

# Policing Burkinis: What France and Saudi Arabia Have in Common

by [Muhammad Mansour \(/experts/muhammad-mansour\)](#)

Sep 7, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/tnzym-albwrkyny-qlqasm-almshtrk-byn-alswdyt-wfrnsa\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Muhammad Mansour \(/experts/muhammad-mansour\)](#)

Muhammad Mansour is an Egyptian expert and Op-ed writer with a specialty in Middle Eastern affairs.



### Brief Analysis

On the shore of Nice's Promenade des Anglais, where July's Bastille Day attack killed 85 people, a photograph of a woman removing a layer of clothes with French police officers standing over her went viral. The image exposed the irony of a country that classifies itself as a "secular" republic where everyone is supposed to enjoy personal freedom. The police officers' actions were supported by other beachgoers who vented their Islamophobic rage at the woman by asking her to "go back to the country she came from."

Despite last week's verdict from the highest administrative court in France suspending the ban and saying that it "seriously and clearly illegally breached fundamental freedoms," the issue is still being fiercely debated between left, right, and far-right commentators. In opposition to the court suspension, authorities in Nice and Frejus, as well as in the Corsican village of Sisco, have vowed to keep the bans in place. A law banning the full-body burkini swimsuit in France would stoke tensions between communities in a time that "France needs healing and people coming together, not divisive outbursts by those contesting in primaries," Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve has said.

In principle, the ban on burkini in France appears to mirror the activities of the morality police in several countries in the Muslim world, including the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in Saudi Arabia or the Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic in Iran. Both official forces compel women to cover their whole bodies using the same charge that so-called defenders of secularism in France use, which in the latter case is "not wearing an outfit respecting good morals and secularism" as described in a ticket issued by French police. In Saudi Arabia, just replace the word "secularism" with "Islamic Sharia."

Both restrictions are always justified by principles of either sharia or secularism. Yet these restrictions have little or nothing to do with the values of either. Furthermore, they serve, in one way or another, the interests of the Islamic State group by fueling a sense of Islamophobia. Both types of enforcement victimize women and consider them objects rather than human beings who have the right to choose how they would like to be dressed.

Western media report that authorities in 30 French towns implemented burkini bans due to concerns about religious expressions after the recent terrorist attacks. But such bans actually provoke the anti-secularist sentiments of minorities in the West in the same way that Saudi and Iranian morality police ignite anti-Islamic feelings.

At the same time, it is no surprise that the so-called lone-wolf attacks in France were committed by Muslims who

were raised in France and Belgium. IS would not be able to recruit them if the so-called “secular” system in France had given them a voice or acted as a genuine defender of freedom in the international community.

Paralyzing the Islamic State can be achieved only by advancing freedom at both the grassroots and international levels. The Islamic State’s goal is to stifle these fundamental rights in the Arab world as well as in the West so as to make it easier to recruit people to their cause. The authoritarian governments of the Arab region do the Islamic State’s job for them by using religion, like Saudi Arabia, or patriotism and nationalism, as is the case of Egypt, all set amidst a climate of fear. The authoritarian religious governments need to instead create a climate where a progressive religious reform can grow, stemming from universal ethics rather than interest-based interpretations of religious manuscripts.

For their part, Western governments ought to give up double standards and build their policies on universal values rather than geopolitical interests. The pursuit of narrow political and economic interests only ignites conflicts that will backfire on the West in one way or another.

The French ban in the name of secularism catalyzes “religious” radicalism by preventing women from swimming, a restriction similarly held by Islamic extremists. Thus, the burkini issue raises suspicions about the willingness of French politicians to effectively and thoughtfully curb Islamic radicalism.

*Muhammad Mansour is an Egyptian journalist based in Washington, D.C. This article was originally published on the Fikra Forum website (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=10196&lang=en#.V9EhcPkrLIU>). ❖*

Fikra Forum

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)