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Behind the veil: Why Islam's most visible symbol is spreading

Embraced or banned, a prayer or a prison, the Muslim veil is spreading: Who wears it – and why?



Views of the veil: Afghans wear burqas at a conference on violence against women in Herat.

Morteza Nikoubazi/Reuters

By Caryle Murphy, Correspondent / December 12, 2009

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

It liberates. It represses. It is a prayer. It is a prison. It protects. It obliterates.



Photo Gallery
Behind the veil

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Rarely in human history has a piece of cloth been assigned so many roles. Been embroiled in so much controversy. Been so misjudged, misunderstood, and manipulated.

This bit, or in some cases bolt, of fabric is the Islamic veil.

For non-Muslims, it is perhaps the most visible, and often most controversial, symbol of Islam. From Texas to Paris, it has gained new prominence and been at the center of workplace misunderstandings, court rulings, and, in Europe, parliamentary debates about whether it should be banned.

The veil's higher profile stems from several factors, including greater awareness and curiosity about Islam since 9/11, US military interventions in Muslim countries

like Iraq and Afghanistan, and the rising visibility of Muslim immigrant communities in the United States and Europe.

It has also become a magnet for trouble in times of distress, as Illinois resident Amal Abusumayah discovered when a woman upset about the Fort Hood, Texas, killing spree tugged Ms. Abusumayah's head scarf in a grocery store.

"The veil has become a clichéd symbol for what the West perceives as Muslim oppression, tyranny, and zealotry – all of which have little to do with the real reasons why Muslim women veil," says Jennifer Heath, editor of the 2008 book "The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics."

All this attention on the veil brings immense chagrin to Muslims because their faith means so much more to them than what women wear on their heads. But the veil – in its many manifestations – also gives rise to disagreement among Muslims. And their contemporary debate about it, while not yet widespread, raises fundamental questions relating to free will, women's status in society, and even how to interpret Islam's holy book, the Koran.

IN ITS BROADEST SENSE, the "Islamic veil" refers to a large variety of coverings. The most widely worn is the head scarf. Covering hair and neck, it can be black and simple, or colorful and sweeping, as in Cairo, where scarves are tightly wound around women's heads and then cascade luxuriously to their waists.

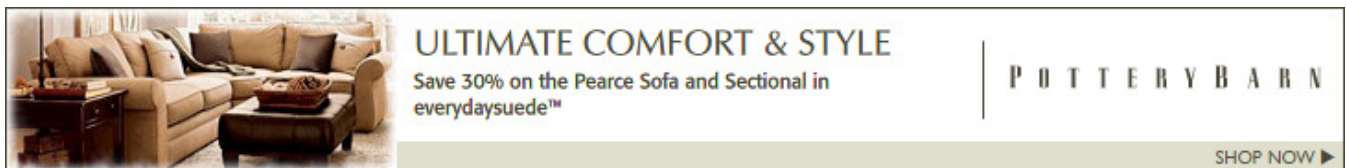
The head scarf is often referred to as *hijab* or *hejab*, an Arabic word meaning a covering or a screen. *Mujahabat* means "women who are covered."

There is sweeping consensus among Islamic religious scholars around the world that Muslim women are required to, or at least should, cover their hair. So the head scarf, or some type of head covering, is widely viewed as mandatory in Islam.

Other coverings worn by Muslim women also fall within the category of "veil." Depending on the country, these outfits can be regarded as either optional or compulsory. Often they are said to be required on either religious or cultural grounds – categories that overlap in most Muslim countries.

Iran's traditional covering, for example, is the chador, an ample black cloth that fits over the head and reaches to the ground. Women often hold part of it over their face in mixed company. The more modern Iranian cover is a head scarf accompanied by a longish, coat-type garment.

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