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# Beyond the Veil: Colonial Legacy and the Hijab Debate in Morocco

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## Abstract

The hijab has been a controversial issue in Morocco, despite the country's Muslim majority and the constitutional declaration of Islam as the state religion. This study examines contemporary debates surrounding the hijab in Morocco. It analyzes the discursive strategies of both opponents and supporters, the material implications for veiled women, and the implications of these patterns for Moroccan national identity. This article employs qualitative content analysis (QCA) and discourse analysis (DA) of Moroccan media sources, public discourse, and intellectual dialogues conducted between 2008 and 2026, arguing that the debate on the hijab is not fundamentally about women's clothing but rather a symptom of deeper, unresolved conflicts. This struggle is between colonial legacy and post-colonial identity, state secularism and popular religiosity, and competing visions of what it means to be Moroccan in the contemporary world. The analysis identifies several patterns in the opposition's discourse, such as calls for development, liberation, universal values, and feminist frameworks, as well as a strategic silence regarding the Moroccan constitution. Supporters respond with arguments based on religious obligation, individual rights, cultural authenticity, and resistance to Western hegemony. This article documents the material consequences of this debate, including professional exclusion, educational barriers, and social polarization. This article suggests that the hijab debate is likely to continue as long as Moroccan institutions operate according to secular norms that differ from the country's constitutional and religious traditions.

**Keywords:** hijab, Morocco, secularism, post-colonialism, Islamic feminism, national identity

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## Introduction

In a predominantly Muslim country whose constitution stipulates that Islam is the state religion and guarantees freedom of religious practice, veiled women are systematically excluded from television screens, diplomatic posts, and prestigious schools (Ayt Laktaoui, 2015; Achto, 2011). Although no law explicitly prohibits the wearing of the hijab, this exclusion is real, persistent, and largely unchallenged. Recent parliamentary debates have highlighted this issue: a parliamentary question was raised in January 2026, demanding clarification of the official criteria for selecting news presenters, specifically questioning the absence of veiled women from news broadcasts (Howiyapress, 2026). Human rights organizations have confirmed that this exclusion operates as an "unwritten custom" within the Moroccan media, constituting discrimination against veiled women based on their personal choices (The Voice, 2026). This contradiction lies at the heart of contemporary Moroccan identities. This raises many questions: How can a well-established religious practice become controversial in its own society? Why do the institutions of an Islamic state exclude women who express their faith through clothing? What do the arguments from both sides reveal about the post-colonial situation in Morocco?

Existing scholarship on clothing and veiling can be thematically organized. One stream of research examines clothing as a marker of identity and social status. Scholars have long considered clothing to be more than just a means of protection; it is a powerful signifier of social status, cultural identity, and personal expression (Tarlo, 1996; Davis, 1994). Throughout history, clothing has served to reinforce gender norms, indicate religious affiliation, and mark boundaries between groups (Hollander, 2006; Eicher, 1995).

The second stream focuses on veiling as a religious obligation. Regarding the Muslim woman's veil, scholars have documented a wide spectrum of practices and interpretations, ranging from those who view the veil as a strict religious duty rooted in Qurʾanic verses (24:31; 33:59) to those who emphasize human free will and contextual understanding of religious texts (Aziz, 2010; Joseph & Naǧmābādī, 2003).

Third-stream addresses veiling as resistance, agency, and modernity. Some researchers have studied the veil as a symbol of resistance against Western cultural hegemony during the colonial period (Cronin, 2014). Nisa (2022) similarly examines how face-veiled women in Indonesia exercise agency through their chosen religious practices, challenging stereotypes of passivity. Others have explored how contemporary Muslim women navigate the tension between religious modesty and modern fashion trends (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2012). Jones (2007) explored similar dynamics in urban Indonesia, where young Muslim women negotiate religious piety and fashion consciousness.

The fourth stream examines Moroccan women's negotiations of religious identity, secularism, and political rights. In the Moroccan context, Salime (2016) examined how women in Morocco's Islamic revival movement created "embedded counterpublics" that challenged secular feminist assumptions. Sadiqi (2016) explored how Moroccan women perceive Islam, categorizing them into three groups: those who wear the hijab as an expression of their faith, those who wear it due to cultural and social pressure, and those who do not wear it yet identify as Muslim. Guessous (2020) argued that feminist condemnations of the hijab often fail to reflect the realities of veiled women's lives, demonstrating how Moroccan women actively participate in social life while maintaining their cultural and religious identities.

This body of work has been further expanded by scholars who examine Moroccan feminism and political rights. Ennaji, Sadiqi, and Vintges (2016) provide a comprehensive overview of Moroccan feminisms, tracing their evolution from secular to Islamic feminist movements and their competing visions of women's rights in the post-Arab Spring era. Neri (2025) offers a generational comparison between Fatima Mernissi and Asma Lamrabet, demonstrating how Islamic feminist thought in Morocco has evolved from documenting historical oppression to articulating reformist interpretations of religious texts. Elliott (2015) and Evrard (2014) analyze the political dimensions of the women's rights movement, situating it within broader struggles over state authority, Islamist politics, and legal reform. Kapchan (1996) has documented how Moroccan women express and negotiate tradition through public performance and embodied practices, while Baker (1998) provides oral histories that foreground Moroccan women's own voices, revealing how they articulate their identities in relation to religion, family, and the state. Taha (2010) analyzes how Moroccan women in Spain became objects of civic and social transformation, with the hijab serving as a focal point for Spanish discourses of progress and modernity. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that Moroccan women are active agents who negotiate, contest, and reshape the meanings of tradition, modernity, and faith in their daily lives.

While existing research from Indonesia (Nisa, 2022; Jones, 2007) examines similar dynamics of veiling and agency in a Muslim-majority context, Morocco's unique colonial history with France, its specific institutional secularism inherited from the French protectorate, and the particular configuration of state-religion relations in the post-independence era require dedicated analysis. Moreover, most existing research on Moroccan women focuses on their perceptions, activism, and feminist movements (Sadiqi, 2016; Guessous, 2020; Ennaji et al., 2016; Neri, 2025), but not on the discursive strategies employed by opponents and supporters in media debates or on the material consequences of these debates for veiled women's lives. This article addresses this gap by analyzing Moroccan media debates and documenting the institutional exclusion of veiled women in Morocco.

This study addresses this gap through qualitative content analysis (QCA) and discourse analysis (DA) of Moroccan media sources, public debates, and intellectual discussions held between approximately 2008 and 2026. Data collection was based on online news and websites (including Hespress, Aljazeera.net, DW.com, and Alarabiya.net), opinion articles, and public controversies documented in digital media. Following Krippendorff's (2018) framework for QCA, the data were analyzed through six stages: first, defining the unit of analysis (individual news articles, opinion pieces, and reader comments); second, defining the data corpus (online news sources as listed above); third, categorizing the data thematically (development arguments, emancipation arguments, universal values arguments, deceptive comparisons, rights-based arguments, and identity arguments); fourth, data reduction (identifying recurring patterns across the corpus); fifth, interpretation (analyzing how these patterns reflect deeper tensions in Moroccan society); and sixth, narrating the findings. This study also employs debate-based analysis and actor mapping to identify the key actors in the hijab debate (opponents, supporters, state institutions, feminist groups, and religious figures) and analyze how each actor's discursive strategies reflect their underlying assumptions about Moroccan identity, colonial legacy, and the role of religion in public life. In addition to thematic coding, discourse analysis was employed to examine discursive strategies such as comparison, trivialization (e.g., describing the hijab as a "handkerchief"), and selective framing (e.g., invoking international frameworks while ignoring the Moroccan constitution). The analysis focuses on how the hijab debate is framed by different actors and what these frames reveal about broader social and political tensions. This study examines how the hijab debate serves as an indicator of deeper and unresolved conflicts within Moroccan society. The theoretical framework is based on two complementary concepts. First, the concept of "Islam Mondaine" (Osella & Soares, 2010) explores how Muslims live with their religious identity in the contemporary world, suggesting the possibility of coexisting with and adapting religious practices to modern secular contexts. Second, the concept of “Public Islam” (Salvatore & Eickelman, 2004) examines the various actors who contribute to shaping Islamic discourse in the public sphere. These frameworks collectively provide a lens for understanding Moroccan women's hijab practices as both products and expressions of broader public discourses concerning religion, identity, and modernity.

This article argues that the debate surrounding the hijab in Morocco is not fundamentally about women's clothing but rather serves as a proxy for deeper unresolved conflicts: between colonial legacy and post-colonial identity, state secularism and popular religiosity, and competing visions of what it means to be Moroccan in the modern world. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section examines Morocco’s colonial legacy and the formation of secular institutions. This is followed by an analysis of the discursive strategies of the hijab’s opponents. The subsequent section explores the arguments put forth by its supporters. The article then presents the empirical findings of the content analysis, followed by a discussion of their implications for theory and practice. The work of Mohammed Abed al-Jabri is examined as an alternative approach to reinterpreting Islamic tradition from within. The conclusion offers insights into what this debate reveals about Morocco's ongoing struggle to reconcile tradition and modernity.

## Hijab and Modernization in Morocco

The historical context in Morocco plays an important role in understanding the origins of the controversies surrounding the hijab and the various attitudes of Moroccans towards tradition, religion, and modernity. Tensions between secular institutions and religious conservatism stem from the power of internal resistance to outsider colonization. Morocco’s identity has undergone three phases: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. This provides an essential base for understanding the contemporary debates over the hijab examined in this article, which did not emerge from nothing but rather from specific historical circumstances that continue to influence how Moroccans argue about the hijab today.

Since the arrival of Arab Muslims in the 7th century, Moroccan identity has been significantly imbued with Islamic culture. The first Moroccan established state was the Idrisid dynasty, followed by other dynasties, namely, the Almoravids, Almohads, and Merinids, all of which reinforced Islamic identity and extended their influence across North Africa and Spain (Cory, 2008; Pennell, 2013). The Almoravids, who originated from the Sahara, formed a vast empire that stretched to Spain. Similarly, the Almohads, who ruled over most of North Africa and parts of Spain, attempted to establish puritanical Islam. The Merinids became patrons of the arts and sciences while maintaining the traditions of previous dynasties. These dynasties not only exercised political power but also inculcated Islam into Moroccan culture, law, and daily life. One of the cultural aspects was the traditional Moroccan dress; the djellaba and women’s hijab, developed within this Islamic framework, reflecting modesty combined with local Berber and Andalusian influences (Nicholas, 2020). Thus, when the interest of European colonial powers grew towards Moroccan territories in the 19th century, Islam was not simply the country’s religion, but rather the foundational constituent for Moroccan identity, with the hijab representing religious commitment and cultural continuity across centuries of dynastic rule. Morocco's early history remains visible today, from the architectural legacy of its dynasties to the continuity of traditional dress forms that have evolved over time.

After signing the Treaty of Fez in 1912, French colonization fundamentally altered Moroccan history. France and Spain in the north controlled Moroccan territories, institutions, and culture for approximately 44 years (Miller, 2013; Segalla, 2009). Colonial rule was not content with taking control over the political and economic aspects, but extended its rule over cultural and psychological aspects by promoting Western clothing, education, and social norms as symbols of modernity and progress, while depicting Moroccan traditions as backward and inferior. Gradually, elite women in major cities, such as Fes, Casablanca, and Rabat, began wearing European styles, tailored dresses, skirts, and blouses, considering them signs of sophistication and progress, while traditional garments underwent changes to align with French tastes; for example, the kaftan became tighter and more revealing (Nicholas, 2020). Consequently, the hijab became less apparent among urban women attempting to meet colonial expectations. In rural areas, where colonial influence was lower, women preserved their traditional attire, including the hijab, djellaba (a long, loose-fitting robe with a hood), and hayek (a large white cloth that covered the entire body, which was common in some areas until the early 2000s). This rural act of not abandoning traditional dress was more than a cultural habit; it was a form of resistance to cultural obliteration and a refusal to accept the colonizer's judgment that Moroccan ways were inferior (Larbi & Boumediene, 2016). Similarly, Spanish colonial authorities in the northern regions encouraged European styles but did not enforce them, leading to the preservation of the hayek along with imported fashions. This colonial period affected Moroccan society and divided it into those who articulated progress and development in Western styles and those who adhered to their authentic identity while opposing external cultural domination. Thus, it paved the way for post-independence debates that made women's clothing a battleground for competing visions of Moroccan identity.

In 1956, after independence, Morocco’s constitution declared Islam its official religion and its monarchy the Commander of the Faithful, drawing its legitimacy from prophetic lineage. However, the institutions of the modern state (whether schools, courts, civil service, media, or military) remained structured based on French models and operated according to the inherited secular norms of colonialism (Wyrtzen, 2014). French curricula and pedagogical approaches continued to mark the educational system, and the legal system was not spared either, except for some laws in the family code based on Islamic principles. Preference was also given to French-speaking elites educated in the colonial tradition in the civil service. Even when no law explicitly forbade religious expression, unwritten norms and institutional cultures created powerful pressure to conform to Western secular models. Hence, Moroccans could only practice Islam in private spaces and mosques, but once in formal state institutions, visible religiosity was left behind.

Starting in the 1970s, the Arab East’s influence and later Wahhabi ideology, transmitted through education, media, and Moroccan expatriates in Gulf countries, led to Islamic revival movements that challenged Western models (Mentak, 2011; Wehrey, 2019). These movements called for more conservative expressions of Islamic identity, including concealing dress, such as the niqab, which created new tensions not only between secularists and Islamists but also between different visions of Moroccan Islamic identity. The hijab became the most visible symbol of this divide: for secular modernists, who were dominant in state institutions, the hijab represented a persistent tradition that blocked progress. Islamists considered it an act of resistance against Western cultural domination and loyalty to the authentic Moroccan Islamic identity. The Arab Spring and the electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party in 2011 briefly shifted this balance downward. For the first time, veiled women were more visible in high-ranking state positions.

This historical context shows how the hijab, as a traditional religious practice in Muslim society, became controversial. The colonial rupture created a continuous division between Western modernity and traditional authenticity, which continues to shape Moroccan social and political life. Post-independence governments institutionalized secularism in state structures while maintaining Islamic symbolism, producing a society in which religious practice was officially honored but marginalized in practice. With the religious revival movements that began in the 1970s, this arrangement was challenged, making the hijab a battleground for competing perspectives of Moroccan identity. Employing assumptions rooted in colonial inheritance, contemporary opponents of the hijab argue that it hinders development and that veiled women cannot represent modern institutions. In contrast, advocates defend the hijab, considering it an expression of religious obligation, cultural authenticity, and an act of resistance. The following sections examine how these competing views are reflected in contemporary debates.

## Opponents of Hijab in Morocco

Following the content analysis procedures outlined in the introduction, this section applies the six-stage framework to analyze opponents' discourses. The unit of analysis consisted of individual news articles, opinion pieces, and reader comments. The data corpus included Moroccan online news sources (Hespress, Aljazeera.net, DW.com, and Alarabiya.net) from 2008 to 2026. The thematic categories identified during the coding process, including development, emancipation, and universal value arguments, deceptive comparisons, and the feminist divide, guide the presentation of the findings below.

Opponents of the hijab in Morocco use a variety of methods and strategies to refute the hijab and portray it as outdated and having no place in modern life. This section investigates the discursive argumentative tools that prevail in Moroccan public discourse from 2008 to the present, drawing on the news media, opinion articles, and public controversies.

### The Development and Emancipation Arguments

Persistent opposition depicts the hijab as incongruous with Morocco's efforts to achieve modernization and development. The logic behind this argument can be summarized as follows: If Moroccan institutions aim to resemble their Western counterparts, particularly the French ones, then any visible expressions of Islamic religion must be removed from these institutions.

In a 2015 opinion article on Hespress entitled "Has the hijab become a barrier that hinders the professional development of Moroccan women?", systematic exclusion of hijabi women from diplomatic roles, television appearances, and selective educational institutions was documented by journalist Majda Ayt Laktaoui. She reported that despite the absence of an explicit legal prohibition, veiled women were excluded from new consular appointments. She also noted that female media workers lost on-screen positions once they started wearing the hijab. Furthermore, she pointed out that Mohammedia School of Engineers necessitates the removal of the hijab for female students to be admitted. Furthermore, the author surveyed a group of female activists, among them a woman who was the head of a youth organization affiliated with a Moroccan party, noting that she was not allowed to deliver her speech at an international youth conference. These women emphasized that women should have the freedom to choose their clothes and that selection criteria must be based on competence solely (Ayt Laktaoui, 2015). As one veiled journalist interviewed by DW.com stated, "I had ambitions to work in the audiovisual field in Morocco, but after graduating I faced the reality that as a veiled woman, it is difficult, if not impossible, to work in the audiovisual field in Morocco" (Achto, 2011).

The responses to her article in the comments section marked a majority of commenters who expressed support and empathy towards the affected women. These opinions criticized the alienation of Islam in a Muslim country and attributed the secular movement to the French colonial impact. A minority, however, celebrated these restrictions; one commenter wrote that "hijabi women should be selected with caution as these positions are quite sensitive, and hijabi women should stay away from their dark ideas." Another claimed that the real hijab is the hijab of mind not the dress, suggesting that veiled women lack the intellectual capacity for sensitive positions, claiming that they are shy and weak and avoid appearing in front of big audiences (Ayt Laktaoui, 2015, comment section). This discourse assumes that modernity and Islamic piety are two contradictory issues. The problem is not that individual veiled women lack competence but the problem is the hijab itself, regardless of who wears it. Hijab is considered incompatible with the image these institutions seek to propagate. One journalist observed that the ban extends even to radio, making no sense as appearance is not visible only the voice is, suggesting the prohibition is beyond audience perception and about institutional identity itself (Achto, 2011).

A second strategy opponents employ is framing the hijab to negatively affect women themselves. From psychological and sociological perspectives, opponents perceive head coverings as prisons for women. They argue that the hijab shrinks women’s opportunities, restricts their potential to professionally compete, and reinforces patriarchal dominance rather than authentic religious commitment. Azouz Al-Tusi, a specialist in social psychology, writing on Ritajepress in 2017, approached the hijab from "psychological and sociological" angles rather than religious ones. He found the hijab too controversial, suggesting that the hijab might have interrelated and complex motives, including a woman’s perception of herself and her body image. He also argued that the hijab can be a tool for women to be immersed in society, especially in smaller cities or working-class neighborhoods, where some women wear it under community pressure. While he recognized that some women choose to wear the hijab out of religious convictions, many women choose it as a custom to avoid stigmatization, for fashion, or to meet social expectations (Al-Tusi, 2017). The emancipation argument against the hijab contains an unresolved contradiction. Opponents claim that the hijab restricts women's freedom and that women wear it only because of social pressure. However, if the latter were true, the problem of restriction would not be the hijab itself but rather social pressure. In addition, the hijab, which decreases women's professional chances, is also an exterior factor that will force women who freely adopted the hijab to reconsider their choice, degrading women's agency in both cases. The argument implies that the choice not to cover one's head is the only free choice, whereas the choice of a veiled woman is mostly suspect, the product of coercion or false consciousness. This reveals that the emancipation argument is not really about freedom but about the kinds of choices and the kinds of Moroccan women that count as authentically modern.

### The Universal Values Argument and Feminist Divide

A third strategy appeals to universal values along with human rights frameworks. Opponents consider the hijab as a violation of the principles stipulated in international conventions, regarding it as a practice against gender equality and individual freedom. This argument is particularly important in a country striving to present itself as modern and in line with global standards. A telling example occurred in Marrakesh, when a human rights association protested practices at a local high school. According to the association's statement, a teacher had separated male and female students, seating males at the front and females at the back, and had prohibited males from sitting next to females at the same desk because women are *awra* ( private and should be covered from the eyes of others) and should not be looked at. The teacher also urged students to wear "modest clothing" in accordance with Islamic teachings. The association denounced these practices as "discriminatory tendencies based on gender.” They also called for “revising education curricula and deleting any expressions or texts that contradict human rights.” Notably, the statement invoked the human values stipulated in the Charter of the United Nations and all conventions and declarations related to human rights (Ouslim, 2015).

Opponents reference international frameworks, such as the UN Charter and global human rights declarations, but neglect to refer to Article 3 of the Moroccan constitution, which declares Islam as the state religion and guarantees freedom of religious practice. The refusal to invoke Morocco's own legal framework is not accidental. By doing so, opponents implicitly reject it as the relevant standard, insisting on the adoption of global Western norms instead.

This means that the real debate is not about whether women should cover their hair, but about the normative order that should govern public life in Morocco. The constitution protects the hijab as an expression of religious freedom and the state religion. In contrast, international frameworks treat religious expression as a private matter managed by secular institutions. When opponents selectively adopt one framework and disregard the other, they are not presenting a neutral legal argument, but rather attempting to redefine the rules of the game, shifting the debate to an arena where their position is stronger and where Moroccan constitutional traditions are marginalized.

The ongoing debate surrounding the hijab reveals deep divisions within the Moroccan feminist movement. Secular feminist movements, whether liberal or leftist, base their advocacy on international conventions and Western models of gender equality, whereas Islamic feminism seeks to achieve women's rights within a religious framework. Although their approaches may seem contradictory, they ultimately serve the same purpose. Asma Lamrabet's case exemplifies this tension. A controversial feminist activist, Lamrabet argued in a newspaper interview that “the hijab is not a pillar of Islam,” despite its central place in contemporary Islamic discourse. She asserted that the “hijab mentioned in the Qurʾān is a garment of chastity," and that “Muslim women have the right to choose the chastity garment that belongs to them,” without anyone having the right to impose a specific style (Chahban, 2021). This position affirms the principle of modesty but rejects rigid forms, representing an attempt to reconcile the secular rejection of the hijab with the traditional insistence on specific styles.

Hamad al-Qabbaj's (2010) article in "Hespress" offered a critical perspective on secular feminism. His article evaluating the performance of Morocco's secular feminist movement argues that the most prominent characteristic of this movement is “complete loyalty to the principles of the Western feminist movement, which had expanded its influence through UN recommendations and its alignment with the ideologies of decision-makers.” He pointed to Nazha Asskali, then Minister of Solidarity, Women, Family, and Social Development, and a member of the Party of Progress and Socialism (formerly the Moroccan Communist Party), as an example of this orientation. Alqabbaj noted that Asskali received awards from Denmark and Italy for her work on women's rights, two countries whose foreign policies, in his view, are incompatible with Moroccan Islamic values. He contrasted this focus on international recognition with what he considered neglected issues, among which are "the spread of prostitution and its causes, the decline of morals within families and educational institutions, the high rate of women addicted to smoking and alcohol, and marginalization and illiteracy, particularly in rural areas" (Al-Qabbaj, 2010). This critique reveals a crucial dimension of the feminist divide, despite originating from a conservative Islamic perspective, raising the question of legitimate authority. For secular feminists, international human rights frameworks constitute the appropriate standards for assessing women's status. However, for their Islamist critics, these frameworks represent foreign interference that disregards Moroccan constitutional and religious traditions. The hijab has become a symbol of this deeper disagreement about who should be granted normative authority.

However, the boundaries between secular and Islamic feminism are not as rigid as this binary suggests. A 2019 article in Hespress by Ilyas Bouzghaya, titled “Islamists Remove the Veil: Overlapping References and Adaptation to New Developments,” documented how some women associated with Islamist movements have begun to remove the veil or adopt more modern forms of hijab. Drawing on a 2007 study by Idriss Bensaid (titled Youth and the Hijab in Morocco), Bouzghaya observed that "hijab is not a single definite form but rather many ‘hijabs,’ just as there are many ‘modernities.’" He noted that "women wear the veil for complex and intertwined reasons, including ‘religious conviction,’ ‘modesty,’ ‘social pressure,’ ‘fashion,’ and ‘identity.’" Bouzghaya reported that women, within Islamic circles, who remove their veil, do not justify their choice as a rejection of Islam, but rather as "an exercise of individual freedom and personal choice,” a discursive shift that borrows from liberal feminist language. Abdelilah Benkiran, the leader of the Justice and Development Party, was quoted as saying that "such matters are personal between one and their God,” indicating that the hijab is not a political or societal obligation (Bouzghaya, 2019).

Bouzghaya's analysis points to the emergence of what some researchers call "post-Islamism": a state in which the rigid ideological dichotomy between Islamist and secularist fades, replaced by hybrid identities in which religious and contemporary values blend and negotiate. The result is not a clear line of conflict between the two feminist camps, but rather a contested arena in which multiple, overlapping, and sometimes even contradictory frameworks coexist. A woman may wear the hijab for religious reasons while simultaneously keeping up with fashion, remove it while affirming her Islamic identity, and combine religious obligation with personal choice. This complexity makes any attempt to draw a simple map of the feminist divide more difficult. Secular feminists are accused of foreign allegiances, while Islamists are increasingly embracing an individualistic, liberal discourse. Islamist feminists defend the hijab as a religious obligation, yet some remove it in the name of personal freedom, rendering the existing divide blurry. The hijab remains at the heart of this divide as the visible marker that categorizes women into competing groups in terms of authenticity, modernity, and belonging.

## Deceptive Comparisons, Hijab Phobia and State Interventions

A more subtle strategy employed by opponents is using seemingly logical comparisons to undermine or reject the hijab altogether. These comparisons shift the focus of the debate by introducing extraneous variables, allowing opponents to draw conclusions that do not logically follow from the premises. The most common form of comparison is a moral comparison. Opponents claim that a woman who is not veiled but has good morals is better than a woman who is veiled but has bad morals; therefore, the veil itself is meaningless. This comparison is misleading because it introduces an irrelevant variable, namely, morality, into a debate about a specific dress practice. This is similar to saying that smoking has no health effects because some smokers, who exercise and follow a strict diet, may live long lives, while some non-smokers die young. The logical fallacy is obvious, but the rhetorical power lies in its apparent plausibility. By shifting the focus from the practice itself to the moral qualities of a veiled woman, opponents can reject the veil without addressing the religious arguments in its favor. Another analogous example is a doctor who would hypothetically refuse to wear a white lab coat, arguing that competence and medical expertise cannot be measured by simple attire. However, attire is a symbol that signals various meanings to the beholder.

Another form of comparison is economic. Some argue that women wear the hijab because of the high cost of modern clothing and cosmetics to avoid expenses. This interpretation reduces religious practice to economic calculations, ignoring the possibility of genuine piety. Similarly, some interpret the hijab as a political symbol rather than a religious obligation, or as an attempt to feign piety and conceal corruption. These interpretive strategies share a common structure: they dismiss religious motivations by replacing them with secular explanations. A woman who says she wears the hijab for God is told that she actually wears it for economic, political, or social reasons. Her personal interpretation is replaced by an external one that the opponent deems more plausible. Mohammed Chaquir's (2017) article in Hespress, titled "Moroccan Women's Hijab: Economic Savings, Religious Commitment, and Various Purposes," exemplifies this strategy. By placing "economic savings" before "religious commitment" in his title, Chaquir subtly prioritizes economic motives over religious ones. He also distinguishes between the "muhajjaba" (a woman who wears the hijab as part of Moroccan social heritage) and the "muhtajiba" (a woman who chooses to veil based on cultural, political, or ideological reasons). These misleading comparisons reveal a crucial dimension of the opposition's discourse. Instead of engaging with the religious arguments in favor of the hijab from their own perspective, the opponents reframe the debate within secular categories, privileging their own position. The hijab is not assessed as a religious practice but rather as an economic behavior, a political statement, or a moral signal, all of which are categories easily manipulated to achieve the desired assumptions.

Moroccan society is characterized by diverse and sometimes conflicting views on social practices such as the hijab. Although the majority of Moroccans accept the hijab as a familiar and legitimate form of religious expression, a minority responds with fear or hostility. This reaction, which could be termed "hijab-phobia," stems from concerns that the spread of Islamic dress would entail broader Islamization of culture, politics, and society. Some opponents explicitly portray the hijab as a return to a bygone era in which women were treated as property or slaves, a characterization that becomes even more pronounced when the style of the hijab appears to be imported from highly conservative contexts, such as the niqab, which remains uncommon in many parts of Morocco. The manifestations of hijab-phobia include prejudiced perceptions of veiled women, social exclusion, avoidance, the use of offensive language, public expressions of opposition, and attempts to vilify those who wear the hijab. These behaviors may stem from hatred, caution, fear, intimidation, or hostility. However, overt hostility is relatively rare in Morocco compared to European countries because the hijab has deep religious and historical roots and is widely present in the daily lives of most Moroccans, among their relatives, neighbors, colleagues, and classmates. Empirical evidence supports this picture of general acceptance despite minority opposition. A 2021 study by the Menassat Foundation for Research and Social Studies, published on the Al-Omq website, surveyed 1,320 Moroccans and found that “61.2% supported women covering their bodies by wearing the hijab.” Support was higher among women (65.3%) than men (57.1%). At the same time, approximately 50% of survey participants considered a woman's choice of dress a matter of personal freedom (Amdouri, 2021). These figures suggest a society where the hijab is widely accepted, yet also reveal considerable diversity regarding the balance between religious norms and individual choice.

The sharp social polarization surrounding the hijab is evident in debates involving public figures. When photos circulated of a Justice and Development Party (PJD) parliamentarian in Paris dressed in modern clothing without a headscarf, social media erupted. Some defended her on the grounds of individual freedom, while others accused her of hypocrisy. Said Al-Salimi, a Moroccan media figure and lecturer, stated that these attacks aim "to strip [Islamists] of their credibility and their discourse by trying to destroy what they have worked on for years in charitable work and preaching within poor circles that constitute an electoral reservoir for Islamists" (Azzam, 2019). This incident reveals how the hijab debate can become intertwined with political polarization, in which personal choices are scrutinized as tests of ideological authenticity. The existence of hijab-phobia reveals an important dimension of the broader debate. The existence of hijab-phobia reveals an important dimension of the broader debate, despite being confined to small segments of Moroccan society, who are often influenced by anti-religious values, foreign cultures, or a quasi-European lifestyle detached from local conservatism. The fact that a minority responds to the hijab with fear and that public figures face intense scrutiny for their choices suggests that the hijab is not merely a personal religious practice but a contentious symbol of identity, belonging, and political allegiance.

In addition to informal social hostility, veiled women in Morocco have faced direct institutional restrictions. Since independence, some state entities have expressed disapproval of veiling among female employees, enforcing exclusion through informal norms rather than explicit laws. This particular form of discrimination is difficult to challenge because it operates in a legal gray area. A clear example is the Moroccan media sector. As mentioned earlier, although no law prohibits veiled women from appearing on television, their absence has become the norm, except in religious programs. Mustapha Ramid, then the leader of the Justice and Development Party, attributed this exclusion to the "secularism" of the media sector, arguing that “its leaders belong to the French secular school, which rejects religious symbols in public spaces” (Achto, 2011). Security institutions present a more complex and contradictory picture. Anas Almasmoudi documented a photograph he took in 2016 of Moroccan policewomen wearing headscarves while monitoring a protest in Inezgane. A security source explained that “some women begin wearing headscarves after their appointment..., and no one prevents them from doing so as long as it does not interfere with their duties" (Almasmoudi, 2017). This contradicts other reports of exclusion, revealing the absence of a coherent state policy. The prison administration's 2008 ban on female staff wearing headscarves is a telling example. The administration justified its decision by stating that elements of the uniform should not be mixed with any inconsistent clothing, such as a "handkerchief over the head" or shoes of a different style or color (Al-Achraf, 2008). The choice of language here is highly significant. The choice of language here is highly significant, as describing the headscarf as a “handkerchief,” a piece of cloth used to wipe the nose or sweat, intentionally trivializes what is a religious obligation and a symbol of identity for Muslims. The sarcastic tone of the statement, along with the comparison of the headscarf to shoes of different styles and colors, reduces a religious practice to a mere violation of uniform policy. By refusing to name the headscarf correctly, the prison administration signals that it does not recognize this practice as worthy of respect; thus, the language itself is exclusionary.

The niqab, however, has been explicitly targeted by the state. In 2017, Moroccan authorities announced “the banning of the sale and tailoring of the burqa (niqab) in many shops”. This decision provoked mixed reactions; while some saw itowards step toward a complete ban, others defended it as a necessary security measure to preserve cultural identity (Aljazeera.net, 2017). Unlike the hijab, which remains in a gray area of informal exclusion, the niqab has faced explicit state restrictions, indicating a hierarchy of acceptability among different forms of Islamic dress. These interventions demonstrate that the state is not a neutral party in the hijab debate. Through informal media practices, contradictory policies within the security apparatus, and explicit restrictions on the niqab, state institutions actively shape which forms of Islamic expression are permitted in Moroccan public life.

### Supporters of Hijab in Morocco

Following the same content analysis procedures, this section applies the six-stage framework to the analysis of supporters' discourses. The thematic categories identified during the coding process–religious obligation arguments, emancipatory arguments, rights-based arguments, and identity arguments–guide the presentation of the findings below.

Unlike opponents of the hijab, who view it as an obstacle to progress, a threat to women's freedom, or a violation of universal values, proponents of the hijab present counter-arguments based on religious duty, individual rights, cultural authenticity, and resistance to Western hegemony. This section examines the main arguments of hijab proponents in Moroccan public discourse.

### The Religious Obligation and Emancipatory Arguments

For many Muslims, the hijab is not a matter of choice, fashion, or political symbolism, but a religious obligation rooted in clear Qurʾanic verses and the Sunnah (Prophetic tradition). Supporters argue that the debate surrounding the hijab cannot be resolved by appealing to modernity, universal values, or women's liberation, as these frameworks are external to Islamic law. Rather, the question of women's dress must be addressed by referring to the Qurʾān and Sunnah.

The main legal basis for the hijab is derived from two Qurʾanic chapters. In Surah An-Nur (24:31), God commands believing women to cover their chests and conceal their adornment, except from close relatives. In Surah Al-Ahzab (33:59), God commands the Prophet (PBUH) to instruct believing women to cover themselves so that they may be recognized and not harassed (The Holy Qurʾān, 2000). Proponents emphasize that these two verses are clear and unambiguous; they not only call for modesty but also mandate specific practices of covering.

Indeed, scholars have differed on some details, such as whether the face and hands should be covered and whether the niqab is obligatory or recommended. “The majority of scholars from the Hanafi, Maliki, and Shafi'i schools agree that a woman is not required to cover her face and hands. The Hanbali school, however, holds that it is obligatory" (IslamicOnline.net, n.d.). However, there is a consensus that the hijab, understood as a covering of the hair, neck, and body, except for the face and hands, is obligatory for adult Muslim women. Therefore, the contemporary debate surrounding the hijab is not about whether it should exist but rather about how it should be implemented in changing social circumstances.

Another argument advanced by supporters, which directly contradicts the opponents' "liberation argument," is that the hijab is not oppressive but liberating. This argument takes many forms. First, it can be depicted in the work of scholars such as Abdul Halim Abu Shuqqa, who, in his book "The Liberation of Women in the Age of Revelation," sought to correct the extreme emerging restrictions after the Prophet's time. He demonstrated that many practices attributed to Islam, including requiring women to cover their faces or prohibiting them from leaving the house, "were not religious obligations but cultural additions." He advocated for the uncovering of the face and hands, considering this practice compatible with the traditions of human life, and distinguished between the stricter requirements for the Prophet's wives (who held a special status as "Mothers of the Believers") and the covering of the body for other women (Abu Shuqqa, 1990). The very title of his book served to emphasize that true Islam liberates women and that restrictions beyond its requirements are historical distortions rather than divine commands. Second, supporters argue that the hijab protects women from harassment and exploitation. As stated in the Qurʾanic verse from Surah Al-Ahzab, the purpose of the outer garment is "that they may be recognized and not harassed" (33:59). From this perspective, the hijab is not a tool of patriarchal control but rather a mechanism that enables women to move freely in public spaces with dignity and safety. Furthermore, beyond Muslim societies, the exploitation, commodification, and objectification of women persist in Western societies under the guise of "fashion," beauty pageants, provocative dancing, and advertising. In contrast, the hijab preserves modesty rather than abandoning it in imitation of other cultures.

## The Rights-Based Argument

A rights-based advocacy approach presents the hijab as an individual right, encompassing the right to freedom of religion and the right to make personal choices. Three key rights-based claims can be articulated as follows:

First, the hijab as a religious right. Every individual has the right to freely practice their religion, including Muslim women, who have the right to wear religious attire according to their beliefs. This right is guaranteed by the Moroccan Constitution, which declares Islam the state religion and guarantees freedom of religious practice.

Second, the hijab as a woman's right. The hijab symbolizes a woman's right to freedom of choice, far from any coercive or oppressive forms. While opponents claim that the hijab is imposed by patriarchal forces, it is argued that for many women, wearing the hijab is an independent decision made after reflection, study, and personal conviction. Denying a woman the right to wear the hijab is a denial of her free will.

Third, the right to advocate for the hijab. They have the right to invite others to their religion, practice its teachings, and express their views peacefully and non-coercively. This includes the right to demand the normalization of wearing the hijab in public spaces, challenge discriminatory policies, and defend the religious freedoms of Muslim women.

Rights-based arguments have been used in legal challenges against hijab bans. In 2020, a French preparatory school in Kenitra required parents to sign an internal regulation prohibiting headscarves. The court ultimately ordered the school to lift the ban (Al-Kuwaiti, 2020). In June 2024, a similar incident occurred in Marrakech, when a student was prohibited from entering her French-run school because of her hijab. The school justified the ban "on the grounds that its internal regulations prohibit wearing any clothing associated with religious symbols" (Alaraby.com, 2024). The court ruled in favor of the student, stating that "the school does not have the right to prevent the student from entering the educational institution with her hijab, because that violates the Moroccan constitution and international covenants" (ibid.). The court further emphasized that "wearing the hijab falls within the student's exercise of her personal freedom and does not pose any threat to the freedom and rights of others" (ibid.). These cases demonstrate that legal avenues exist to challenge institutional exclusion, although each case requires individual legal action rather than systematic reforms.

Notably, the rights-based framework invoked by supporters is the same liberal individualist framework used by opponents to argue against the hijab. This reveals that the liberal rights framework is not inherently for or against the hijab but a terrain of struggle in which both sides compete to define freedom and choice. It also exposes a tension within supporters' discourse: arguing for the hijab as a matter of individual choice sits uneasily with the claim that it is a religious obligation.

### The Identity and Resistance Argument

Another argument portrays the hijab as a symbol of cultural authenticity and resistance to Western hegemony. This argument is particularly relevant in post-colonial contexts, such as Morocco, where the legacy of French colonialism continues to influence institutions, culture, and social hierarchies.

From this perspective, opposition to the hijab is not a neutral stance but rather a continuation of the colonial project. As mentioned in the second part of this article, the French colonial authorities promoted Western clothing as a symbol of modernity and progress, while devaluing Moroccan traditions and labeling them as backward. The association of the hijab with backwardness and Western clothing with progress is not an established fact but a colonial construct that Moroccans internalized over decades of foreign domination.

Those who support this argument view the hijab as an act of resistance and a rejection of the standards of civilization imposed by the colonizer. By wearing the hijab, Muslim women assert that their identity is not defined by the West, that their values are not inferior, and that their bodies are not commodities to be consumed. This is particularly important for women working in French-dominated sectors or who have experienced discrimination in French-run institutions. In this context, the hijab becomes a clear declaration of belonging to a different moral and cultural order.

Advocates have also documented instances in which Moroccan institutions have attempted to erase Islamic identity from the public sphere in Morocco. In 2022, a French language textbook for primary school students replaced a picture of a veiled woman with one without a headscarf. Social media users described the change as "evidence of a campaign hostile to Islamic values" and accused the Ministry of National Education of attempting "to distance young people from the fundamentals of their religion" (El-Abid, 2022). Similarly, in July 2024, a restaurant in Rabat reportedly prevented four veiled women from entering on the grounds that "the hijab is prohibited to preserve the feelings of the restaurant’s foreign visitors” (Almasmoudi, 2024). One witness described the incident on social media, asking: “by what right do some restaurants in Morocco give themselves the right to prevent veiled women from entering?” (ibid.). Defenders argue that these cases reveal a systematic effort to marginalize Islamic identity in Moroccan public life, an effort resisted by the headscarf as a clear symbol of this identity.

## Findings

A content analysis of Moroccan media sources, public debates, and intellectual discussions from 2008 to 2026, revealed three distinct patterns in the hijab debate.

### Pattern 1: Informal Exclusion

The first pattern is the informal nature of exclusion. As documented in the analysis of opponents’ development and emancipation arguments, there is no explicit law prohibiting veiled women from holding diplomatic positions, presenting television programs, or attending schools or universities. Nevertheless, exclusion occurs systematically. As noted in the section on state interventions, the ban extends even to radio, where the presenter's appearance is not visible (Achto, 2011). When a veiled woman is denied a job, the reason given is rarely "because of your headscarf." Exclusion is implicit and deniable.

### Pattern 2: Inconsistency

The second pattern is inconsistency in state policy. As illustrated earlier, female police officers have been photographed wearing headscarves while monitoring protests. A security source explained that "some women begin wearing headscarves after their appointment, and no one prevents them from doing so as long as it does not interfere with their duties" (Almasmoudi, 2017). However, the prison administration has banned female employees from wearing headscarves, derisively referring to them as a "handkerchief over the head" (Al-Achraf, 2008). The media sector excludes veiled women from television and radio, while other sectors tolerate them.

### Pattern 3: External Referencing

The third pattern is the systematic invocation of external frameworks while neglecting the Moroccan Constitution. Opponents cite UN declarations, international human rights conventions, and Western standards but do not refer to Article 3 of the Moroccan Constitution, which declares Islam the state religion and guarantees freedom of religious practice (Ouslim, 2015).

## Discussion

The three patterns identified in the findings reveal a fundamental tension within Moroccan society. The informality of exclusion makes it difficult to challenge discrimination. Unlike explicit legal bans, which can be contested through courts and legislation, informal norms operate through unwritten understandings, employment practices and institutional cultures. Exclusion is implicit, deniable, and difficult to address.

The inconsistency in state policy suggests that exclusion is not the result of a deliberate strategy. Rather, it is a product of local institutional cultures, managerial preferences, and the legacy of French secularism in specific sectors of society. The result is a mixture of exclusion and acceptance that veiled women must navigate without clear guidance or support.

The pattern of external references reveals that the hijab debate is not fundamentally about whether women should cover their hair. Rather, it is about which normative order should govern Moroccan public life: the international (Western) system or Morocco's constitutional and Islamic traditions. When opponents cite international frameworks while disregarding the Constitution, they are not presenting a neutral legal argument but rather attempting to redefine the rules of the debate to a position where their stance is stronger.

The patterns documented above suggest that the exclusion of the hijab from Moroccan institutions is inevitable. However, the Arab Spring and the brief rise of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) demonstrated the possibility of alternative arrangements for the monarchy. During the party's rule, veiled women appeared in high-ranking government positions for the first time in Iran. This moment generated a backlash, and the party's subsequent electoral decline indicates that underlying tensions persist. The hijab debate is likely to continue as long as Moroccan institutions prioritize secular Western standards over the country's constitutional and religious traditions.

These patterns have two important implications. First, for Muslim women, the irregularity and inconsistency of exclusion create an environment of uncertainty. A veiled woman cannot know whether her hijab will be accepted or rejected in any institution. She must constantly navigate an environment in which her religious practice could be a cause for exclusion, without these reasons being clear. This ambiguity has a discouraging effect. Some women may choose not to wear the hijab to avoid discrimination, and others may avoid certain professions altogether. Thus, the debate restricts women's choices, even in the absence of an explicit ban.

Second, regarding Islam in Morocco, the systematic exclusion of the hijab from prestigious government institutions sends a message about the type of Islam accepted in contemporary Morocco. As discussed in Hijab and Modernization, the colonial era established the association between Western dress and progress and traditional dress and backwardness. The contemporary exclusion of the hijab from prestigious institutions perpetuates this colonial association. The message is clear: to participate fully in modern Moroccan public life, one must abandon visible expressions of Islamic identity. This places practicing Muslims in an unenviable position: either adherence to their faith or full participation in society. The existence of this choice in a country whose constitution stipulates that Islam is the state religion is the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the hijab debate.

## Reinterpreting the Hijab from Within: The Question of Ijtihad

Moroccan intellectuals who advocate for modernizing society and re-evaluating cultural heritage have taken divergent positions on the issue of the hijab. Some view it from an Orientalist perspective, interpreting Islamic cultures according to Western values and historical frameworks; a perspective exemplified by Fatima Mernissi, who wrote extensively about the "harem" in Muslim societies. Others have sought to reinterpret this tradition from within. One example is Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, who offered an analysis of the cultural heritage related to the hijab, presenting a renewed perspective that leads to conclusions that revitalize the heritage itself rather than disregard it (Al-Jabri, 2004a). Al-Jabri is widely regarded as one of Morocco's most influential modern philosophers, and his approach to reinterpreting Islamic tradition from within offers a distinctive alternative to both secular rejection and traditionalist defenses of the hijab. Al-Jabri published three articles on his website under the main title "The Hijab... A Controversial Issue."

In the first article, "Different Types of the Hijab, but All Considered Valid (in Islam)," Al-Jabri proposed a solution to the French government's ban on the hijab in schools by imposing a uniform school dress code for girls. The style of which would be determined by school administrators and parents, provided that it only features neatly styled hair without any adornment or makeup. The proposed uniform would be similar to that of flight attendants. He asserted that this solution fulfills the objectives of the hijab in Islamic law as stated in the Qurʾān, not according to the interpretations of jurists, pointing out that jurists have regulated the hijab based on the realities of their time. He emphasized that the hijab is a matter of interpretation, evolving with each time (Al-Jabri, 2004a).

The second article, "A Custom of the Past... and Nowadays Circumstance," argued that the veil originated from pre-Islamic Arab customs rather than from a fixed religious commandment. He asserted that the Qurʾān addresses all of humanity in all times and places, including the present. He called upon Islamic scholars to engage in a "continuous revival" of their interpretive methodology. Examining pre-Islamic and early Islamic practices concerning women, he observed that the social and moral justifications varied. A key observation is the distinction between free women, who remained in their homes and wore the veil, and slave women, who went out to work and did not wear it. This indicates that jurists based their rulings on prevailing social conditions rather than on a fixed divine decree (Al-Jabri, 2004b).

Article three, "The Verses on Hijab..., the author interprets the purpose of these verses as a means to ensure that women are recognized to avoid harassers and distinguished from the female slaves accompanying them. He interpreted the purpose of these verses as a measure to ensure women to be recognized to avoid harassers and to be distinguished from the female slaves accompanying them. He then highlighted the differing interpretations of scholars regarding the definition of "jilbab" and "visible adornment." Al-Jabri concluded that the principle of "necessity permits the forbidden" may allow for flexibility for working women, arguing that unveiling in the present era serves the original purpose of asserting a woman's identity more effectively than the hijab itself, thus reflecting the true meaning of the verse. He also emphasizes that discussions of the hijab should stem from a genuine desire to understand the text, not from any other agenda. Finally, he concludes that the command to wear the hijab does not carry any explicit threats or punishments (Al-Jabri, 2004c). Finally, he concluded that the command to wear the hijab did not carry any explicit threats or punishments (Al-Jabri, 2004c).

This displays a mindset that reinterprets texts on the hijab in a new way, ultimately leading to its abolition. This conclusion parallels that of secular critics, who advocate the abolition of the hijab through the reinterpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. This raises the question: Is there a real difference between those who use ijtihad to reinterpret verses and those who categorically reject the hijab as incompatible with modernity?

## Conclusion

The debate surrounding the hijab in Morocco is not merely about clothing; it reflects the legacy of colonialism, the formation of national identity, the role of religion in public life, and the meaning of women's freedom. The disagreement between supporters and opponents is not about the garment itself but about the fundamental character of Morocco and its desired future.

Returning to the research questions posed in the introduction, this study finds the following. First, a well-established religious practice became controversial in Moroccan society because of the historical rupture caused by French colonialism, which associated Western dress with progress and traditional dress with backwardness. This colonial legacy created a lasting division between those who identify with Western modernity and those who adhere to authentic Islamic identity. Second, institutions of an Islamic state exclude veiled women not because of explicit laws, but through informal mechanisms rooted in the secular norms inherited from the French protectorate. The absence of a coherent state policy, the inconsistency across sectors (prisons allowing bans while policewomen wear hijab), and the strategic invocation of international frameworks over the Moroccan constitution all contribute to this exclusion. Third, the arguments from both sides reveal that post-colonial Morocco is caught in a fundamental contradiction: its constitution declares Islam the state religion, yet its institutions systematically marginalize visible expressions of Islamic identity. The hijab debate thus exposes a nation still struggling to reconcile its colonial inheritance with its self-understanding as a Muslim society. Understanding the hijab debate in these terms reveals it as a proxy for deeper, unresolved conflicts in Moroccan society.

This article makes several contributions to the broader study of hijab debates in Muslim-majority contexts by building on and extending existing scholarship. First, scholars such as Cronin (2014) examined anti-veiling campaigns in the Muslim world as top-down, state-driven policies during the interwar period, revealing the ideological purposes behind these campaigns and their implementation across countries, including Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. This article contributes to this literature by demonstrating that in contemporary Morocco, exclusion operates through informal, not legal, mechanisms, a pattern that makes discrimination particularly difficult to challenge and represents a different modality of anti-veiling politics. Second, while Sadiqi (2016) and Guessous (2020) have explored Moroccan women's perceptions of Islam and the limits of secular feminist critiques, this article extends their work by revealing that the state lacks a coherent policy on the hijab and that exclusion reflects local institutional cultures and the legacy of French secularism rather than a deliberate national strategy. Third, building on Salime's (2016) analysis of "embedded counterpublics" in Morocco's Islamic revival movement, this article shows how opponents strategically invoke international frameworks while ignoring the constitutional protection of religious freedom, revealing that the debate revolves not around the hijab itself but around which normative order should govern Moroccan public life. Fourth, while Gökarıksel and Secor (2012) and Jones (2007) have examined how Muslim women navigate the tension between religious modesty and fashion, this article contributes a different dimension by documenting how informal exclusion perpetuates the colonial association between Western dress and progress, restricting women's choices while the constitution declares Islam the state religion. The very existence of this choice in a country whose constitution stipulates that Islam is the state religion is the fundamental contradiction at the heart of this debate. The brief ascendancy of the PJD demonstrated that alternatives are possible; however, backlash followed, and the tension remains unresolved.

This study has several limitations. It focuses on media discourse and lacks interviews with veiled women, whose voices are essential for understanding the lived experience of this debate. Future research should address this gap by incorporating ethnographic or interview-based methods, exploring comparative cases with other Muslim-majority contexts, such as Tunisia or Turkey, and focusing on specific social groups, particularly younger generations who navigate these debates through social media and transnational Islamic fashion. The hijab debate continues not because Moroccans disagree about the hijab, but because they disagree about their identity. As long as Morocco avoids confronting its colonial inheritance and its understanding of itself as a Muslim society, the hijab will remain contested. The debate reveals a nation still engaged in defining who it is.

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