

MATERIAL FOR CONFLICTS. EGYPTIAN ROW OVER THE FULL FACE VEIL

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Since the French attempted "burka ban" in December 2009, if not before, the Islam debate in Europe has a new element, the argument whether to tolerate or ban the full face veil. What many don't know is that the pioneer in this controversy was not strictly secular France, but deeply religious Egypt. Largely unnoticed by the European public, a fierce public debate has been raging for months over the "niqab" – the Arab version of the burka. As in Europe, the issues in Egypt are also religious and cultural identity, the relationship between the state and religion, and the question of what is actually "Islamic" and who decides this. But the Egyptian niqab discussion features a number of additional facets, positions, players and backgrounds – and some singularities. In the Egyptian niqab row, there are also issues of political influence and national security, class barriers, etiquette and lifestyle, and finally criminality and sexuality. Precisely because the Egyptian niqab row, unlike in Europe, is not overlaid by an immigration and integration debate, it offers several notable views and insights.

Ostensibly, the Egyptian niqab row has a very simple cause: the rapid increase in women wearing the face veil. While ten years ago the niqab was worn only by tourists from Gulf states and an exception or completely unknown among Egyptian women, the number of niqab wearers has been steadily increasing for several years. No-one knows how many Egyptian women now cover their faces in public, sometimes also their hands and even their eyes, but it is certain that the number is rising. According to subjective estimates, between three and five percent of women in Cairo now wear the niqab. To explain the trend towards the full face veil, three overlapping contexts of justification can be discerned: first of all the search for a life that is as Islamically correct as possible, secondly the influence of the family environment, and thirdly the need for privacy and protection from harassment.

The majority of niqab wearers justify their decision to fully veil their faces with the rationale that the "true" Islamic lifestyle prescribes the wearing of the niqab. Their references and role models are generally the Prophet's wives. The degree of intellectual debate about the niqab varies depending on level of education and environment. The spectrum stretches from religiously insecure illiterates who don't want to take any risks in the search for an Islamically correct lifestyle, to educated academics who have studied the body of source material for a long time, intensively and at a high theological level.

However, this source material is in no way conclusive. For the overwhelming majority of Muslim legal scholars, there is no religious justification for the niqab. According to this majority opinion it belongs to a pre-Islamic tradition which has been preserved in the traditional states of the Arab peninsula. Nonetheless, in the Islamic theological debate there is an abundance of opinions and positions which often get lost in one of the successions of exegetical details and contexts which are completely incomprehensible to strangers to the discussion. Niqab opponents cite 18 sayings of the Prophet (or "Hadiths") according to which women are allowed to uncover their face and hands. At least two of the four recognised schools of law within Sunni Islam are unequivocally opposed to the obligatory niqab, with only the strict Hanbali school arguing in support of the niqab.

However, the niqab debate revolves not only around the theological justification for full veiling, but also the related lifestyle. For the respective women, the niqab often represents far more than just a change of dress habits. In fact, the decision to wear a full face veil is generally accompanied by the choice of an ultra-orthodox lifestyle. The meeting of Egyptian devoutness and the traditional dress beliefs and etiquette of Gulf Arabs has – often without being noticed – therefore led to the development of a "new orthodoxy" in Egypt. However, this orthodoxy still has no absolutely unified line on dress code.

As a second context of justification, requirements of the family and local environment play an important role. Everyone who lives in Cairo knows stories of niqab wearers who take off their veil in the back of taxis in order to pursue a job in one of the city's many hotels, banks and restaurants dressed in a skirt and blouse and with uncovered hair. As in Europe, Egyptian niqab wearers also stress that they made the decision freely and independently for religious reasons. That may be true in many cases, but often it is only part of the story. How many women actually make a free decision to wear the niqab, and how many do so only at the request or coercion of their families and husbands, cannot be reliably determined. In light of beliefs about individuality, which are largely influenced by the family, social and religious living environment, this is not the only question where the lines between voluntariness and constraint are fluid.

The third characteristic context of justification for wearing niqab is protection from harassment. Field research by the nongovernmental organisation "Egyptian Center for Woman's Rights" (ECWR) – a partner organisation of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung – has revealed alarming results. According to this study, around 83 percent of Egyptian women surveyed reported that they are regularly sexually harassed. Only 2.4 percent of these women have ever reported assaults to the police or authorities. Almost all were unsuccessful. The ECWR study and also some amateur videos on the Internet of hordes of

young men pestering individual women on the streets of Cairo, as well as a startling legal judgement in favour of a young woman in a molestation lawsuit, have started a cautious public debate on the problem in recent years. Despite this, for many Egyptian women, wearing the niqab remains one of the few means (aside from their own car) of escaping the looks and violent behaviour of men. Here, too, there are no figures, not even reliable estimates. It is evident, however, that women's increasing experience of sexual harassment corresponds to the rise of the niqab. In particular women who have to go out in public unaccompanied – workers with medium and low incomes as well as beggars – are more and more frequently resorting to the niqab.

For its wearers, the niqab is often a visible expression of nonconformity with the definitions of religion and society that have prevailed until now. No wonder, then, that the opponents of the niqab are to be found most of all in the ranks of the political, social and religious establishment. In these circles particularly, people fear for their influence and privilege, and oppose the full face veil trend with a plethora of arguments.

The authorities and government are primarily concerned with the security argument and point out a series of concrete events and cases of abuse. Behind the concern over abuse, however, are often another series of different, frequently silent fears. The row surrounding the niqab is escalating in Egypt because niqab wearers are also gradually making inroads into what were considered the safe refuges of the Egyptian middle and upper class. No small number of niqab wearers are well-educated, comparatively well-off and confident. They are part of an emerging middle class which is pushing into the former Egyptian establishment and challenging their privileges and way of life.

The ranks of the opposition group Muslim Brotherhood particularly know the political symbolism of the niqab. For this reason, supporters of the Brotherhood in particular campaign for the full face veil. However, this is motivated less by Islam and far more by freedom of religion and opinion. Even among the Muslim Brotherhood, they conspicuously hold back from defining the religious symbolic value of the niqab. This is political calculation and at the same time a balancing act. On the one hand, the strict conservatives are among the most loyal supporters of the Brotherhood. On the other hand, the niqab is not without controversy among the wider population and even among strictly religious Egyptians. It is considered an import from unpopular Saudi Arabia, which does not belong in Egypt.

The niqab row highlights a series of problems and imbalances in Egypt's political and social reality. Niqab wearers are not only practicing a new religious fashion trend, but also to some extent quite consciously challenging estab-

lished religious practice. At the same time, this challenge of Al-Azhar Islam targets the state. By bowing (voluntarily or not) to the dress beliefs of a trans-national Islamic orthodoxy, more and more Egyptian women are delivering a clear message: we reject not only Al-Azhar and its representatives' interpretation of Islam, but also the state and the society that support and maintain this interpretation. Resistance to the niqab by the rich and powerful therefore turns out to be fierce. For them, it is not just a question of a piece of cloth, but security, boundaries and control.

The Egyptian niqab debate can only be compared in a limited way with the European "burka debate". The degree of concern as well as the political, religious and social context are too different. Nonetheless, three basic insights from the row over the full face veil in Egypt are of interest to the European discussion: firstly, not every niqab is worn for religious reasons (and these other reasons are almost all unacceptable from a human and women's rights perspective). Secondly, not everyone who is opposed to the niqab is an opponent of Islam (although the niqab is particularly well suited as a starting point for criticism of Islam). And thirdly, the niqab is not an immigration phenomenon, but an immigrated phenomenon (and therefore affects both non-Muslim and Muslim societies). This last finding in particular is also good news, because if the advance of the niqab is really a problem – and many in Egypt feel it is – then this problem must be solved in non-Muslim societies as well as in Muslim ones, and ideally through mutual dialogue.

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