Those who support the French State’s decision to ban hijab from its schools argue that the law is a necessary step to protect young Muslim girls, as French citizens, from fundamentalist pressure to wear hijab. Such a law, thus, penalizes innocent girls who wish to cover in order to protect those who do not wish to cover. The French see hijab as more than just a piece of cloth. The girls who wear it are not innocent; they are, in fact, seen as signs of a cancer in the French body politic – “Islamic fundamentalism”. That the French see the hijab in this way is due to an old and resilient Orientalist stereotype of the hijab as a symbol of Muslim women’s oppression. This idea was introduced into Western discourse in the early eighteenth century and was given “teeth” during the colonial era. During the British and French occupations of the Middle East, the colonialists went to great lengths to unveil Muslim women. The Europeans’ campaigns against the veil were eventually successful, as a new generation of Muslims internalized the Western colonial view of the veil as a symbol of backwardness. A society that wished to modernize had to follow the secular, Western path or else be condemned to the backwater of history. In 1936, the Shah of Iran initiated a policy of forced unveiling of women, decreeing that they wear Western women’s dress. Taxi drivers could be fined if they accepted veiled passengers; policemen would pull scarves off women’s heads in the streets and were actually instructed to shred a woman’s veil with scissors if she was caught wearing it in public. (This is the secular equivalent of the “religious police” in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Taliban Afghanistan, who enforce the wearing of hijab. The French State’s decision to ban hijab in its schools, while not being enforced with police violence, is nevertheless part of the same phenomenon of state coercion in the name of modernity.)

By the 1960s, the colonial and Muslim modernizing elites’ attacks on the veil had been largely successful. Only rural, peasant or lower-class urban women continued to cover. The urban, modern woman who wanted to “get ahead” did not cover and scorned those who did as illiterate, backward peasants. Thus, the movement for re-veiling, which has swept the Muslim world since the early 1970s, has surprised many observers. Social science research into the phenomena has revealed that the “re-veiling movement”, as it is called (though it is not really re-veiling, since most of the women are adopting hijab for the first time), is a women-driven movement. That is, contrary to media reports and the opinions of intellectuals who aim to foster fear of and hatred towards Muslims, the re-veiling movement is not the result of fundamentalist violence or coercion, but the result of women choosing to cover.

Academic research has, also, highlighted the fact that the motivations and meanings behind covering are extremely diverse; though the women may look similar in their dress, they are not thinking similarly, nor experiencing hijab similarly. This is an important point to make because those who would claim that the hijab is a sign of oppression ignore the multiple sociological meanings that hijab carries.

According to some analysts, the first impetus of the re-veiling movement was the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel. This event made many Muslims reconsider the paths of Westernization and modernization that their countries were pursuing. Many felt that their heritage and religion had been sidelined in the process, and they turned to Islam for solace during those difficult times. Many women adopted hijab as a part of this new mental state. (Many men grew beards and began wearing the traditional jallabiya.) It is important to note that the style of hijab adopted by these women was new and quite different from traditional forms of covering worn by their ancestors. Instead of a large piece of material wrapped around the body and, often, a face veil, these women adopted long coats and head-

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scarves pinned under the chin. For these women, the hijab was a combination of piety and political protest. One Egyptian woman told Williams, during his 1978 study into why Egyptian women embraced the veil, "Until 1967, I accepted the way our country was going. I thought Gamal Abd al-Nasser would lead us all to progress. Then, the war showed that we had been lied to; nothing was the way it had been represented. I started to question everything we were told. I wanted to do something and to find my own way. I prayed more and more, and I tried to see what was expected of me as a Muslim woman. Then, I put on shar’i dress…"

Hessini found similar sentiments of political protest in her 1989 study of urban and professional Moroccan women who had adopted hijab. One woman, Hadjia, stated, "the hijab is a way for me to retreat from a world that has disappointed me. It’s my own little sanctuary."

Some women felt that, in adopting this dress, they were proactively working to improve their societies and promoting social justice. Nadia told Hessini, "My religion saved me. In a world where there is no justice, I now believe in something that is just. I now have something I can count on."

Many women, however, have prioritized religious belief as the main motivation behind their decision to cover. Their adopting the new style of hijab is meant to express their adherence to “true Islam.” Sou’al told Hessini, "My mother has always worn the veil, but she knows nothing about Islam. She wore the veil out of tradition, whereas I wear it out of conviction." My own research amongst Toronto Muslim women in 1994, also, found similar motivations. Yasmeen, an immigrant to Canada from the Middle East, who is in her early thirties, told me, “I feel in peace [wearing hijab], and ah…I feel I respect myself more. I am not concentrated about my beauty and ah… the fashion and this stuff ah…I think it’s a peace of mind…I feel comfortable because this is what God want from the human being, ah…I am obeying.”

But the hijab carries a multitude of meanings. Researchers in Egypt, for instance, have found that not all those who adopt

### Hijab & My Story

In 1991 I saw a news report on the television that showed Turkish women who were returning to the veil. I felt shocked and saddened for them. "Poor things," I thought, "they are being brainwashed by their culture." Like many Westerners, I believed that Islam oppressed women and that the veil was a symbol of their oppression. Imagine my surprise then, four years later, at seeing my own reflection in a store window, dressed exactly like those oppressed women.

I had embarked on a spiritual journey during my Master’s degree that culminated four years later in my conversion to Islam. The journey included moving from hatred of Islam, to respect, to interest, to acceptance. Naturally, being a woman, the issue of the veil was central. Despite my attraction to the theological foundations of Islam, I was deeply troubled by what I believed to be practices oppressive to women. I felt that the veil was a cultural tradition that Muslim women could surely work to eliminate. I was shown the verses in the Qur'an that many Muslims believe enjoin covering on men and women, and it seemed quite clear to me then that, indeed, the verses did impose covering. I wandered home, feeling quite depressed and sorry for Muslim women. If the verses were clear, they had no recourse: covering would be required for believing Muslim woman. I had to put these issues aside in order to decide whether or not to accept Islam. What counted, in the final analysis, was the fundamental theological message of the religion— that there is a single God, and that Muhammad (SAAS) was His Last Servant and Messenger. After several years of study I had no doubt about that …..if only it were not for the issue of women and Islam.

When I finally made my decision to convert, now one and a half years into my doctorate (July 1994), I decided that whether I liked it or not, I should cover. It was a commandment, and I would obey. I warned some people in my department that I had become a Muslim, and that the next time they saw me I would be covered.

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Needless to say, people were quite shocked, and as word spread (and as people saw me in my new dress), I found myself subject to some hostile treatment. How could I have embraced an oppressive practice, especially when I was known as a strong and committed feminist? How could I embrace Islam? Had I not heard what Hams had just done? Had I not heard what some Muslim men had just done to a woman? I was not quite prepared for this hostility, nor was I prepared for the different way I was being treated by secretaries, bureaucrats, medical personnel, or general strangers on the subway. I felt the same, but I was often being treated with contempt. I was not treated as I had been as a white, middle-class woman. It was my first personal experience of discrimination and racism, and made me see my previous privileged position in a way that I had never before properly understood.

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Excerpted from ‘Introduction’ of *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*
hijab do so out of religious sentiments. Many of these women do not pray regularly, nor do they discuss hijab as a religious form of dress. Rather, they have found in hijab an empowering dress that facilitates their access to education and work. Often coming from urban lower class families and being the first woman in the family to achieve formal education, hijab has, for them, served the purpose of declaring their modesty to a conservative milieu, in spite of the fact that they are outside the family home for extended periods a day. They, also, find economic advantages to hijab; by wearing hijab, they do not have to spend huge amounts of money on work clothing. Sommaya told Hoodfar (1991) that she was having trouble with her fiancé and his family who did not want her to work after marriage; she solved the problem by wearing hijab; “if I have only two sets of clothes, I can look smart at all times because nobody expects muhaggabat (the veiled ones) to wear new clothes every day. This will save me a lot of money. It will, also, prevent people from talking about me or questioning my honor or my husband’s. In this way, I have solved all the problems, and my husband’s family are very happy that he is marrying a muhaggabat.”

Muslim women in the West find other compelling reasons to wear hijab, one of which is to assert their Muslim identity publicly and with pride, something which is especially important to them as citizens of Western, multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious polities. Nadia, a second-generation British Asian woman, who began to cover when she was sixteen, told Watson (1994, "My cultural background and my family’s roots are in another part of the world. These things are very important to me and make me feel special. It is important to me not to lose these parts of my life. My decision to wear the veil also ties into my feeling of coming from this different kind of background. We are a British family but because of Islam and our links with Pakistan we have different values and traditions from the families of my non-Muslim friends...[So] wearing the veil makes me feel special, it’s a kind of badge of identity and a sign that my religion is important to me.”

Even in Saudi Arabia, where there is no obvious choice about veiling, some women feel they are wearing hijab as a symbol of identity and pride. As a 35 year old teacher, married with two children and holding a BA in education from the United States, told AlMunajjed (1997), “Yes, I wear the veil out of conviction’. ‘On what do you base your conviction?’ [AlMunajjed] asked. ‘I am attached to my traditions. Wearing a veil is part of one’s identity of being a Saudi woman. It is a definite proof of one’s identification with the norms and values of the Saudi culture.’”

Thus, sociologically, the hijab carries many meanings, and it is wrong for the West to argue that the hijab is a symbol of male domination over women or a sign of fundamentalist threat or coercion. I say “wrong” purposefully, even though empirically it may sometimes be true. There are Muslim women who are forced to cover against their will, either due to state policy, Islamist violence or family coercion. I condemn coercion and violence perpetrated against Muslim women by those who seek to impose hijab. However, just because there are some women who experience hijab in this unfortunately negative way, it does not turn the hijab into a symbol of coercion. To be a symbol, the thing being represented must have a constant meaning.

Quite simply, hijab signifies a variety of things, depending on the historical and social context. We have seen a wide range of meanings that arise out of the contemporary Muslim women’s re-veiling movement. There are other meanings too. Prior to the European intervention into the Middle East, the face veil was a symbol of wealth and status. In the 1950s during the Algerian war of Independence, secularized, urban women donned headscarves to show their support of the war; the hijab was a symbol of resistance to French colonial rule. In the 1979 Iranian Revolution a similar process took place, with secular women joining religious women to wear chador as a sign that they supported the movement against the Shah. These women grew up not covering, but the chador became a symbol of the anti-Shah revolution.

Thus, hijab expresses many meanings, and commentators should be wary of attempting to impose one single meaning on it. In addition, the West should take notice that many Muslim women wear hijab with pride, conviction and happiness. I do not mean to downplay the tragedy of a Muslim woman who is forced to wear hijab out of coercion, but the prevalent image of the veil in the West, as a symbol of oppression, ignores the real expression women find in hijab. Furthermore, this is not simply an academic matter because public policy is being founded on the misconception of hijab as a symbol of oppression; state policies are being made to ‘save’ the Muslim women. The French decision to ban the veil is based on this kind of logic. It is a dangerous precedent because it will encourage and inflame both Islamophobia in the West and extremism in the Muslim world. The only reasonable way forward is for people to understand the multiple and positive meanings of hijab; allow people to freely practice their religious convictions; and to work together to eradicate coercion and violence in ways that do not denigrate religious convictions.