

Assessing British MP Jack Straw's Comments Concerning *Hijab* In Islam
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On October 6, 2006, in the wake of the suspension of a full-face veiled teaching assistant in the United Kingdom, former British Foreign Secretary and current leader of the House of Commons Jack Straw made controversial remarks about the Islamic tradition of *hijab* or “covering.”¹ Specifically, Mr. Straw wrote in the *Lancashire Telegraph* that Muslim women should remove their *niqabs* when visiting him because he “felt uncomfortable about talking to someone ‘face to face’ who [he] could not see.”² The *niqab*, he claims, is a “visible statement of separation and of difference” that is “bound to make better, positive relations between the two communities more difficult.”³ While he did not condone any law or formal prescription banning *hijab* in the United Kingdom, Mr. Straw said that he would rather *hijab* (and not just the *niqab*) be abolished all together.⁴

Mr. Straw's comments have since plunged the United Kingdom – and indeed much of Europe – into a debate over Islamic integration. Notable European political leaders have supported Mr. Straw's comments. British Prime Minister Tony Blair echoed Mr. Straw's sentiments, calling *hijab* “a mark of separation” that “makes other people from outside the Muslim community feel uncomfortable.”⁵ Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi agreed with Mr. Straw remarking, “You can't cover your face. [Muslim women] can't be hidden.”⁶ The Dutch Government has gone so far as to propose legislation banning outright the wearing of the *niqab* in public places, and Dutch Immigration Minister, Rita Verdonk, has signaled the imminent end of *hijab* altogether in The Netherlands.⁷

However well intentioned Mr. Straw's comments were, they exhibit a fundamental lack of knowledge of Islamic traditions, the role of women and the function of *hijab*. In particular, Mr. Straw and his supporters makes several faulty assumptions: (1) *hijab* is a peculiar Islamic construct inimical to Western culture and society; (2) *hijab* inhibits the freedom and equality of Muslim women in the West; and (3) *hijab* thwarts integration of Muslims in the West.

We address each assumption in turn.

1. *Hijab's* Deep Roots

First, Mr. Straw wrongly assumes that *hijab* is unique to Islam and foreign to the West. Notwithstanding Islam's distinctive teachings concerning *hijab*, the wearing of a veil is not unique to Islam.⁸

The veil can be traced back to 13th Century B.C. in ancient Assyria (Mesopotamia). At that time, wearing the veil was a mark of social class and not religion.⁹ The law required all Assyrian women except prostitutes to cover their heads in

public.¹⁰ Similarly, ancient Greek and Roman artifacts suggest that wearing a veil was not an uncommon practice.¹¹ Although the veil's significance in Greek and Roman society is unclear, its custom cannot be discounted.¹²

Beginning with Judaism, wearing a veil took on religious significance. It was a symbol of propriety and modesty. Jewish women would cover their heads in public in observance of Jewish law.¹³ Jeremias commented: "When the Jewess of Jerusalem left her house, her face was hidden, so that her features could not be recognized."¹⁴ A Jewish woman's failure to cover her head during the Tannaitic period was "considered an affront to her modesty."¹⁵ The veil elevated a woman's high status in Jewish society.¹⁶ Today some orthodox Jewish women still practice traditional Jewish teachings by wearing scarves or wigs.¹⁷

Similarly, the Bible taught the wearing of a veil long before Islam. In the Old Testament we read:

"When Re-bek'ah raised her eyes, she caught sight of Isaac and she swung herself down from off the camel. Then she said to the servant 'who is that walking in the field to meet us?' and the servant said 'It is my master' And she proceeded to take a head cloth and to cover herself." (Genesis: 24:64-65)

In the New Testament we read:

"But every woman that prays or prophesies with her head uncovered shames her head for it is one and the same as if she were a (woman) with a shaved head. For if a woman does not cover herself let her also be shorn; but if it is disgraceful for woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered." (1 Corinthians: 11: 5-6)

As explained from these verses, the Bible treats the wearing of a veil as an inherently righteous undertaking. The Virgin Mary is often depicted in works of art with her head covered.¹⁸ In fact, for a time it was obligatory upon Catholic women to don a headscarf while attending church service.¹⁹ Today Christian nuns and Amish women continue to cover their heads.²⁰

Finally, traditional Hindu women also wear head coverings while in the company of men, further highlighting that *hijab* is not exclusive to Islam.²¹ Sometimes veiling is accomplished with a loose end of the woman's sari, and sometimes it is done with a scarf-like fabric.²²

Thus, *hijab* must be understood in the context of the veil's cultural and religious roots.

2. *Hijab's* Liberating and Equalizing Force

Second, Mr. Straw wrongly assumes that *hijab* inhibits freedom and equality of Muslim women.

As an initial matter, the view that *hijab* inhibits freedom and equality arguably is a reaction to the original Biblical explanation concerning the same. St. Paul teaches:

“A man indeed ought not to cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God. But woman is the glory of man. For man was not created for woman, but woman for man. This is why the woman ought to have a sign of authority over her head, because of the angels.” (1 Corinthians, 11:7-10)

Thus, according to St. Paul the veil is a sign of man’s authority over her. A veiled Christian woman is pious only insofar as she accepts her inferior role to man. Perhaps owing to this explanation, many in the West view the veil as a symbol of inferiority, subservience, and degradation.

But the Islamic rationale for *hijab* is entirely at odds with this prevailing stigma. In Islam *hijab* signifies modesty and is a means of protection. A multitude of Quranic references attest to a woman’s equality to man. For example, the Qur’an unequivocally explains that men and women belong to the same species and possess identical aptitudes and propensities.²³ The requirement of *hijab* is not intended to imprison a woman or render her susceptible to male dominance.²⁴ Rather, it is intended to enhance her God-given faculties.

In Islam, faith is premised on the belief that God created men and women for a lofty purpose, namely establishing peace in society. Since a peaceful home is the basic unit of a peaceful society, Islam seeks to protect marital harmony by promoting modesty. In the United States, nearly 40% of all marriages end in divorce, half of which end due to extra-marital affairs.²⁵ As a precaution, the Qur’an enjoins women to draw their head coverings over their bosoms when in the presence of men outside of the family:

“And say to the believing women that they restrain their looks and guard their private parts and that they display not their beauty or their embellishment except that which is apparent, thereof, and that they draw their head coverings over their bosoms, and that they display not their beauty or their embellishment save to their husbands...” (24:32)

The injunction concerning *hijab* is an obligation not limited to women but refers to men as well; *hijab* only assumes a different form:

“Say to the believing men that they restrain their looks and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Surely, Allah is well-aware of what they do.” (24:31)

Yet another purpose of *hijab* is to protect women from unwarranted harm. In the West, often there is a casual willingness to dehumanize women by seeing them first and foremost as sexual objects. A staggering US \$57 billion worldwide is generated by pornography.²⁶ This is more than the combined revenues of all U.S. professional football, baseball and basketball franchises and exceeds the combined revenues of ABC, CBS, and NBC television stations.²⁷ The pernicious consequences of such sexual degradation are well known. In the United States alone, one of out every three women has been the

victim of physical and sexual abuse,²⁸ and a woman is raped every two and a half minutes.²⁹

Because women are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, Islam advises them to take their protection into their own hands:

“[T]hey should pull down upon them their outer cloaks from their heads over their faces. That is more likely that they may thus be recognized and not molested. And Allah is Most Forgiving, Merciful.” (33:60)

Thus, *hijab* is a physically manifested barrier to unwarranted harassment. It is not a disgrace or a hindrance for a woman; on the contrary, it honors her and frees her from the bondage of society and the obstacles that prevent her intellectual, moral, and spiritual advancement. Indeed, by electing to safeguard herself and her virtues, a woman protects society from social evils such as adultery, spread of disease, children born out of wedlock, rape, and divorce.

A woman does not have to rely on her physical beauty or dress in order to contribute to society. Her character defines the peace, prosperity, and progress of a nation. This is why the Prophet of Islam emphasized the importance of religious and worldly education for both men and women³⁰; indeed, education is one of the basic elements of a progressive society. According to Islam, women have the power to eliminate suffering wherever they tread, and the liberating force of *hijab* makes them the architects of the fate of future generations. Indeed, the true Muslim woman is neither the exploited woman of the West nor the stymied woman in totalitarian Arab regimes.

Mr. Straw also neglects the fact that Islam itself safeguards against a harsh and irrational application of *hijab*. There is no law in Islam that punishes a woman from not abiding by *hijab*. *Hijab*'s fundamental aim is to protect a Muslim woman and to provide her greater liberty to participate in society. Where *hijab* fails to achieve this aim, Islam allows for relaxation of the requirement.³¹

3. *Hijab*'s Integrative Role

Finally, Mr. Straw wrongly assumes that prohibiting *hijab* will somehow improve integration and social cohesion.

Other nations have attempted to improve integration by banning the veil. France outlawed headscarves in public schools. Turkey outlawed the wearing of the veil in public places. By most assessments, such efforts at “integration” have had little success.³² In France, for example, recent rioting is a clear indicator that Muslims continue to feel alienated and disaffected.³³ The reason is obvious. The veil has nothing to do with integration. The real barriers to integration are poverty and unemployment. For example, in the United Kingdom two-thirds of children of families of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin are growing up in poverty.³⁴ More than 20 percent of all Muslim

youths between 16 and 24 are unemployed. Muslim women practicing *hijab* have nothing to do with these sobering statistics.³⁵

Moreover, at a micro level, *hijab* does not prevent communication. Technological advances have made it easier for society to communicate virtually without “face-to-face” dialogue. The face has never been the only essential tool for effective communications. Prime Minister Blair can be effective communicating to the British public over the radio just as he can in person. A Muslim woman can be effective communicating with others even with her face covered. Quite obviously, it is the substance of what is said that counts more than the appearance of who said it.

In addition, efforts at integration should not come at the expense of restricting the fundamental human right of religious freedom. Essential to successful integration in a democratic society is the enmeshing of divergent religious cultures and traditions. Forcing a Muslim woman to “unveil” is thus a self-defeating measure. Not only does such a measure violate a Muslim woman’s fundamental human right, it also prevents Western society from understanding, and perhaps even integrating, Islamic traditions.

Conclusion

At their core, Mr. Straw’s remarks concerning *hijab* in Islam reflect an entirely flawed and ultimately dangerous understanding of true Islamic teachings. Mr. Straw wrongly assumes that *hijab* is foreign to the West, inhibits the freedom and equality of Muslim women, and thwarts the integration of Muslims in Western society. In actuality, *hijab* has deep roots and ensures true freedom and equality for women. Moreover, far from thwarting efforts at integration in Western society, *hijab* can potentially benefit Western society.

¹ The Arabic word *hijab* broadly refers to modesty, privacy and morality. See John Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (The United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.112. The Arabic word *niqab* (facial veil) is a physical manifestation of *hijab*.

² Jack Straw, “I want to unveil my views on an important issue,” *Lancashire Telegraph*, Oct. 6, 2006.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ BBC News, “Remove Full Veils Urges Straw,” Oct. 6, 2006 (quoting BBC Radio 4).

⁵ Prime Minister Tony Blair Monthly Press Conference [Transcripts], Oct. 17, 2006 (BBC News, Oct. 17, 2006).

⁶ Stephen Brown, “Italian PM: Muslims should not ‘hide’ behind veil,” *Reuters*, Oct. 17, 2006.

⁷ Dan Bell, “Netherlands Moves Towards Total Ban On Muslim Veils,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 11, 2006.

⁸ Farzaneh Milani, “Coverings Uncovered,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 22, 2006.

⁹ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 359-360.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Michael D. Marlowe, *Headcovering Customs of the Ancient World: An Illustrated Survey*. Feb. 2005, available at <http://www.bibleresearcher.com>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Menachem M. Brayer, *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature: A Psychosocial Perspective* (Hoboken, N.J: Ktav Publishing House, 1986) p. 139.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ See, e.g., “Madonna and Child” by Raphael, 1514 and “Pietà” by Michelangelo, 1499.
- ¹⁹ Clara M. Henning, “Canon Law and the Battle of the Sexes” in Rosemary R. Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) p. 272.
- ²⁰ Sharon M. Weyer, et. al. “A Look Into the Amish Culture: What Should We Learn?” *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, Vol. 14(2), April 2003. pp.139-145.
- ²¹ Eli Sanders, “Interpreting Veils: Meanings Have Changed With Politics, History,” *Seattle Times*, Oct. 5, 2001 (discussing the religious tradition of veiling).
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ See, e.g., Qur’an, at 3:196: “I will suffer not the work of any worker from among you, whether male or female, to be lost. You are from one another . . .”
- ²⁴ The Prophet of Islam emphasized that a husband should not inflict a mark of any kind, physically or emotionally, on his wife. See Bukhari, Vol., 8, Hadith 68.
- ²⁵ Centers For Disease Control, *National Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 54, No. 20, July 21, 2006, available at: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr54/nvsr54_20.pdf; see also <http://www.infidelitycheck.org/statistics.htm>
- ²⁶ Family Safe Media, Pornography Statistics, available at: http://www.familysafemedia.com/pornography_statistics.html
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ The Commonwealth Fund, *Health Concerns Across a Woman’s Lifespan: 1998 Survey of Women’s Health*, May 1999.
- ²⁹ U.S. Department of Justice (Bureau of Justice Statistics), *National Crime Victimization Survey*, September 2006, available at: <http://www.rainn.org/statistics/index.html>.
- ³⁰ See, e.g., Kashf al-Khafa', no. 1665; Sahih al-Jami' al- Saghir, nos. 3913-4 (“Seeking knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim, man and woman.”).
- ³¹ Malik Ghulam Farid, ed. *The Holy Qur’an: Arabic Text With English Translation And Short Commentary* (Tilford: Islam International Publications, 2002) at 24:32 (reference 2044).
- ³² See, e.g., “Integrating Minorities: The War of the Headscarves,” *The Economist*, Feb. 5, 2004 (“The French model [of banning the headscarf] fails to promote social mobility.”).
- ³³ Ariane Bernard, “10 Officers Shot as Riots Worsen in French Cities,” *New York Times*, Nov. 7, 2005 (noting that the violence involved predominately Muslim immigrants and youth).
- ³⁴ Madeleine Bunting, “Jack Straw Has Unleashed a Storm of Division and Intensified Division,” *The Guardian*, Oct. 9, 2006.
- ³⁵ Ibid.