

Table of Contents

- ***Syria bans full Islamic face veils at universities***
-

Syria bans full Islamic face veils at universities

Albert Aji and Elizabeth A. Kennedy

AP (20.07.2010) / HRWF (22.07.2010) – website: www.hrwf.net - Syria has forbidden the country's students and teachers from wearing the niqab - the full Islamic veil that reveals only a woman's eyes - taking aim at a garment many see as political.

The ban shows a rare point of agreement between Syria's secular, authoritarian government and the democracies of Europe: Both view the niqab as a potentially destabilizing threat.

"We have given directives to all universities to ban niqab-wearing women from registering," a government official in Damascus told The Associated Press on Monday.

The order affects both public and private universities and aims to protect Syria's secular identity, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly about the issue. Hundreds of primary school teachers who were wearing the niqab at government-run schools were transferred last month to administrative jobs, he added.

The ban, issued Sunday by the Education Ministry, does not affect the hijab, or headscarf, which is far more common in Syria than the niqab's billowing black robes.

Syria is the latest in a string of nations from Europe to the Middle East to weigh in on the veil, perhaps the most visible symbol of conservative Islam. Veils have spread in other secular-leaning Arab countries, such as Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, with Jordan's government trying to discourage them by playing up reports of robbers who wear veils as masks.

Turkey bans Muslim headscarves in universities, with many saying attempts to allow them in schools amount to an attack on modern Turkey's secular laws.

The issue has been debated across Europe, where France, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands are considering banning the niqab on the grounds it is degrading to women. Last week, France's lower house of parliament overwhelmingly approved a ban on both the niqab and the burqa, which covers even a woman's eyes, in an effort to define and protect French values - a move that angered many in the country's large Muslim community.

The measure goes before the Senate in September; its biggest hurdle could come when France's constitutional watchdog scrutinizes it later. A controversial 2004 law in France earlier prohibited Muslim headscarves and other "ostentatious" religious symbols in the classrooms of French primary and secondary public schools.

Opponents say such bans violate freedom of religion and personal choice, and will stigmatize all Muslims.

In Damascus, a 19-year-old university student who would give only her first name, Duaa, said she hopes to continue wearing her niqab to classes when the next term begins in the fall, despite the ban.

Otherwise, she said, she will not be able to study.

"The niqab is a religious obligation," said the woman, who would not give her surname because she was uncomfortable speaking out against the ban. "I cannot go without it."

Nadia, a 44-year-old science teacher in Damascus who was reassigned last month because of her veil, said: "Wearing my niqab is a personal decision."

"It reflects my freedom," she said, also declining to give her full name.

In European countries, particularly France, the debate has turned on questions of how to integrate immigrants and balance a minority's rights with secular opinion that the garb is an affront to women.

But in the Middle East - particularly Syria and Egypt, where there have been efforts to ban the niqab in the dorms of public universities - experts say the issue underscores the gulf between the secular elite and largely impoverished lower classes who find solace in religion.

Some observers say the bans also stem in part from fear of dissent.

The niqab is not widespread in Syria, although it has become more common in recent years, a development that has not gone unnoticed by the authoritarian government.

"We are witnessing a rapid income gap growing in Syria - there is a wealthy ostentatious class of people who are making money and wearing European clothes," said Joshua Landis, an American professor and Syria expert who runs a blog called Syria Comment.

The lower classes are feeling the squeeze, he said.

"It's almost inevitable that there's going to be backlash. The worry is that it's going to find its expression in greater Islamic radicalism," Landis said.

Four decades of secular rule under the Baath Party have largely muted sectarian differences in Syria, although the state is quick to quash any dissent. In the 1980s, Syria crushed a bloody campaign by Sunni militants to topple the regime of then-President Hafez Assad.

The veil is linked to Salafism, a movement that models itself on early Islam with a doctrine that is similar to Saudi Arabia's. In the broad spectrum of Islamic thought, Salafism is on the extreme conservative end.

In Gaza, radical Muslim groups encourage women to cover their faces and even conceal the shape of their shoulders by using layers of drapes.

It's a mistake to view the niqab as a "personal freedom," Bassam Qadhi, a Syrian women's rights activist, told local media recently.

"It is rather a declaration of extremism," Qadhi said.
