

When Hijab is Politicized and Stripped of its Religious Meaning - a Book Excerpt



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Guest Contributor



The following essay on the politicization of the hijab in a climate where Islam is being stripped of its "religious bona fides and being positioned instead as an enemy of the state" is excerpted from ["When Islam is Not a Religion"](#) by Asma T. Uddin; Published by Pegasus Books. © Asma T. Uddin.

Given the diversity of fiqh, many Muslim women who wear head-scarves view the hijab as unequivocally obligatory. Even as he pointed out the possible exceptions to the rule, Dr. Abd-Allah, an Islamic scholar with whom I consulted in my own time of spiritual need, made clear that all four major Sunni schools of thought hold that women are required to wear the headscarf in the public space: "A woman's covering and the scarf are highly regarded in Islam and it is obligatory for a woman to cover her hair and wear the scarf according to the four [schools of thought]."



Author (and editor-in-chief of Altmuslimah) Asma T. Uddin

And for many women who wear the hijab, it is not just a wardrobe accessory, or even a religious symbol; the very act of wearing it is a form of worship. How could this very basic form of religious practice be so difficult in a country whose Constitution provides broad latitudes for religious freedom? Not just broad protection—but the broadest in the entire world? The US is home to diverse religious believers, each with their unique forms of religious expression—Orthodox Jewish, Amish, and Mennonite women cover their heads for religious reasons, as do some Catholic nuns. There was a time when Americans viewed nuns with suspicion and even enacted anti-religious dress statutes that prohibited nuns in habits from teaching in public schools (all states except Pennsylvania have since repealed these laws). But today, while many Americans may consider these women’s dress choices quaint or peculiar, almost no one questions their right to choose religious dress. Few, if any, Americans make political assumptions about other women’s modest dress, but many Americans stereotype Muslim women in headscarves.

Wearing hijab in America is complicated because the headscarf has been

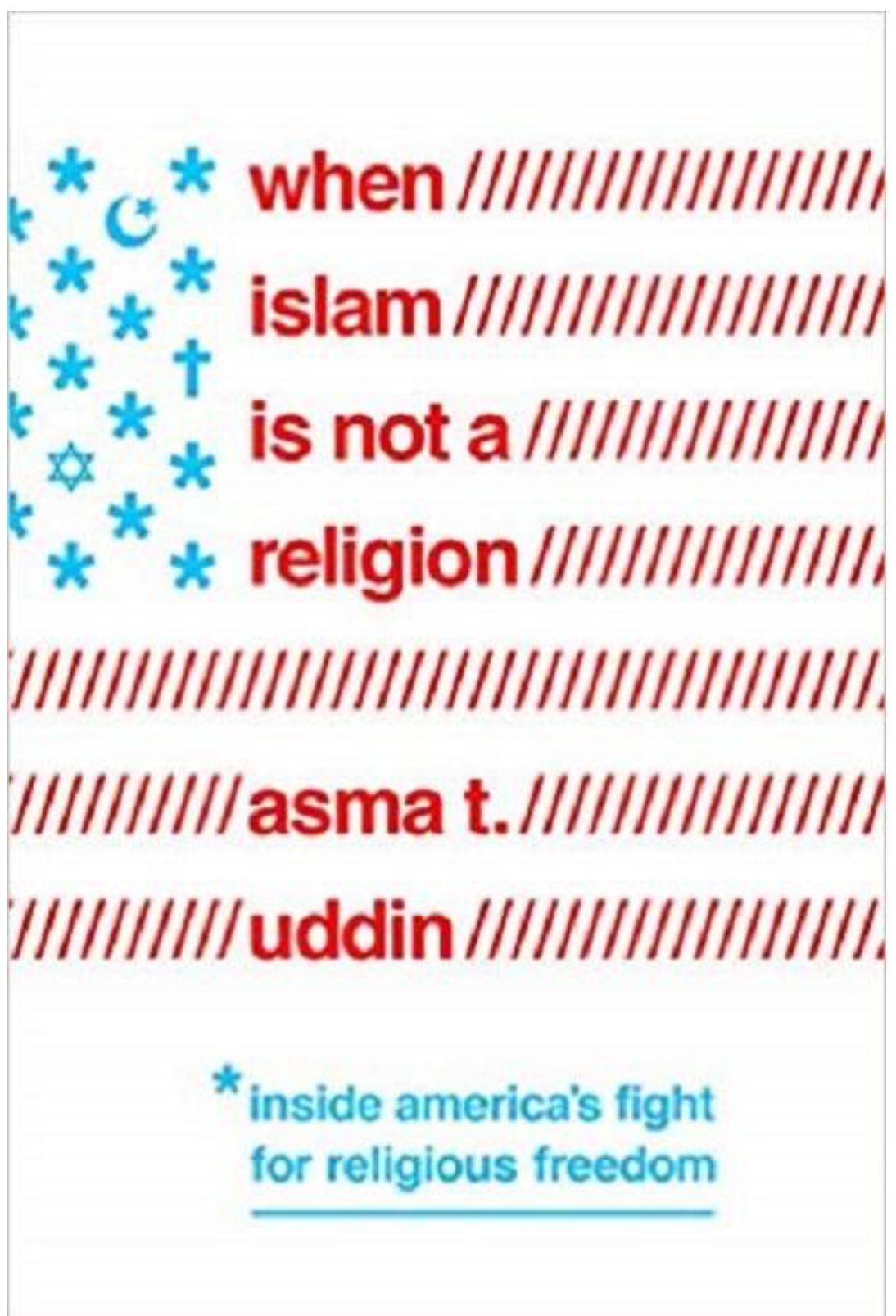
reconstituted from a religious act to a political one. According to political discourse, which grows more feverish by the day, the headscarf is not religious because “Islam is not a religion.” The hijab in particular “frames the female body as an icon of the ‘clash of civilizations’” and the very act of wearing a headscarf is perceived as an act of resistance.

With this definitional shift, actions that Americans would normally classify as religious discrimination are accepted as legitimate national security measures. “Recasting thus serves as the basis for calls to deny Muslims rights otherwise protected under the law.” By this logic, “mundane religious accommodation cases” like the ability to wear a headscarf in the workplace “become evidence of stealth, imperialistic designs” because the headscarf is seen as a “visible ‘marker’ of [a woman’s] membership in a suspect group.”

Pamela Geller enunciated this phenomenon when she argued in a 2016 Breitbart piece that Muslim women seeking workplace accommodations are part of a “Muslim effort to impose Islam on the secular marketplace.” That same year, a policy paper by the Air Force Research Laboratory called the headscarf a form of “passive terrorism”: “‘hijab contribute[s] to the idea of passive terrorism’ and represents an implicit refusal to ‘speak against or actively resist

terrorism.” Also in 2016, shortly after Minnesota elected its first headscarf-wearing legislator, Ilhan Omar, she found herself accosted by her cab driver: “The cab driver called me ISIS and threatened to remove my hijab, I wasn’t really sure how this encounter would end as I attempted to rush out of his cab and retrieve my [belongings].” Two years later, when Omar was elected to the US Congress and asked Congress to reconsider its ban on headwear, she was immediately met with claims about a Muslim takeover: “Don’t try to change our country into some sort of Islamic republic or try to base our country on Sharia law.” (Omar succeeded in getting the rule changed in January 2018, fittingly the 233rd anniversary of the Virginia General Assembly’s adoption of Thomas Jefferson’s Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.)

The argument is ludicrous on its face, but downright confusing when probed. Even as Muslim women in headscarves are portrayed as aggressors, spreading extremism by the mere act of covering their heads, they are also talked about as oppressed and subjugated. For many Americans and non-Muslims worldwide, the hijab stands for patriarchy. Outsiders cannot fathom why a woman would want to wear a headscarf



out of her own free choice; it's seen as drab and movement-limiting, and thus could only be a sign that a woman is forced by her family members (usually the stereotypical domineering Muslim male) to wear it. As for the woman who insists she wears it out of free choice—she's considered brainwashed, as no woman could rationally choose this for herself. It is inconceivable to many people that a woman could choose to wear clothing that defies social expectations, that she could dress for herself and not for popular approval or the male gaze. As Ali-Khan wrote, "It baffles me, the politics of hijab today: the designation of it as anti-feminist, as regressive... Because what is the legacy of feminism if not the conviction that this body and this spirit are mine to steward?"

A Muslim woman in a headscarf is oppressed and submissive—but in a post-9/11 world she is also an aggressor. The argument is internally contradictory, but many pundits continue to push it, violent actors continue to act on it, and it is threatening women's legal rights, too. Already in Europe, the highest court of human rights has explicitly adopted this contradictory rationale to uphold bans on headscarves and face veils, and in America, Muslim women in the workplace and elsewhere are facing discrimination fueled by the same biases.

When Islam is stripped of its religious bona fides and positioned instead as an enemy of the state, Muslim women pay the price. In a land committed, at least on paper, to robust religious freedom, Muslim women in headscarves are forced to choose between their religion and their safety and livelihood.

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