

ISLAM & THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE: HIJAB

WOMEN IN ISLAM SERIES VIII

HIJAB IN THE QUR'AN

Today, we understand hijab to be the head covering worn as a symbol of modesty by Muslim women. However, this monolithic understanding of the phrase is contrary to its use in Islamic jurisprudence. To understand hijab as it relates to bodily autonomy, we need to review how hijab was used in the Qur'an:

Screen to separate the Prophet's (PBUH) wives from visitors.
Qur'an 33:53

Separation between deity and mortals.
Qur'an 42:51

Separation between wrongdoers and the righteous.
Qur'an 7:46

Separation between light and darkness.
Qur'an 38:32

HIJAB IN THE QUR'AN

There is no denying that the Qur'an demands modesty in appearance (i.e. covering the breasts and genitals) and behavior from both men and women. However, **darabat al-hijab** was initially only practiced by the wives of the Prophet (PBUH) who held special status and whose private living quarters were often visited by the public at all hours of the day. We can understand verse 33:53 to reference hijab as a way of separating public and private life, particularly as it pertained to the Mothers of the Believers.

**"And when you ask [his wives] for something, ask them from behind a partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts."
QURAN 33:53**

Tell the acknowledging men to lower their gaze and guard their private parts, for that is purer for them. God is fully aware of what you do. Tell the acknowledging women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts, and that they should not show off their attraction except what is apparent, and let them cast their clothes (khumurihina) over their cleavage.

QUR'AN 24:31

THE KHUMURIHINA

Hijab, though utilized in the Qur'an, does not actually refer to a head covering. Instead, khumurihina refers to a piece of cloth that the Qur'an commands women to cast over their cleavage. Believing women are invited to cast a khimar over their chest as a way to distinguish themselves from the pagan Arab women as a way to counter the classism practiced amongst the tribes.

"let them cast their clothes (khumurihina) over their cleavage."

According to Fatema Mernissi's analysis, the Qur'an's mandate of covering the chest was a way **to counter classism common amongst the tribes**. The tribes had instructions on how much women were able to cover. The more a woman covered, the higher her class as the covering indicated that she was an urban elite who was not enslaved or did not have to do manual labor.

The recommendation to cover was an effort to flatten the elitism rampant amongst the tribal society in the Arab peninsula. By recommending that all women cover their chests at a minimum, the Qur'an attempts to eliminate the common practice of judging individuals by their attire or class and instead to judge individuals by their character and their convictions.

THE MANIPULATION OF HIJAB AS A POLITICAL TOOL

In the 20th and 21st century, we see how headscarves are being manipulated to represent political movements that predominately serve the interests of men in power who seek to promote a religious or secular form of government.

Hijab Bans	Compulsory Hijab
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represents the far right populist political movement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represents the political Islam political movement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denies women the four tenants of autonomy: agency, choice, dignity, and freedom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denies women the four tenants of autonomy: agency, choice, dignity, and freedom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violates a woman's right to freedom of expression. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violates a woman's right to freedom of expression.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violates Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violates Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)