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Copious studies on Islamic resurgence throughout the Muslim world deal with new veiling, a socio-religious practice which has been explained as a form of both resistance and submission to patriarchy, an assertion of cultural authenticity, a reaction against Western imperialism and local secular regimes, a genuine desire by women to live more piously, and a practice born out of economic necessity. While there is a degree of plausibility in each of these theories, especially when taken in tandem, another dimension should be added to the debate on new veiling, and that is a subtle and seemingly growing tendency among many urban Egyptian women towards what can be called 'downveiling'.

Middle East

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Downveiling refers to the shift by Muslim women to less concealing and conservative forms of Islamic dress – or to changing embodied religious practices – and is indicative of the complexity and dynamism with which socio-religious change occurs in contemporary societies. It points to a transformation in Egypt's Islamist trend.

A class of first graders at a private Islamic school.



PHOTO: ANONYMOUS, 1992



PHOTO: ANONYMOUS, 1994

The same class in the third grade following the hijab ban by the Ministry of Education.

A fourteen-year resident of Cairo, I first became aware of downveiling in the mid-1990s when a number of acquaintances from diverse social and professional backgrounds began shifting to lesser degrees of veiling, and even sometimes 'unveiled' or eliminated their head covers altogether. My understanding of this practice was anecdotal until I began conducting research in schools on the Islamization of education. While schools are by no means the only – or

even necessarily the most commonplace arenas – of downveiling, they provide a compelling social context in which to trace this practice which is increasingly observable throughout urban Egyptian society.

Schools as contested cultural spaces

The past two decades have witnessed the increased Islamization of public spaces and social institutions, one manifestation of which has been the Islamization of the nation's schools. Numerous government and private schools have institutionalized Islamic practices, such as enforcing an Islamic uniform (*zayy Islammay*). Schools often require female students, staff and sometimes even students' mothers to don a head cover. Veiling has multiple gradations and ranges from a *hijab*, a scarf that covers the hair and is pinned under the chin, to a *khimar*, a substantially longer nylon scarf that drapes over the torso and arms, to a *niqab*, a face veil with ankle-length dress.

The Ministry of Education (MOE), in its attempt to curb the Islamization of schools and as part of a larger state strategy to control and monitor the Islamization of public spaces, politicized the issue of Islamic uniforms. In 1994, the MOE enacted a ministerial order prohibiting girls from wearing the *hijab* to school at the primary stage (grades 1-5), requiring that students at the preparatory level (grades 6-8) provide written permission by their guardian if they wear the *hijab* (thereby giving the parents rather than the school authority over the girl's religious attire), and forbidding teachers and students from wearing the *niqab* on the grounds that it presents a security risk by concealing the wearer's identity and prevents teachers from effectively teaching since it covers the face.

The new uniform regulation was strongly contested in the press and courts, but was ultimately ruled constitutional in a case that reached the Supreme Constitutional Court, and was therefore enforceable. To ensure its compliance, MOE inspectors and state secu-

rity forces were dispatched to schools throughout the country; guards stood outside school gates to inspect students' attire and to prohibit anyone in defiance of the regulation from entering their school. Many school communities reacted to the state's actions with outrage and some unveiled students even took on the veil in protest. However, over the longer term, the new regulation served as a catalyst for many who had been wanting to downveil, as will be illustrated in the case of a private Islamic school in Cairo.

The state as a catalyst for shifting socio-religious practices

Since its establishment in 1981, the school uniform for girls from first grade at a 'private Islamic school' in Cairo, a fee-paying general school that incorporates Islamic rituals and symbols into its daily life, consisted of a long blue-grey smock, pants and a mini-*khimar*. The school's founder and director, Sheikh Mohammed, selected this uniform so that the female child would get used to comporting herself according to the teachings of her religion because, as he proclaims 'in Islam there is no grey, everything is black or white. The *hijab* is a requirement, not a choice.'

In 1994, the sheikh initially resisted implementing the new uniform regulation, convinced that he, not the government, was religiously in the right. However, when faced with the possibility of the MOE taking over his school's administration, he eventually eliminated the headscarf for girls at the primary level. Nevertheless, with the parents' cooperation, the veil remained mandatory for girls at the preparatory stage. Despite a pervasive sense among staff, parents and students, that the government was unjustly interfering in the school's internal policy and in their private lives, an unexpected shift occurred among a number of them: they began modifying their own style of dress by downveiling.

The older students (ages 11-14) were the

first to downveil. Backed by the law, the overwhelming majority of girls immediately substituted their uniform *khimar* for a simple headscarf and, in an act of defiance against school policy, decided among themselves to replace the regulation grey smock uniform, which they described as 'ugly' and 'old-fashioned', for a more 'normal' and attractive uniform of a tailored long grey skirt and white blouse. Thereafter, members of the school staff also began downveiling. Two senior administrators – school disciplinarians and tacit role models – gradually substituted their dark ankle-length skirts for shin-length cotton skirts, and, in gradations, replaced their thick nylon *khimars* that extended down to their thighs, with shoulder-length scarves. They had both begun sporting the *khimar* just prior to being employed at the school in the early 1980s, in part to show their commitment to working in an Islamic environment, but also because they could not justify wearing a lesser degree of clothing than the children under their authority. When the primary school children ceased wearing the *khimar* and the preparatory girls downveiled at their own initiative, the need to dress religiously on par with the students no longer existed. A number of their colleagues, over time, also modified their dress to less concealing and more functional forms of Islamic dress.

The general tendency among the staff towards downveiling has had the effect of hindering others from upveiling or adapting 'higher', more concealing and virtuous forms of Islamic dress. One senior teacher in her mid-40s has been expressing a desire to upveil from her current *khimar* to the *niqab*, a form of dress which she believes to be a religious obligation. However, with her peers substituting their *khimars* for simpler and shorter headscarves, she is not encouraged to upveil and is not only putting it off, but is even practising her own downveiling. She recently began wearing loose-fitting pants instead of a skirt under her *khimar*,

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something she would have considered inconceivable just a year ago.

Many of the women with whom I spoke, both inside and outside the school, cited a number of largely profane reasons for downveiling: some noted that the tight nylon *khimar* caused their hair to thin and in some cases resulted in their getting bald patches; others who routinely walked long distances to and from work complained of excessive sweating under the *khimar*; and still others pointed out that their form of dress was too cumbersome and restricted them from moving about as they required. A number of unmarried *niqab*-wearers (*mu-naqabaat*) felt their prospects of being approached for marriage were diminished when men had no chance of seeing their faces. The decision to downveil, in other words, was never explained in association with a crisis of faith or a retreat from religion, and the women routinely emphasized that they continued to perform their religious rituals as before. Rather, downveiling appears to be more of a relaxing of socio-religious practices spurred largely by practical reasons. While some women have experi-

enced social exclusion from peers following their decision to downveil, in both subtle and dramatic ways, it appears that as more women engage in downveiling, it is becoming an increasingly more socially accepted practice.

The trend of downveiling has caused something of a crisis of moral authority on the school grounds. One seventh grade student remarks, 'Our school has changed. In the beginning it was very strict and all our teachers wore the *khimar* or the *niqab*. Now a lot of our teachers who once wore the *khimar* wear very tight clothes with a little scarf, to which her friend adds, 'a very, very little scarf'. An eighth grade girl complains that the vice-principal scolded her for wearing a uniform skirt that fits too snugly around her hips and for not buttoning her blouse to the neck and asks, 'How can she comment on my appearance when she herself used to wear the *khimar*, took it off, and now only wears a scarf? She tells us not to wear tight clothing, but she sometimes wears very tight skirts with sandals.' These same students do not see any conflict in their own downveiling since, as they point

out, the Islamic uniform was imposed on them; they did not adopt it of their own will as their teachers had.

In more complex ways, however, many women took on higher degrees of veiling not so much because it was imposed on them, but because it had become the normative practice of their professional and community milieus. Women began downveiling due to a complex process involving state intervention, changes in community and public norms, and mundane and sacred considerations. The recent trend of downveiling among Cairene women is suggestive of the ways in which gendered practices respond and contribute to socio-religious change and indicates a relaxation, or changing of form, of the Islamist trend in Egypt. ◀

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