

# Modernized Hijab and the Emergence of Post-Secular Society in Turkey

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**ABSTRACT:** *Hijab in the Western world is one of the main symbols of Islam, causing intense debate regarding its compatibility with modernity. As a representative case, the author selected the phenomenon of hijab in the Republic of Turkey - a westernized and simultaneously Islamic country. An important transition of Turkey from religious to secular society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to the post-secular in the 21<sup>st</sup> century gives the Turkish case additional significance for the study of hijab in the context of modernity. Using the example of a Turkish case, the author shows how, during the processes of secularization and desecularization of society, the attitude to the hijab, its interpretations and related practices change. Against the backdrop of the intense struggle that was waged by supporters and opponents of secularism, the hijab received a new meaning, becoming truly modernized and then fashionable. Moreover, the hijab, fitting into modernity, was not just a headscarf, preserving all religious and moral connotations and changing the overall way of dress and lifestyle of city dwellers. The author concludes that Islam began to play a greater role in the life of Turkish women and the country as a whole, which suggests the emergence of a post-secular society in Turkey, which does not mean, however, a complete rejection of modernity.*

**KEYWORDS** - *Hijab; Islam; post-secular society; secularism; Turkey*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Hijab in the Western world is one of the main symbols of Islam, causing intense debate regarding its compatibility with modernity. Most often, it is seen as an unacceptable form of patriarchal male domination and suppression of women, social coercion and violation of rights in a democratic society, moreover, as a form of religious and even political propaganda [1-3]. In turn, there are alternative points of view that emphasize the importance of hijab for ensuring women's social security [4-5], defending their right to self-expression and otherness; presenting the hijab as a free, even non-conformist choice of Muslim women [1], a symbol of resistance against the violent westernization and marginalization of Muslims [6] and, moreover, against "cultural racism" that is supposedly widespread in the West [7].

A new round of public interest in hijab emerged primarily after the September 9 attacks in the United States, when mass media began to spread anti-Islamic sentiments, and those dressed in accordance with Muslim norms became associated with terrorism [8-9]. The next important stage was the legislative ban on wearing the hijab as a religious symbol in French schools in 2004, which provoked disputes about the rights of Muslims as Western citizens, the interaction of religious, national and civic identities and the limits of multiculturalism [10-12].

However, despite the fact that due to the increased relevance of the topic, a lot of academic attention has been attracted to the hijab, the phenomenon itself remains poorly understood. Suffice it to say that in the West, including among researchers, hijab is generally understood as a headscarf [13-14]. At the same time, for Muslims, hijab is a complex religious concept and therefore should also be considered in cultural and philosophical aspects. From this angle of view, we can take a fresh look at the issue of hijab and its connection with modernity.

As a representative case, I chose the phenomenon of hijab in the Republic of Turkey - a westernized and simultaneously Islamic country. An important transition of Turkey from religious to secular society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to the post-secular in 21<sup>st</sup> century gives the Turkish case additional significance for the study of hijab in the context of modernity. In this regard, the study will focus on the hijab phenomenon in its classical understanding and the variety of interpretations based on the specific practices of Turkish Muslim women.

## **II. RESEARCH METHODS**

To analyze the hijab in connection with modernity in the light of the variety of interpretations, practices and cultural contexts, I have used a wide range of research tools: interpretative phenomenology, critical discourse analysis, cultural and historical contextualization, descriptive-analytical and case-study methods. The study is structured in two steps. In the first part we will examine in more detail the understanding of hijab in Islam, in the second - we will highlight the specifics of hijab interpretations by modern Muslims in Turkey.

## **III. THE CLASSIC UNDERSTANDING OF HIJAB**

When we talk about the “classical” understanding of the hijab, we associate it with normativity, which for Islam means referring to the sacred primary source of all the prescriptions for Muslims - the Arabic-language text of the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, which appears to Muslims as addressed by Allah, the word “hijab” occurs 7 times (7:46; 17:45; 19:17; 33:53; 38:32; 41: 5; 42:51) in the meaning of the veil, the barrier between light and darkness, people (for example, believers and non-believers, men and women) or man and God. At the same time, indications of the need for women to cover themselves when being with men who are not their relatives (24:31; 33:59; 7:27), regulate the clothes that are prescribed for a Muslim woman, but do not contain the term “hijab”. Women are instructed not only to throw blankets tightly over their heads (24:31; 33:59), but also to be modest - to “cast down their glances/ restrain their looks” and not to show jewelry (24:31).

On this basis the “classical” Islamic understanding of hijab includes both a specific situational principle of clothing selection - to hide one’s appearance from strangers and a moral foundation (“hijab of the eyes”) - the principle of purity, modesty and restraint, as well as a special philosophy of distinguishing between a man and a woman, a stranger and a relative, permissible and forbidden.

In accordance with the normative understanding of the hijab, modern Muslims can divide it into “internal” and “external”, “bad” and “good”, “complete” and “incomplete”, and speak not only about the form, but also about the spirit of the hijab, which is incompatible with attractive beauty. As Natalia Bahadoria and Kamila bint Rasul [15] point out in a modern manual for Muslim women: “You cannot blush and be embarrassed, it will happen only if you are covered with a hijab inside, if you are covered inside and outside.”

However, the variability of understanding of the Quranic verses in different translations and the variety of Islamic traditions based on hadiths regarding the covering provided the diversity of hijab practices in the Muslim world. Given the influence of climatic features and local traditions, Muslim communities decide by themselves which type of hijab their women will use. The most common is the requirement for women to hide their hair, chest, neck and ears with a head scarf, and the figure –with loose clothing, leaving only the hands and feet open. Some ultra-conservative communities require women to hide their faces and hands, also referring to the Qur'an and Hadith. At the same time, as a result of globalization and Westernization, hijabs in the form of headscarves of various kinds that can open both the neck with ears and even part of the hair are becoming more and more popular among Muslim women. Researchers even point out the emergence of the “hijab revolution” in some countries as Indonesia, when the hijab becomes a modern, fashionable and stylish piece of clothing [16]. Thus, the hijab is organically integrated into the fashion industry and consumerism practices [13], which causes the protest reaction - Muslims raise the issue of “internalizing” the hijab through strengthening their faith [17]. This means that the philosophical meaning of the hijab is still alive in the Muslim world.

## **IV. HIJAB AND SECULARIZATION IN TURKEY**

Unlike a number of Islamic countries in which the wearing of a hijab is mandatory for women (for example, Saudi Arabia and Iran), Turkey chose the French model of secularism – Laïciste – as a result of Westernization.

Laïciste is based on the rigid separation of state and church, the crowding out of religion from public to private space, and the emphasis on individual autonomy and rationality as the highest values of society [1].

Borrowing Laïciste, Turkey introduced a number of laws and restrictions regarding the role of Islam in the life of Turkish citizens: in 1924 the caliphate was abolished and Sharia courts were closed, a year later the wearing of traditional costume items and hats was restricted and Sufi brotherhoods were banned, in 1926 polygamy and many other norms of Islamic law became outside the law, and in 1928 Islam ceased to be the state religion according to the Constitution of Turkey.

At the same time, a fashion for a western costume was introduced by the Turkish government, and this new clothing was not compatible with the hijab. The formed image of a modern woman as secular and westernized turned the hijab into a sign of stagnation, backwardness, was strongly associated with a rural rather than urban lifestyle [18]. In turn, religious families from conservative circles did not let their daughters to go to secular schools, leaving them at home [19].

The changes in the situation with hijab emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century after the transition from a single-party to a multi-party system in Turkey. In the 1950 elections the Democrat Party came to power, bringing with it the return to politics thousands of followers of the disgraced religious leader Said Nursi (1878-1960). Said Nursi's students opened their classrooms (so-called 'houses of Light') throughout Turkey where, with references to their teacher's religious texts, they justified the need for women to wear a hijab called the *tesettür* according to the Ottoman tradition.

Already in the 60's hijab fashion was introduced by one of the students of these classes, public activist and journalist Shule Yuksel Shenler, who was able in 1965 to offer urban Turkish women a new modern image of a Muslim woman. Influenced by the style of famous British actress Audrey Hepburn, Schener has developed a special way to tie a headscarf so as to cover her hair, ears, neck and chest, while keeping up with the spirit of the times. The modernized headgear for women received the negative name "*türban*" in Turkey, the neutral name "*sıkmabaş*" (sykmabash), and the positive one, by the name of the creator, "*şulebaşı*" (shulebashy).

Shener did not only publish articles in many popular Turkish newspapers, urging women to wear hijab, but also traveled throughout the country with lectures for women. As a result, *şulebaşı* paired with a long cloak or coat turned into a "women's uniform" of the Islamist movement that was being formed in Turkey in those years [20]. As the first lady of modern Turkey Emine Erdogan, who was the assistant to Schener in the leadership team of the "Association of Women Idealists" (Ülkücü Kadınlar Derneği) points out, it was during a meeting with the latter that she realized – a Muslim woman can be modern and cultural wearing a hijab [21]. At the same time, Shener under the influence of her second spouse from the Muslim community (*jamaat*) Ismailağa soon chose a black *çarşaf* - a loose robe that completely hides the figure and the head with except for a face only [22].

As a result of popularization of hijab among urban girls, they started to be more active and visible in the public sphere. This became a concern for secular authorities, leading first to local, and then, in the 80s, to the general headscarf bans in educational institutions [23]. Moreover, it was precisely *şulebaşı* that the authorities raised objections, perceiving it as an alien phenomenon associated with Arab influence. This type of headress was called *türban* and considered a symbol of the Islamist political project distributed among the youth student community [24]. It is important to note that the girls separated themselves from the traditional Turkish Muslim women, considering wearing a traditional and rural form of scarf (*başörtüsü*) insufficient by formal signs (not completely covering hair, neck, etc.) or not enough conscious [25].

The struggle began for the right to wear a hijab and receive education, for freedom of expression and religion, accompanied by rallies and court cases for an attempt to undermine the constitutional order and violate the Laïciste principle [18]. However, already in the 90s the process of religious mobilization has developed so much that the hijab industry was formed, hundreds of manufacturing firms functioned and Muslim brands already begun to form [26].

A new stage of Islamic consumerism fully manifested itself in the 2000s, when religious conservative cadres came into big politics and initiated the process of de-secularization of Turkish society, while their wives began to set the fashion for hijab. If back in 2003, the wives of the head of the parliament, the prime minister

and a number of senior officials were not invited to the President's gala evening because they were wearing a hijab, then in the 2010-s the wife of the prime minister, and since 2014, the president of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the new trendsetter of Islamic hijab fashion.

This “consumerism” of the hijab in Turkey is criticized on the basis of the “classical” understanding of the hijab, which even resulted in the nickname for fashionable women in hijabs - *süslüman*, which is a fusion of two Turkish words: a Muslim woman (*müslüman*) and a fancy (*süslü*) [27].

## V. CONCLUSION

On the Turkish case one can see how during the processes of secularization and desecularization of society the attitude to the hijab, its interpretation and related practices have changed. Following the western path and choosing Laïciste, Turkey turned the hijab into a symbol of archaism, inertia and backwardness, and for several decades anticipated the French ban on hijab in educational institutions. Moreover, like in France, the latter was a reaction to the increased activity of Muslims and the strengthening of Islamic identity, since the religious model was perceived as competitive for the secular state. Moreover, just like France, it was presented as culturally alien, not peculiar to the Turks, although, unlike France, Turkey has had a centuries-old Islamic heritage. Thus, the secular model showed in the same way both in Catholic France and in Islamic Turkey.

Against the backdrop of the intense struggle that was waged in both the public sphere and in politics, the hijab received a new reading, becoming truly modernized, although not yet fashionable. It was the easily recognizable form and modern look that made *şulebaşıor türban* for urban Turkish Muslims a symbol of the struggle for freedom of choice and practice of religion, following its canons without abandoning the modern benefits of civilization. Moreover, the hijab, fitting into modernity, was not only a headscarf, preserving all religious and moral connotations and changing the overall way of life and lifestyle of city dwellers, in particular, in their gender relationships.

The next step is to highlight the hijab in Turkish society at the stage of desecularization, when differences in the ways of covering a woman and attitudes towards the principle of hijab already play a much larger role than at the stage of combating aggressive secularization. So two contradictory trends can be clearly seen - the appeal to a more conservative interpretation of the hijab, which is accompanied by the choice of a black *çarşaf* hiding a woman, and, on the contrary, modernization in the spirit of Westernization, when the hijab turns into a fashion accessory for *süslüman* women. Between these two poles is the multitude of interpretations of the hijab and related practices, which are united by the fact that Islam began to play a greater role in the life of Turkish women and the country as a whole, which allows talking about the emergence of a post-secular society in Turkey, which does not mean, however, a complete rejection of modernity.

## VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication was made possible by funding from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, research work No. 30.2875.2017/8.9.

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