous [Prophète Mohammed] et nous est **un voile**. Agis, car nous allons agir!"

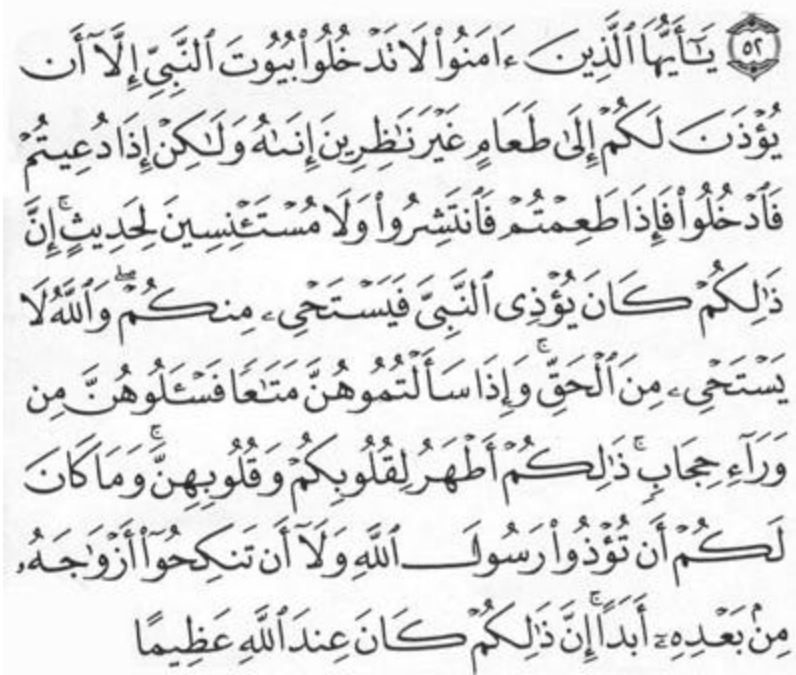
IV. Sura 42:51 (Mecca revelation):

وَمَا كَانَ ﴿٥١﴾
لِبَشَرٍ أَنْ يُكَلِّمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِنْ وَرَائِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ
رَسُولًا فَيُوحِيَ بِإِذْنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ إِنَّهُ عَلَىٰ حَكِيمٍ

"It is not given to man that God should speak to him except by suggestion or **indirectly**, or send a messenger to convey by His command whatsoever He please. He is all-high and all-wise."

"Il n'a pas été donné à un mortel qu'Allah lui parle, sinon par révélation, ou de derrière **un voile**,/ ou en envoyant un messager tel que celui-ci..."

V. Sura 33: 53 (Medina revelation):



يٰۤاَيُّهَا الَّذِيْنَ ءَامَنُوْا لَا تَدْخُلُوْا بُيُوْتَ النَّبِيِّ اِلَّا اَنْ
يُّؤْذَنَ لَكُمْ اِلَى طَعَامٍ غَيْرِ نَّظْرِيْنَ اِنَّهُ وَلٰكِنْ اِذَا دُعِيْتُمْ
فَادْخُلُوْا فَاِذَا طَعِمْتُمْ فَانْتَشِرُوْا وَلَا مَسْتَعْسِيْنَ لِحَدِيْثٍ اِنَّ
ذٰلِكَ كَانَ يُؤْذَى النَّبِيَّ فَيَسْتَحْيِ مِنْكُمْ وَاللّٰهُ لَا
يَسْتَحْيِ مِنَ الْحَقِّ وَاِذَا سَأَلْتُمُوْهُنَّ مَتَعًا فَسْأَلُوْهُنَّ مِنْ
وَّرَآءِ حِجَابٍ ذٰلِكُمْ اَطْهَرُ لِقُلُوْبِكُمْ وَقُلُوْبِهِنَّ وَمَا كَانَ
لَكُمْ اَنْ تُؤْذُوْا رَسُوْلَ اللّٰهِ وَلَا اَنْ تَنْكِحُوْا اَزْوَاجَهُ
مِنْ بَعْدِهِۦ اَبْدًا اِنَّ ذٰلِكَ كَانَ عِنْدَ اللّٰهِ عَظِيْمًا

"O you who believe, do not enter the houses of the Prophet for a meal without awaiting the proper time, unless asked, and enter when you are invited, and depart when you have eaten, and do not stay on talking. This puts the Prophet to inconvenience, and he feels embarrassed in (saying) the truth. And when you ask his wife for some thing of utility, ask for it from behind the **screen**. This is for the purity of your hearts and theirs."

"O vous qui croyez!, n'entrez dans les appartements du Prophète que [quand] il vous est donné permission pour un repas! [N'entrez point alors] sans attendre le moment de [ce repas]! Quand toutefois vous êtes invités, entrez! Dès que vous avez pris le repas, retirez-vous sans vous abandonner, familiers, à un discours. Cela offense le Prophète et il a honte de vous. Mais Allah n'a pas honte de la vérité. Quand vous demandez un objet aux [épouses du Prophète], demandez-le de derrière **un voile**! Cela est plus décent pour vos coeurs et leurs coeurs."

It is evident to anyone reading these passages that except for the last quotation, the word *hijab*, though used indeed in the Arabic text, is not understood to mean or to refer in any way to an Islamic dress code for women.

- The first passage Sura 7: 46 talks about the separation (called **veil**) between the inhabitants of Hell and those of Paradise.

- The second passage Sura 19: 16-17 speaks about how when she found out she was pregnant, Mary separated herself from her people in space and in silence (this separation is spoken of as a **veil**).
- The third passage Sura 41: 5 speaks about the polytheists who have a **veil** on their heart that prevents them from hearing and understanding the preaching of the Prophet.
- The fourth passage Sura 42:51 speaks of the **veil** God uses to speak to humankind as a protection to humans from the divine brilliance.
- Only the last passage (Sura 33: 53) uses the word *hijab* to speak of the Islamic dress code for women (I will return to this citation below). And it is this passage, in combination with 3 other passages from the Quran that are regularly invoked by Islamic theologians (*'ulamas*) in some countries to coerce women into wearing the headscarf; and it is these passages also that are invoked by Muslim women as a justification for their adoption of the veil.

These 3 additional passages are given below. While reading them, it is crucial to keep in mind the fact that although the translation into English and French sometimes uses the word "veil," the Arabic Quran actually never uses here the word *hijab*. Passages in bold refer to the particular areas where women clothing is more directly addressed.

VI. Sura 24: 30-31 (Medina revelation):


﴿٣٠﴾ وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ

يَعْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ
زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَى جُيُوبِهِنَّ
وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ
أَبَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَاءِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ
أَوْ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِي إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنَاتِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ
أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُنَّ أَوِ التَّابِعِينَ غَيْرِ أُولِي الْإِرْبَةِ مِنَ
الرِّجَالِ أَوِ الطِّفْلِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَى عَوْرَاتِ النِّسَاءِ
وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا يُخْفِينَ مِنْ زِينَتِهِنَّ وَتَوْبُوا
إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا إِنَّهُ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ فَفَلِحُونَ

"Tell the believing men to lower their eyes and guard their private parts. There is for them goodness in this. God is aware of what they do./ Tell the believing women to lower their eyes, guard their private parts, and **not display their charms except what is apparent outwardly**, and cover their bosoms with their **veils** and **not to show their finery** except to their husbands or their fathers or fathers-in-law, their sons or step-sons, brothers, or their brothers' and sisters' sons, or their women attendants or captives, or male attendants who do not have any need (for women), or boys not yet aware of sex. They should not walk stamping their feet **lest they make known what they hide of their ornaments**. O believers, turn to God, every one of you, so that you may be successful."

"Dis aux Croyants qu'ils baissent leurs regards et soient chastes. Ce sera plus décent pour eux. Allah est bien informé de ce qu'ils font./ Dis aux Croyantes de baisser leurs regards, d'être chastes, **de ne montrer de leurs atours que ce qui en paraît**. Qu'elles rabattent leurs **voiles** sur leurs gorges! Qu'elles montrent seulement leurs atours à leurs époux, ou à leurs pères, ou aux pères de leurs époux, ou à leurs fils, ou aux fils de leurs époux, ou à leurs frères, ou aux fils de leurs frères, ou aux fils de leurs soeurs, ou à leurs femmes, ou à leurs esclaves, ou à leurs serviteurs mâles que n'habite pas le désir [charnel], ou aux garçons qui ne sont pas [encore] au fait de la conformation des femmes. Que [les Croyantes] ne frappent point [le sol] de leurs pieds pour **montrer les atours qu'elles cachent!** Revenez tous à Allah, ô Croyants! Peut-être serez-vous bienheureux."


VII. Sura 33: 32-33 (Medina revelation):

 وَقَرْنَ
 فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ وَلَا تَبَرَّجْنَ تَبَرُّجَ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ الْأُولَىٰ وَأَقِمْنَ
 الصَّلَاةَ وَآتِينَ الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِعْنَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ إِنَّمَا
 يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ
 تَطْهِيرًا

"O wives of the Prophet, you are not like other women. .../ Stay at home, and **do not deck yourselves with ostentation** as in the days of paganism; fulfil your devotional obligations, pay the zakat, and obey God and His Apostle."

"O femmes du Prophète! .../ Demeurez dans vos demeures! Ne vous produisez point en **vos atours**, à la manière de l'ancienne Gentilité (jâhiliyya)! Accomplissez la prière! Donnez l'Aumône (zakât). Obéissez à Allah et à son Apôtre!"

VIII. Sura 33: 59 (Medina revelation):

 وَقَرْنَ
 فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ وَلَا تَبَرَّجْنَ تَبَرُّجَ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ الْأُولَىٰ وَأَقِمْنَ
 الصَّلَاةَ وَآتِينَ الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِعْنَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ إِنَّمَا
 يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ
 تَطْهِيرًا

"O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters, and the women of the faithful, **to draw their wraps a little over them**. They will thus be recognized and no harm will come to them. God is forgiving and kind."

"O Prophète!, dis à tes épouses, à tes filles et aux femmes des Croyants **de serrer sur elles leurs voiles!** Cela sera le plus simple moyen qu'elles soient reconnues et qu'elles ne soient point offensées. Allah est absolu et miséricordieux."

While, the Quran is indeed concerned in these passages about women's clothing and the way women appear in public, in none of these 3 passages is the word *hijab* used. In fact,

nowhere in the Quran, except in Sura 33: 53, is the word *hijab* used to speak about a particular dress code for Muslim women. And nowhere, including in Sura 33:53 is *hijab* used to describe, let alone to prescribe, the necessity for Muslim women to wear a headscarf or any of the other pieces of clothing often seen covering women in Islamic countries today. Even after reading these passages dealing with the female dress code, one continues to wonder what exactly the *hijab* is: is it supposed to be a simple scarf? A *purdah*? A *chador*? Or something else? Which parts of the body exactly is it supposed to cover: just the hair? The hair and neck? The arms? Hands? Feet? Face? Eyes? What colour is it supposed to be? More often than not, the Quranic *ayat* seem to offer a new use for an existing piece of clothing (it is a well known fact that women in the Roman, and therefore pre-islamic, world, but also in the Jewish and Christian traditions wore veils).

If the word *hijab* is used indeed in one passage, namely Sura 33:52, it does not in any case refer to what is today commonly understood by the word, namely a headscarf of some sort to be worn by all Muslim women. For this prescription is addressed clearly and specifically to the wives of the Prophet, and not to all Muslim women. Moreover, when one considers the circumstances surrounding the specific revelation of this sura, one realizes that the meaning of the term *hijab* here seems to have been vastly misunderstood by succeeding generations. For sura 33:52 was revealed at the time of the Prophet's marriage with a new bride and speaks of his desire to consummate his marriage, a desire which was frustrated because some guests were overstaying their visit. God has thus sent in this revelation in order to separate the guests **through a veil** from the private chambers of the Prophet and his bride. When one thus contextualizes the Quranic revelations and their prescriptions, one sees that the *hijab* in this *aya* was meant to be a physical object aimed at securing the privacy of the Prophet and of his family and not, as is still often believed, a piece of clothing for women to wear. Evidently, the use of the word *hijab* here may not be interpreted as a prescription for any specific type of Islamic dress code for women.

Another example of a misinterpretation in the Quran as it relates to the headscarf is found in sura 33:59. Once again here the dress code that is advised ("to draw their wraps a little over them") is not aimed at prescribing the wearing of a *hijab* for Muslim women; rather it is meant to distinguish between the clothing of free aristocratic women from that worn by the female slaves. The dress code here is a social marker, and has nothing to do with a gender dress code.

Finally, sura 24:30-31 is particularly valuable to this discussion of the dress code for the Muslim faithfuls because before even addressing the particular dress code for women, the Quran speaks first of the Islamic dress code for men. And it does so in the same words as it does for women. This sura is interesting because throughout the Islamic world and in the West, one never hears anything said about the way men must dress or conduct themselves in public. The focus has always been and continues to be on women.

These examples demonstrate that the exclusive focus placed on the *hijab* (veil) as it relates to women and the implications the veil has for the female body clearly constitute another form of veiling, this time of the prescriptions that the Quran specifically

addresses to men. By focusing on women, Muslim men have allowed themselves to be removed from any type of responsible behavior, and have ended up maintaining an inequality of the sexes, despite of Islamic prescriptions on the subject of equality, because the latter is viewed as a threat to their power and political monopoly.

In conclusion, it seems that the *hijab* is a construction created shortly after the Prophet's time and maintained till today by patriarchal society in order to keep women in a subordinate position. Because of the vagueness of its prescriptions on the dress code for women, the Quran has been manipulated at various historical times, including in our own times, in order to uphold various political agendas. Fatima Mernissi, in her famous *The Veil and Male Elite*, has poignantly explained the political construction of the veil throughout the post-islamic times. She has described how shortly after the Prophet's time, Muslim men attempted to keep the privileges they enjoyed in the pre-islamic world over women by denying women the equality of the sexes preached by Islam, by discouraging education even though the first words of the Quran revealed to the Prophet were precisely "to read;" by not allowing women to go out to wars and collect booty, thereby maintaining them in an economically dependent position *vis-à-vis* them, etc. These injunctions have translated into the modern period by the imposition on women by men to wear the veil, to remain in the house, and not participate in the socio-political world. In the 19th century, the question of the Islamic Veil became a particularly heated item during the Western colonization of the Arabo-Islamic world, and was used and misused by the West in its claim to bring civilization and liberation to Muslim women from their socio-cultural oppression. The same debate surrounding the Veil continues in France today even though the terms of the debate have changed (*laïcité* and equal opportunity instead of oppression and cultural superiority). Evidently, the history of the meaning of the veil teaches us that the veil is a construction that has little to do with Islamic prescriptions over a particular dress code for women, but is rather a space where conflicts of male superiority and patriarchy on the one hand, and power relations between the Islamic world and the West on the other manifest themselves.

NUMBER OF ARTICLES: NATIONAL PRESS* 1989-1998			
	Islamic headscarf:	State funding:	Total:
France:	1295	5	1300
French press	1261	5	1266
British press	34	0	34
Britain:	31	241	272
British press	23	241	264
French press	8	0	8
Total:	1326	246	1572

*: **Mainstream dailies:** *Le Figaro* (conservative), *Le Monde* (independent), **Libération** (liberal), *L'Humanité* (communist), *The Times* (conservative), *The Independent* (independent), *The Guardian* (liberal), *Morning Star* (communist)

Religious papers: La Croix (Catholic), Church Times (Anglican)

Education papers: *Le Monde de l'Education*, *Times Educational Supplement*

Lina MOLOKOTOS LIEDDERMAN-1/99

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