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## No covering up Egypt's niqab row

**There have been demonstrations by women students in Cairo after a leading cleric backed moves to ban the wearing of full women's veils, known as the niqab, in classrooms or dormitories. Christian Fraser has been hearing both sides of the argument.**

It is not often I am summoned to the door of the Supreme Council of the ancient al-Azhar university.

It is, after all, the high seat of Sunni Islam.

But this was where the diminutive sheikh who presides on this wise council chose to meet the journalists who wanted to learn more about his ban.

In fact it was more of a sermon than a press conference and the sheikh, who is by the way a government appointee, seemed unruffled both by the unruly scrum of journalists and the commotion his announcement has caused.

He has this unshakeable confidence that he is right. Perhaps it comes from the Koran he holds in one hand and the hotline to President Hosni Mubarak he has in reach of the other.

For some unfathomable reason, given the number of Egyptian press conferences I have attended this year (most of which run for hours with no discernible purpose), I had somehow raised my expectations that the Supreme Council might deign to answer my questions.

Why are an increasing number of young women in Egypt turning to the niqab? What role did the government play in the sheikh's ruling?

And how will it be seen by the politicians of Europe, like President Nicolas Sarkozy who banned the niqab from French classrooms? And indeed the British Justice Minister, Jack Straw, who asked women to remove them in his constituency office?

"You must read my judgment," insisted the sheikh. It was a two-page slab of scripture in classical Arabic, for which a lifetime's education in the halls of al-Azhar would surely not have prepared me.

And so, somewhat ill-informed, I left the supreme scholars in search of my own, more earthly answers.

### Increasingly conservative

On Taalat Harb, one of the main arteries through Cairo, the Egyptian clash of cultures is on prominent display.

There are shops doing a roaring



Wearing the niqab is widely associated with more radical Islam

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trade in garish fishnet stockings, clothes that belong to a budget production of the film Moulin Rouge, alongside those selling the all-enveloping outfits more commonly seen in this increasingly conservative society.

It is, though, whispered in shadowy corners of this city that prostitutes are in fact customers at both types of shop.

Mar Mohammed runs Nur Moda (Women's Fashions). He has been in business for 20 years.

"I have never sold as many niqabs," he told me. "A hundred, 120 a day," he says, "no problem."

And, as if by magic, Heba the trusty shop assistant appeared.

"The sheikh won't affect my decision to wear it," says Heba. "I feel more relaxed in this. Men aren't looking at me. I feel closer to God."

Her words reminded me of a pro-niqab spam campaign that circulated around Cairo by e-mail last year. "A veil to protect or eyes will molest!" it warned.

### Open to interpretation

So can the Koran itself help provide an answer to the question? Is the niqab a modest covering required by the holy book, or is it the dangerous manifestation of extremist Islam that so concerns the Egyptian government?

Well, the verse in question translates along these lines: "O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks all over their bodies."

You see, it is rather vague and open to interpretation.

The sociologist Said Sadeq of the American University in Cairo points to the influence of Salafism, the ultra-conservative brand of Islam imported from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

In the Middle East, religion is expanding, he explains. It has morphed with custom and tradition; the boundaries are disappearing.

In Arab society, he adds, the women are socially, politically, economically repressed and they are a soft target for the religious groups advancing a more dangerous philosophy.

But Hossam Bahgat, one of Egypt's prominent human rights campaigners, thinks that is too simplistic.

Two years ago, his group supported the veiled Dr Iman al-Zainy, who sued the American University after she was banned from their library, and she won.

"They are not all coerced into this by their parents or their peers," he says. They are intelligent women who follow a version of Islam that requires them to cover up in the presence of men.

### Destructive debate

Some here and further afield will try to give you the impression that the Egyptian government is some monolithic, secular organ averse to any form of radical Islam.

But this is the same government that, a month ago, was alleged to

“ **The Sheikh won't affect my decision to wear it. I feel more relaxed in this. Men aren't looking at me. I feel closer to God.** ”

Heba, shop assistant

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“ **This is a debate as destructive as a lightning bolt on a tree trunk; it splits the country apart** ”

have prosecuted people for breaking their Ramadan fast.

There are all sorts of views in the Egyptian parliament, and this is a debate as destructive as a lightning bolt on a tree trunk.

It splits the country apart.

What it also does is leave the sheikh open to both criticism and some loathing from a number of female students.

And it goes to show, even here in the Arab world's most populous country, just as in Europe, the row over the niqab can no longer be covered up.

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