

THE HIJAB BAN: LIBERATION OR OPPRESSION?

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to understand the effects of the hijab ban on covered women in Turkey and how they respond to the challenges in educational, professional and social life. This study examines the religious, political and personal aspects of wearing hijab from Muslim women's perspective. Interviews shed light on the benefits and risks of wearing hijab in Turkey through individual experiences of those who wear it.

Turkey as a secular state banned hijab in schools and public buildings. The ban has been highly controversial, because %99 of the people are Muslims¹ and many women wear hijab in Turkey. The controversy mostly revolves around whether hijab is a political or a religious expression, whether it is a threat to secular modern life or not, whether it oppresses or liberates women, and whether it is merely a piece of clothing or sign of modesty. Within all this difference of opinion about hijab, the voice of veiling women is hardly heard. This study aims to present Turkish Muslim women's experiences and perceptions as insiders' voices about the subject matter. The religious, political and personal aspects of wearing *hijab* are examined. Interviews shed light on the benefits and risks of wearing *hijab* in Turkey through individual experiences of those who wear it.

The analysis of the *hijab* ban case contains many challenging issues such as the application of secularism, modernity, and democracy in Turkey and leaves room for further discussion on human rights and freedom of expression. Analyzing the literature of Modern Turkey's history and interview responses together show that potential resolution of *hijab* controversy is restructuring interpretations attributed to secularism and modernity and lifting the ban which has been an obstacle to create a more egalitarian and democratic society.

Hijab ban has been one of the most controversial topics in Turkey. Ban supporters argue that *hijab* is contrary to secularism as a symbol of political ideology, and that it limits women's liberties. Opponents maintain that the ban inhibits freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and that there is no written law in the Turkish Constitution explicitly prohibiting women's right to wear *hijab*. One could argue that the common point between these two opposing sides is the idea that *hijab* is more than a piece of clothing.

The ban applies to public institutions. It covers public and private schools from primary school through all levels of university education, courts, parliament, government offices, the military and police, and some private institutions. It is enforced against public and government employees, military personnel, teachers, and students.²

Hijab has been discouraged in public institutions since Ataturk introduced the clothing reform, alongside other reforms, to bring about a Western-style, modern republic.³ The basic goal of this transformation in clothing was to create model public citizens to support the speedy

¹ US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3432.htm> (March 20, 2012).

² Mary Lou O'Neil, "[You Are What You Wear: Clothing/Appearance Laws and the Construction of the Public Citizen in Turkey](#)," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 14:1 (Mar 2010): 66.

³ *Ibid.*, 65,71.

modernization and westernization project in the country.⁴ Clothing regulations were extensively enforced to create modern citizens,⁵ with the hope that changing their appearance would also change the way they think.

Ataturk attached great importance to the hat⁶ and dress revolution, because he believed that in order to create a “modern” nation, the Turkish people had to resemble the “civilized”⁷ world in their costume also.⁸ For this reason, adopting the Western dress code was considered as the most natural sign of being civilized. The religious and traditional attire⁹ which existed until then was considered uncivilized and was replaced with the “modern” dress code. The new dress code led to the replacement of *fezzes*¹⁰ with hats, and *shalvar*¹¹ with Western suits and skirts. In the new Republic, hijab was deemed oppressive and backward, and perceived as a barrier to building a modern nation.¹² In his book *Islam and Modernization*, Saeed stated that the Republican clothing reform sought to create a religion-free zone.¹³

While Michael Hirsh describes the revolutions of Ataturk as “for the people, despite the people,”¹⁴ Bernard Lewis disagrees; he interprets Ataturk’s reforms as taking “the first decisive

⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁵ The term “modern” was never specifically stated in the laws, but its implication is Western clothing, which does not include the hijab.

⁶ In 1925, Ataturk said, “It is necessary to deepen and support the foundation of the reforms. Do not deceive each other. The civilized world has made great progress. We must catch up and must be included in that civilization. It is necessary to remove all these null and void discussions. The discussion whether to wear the hat or not is nonsense. We shall wear the hat and adopt all kinds of civilized inventions of the West. The uncivilized will be crushed under the feet of the civilized.” (Ataturk’s S.D.II, Page 223) <http://www.kultur.gov.tr/EN/belge/2-4742/civilization.html> (accessed March 24, 2012)

⁷ The West was accepted as the only civilization. In 1925, Ataturk declared, “We have to be civilized persons in every aspect. We have suffered much. The cause for this is the misunderstanding of the world situation. Our opinions, our thoughts will be civilized from head to toe. We shall not take heed of nonsensical words. Look at the entire Turkish and Islamic world, in what grave and difficult situation they are because their ideas and thoughts are not adapted to the reforms made imperative by civilization. Our regression and our recent disaster stem from this as well. If we have rescued ourselves in 5 or 6 years, it is the result of our mental changes. We cannot stop any more. We shall definitely progress because we are obliged to do so. Our nation must clearly know that civilization is like a fire that can burn and harm the people who are unacquainted with it. We shall take our proper place in the civilization family, we are now a member of, and we shall protect and enhance it. Prosperity, happiness and humanity are a part of this process.” (Mustafa Selim İmece, Ataturk’s Ş. D.K and I.S., p. 18) <http://www.kultur.gov.tr/EN/belge/2-4742/civilization.html>

⁸ Utkan Kocatürk, *Ataturk Arastirma Merkezi Dergisi (Sayı 13, Cilt V, Kasım 1988)*.

⁹ Some of the traditional dresses are the headgear such as *hijab*, *fes* (fez), *kalpak* (fur hat), *kulah* (conical hat), *takke* (nightcap) or turban; and dresses, like *cübbe* (robe with full sleeves and long skirts); *shalvar* (baggy trousers); and *potur* (full gathered knee-breeches worn with tight leggings).

¹⁰ The *fez* is a [felt hat](#) either in the shape of a red truncated cone or in the shape of a short cylinder made of [kilim](#) fabric. It has [tassels](#). [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fez_\(hat\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fez_(hat)).

¹¹ *Shalvar* are loose [pajama](#)-like [trousers](#). The legs are wide at the top and narrow at the ankle. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shalvar>.

¹² Carol Delaney, “Untangling the Meanings of Hair in Turkish Society,” *Anthropology Quarterly*, 76 no.4 (1994): 159.

¹³Javaid Saeed, *Islam and Modernization* (Westport, CT, 1994), 160.

¹⁴ [Michael Hirsh](#), “What if Islam isn't an obstacle to democracy in the Middle East but the secret to achieving it?” *The Washington Monthly*, <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2004/04111.hirsh.html> (November 2004).

steps in the acceptance of Western civilization.”¹⁵ Others argue that secularism, a strictly enforcing laicism was a mere imitation of the Western model, which did not always fit with the values and life styles of traditional Turkish society and people. As Saeed notes, the Kemalists mistakenly believed that “cultural change could be imposed from above through the force of law...” However, the attempt to remove the traditions of Islamic society could not succeed without “providing, at the same time, a new ideological framework which has mass appeal.”¹⁶

Atatürk favored modernization through westernization. His westernization model was unconditional and radical. He utterly rejected historic Islamic model by which Turks had lived for hundreds of years.¹⁷ And yet, Atatürk’s efforts had an avenue for success. Some think that what made these reforms possible was incorporating religious institutions into the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*). This put them under the state authority so the government could exercise full control over religion. The control was extended to determining religious education in mosques and schools. These reforms have fundamentally changed the relation between religion and politics.¹⁸ In addition to the reforms, a national education effort was introduced to build a collective memory of the Islamic past and the secular future of the country. This scheme placed each in its place of priority.

It is significant that one of the goals of modernization was to elevate the condition of Turkish women, to liberate them. Hijab was perceived as a hindrance before woman’s liberation. Therefore, unveiling her was encouraged. Gurbuz addressed the issue: “The modern Turkish state emerged as the savior of so-called ‘historically oppressed,’ ‘invisible’ and ‘mute’ women by granting them the right to be unveiled and have a vocal public presence. The secularist elite discourse has long equated veiling with the ‘backwardness’ of women.” However, for devout Muslims unveiling women was perceived as a sign of oppression rather than liberation. As a consequence an increasing number of educated female professionals and university students posed a challenge to the secular authorities by wearing hijab at public schools or offices, in the face of the state’s discouragement. Their public visibility has been perceived as a threat to the state’s secular discourse and a violation of the hijab ban policies. In reaction, after the 1980s the government enforced the ban was applied more strictly. This pressure in turn generated more hijab adopters, who were educated professionals, to become visible and outspoken.¹⁹

Besides creating the “ideal” citizen, the ban also aimed at preserving the nature of secularism. Interpreting hijab as a religious symbol, and thinking that it is a threat to the secular way of life, form the basis of this a prevalent idea. That is why it is perceived as a violation of secular culture, which guarantees freedom of religion for all. The following three examples shed light on how the ban is applied in the public sphere.

In May 1999, Merve Kavakçı, who was a newly elected member of parliament from the Virtue Party, was prevented from taking her oath in the National Assembly because she wore hijab. Prime minister Bülent Ecevit accused her of violating the principles of secularism, as she refused demands to leave the building. A few months later, her Turkish citizenship was revoked and her party was shut down. The second instance took place in October 2006, when Turkish

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Saeed, 165.

¹⁷ Yaşar Nabi Nayir, *Atatürkism and Secularism* (New York, 1968), 326.

¹⁸ Stefan Hojelid, “Constitutional Crisis in Turkey: Headscarves, Judicial Activism, and Democracy,” *The European Legacy* 15, no.4 (July 2010): 154.

¹⁹ Mustafa E. Gurbuz, "Over the Bodies of the T-Girls: The Hijab Ban as a Secular Effort to Monopolize Islam in Turkey." *Middle East Critique* 18, no.3 (Autumn 2009).

president Ahmet Necdet Sezer refused to allow some politicians whose wives wore headscarves to attend a ball marking Turkish independence. He claimed that their practice would endanger and weaken the secular state founded by Atatürk. Lastly, Suleyman Demirel, who is the former president of Turkey, stated that hijab represents backwardness and women wearing hijab should not enter universities in Turkey. According to him, those who would like to wear hijab should study in Iran or Saudi Arabia.²⁰

Although Turkey's population is 98% Muslim, and two-thirds of Turkish women wear hijab,²¹ the hijab ban policies continue to prevent women who wear hijab to participate in public life fully. The approximate number of female students who were expelled from university between 2000 and 2007 is 270,000.²² Besides their difficulties in obtaining an education, they are not hired by public and private institutions.²³

The data for this study come from the interviews which were designed with a list of 30 questions for 30 Muslim women from Turkey who wear hijab. It consists of personal experiences and perceptions of the participants who provided both oral and written answers on the effects of hijab ban in Turkey. Among 30 research participants, four participants discontinued their university education because of the hijab ban in university. 25 of them are university graduates. Among them one participant is pursuing her Master's degree. Three participants are studying for their PhD and one has already completed her doctorate.²⁴ The participants work in different fields. These include teacher, banker, nurse, psychologist, dietician, IT system operator, accountant, self-employed, engineer, housewife, aviator, and student.²⁵

The research shows that hijab carries multiple meanings for Muslim women. Besides the general meaning that it is a traditional, modest Muslim-style dress, it is a personal choice to discipline and separate oneself from worldly pleasures through modesty, chastity, decency, privacy, morality, respect, and worship of God. Participants reported that hijab is about faith, protection, respect, humility, honor, identity, culture, and a way of life.

As explained by the participants, there are several advantages of wearing hijab. These include feeling closer to God, contentment and happiness, being respected, feeling safety and security, reminding others of one's religious identity, and personal reasons. They also mentioned difficulties associated with wearing hijab in the public domain and in their personal lives.²⁶

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Asli Çarkoglu and B. Toprak, *Religion, society and politics in a changing Turkey* (Istanbul: TESEV Publications, 2007).

²² "Turkey: Situation of women who wear headscarves," Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,IRBC,,TUR,,4885a91a8,0.html>, (May 3, 2012).

²³ Christina Lamb, "Headscarf War Threatens to Split Turkey," *The Sunday Times* http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article1752230.ece, (May 6, 2007).

²⁴ Table 1.

²⁵ Table 1.

²⁶ One participant talked about some of the challenges she faced throughout her school career:

It was forbidden to cover your head in school. So I made my way to school with my head covered, but then at the school gate I removed my scarf. I was one of many students who did so. I was warned by the school administration shortly afterward, because I wore my hijab on the way to school. One morning I saw the school director waiting at the gate. She said that I should not wear a scarf when coming to school. The director said my hijab showed disrespect to the school uniform and did not suit the education I was receiving. When my geography and physical education teachers saw me covered outside of school, they adopted a negative attitude toward me. I heard that the school director instructed the gatekeeper not to

Research participants focused on several reasons why they think hijab has been a controversial topic. Among these are the following; ignorance of Islam, negative propaganda; admiration for the West; anti-religious attitudes; and misrepresentation. It is noted that due to lack of knowledge, or education, people oppose hijab.

The following statements were highlighted as the negative images of hijab and women who wear it:

allow me into the school if I was seen to be covered. I was deeply distressed by what I experienced. I had to make a decision. It was like they were saying to me, “Belief or education – choose one.” I talked about this with my family, and they said they would support me no matter what decision I made. So I continued with my schooling, thinking that with a good education I would play a role in breaking prejudices and bringing freedom for head covering. At first it was like I forbid myself to go outside uncovered. I felt like a traitor to my religion and co-religionists. I felt shameful in front of those in my circle, and when necessary I changed direction on the street so as not to encounter people on my way. At the age of 17 I felt most deeply what it meant to struggle for one’s faith. I was not able to accept that I was other-ized, ostracized, and forced to change because of my faith. From then on the headcovering became not just a target of my faith but a symbol of justice and freedom. I thought that because the free atmosphere of a university should not allow interference with one’s thoughts, faith, and expressions, I would not encounter any hassling with one’s clothing, beliefs, and ideological preferences in a scholarly environment. But at university, where I took my bachelor and post-bachelor education, I met inconceivable pressures and insults. In my first year I was scolded in front of my other classmates by the English teacher for going to the prayer room, wearing long skirts, and having covered friends. The English teacher criticized me in front of my friends, saying, ‘You are talking with covered girls, and you wear long skirts. I’m afraid you’ll soon be covering your head. I don’t want to hear any more that you favor the prayer room.’ It wasn’t just my preferred style of dress—people also openly interfered with my choice of friends. Of course all of these restrictions were not directed solely at me. I remember there were friends who saw much heavier intervention. For instance, I witnessed how a doctoral candidate friend of mine, when she wore a hijab in the cafeteria, was expelled from the building and showered with insults by the professors. I wondered at the extreme ruthlessness and coarse behavior of people who were at the zenith of education. I recognized the dignified, upright stance and how the tears shed in consequence are truly a silent resistance in the name of freedom. The attitudes and things I heard directed at me in university were not just limited to the hijab, but I felt them directed also at my thoughts, my mentality, my beliefs, and my personality. When I began in my department, one of the professors in the first year class asked everyone individually, “Do you believe in God?” I couldn’t understand this questioning. In showing that it would mean expulsion from class, the same professor said to me, “You will expose your hair. Either take that hat off your head or get out of the room.” The official in the association gathered us student applicants together, and I remember this person saying, “The reason we have brought you together here is to determine those students among you who have a religious background, because we don’t give scholarships to such students. We will never drop our war axes against those who are religious.” Such expressions showed how much hatred and hostility existed against those who were covered. What I witnessed during this time at university taught me that even if I uncovered my head that the hassling against me would not end, and that I would have to hide my religious and social personality. I was not able to share with anyone that I had attended a public religious school, that I came from a devout family, and that my father was a theologian. I thought that the source of difficulties in Turkey was in education. I saw that unless the quality of education and training improves in Turkey, especially in the universities, no problem in Turkey could be solved. I began to think that the source of Turkey’s problems was in a concept of education. I saw that unless this education was of high quality, free, realistic, and suited to the realities of life, the conflicts, difficulties, divisions, and injustices experienced in non-realist Turkey would never end. I was depressed by the prohibitions in Turkey, the pressures of my teachers, and the deficiencies in education.²⁶

*Negative images of hijab*²⁷

- Hijab is not modern.
- It is a threat to modernity.
- It represents Islamic countries which are underdeveloped.
- It represents anti-Western values.
- It is a sign of backwardness.
- It is a symbol of chastity.
- It is a political symbol and it is a political reaction.

*Images of women wearing hijab*²⁸

- She is uneducated, ignorant, primitive and uncivilized.
- She is from a rural area.
- She is not free.
- She does not cover by choice. Her father or husband forces her to cover.
- She must be the daughter of an imam or a theologian.
- In order to communicate with a women who wear hijab you have to talk about religious people in your family.
- She must be a perfect Muslim without any sin.
- She knows the Qur'an by heart.
- She votes for Islamic political parties.
- She is radical.
- She covers for political purposes, not for religious purposes.
- She cannot defend her rights.
- She is against the Turkish Republic.
- She is not intelligent.
- She is anti-social.
- She is repressed.
- She treats women who do not cover as inferior.
- She sees uncovering women as non-Muslim.
- Her goal is to bring back Sharia and then force hijab upon all women.
- She is against secularism and democracy.
- She is against development and progress.

Participants opposed the idea that hijab limits freedoms. They argued that it is the ban which limits the freedoms of women, not hijab. With the hijab ban, Muslim women who perceive hijab as an inseparable part of their faith have lost their right to study and work. The ban discriminated against women and reduced their influence in society.²⁹ It is argued that hijab is perceived as an excuse to isolate Muslim women from public life. Yet, it is stated that isolating women and discriminating against them would not change her ideas.³⁰

²⁷ Table 5.

²⁸ Table 4.

²⁹ Participant 2, 12, 19, 23, 25, 26, 27, 29.

³⁰ Participant 19.

One can argue that for any society to be successful, it should be just, free, egalitarian and tolerant. In the Turkish context, the hijab ban forces people to take sides and divides society as “secular.” This division leads to prejudice and hostility against religious people. According to the participants, the ban generates a big gap between religious and secular people. Religious people feel suppressed in their own country, have almost lost their trust in the state because they feel like second class citizens.³¹ Participants claimed that if the ban is lifted secular people will realize that Muslim people are not a threat and Muslim people will not feel suppressed.³²

Research data show that one of the reasons for the failure of Turkish secular policies is the disrespect towards veiling women. The research participants thus believed that the only way to the hijab controversy is to lift the ban at all levels and create a more egalitarian society in which Muslim women do not feel isolated or discriminated against.³³ They believed that when co-existence and tolerance prevail in the society, differences among people will be a source of richness and not a source of division.³⁴ Participants agreed that Turkey would then be truly democratic and allow religious and non-religious voices to have equal say in public and social life.³⁵

The research participants indicated that the hijab ban is a failure of Turkish secular policies and a violation of freedom of faith and expression. They believed that the only way to end the tension in the society is to lift the hijab ban at all levels. Participants agreed that Turkey would then be truly democratic and secular by allowing religious and non-religious voices to have equal say in public and social life.³⁶

This study shows that hijab is and will continue to be a controversial issue, because it is more than a religious obligation. It represents a history, a civilization, a culture, and a thought and belief system. It brings identity to a person, gives her responsibility, consciousness, and is seen as both a spiritual and a material duty and a way of life.

³¹ Participant 16, 23, 28.

³² Participant 1, 2, 14, 26, 27, 30.

³³ Participant 1, 18, 2.

³⁴ Participant 3, 19, 22, 25, 28.

³⁵ Participant 9, 16, 21, 26, 30.

³⁶ Participant 3, 19, 22, 25, 28.