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Muslim women (left to right) wearing a khemar, khemar, niqab and hijab, cross a street in Cairo. In Egypt and other Muslim countries, a fierce debate has broken out over whether the niqab, a cloth covering a woman's face with a only a slit for the eyes, is required for modesty or a dangerous sign of political extremism that should be banned.

Facing an issue: Is the veil a sign of extremism?

RELIGION | The growing popularity of the full Muslim face veil has touched off an emotional dispute in the Arab world and beyond

BY NADIA ABOU EL-MAGD

CAIRO — The origin of the debate could not be more intimate: What a woman chooses to wear before she leaves home. But the increasing popularity of the full Muslim face veil has set off an emotional dispute in the Arab world over whether the covering is required by Islam for modesty or a dangerous sign of political extremism.

The debate is most intense in Egypt, the world's largest Arab country, where two weeks ago a university banned women who wear the face veil — or niqab — from living in a hostel, and government-backed newspapers have launched a campaign against the veil.

"The niqab vogue: an imported innovation, used by the political extremists," read a recent banner on the pro-government *Al-Mussawar Weekly*. "Our new battle is against the niqab," added Mohammed Fatouh, a specialist on Islamic issues in another government-owned weekly, *Rose el-Youssef*.

Salama Ahmed Salama, a columnist in Egypt's biggest government daily, *Al-Ahram*, was more blunt: "It expresses an extremist attitude. . . . Wearing the niqab is as outrageous as wearing a bathing suit or pyja-

mas to the office."

On any given street in the capital, the face of one woman will be fully covered, with only her eyes peering through; nearby, another woman will cover her hair, leaving her face bare; still another will have her face and hair free of any covering.

The dispute highlights the growing wave of conservative Islamic practice across the Arab world — and among Muslims living in the West — and the intense struggle between secular governments and Islamic opposition groups. Head scarves fell out of favour among some urban Arab women in the 1920s and 1930s but began reappearing in the 1970s and 1980s. The evolution has been steady, with more women covering their hair each year and more also wearing body cloaks.

But the biggest dispute has been over the niqab — a full facial veil that leaves only a slit for the eyes. It re-emerged in Egypt in the late 1980s and has since grown in popularity, both in the Arab world and among Arab Muslims in the West.

Former British foreign secretary Jack Straw said in early October that he asks women who visit his office to remove the veil so he can see their faces, and called it a disturbing sign of

the divisions in British society. Aishah Azmi, a 24-year-old Muslim teaching assistant in northern England, was then suspended from her job for refusing to remove a black veil that left only her eyes visible.

In Egypt, the issue has simmered for years and caught new fire after Straw's comments.

The president of Helwan University on the outskirts of Cairo banned students who wear the niqab from living at the university's hostel, citing security reasons — and leading to small protests by students.

The head of the Islamic department of the women's college at Al-Azhar University, Soad Saleh, was recently sued by a radical cleric and received death threats after she said she was "disgusted by women in niqab."

In the West, traditional Muslim dress is seen as a refusal by Muslim immigrants to assimilate and accept Europe's secular values. Two years ago, France banned head scarves and other religious symbols from public places, enraging many Muslim immigrants. Australia's top Islamic cleric also recently sparked outrage when he said that women who do not dress modestly invite rape.

In the Arab world, the dispute

centres on fears of growing Islamic extremism and concerns by secular governments, like Egypt's, that they will lose ground to Islamic opposition groups.

Complicating the issue, there is no uniform religious opinion across the-Muslim world about whether a head scarf — much less a face veil — is required. Some view various forms of head scarves and niqabs as signs of cultural or Islamic pride. Others, however, view face veils as indications of Islamic extremist political opposition.

But some who wear the face veil contend they do so for purely personal religious reasons.

"Believe me, we are normal human beings. But they deal with us like terrorists who are going to blow up everything," said Ashgan, a woman wearing the veil at Helwan University, who would give only her first name during an interview with The Associated Press because she did not want to appear immodest.

She began wearing the niqab three years ago, and takes it off her face just before she enters the hostel's gate, she said.

The top theological authority of Al-Azhar University, the highest seat of Sunni Muslim learning, said he accepted the Helwan

University decision to keep women wearing niqabs from the hostel as long as Helwan officials do not require women to also remove their head scarves.

Clerics who believe women should be veiled refer to a verse in the Koran: "O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks all over their bodies."

Many Islamic scholars do say that covering the hair is a religious duty, but others disagree and say the verse has other interpretations. As for the face veil, the majority of Islamic scholars say it is not required but is merely a custom that dates back to tribal, nomadic societies living in the Arabian desert before Islam began.

In Saudi Arabia, most women wear a face veil along with a head scarf and full black cloak —

or face harassment by religious police.

Many Egyptian women took off their head scarves in the 1920s. But Egypt became more religious in the 1970s and women began wearing scarves again, even though the government does not encourage it.

Egypt keeps newscasters wearing head scarves off its TV stations; the president's wife, Suzanne Mubarak, and most female officials wear neither head scarf nor face veil.

But the streets are full of veiled women. There are no accurate statistics on Egypt's 75 million people, about 10 per cent of whom are Christian Copts who do not wear veils. But between 70 and 80 per cent of all Egyptian Muslim women are believed to wear a head scarf; according to most estimates.

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Aishah Azmi, a teaching assistant in Leeds, England, was suspended after she refused to remove a veil during lessons.

Muslim women, wearing a niqab (left) and a khimar (right), leave Al-Azhar Mosque after Friday prayers in Cairo.

Malaysian woman: 'Wearing the niqab is as outrageous as wearing a bathing suit to the office,' an Egyptian columnist has written.

A veiled freedom of expression

The debate over the wearing of veils has ignited disputes in the Arab world. A woman's face is fully covered in some countries, while in others, only her hair is covered and yet in others, no head covering is worn at all.

The use of head scarves and veils in some Muslim countries

EGYPT 70-80 percent wear scarf; government does not encourage scarves or veils

INDONESIA, MALAYSIA Scarf use has come into vogue as part of Islamic revival

IRAN Many wear scarf and a cloak — or chador, required by law; few wear a veil

IRAQ Many wear a scarf, others a veil; forcible in some parts of country

JORDAN Conservative women required by their families to wear scarf

KUWAIT, LEBANON, SYRIA Use of head scarves has grown in recent years

SAUDI ARABIA Law requires a full black cloak, an abaya; a scarf and veil for all

TUNISIA 1980s government ban forbids scarves worn in many public places

TURKEY Ban forbids scarves in all government offices and institutions

