

The Veil as a Political Act

Written by Elham Manea

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ELHAM MANEA, FEB 7 2018

There is something very odd about the issue of the 'veil' and what the Western media collectively calls the 'Muslim woman'. What's odd about it has to do with its effects on us, when we try to discuss it. Yes, there are issues to be discussed: it tends to get under our skin, it makes us angry and nervous, and sometimes we end up behaving irrationally. In fact, we often try to stop the discussion before it even starts.

I use the pronouns 'we' and 'us' a lot. And this can be confusing.

By 'we', do I mean people of the human race, of Muslim-majority countries, or of Western democracies?

The first is my favourite 'we'; I use the other two within their contexts. I belong to all three categories and that makes me a bridge. But when it comes to the 'headscarf' and the 'Muslim woman', I mean the 'we' that is all of us.

We get emotional when we talk about this 'piece of cloth' and the 'right' of a 'Muslim woman' to wear it. Some well-meaning Western women are actually engaging in campaigns to wear headscarves as a sign of solidarity for the 'Muslim woman'. They sincerely believe that their actions will help the 'civil rights' of the Muslim woman. If you are one of these women, I ask you to recognize that the issue is not as simple as you are made to believe. There is an element of choice in the matter, of course, but the issue also has social, power, ideological and political dimensions. When you look at the issue from all of these dimensions, it becomes clear it requires action, and those actions certainly do not involve silly campaigns of wearing headscarves. Would you engage in similar campaigns for the right of women forced to wear the veil? These campaigns are many.

I stand among scholars of Arab and Islamic heritage who believe that the headscarf is political.

It is the core of an Islamist political project. With it, Islamists mark their presence.

If you think I am exaggerating, listen to Essam El-Erian. He was the Egyptian vice chairman of the Freedom and Justice Party, the Egyptian political party of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as a former member of the Guidance Bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood.

He was in fact gloating about the Brotherhood's success in spreading the headscarf in Egypt without force. In a recorded talk he explained:

When I entered medical school in 1970, there was only one veiled student, and we [the MB group] realized that it was necessary to control this situation. So we decided to launch our missionary work, so women would choose the veil for themselves. We started to distribute booklets, statements and the book *To Every Girl who believes in God*, written by the Syrian [Islamist] preacher Mohammed Saeed al-Bouti. Given the fact that the veil was not used at the time, we took action to remedy the situation [by providing a supply] and made a deal with certain factories, which enabled us to distribute the veil to the students at the university at production cost. Five years later, a third of the female college students were wearing the veil.

When Islamists launch their missionary work anywhere, this is how they start. They start with the woman first,

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controlling her behaviour and getting her to cover her body. And they play on her religious feelings, guilt and fear.

“If you do not cover up, you will be disobeying God, displeasing him,” they say, “and you do love God, do you not?” And, “you also will be responsible for the sins committed by men who are seduced by your beauty. These poor men cannot control their desires and you are constantly seducing them with your hair and body”. And, “you will burn in hell, if you do not cover up. Hell is filled with women held from their hair, for their sins”.

Tell me, please, how is choice being exercised here? Where is choice, when young girls and women are constantly told they will burn in hell if they do not cover themselves? This reminds me of a young woman phoning in to Maajid Nawaz, a British activist, radio host and author of *Radical*, on his British talk show on LBC in September 2017. He criticized British schools that allow girls as young as five to wear the headscarf. The young woman condemned him for that, saying she is proud of her headscarf, which she has worn voluntarily since she was seven. When he pressed her to tell him why she is wearing it, she answered that God would punish her if she took it off, by burning her in hell. The irony in what she said was lost on her.

Would she wear it if she were told God would love her with her hair uncovered, and she would not burn in hell? I am inclined to say no. She wouldn't.

And, you know what? God has nothing to do with this.

The Quran never mentioned a headscarf. In fact, the Quran never introduced a dress code.

The way women were dressing in the 7th century, at the time of Mohammad, the Prophet of Islam, reflected the traditions during that historical period. The verses used to justify covering women were in fact an injunction that asked *free* Muslim women to cover their breasts, so they could be distinguished from *slave* Muslim women. At that time Muslim women, both slave and free, walked in public with their breasts uncovered. During a time when Mohammad had not yet become very powerful, his so-called enemies started to harass his female followers. When he complained, they would reply, “We thought they were slave women”. So the Prophet found a solution: ask free Muslim women to cover their breasts. Hence those verses in the Quran.

What people seem to forget today is that for centuries, Muslim women who were slaves would be sold in the market with their breasts bare, and would walk in the streets that way. They would pray with their breasts bare. You can find video clips on YouTube showing Saudi slave markets from the 1960s with slave women standing bare-breasted. You can see it in photos and paintings taken in the early 20th century in Turkey, Egypt and elsewhere: slave women with their masters. If Mohammad issued an injunction from this custom for all women who are Muslims, why make an exception for slave women? Why would the second caliph, Omar ibn Al Khatab (579-644), the one best known for his rigorous enforcement of religious rules, punish any slave Muslim woman who tried to cover her breasts like a free woman (Moaouth 2009)?

I am not inventing this history. It is recorded history in the Islamic tradition and religious books.

The fact that in the 1970s you could hardly find a woman wearing the headscarf anywhere in Egypt, except in rural areas, tells you something about the social change that took place in many Muslim-majority countries—a change mainstreamed by the Islamist ideology of Hasan al Banna.

Al Banna first articulated his position on the veil in a tract called *The Muslim Woman*. The original date of that tract is not known but two points are certain: it was written in the early decades of the 20th century, and he was in fact reacting to the encroachment of modernity, as more women started to take off the traditional veil. It was also a reaction to Ataturk's vision of a national and secular state. Kamal Ataturk was a young military leader, the first president of modern-day Turkey, and he abolished the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924. To him the answer to the problems of his nation was clear: build a nation-state, modernize it through a comprehensive program of reforms, and adopt secularism as the cornerstone of that state. Central to his vision was the role of the women, who were encouraged to take off the veil and participate actively in society. They were assisted by a new family law imported

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from Switzerland; conservative as it may have been, it was nonetheless a welcome departure from the Islamic provisions of the Ottoman family law (Manea 2009).

Al Banna answered with his own vision of an Islamist state, one that would ultimately lead to the creation of the Caliphate. To match that ideology he needed a dress code: the veil that covers the woman and leaves her hands and face visible. It was the symbol for a political project, one that sought to create a puritanical society based on a fundamentalist view of gender roles (Manea 2009).

Three principles stand at the core of al Banna's view on women:

- Men and women have different rights because of their biological differences. It is determined by their biological nature. Accordingly, women should only be taught what suits a woman's natural function and duty. She should be taught "what suits her task and function which God has created her for: to take care of her house and raise children" (al-Banna 1988)
- Segregation between the sexes is a must because men and women cannot be trusted to be alone. They cannot control their sexual desires and will always be tempted sexually. Hence al Banna sees "a true risk" in any "mixing between sexes" and insists on separation "between the two of them unless they marry" (al-Banna 1988)
- Wearing the veil is a duty and mandatory. In fact, al Banna insists that "Islam forbids a woman to *reveal her body; be alone with someone; to imitate a man*"; it encourages her to "*pray at her home*", and orders her to "*wear the veil*" (al-Banna 1988)

Of course, it is al Banna who insists on according different rights to women because of their biological differences, and on segregation between the sexes and veiling for women. God has nothing to do with any of that.

Do you see why, wherever this ideology starts to spread, the veil appears in tandem? The veil is core to its teaching, just as segregation between the sexes is central to its vision of a fundamentalist society. This explains why segregation between the sexes and avoidance of contact between males and females in schools and workplaces starts to become an integral demand of the Islamists, as they claim to speak for *all* Muslims in western democracies.

The veil is a symbol. It is the symbol of political Islam. But some of the women who are wearing it today truly believe they are following God's orders. They think that when they wear it they become 'good Muslims'. Some of my female relatives in Egypt wore mini-skirts in the 1970s, but turned to the veil in the 1990s—and think they did so of their own free will. Today a reverse wave is taking place in Egypt as young women are rebelling and taking off their veils. But, for doing so, many of them endure psychological and physical punishments, defamation and threats.

In Western democracies the picture is also complicated. In Europe, some young immigrants from Muslim-majority countries turn to it as a means of asserting their identity—but it becomes an identity of seclusion. In fact, I know of young women who were so enraged by the Danish caricatures of Mohammad that they began to wear the headscarf. Their decision was not a matter of religion. It was a way of expressing their anger and defiance.

But many others are forced to wear it. Those who insist on not wearing it face both physical and physiological sanctions from their family and community. This pressure and punishment stems from several sources: patriarchal structures, religion, and efforts to control woman's sexuality. I deal with many such cases in here in Switzerland but also with those connecting with me from closed communities in Europe and in Arab majority states. In certain parts of the UK, some women's rights activists have to wear the headscarf in order to get access to the women trapped in their closed communities (Manea 2016). That tells you something about the suffocating social control in place there.

Most importantly, wherever the numbers of Muslim students reach a critical mass in either a school or a neighbourhood, peer pressure and group dynamics gain a certain level of clout and force girls and young teenagers to wear the veil. I documented these cases in my forthcoming book on non-violent Islamism. Some will tell you it was their free choice. But when they try to take it off, they learn that free choice only applies to choosing to wear the headscarf. No free choice is the other way around.

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