Women's Dress in Iran: From the Islamic Sitr to the Political Hijab

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Brief Analysis

The Islamic Republic's position that it is merely carrying out a religious mandate is disingenuous, as is clear from Khomeini's own religious writings and from the history of the hijab in Iran. Whereas the concept of sitr remains separated from politics in Iran, the hijab is now unequivocally a political concept.

Throughout the course of human history, covering (*sitr*) has been a normal part of cultural and other societal needs and religious guidelines, including those issued by Islamic religious authorities. However, during the last two centuries, we have gradually begun to see the rise of the distinct and politicized concept of the "hijab" in a number of Muslim societies, and in particular, the use of this term in place of *sitr* in Iran. For Iranian women, donning the hijab or taking it off has political connotations two centuries in the making. The hijab has repeatedly featured in popular protests against the Iranian government—most recently in the protest movement after the death of Mahsa Amini—and the regime and its opponents vie with each other over imposing or removing the veil.

The Arabic root of hijab means to conceal, seclude, or withhold; a hijab prevents two things from converging or affecting each other, whether physically, metaphorically, or otherwise. Notably, the use of the term in the Quran draws on this more abstract sense of partition, curtain, or veil rather than referring to a specific type of clothing as covering, and many pre-modern Islamic legal jurisprudence sources (*fiqh*) use the words *sitr* or *satir* rather than hijab. A smaller number of sources reference the hijab in the context of prayer, such as Ibn Taymiyya's "Epistle on Muslim Women's Veiling during Prayer."

The hijab implies the seclusion of women from society and their staying at home. By contrast, *sitr* refers only to covering in order to avoid another's gaze, which is considered necessary when there is mixing of genders or when people go out in society. For example, the Quran says: "Tell the believing men to lower their gaze… and tell the believing women to lower their gaze" (24:30–31 ()). The same injunction applies to both men and women.

When the term hijab first entered Persian, it bore the same meaning. From the first poet to write in modern Persian, Abu Abdollah Rudaki (858–941 CE), to those who came after him, including Nasir Khusraw, Attar of Nishapur, Khaqani, Rumi, Saadi, Hafez, Unsuri, and Saib Tabrizi—all used the word hijab in their poetry in its abstract sense rather than to refer to something women should wear. This distinction can be found in Iranian Shia religious jurisprudence all the way up to that of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

The lack of references to hijab as an article of women's clothing is particularly stark in Khomeini's lengthy treatise *Tahrir al-Wasilah* (*Exegesis on the Means of Salvation*), which contains a collection of edicts drawn from Shia jurisprudence. The book, written in Arabic, covers more than 4,500 topics in Islamic **jurisprudence. ()** Khomeini, like other jurists, discussed in various sections of the book the legal provisions for *sitr* and *satir* and how people of opposite sexes may look at each other. This included edicts on the state of renunciation (vol. 1, p. 17), washing of the dead (vol. 1, p. 65), wrapping the dead in a shroud and praying (vol. 1, p. 73), what to do before praying and errors that occur (vol. 1, p. 135), the sacred state of *ihram* that a pilgrim enters before performing the Hajj and circling the Kaaba, defense, and certain sections on the marriage contract (*nikah*) (vol. 2, pp. 236 and 245). Significantly, the term hijab to refer to a head covering for women does not appear in these pages.

A similar collection that Khomeini wrote in Persian (*Clarifications on Questions*) discusses clothing in the context of *sitr,* looking at others, and private parts (*'awra*) but does not include the word hijab.

Hijab as a Political Concept in Iran

However, Khomeini, in his political speeches, did use hijab in reference to women's clothing. This difference between his religious and political writings reflects the increasingly political role that women's head coverings had come to play in Iranian society.

Fatima Baraghani, known as Qurrat al-Ayn (1814–52), became perhaps the first Muslim woman to uncover her face in public in the presence of men. She removed her face covering during the Conference of Badasht, a meeting among leading Bábís—adherents of a messianic strain of Islam —held in 1848 near Khorasan. Qurrat al-Ayn was later killed as part of a campaign against Bábís in Iran.

Women in other Islamic countries later took off the face veil and began speaking about the need for women to participate in society, and letters and poems calling for the removal of the face veil likewise emerged. The question sparked a particularly vigorous debate in Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, framed as a **debate (https://www.jstor.org/stable/4283318)** between *al-hijab* (veiling) and *al-sufur* (unveiling), which reached Iran through two books by Egyptian political liberal Qasim Amin: *The Liberation of Women* and *The New Woman.* Both works were translated into Persian by Ahmed Muhadhdhib al-Dawla and published by the Iranian Ministry of Culture. These ideas mixed with complementary political currents from India, Turkey, the Soviet Union, and the West on reevaluating gender norms and women's roles in society.

Attempts to Remove the Hijab

After World War I, secular regimes emerged in a number of Muslim countries, and in some of them, women's dress was explicitly regulated and politicized, which affected the Iranian approach. For example, in Turkey, Kemal Ataturk prohibited women from wearing the veil while working in state institutions or attending school or university. In Iran,

Reza Pahlavi was greatly inspired by Ataturk's decision; both men sought to establish new, secularized nation-states in territories previously ruled by sultanates (Ottoman or Qajar) in which religious and secular authority was intertwined. Pahlavi attended a Persian Nowruz (New Year) ceremony with his family at the Shrine of Fatima Masumeh in 1928, and the women in his family did not wear the attire usual for the time. Everyone was shocked by this behavior, which resulted in pushback from religious figures.

Nevertheless, Pahlavi's efforts continued, and in 1935 he established an association for "liberating women from the hijab." The next year, he issued a decree known as *Kashf-e hijab*, banning all veils including the chador, a type of covering especially common in Iran. The date of the decree, the 17th of Dey in the Persian calendar (January 7), was declared to be Women's Liberation Day. Many scholars, however, consider Pahlavi's rhetoric on women's empowerment to have been a pretext for the oppression of the people of Iran, men and women alike.

Pahlavi used his monarchal pulpit to advocate for modernizing women's clothing and for obeying the king. To defend himself from accusations of being subordinate to the West, he argued that the clothes that women were wearing in advanced countries were the same as the clothes that Iranian women had worn for a long time.

It subsequently became common for religious men to write treatises (*rasa'il*) on the hijab, thirty of which were collected by Rasul Jafarian in his book *Treatises on the Hijab.* The shah, by prohibiting the hijab in a dictatorial and provocative manner, helped to form a connection between unveiling and his authoritarian regime and the colonial powers that supported him.

For the first time, the hijab became a tool in the Iranian political arena, and women's bodies became a key battleground between the dictator and his opponents. The hijab would again become a prominent tool toward the end of the Pahlavi dynasty. During the last two years of the government of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, female university students began to don the hijab that had been forbidden decades before they were born—a form of resistance against the monarchy. In other words, it was political Islam that led these women to put on the hijab, not the hijab that led to political Islam. Committing to wear the hijab became an Islamist act, while taking it off indicated Westernization **(https://www.ettelaat.com/archives/372435#gsc.tab=0)** imposed by the shah.

The Iranian Revolution Imposes the Hijab

Such was the background to the use of the hijab as Ayatollah Khomeini rose to political power. From the earliest days of the revolution, Khomeini repeatedly emphasized that "our religion is at the core of our politics" and thus, women's veiling became a concern of the Islamic state. Religious sermons repeatedly drew attention to the hijab, not only as a provision of sharia, but also as a weapon of the revolution for which the martyrs' "blood had been shed"—a symbol impossible to ignore. Thus the hijab—as defined and prescribed by the state—became a means of cementing the modern political system and reestablishing political dynamics among the forces within the regime.

From the beginning, the regime took gradual steps to impose the wearing of the hijab in the workplace and in educational spaces. On August 9, 1983, the requirement was expanded to include public streets, and penalties including flogging were imposed for those who did not comply. During the following four decades, the regime passed further regulations regarding specific aspects of clothing, along with personal behavior, family life, art, theater, and the like.

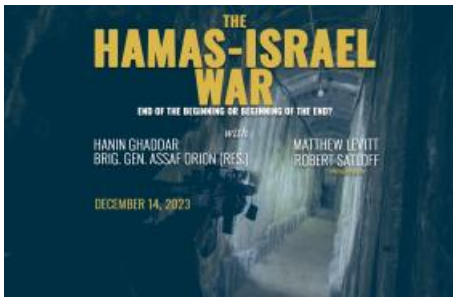
By the time Supreme Leader Khamenei came to power, no one repeated statements about women's dress that were once common in Iranian political discourse: that the chador mimicked the Arab *'abaya* or that the veil was only a religious requirement. The hijab had become a national symbol of Iran.

Although many government research centers in Iran are increasingly expressing opposition to mandatory

(http://ircud.ir/bfnvyp/) wearing of the hijab, the regime has not relented. Indeed, in recent years, the term "bad hijabs" has emerged in reference to veils whose fabric does not fully conceal what is behind them, or which do not cover all the hair. These "bad hijabs" have become something the state seeks to stamp out. Khamenei issued a fatwa four years ago requiring that the hijab also be worn by women in **cartoons and animated films (https://tn.ai/2455411)** .

Although the Islamic Republic tends to focus on the hijab, covering in Islam is a general rule for all humans, even if the specifics differ between genders. Additionally, social and cultural circumstances have traditionally played a key role in determining proper attire. Throughout history—and unlike the hijab law in Iran—jurists have never called for the imposition of hijab. Therefore, some sectors of Iranian society, especially young women, have become involved in activities in recent years to voice their opposition to mandatory veiling, such as the Girls of Revolution Street movement in 2018. Many have been arrested. Last year, the death of Mahsa Amini led to the largest protests in Iran since the Islamic Revolution. But as this history helps clarify, politicization of the hijab is by no means new or unusual in Iran, and the way women dress has been a highly politicized aspect of Iranian life for a century, commandeered by several successive power structures to enforce control over all aspects of Iranian life.

Thus, the Islamic Republic's position that it is merely carrying out a religious mandate is disingenuous, as is clear from Khomeini's own religious writings and from the history of the hijab in Iran. Whereas the concept of *sitr* remains separated from politics in Iran, the hijab is now unequivocally a political concept. As Ishaq al-Fayad, one of the leading Shia religious authorities (*maraji'*) in Najaf, put it while receiving a delegation from Iran, using force to impose the hijab is **unhelpful (https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f7-the-other-voice-on-mandatory-hijab-in-iran/28104018.html)** . ❖



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