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France's Burkini Debate Reverberates Around the World

By DAN BILEFSKY AUG. 31, 2016



A woman in a burkini this month in Marseille, France.

Credit Dmitry Kostyukov for The New York Times

LONDON — The burkini has become perhaps the most potent symbol in France's long-running battle over its vaunted secular identity. This summer's heated debate over bans on the full-body swimwear by beach towns on the French Riviera has reverberated around the world, with widely different reactions.

In Britain and the United States, the modest outfits are being seen as part of a multicultural model of integrating minorities. In China, where face-covering swimwear has long been popular among wrinkle-fearing beachgoers, many do not understand what the fuss is about.

The swimsuit's Lebanese-Australian inventor, Aheda Zanetti, said in an interview last week that the French and others have "misunderstood the burkini swimsuit," which she said she created after her young niece found it cumbersome to play sports in a regular Islamic head scarf.

"The burkini swimsuit is freedom and happiness and lifestyle changes — you can't take that away from a Muslim, or any other woman, that chooses to wear it," Ms. Zanetti said.

Of course, the burkini debate is not only about feminism. It is foremost a debate about the visibility and presence of Islam in France, and it comes in the context of the most recent act of terror to traumatize the country, this one in Nice, on the Mediterranean coast.

On July 14, a man drove a cargo truck into crowds of people there, killing 86 and wounding

300. The Islamic State later called him one of its "soldiers."

Less than a month later, the first of at least 30 bans on "inappropriate" clothing on beaches

— meant to target Muslim attire — was enacted in Cannes, about 20 miles from Nice.

Although France's highest administrative court, the Council of State, struck down one town's burkini ban on Friday — and clearly would do the same for other towns if lawsuits were brought — the fight is far from over.

The Parliament could enact a ban, and some of France's 2017 presidential candidates on the right and far right have pledged to enact measures that run from banning the Muslim veil in universities and businesses to banning almost all religious attire in public.

As the debate continues, much that is important will be said about France and racism and Islam, but it is worth pondering that it is women's clothes that are at issue.

Throughout history, a combination of legislation, local regulation and social pressure has influenced the way women have dressed — corsets and décolleté, hoop skirts and bustles, the controversial advent of pants. France is now a society demanding that women undress, but in many ways this debate is part of the same narrative.

In the case of both the bikini and the burkini, "people in positions of power say, 'We're putting these rules in place for the woman's good,'" said Deirdre Clemente, a history professor at the University of Nevada who has studied dress codes for women. "The implication is that women are unable to regulate their appearance themselves."

As recently as the 1980s, a number of large American corporations had extensive dress codes for women. “There would be four pages on what a woman could wear to work, and four sentences for men,” Professor Clemente said.

When it came to the bikini, not only was it forbidden in some countries, with women forced to pay fines and leave many beaches if they wore one. It was also seen as subversive and a sign of moral weakness.

“The burkini swimsuit is freedom and happiness and lifestyle changes — you can’t take that away from a Muslim, or any other woman, that chooses to wear it,” Ms. Zanetti said.

“I wanted to introduce a full range of clothing to suit a Muslim woman — or any woman — that wanted a bit of modesty and wanted to participate in any sporting activities,” she added. “It was also my aim for them not to be judged for who they are, or where they’re from, and who people think they’re representing.”

Here is a look at how the battle over the burkini has played out in various places.

Britain



Kausar Sacranie, in front of a display of her burkini designs last week in London.

She and her husband, Ismail, sell the swimwear through their company, Modestly Active.

Credit Leonora Beck/Associated Press

Last week, the populist tabloid The Sun published an article showing Muslim women dressed in body-covering garments playing joyously on the beach in the seaside city of Brighton. “British Muslims enjoy day at the beach in Islamic dress ... while Frenchwomen face arrest for doing the same,” the headline proclaimed.

The swimsuit has become so popular that it recently sold out at the retailer Marks & Spencer. Sales may also have been given a lift thanks to the popular television chef Nigella Lawson, who wore a burkini while on vacation in Australia five years ago. Ismail Sacranie, a founder of Modestly Active, the Islamic sportswear manufacturer that designed Ms. Lawson's burkini, said 35 percent of his clients were non-Muslim. "It is primarily driven by the desire to protect against the sun," he said in a phone interview, "but the other reason is that some women of all sizes just don't want to wear something tiny, and feel more comfortable being covered."

After the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy called the outfit "provocation for the service of a project of radicalized political Islam," the best-selling author J. K. Rowling retorted: "So Sarkozy calls the burkini a 'provocation.' Whether women cover or uncover their bodies, seems we're always, always 'asking for it.'"

Not everyone in Britain is wild about the burkini, of course.

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a Muslim, wrote in The Daily Mail that burkini sellers were "complicit in a version of Islam that believes women must be subjugated in public."

North Africa



Women in burkinis this week in Tunis.

Credit Mohamed Messara/European Pressphoto Agency

This summer a Facebook page was created with the apparent aim of shaming women wearing bikinis on the beaches of Morocco, a majority-Muslim kingdom and former French protectorate. "Our slogan is: No to vice in an Islamic Moroccan nation," the

country's news media quoted the creator of the page, identified as Aicha Amal, as saying. The page has been taken down.

On his own Facebook page, Omar al-Kazabri, the imam of the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, condemned the “obscene nudity” of women on the beaches.

Long before the French ban, many private hotels and pools in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia — all governed by France in the past — had put up signs banning the burkini, or variations of it, some citing hygiene. But the bans did not come from the government.

“Unlike France, the ban on burkini in Morocco comes from a few private institutions,” the Moroccan tourism minister, Lahcen Haddad, recently told the magazine *Jeune Afrique*. “We are in a Muslim country that also respects individual freedoms and private initiative.”

Burkinis caused a stir years ago in Algeria when they started appearing on beaches. “Just walk along the Algerian coast to find that most Algerian women shun the swimsuit,” the website *Algeria Focus* reported in 2014. “The general trend is modesty, so we see more and more women dressed in a burkini.”

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West Africa



Yoff Beach this month in Dakar, Senegal, where no one seems to notice or care what anyone wears in the water. Credit Jane Hahn for The New York Times

On the beaches of Dakar, the mostly Muslim capital of the overwhelmingly Muslim country of Senegal, no one seems to notice or care what anyone wears.

One recent hot afternoon, male bathers wore jeans, white briefs or board shorts into the water. Women were soaking in long dresses, burkinis, bikinis and one-piece swimsuits.

Nordpresse, a Belgian website of political satire, created a stir this week with an article that falsely linked the origin of burkinis to Burkina Faso.

The article claimed that a member of the French Parliament had said that women wearing burkinis “should be sent back to their country, Burkina Faso.”

The story, even though it was satire, prompted outrage. In the region, jokes by Western politicians or news publications are sensitive, especially when the butt of the joke is a former French colony.

Germany



A beach last week in Munich, where the burkini was just another outfit.

Credit Michaela Rehle/Reuters

In anything-goes Berlin, which is as comfortable with intellectuals, nudists and clubbers with body piercings as it is with newly arrived Syrian refugees, the burkini is just another outfit.

There are no national regulations governing religious dress, and the German government has indicated that it will not support bans on burkinis.

In the bustling working-class and multicultural Wedding district of Berlin, Julia Frieese, a journalist, showed up at one pool in a burkini and said she felt “invisible.”

Writing in *Die Welt*, she said that no one looked askance at her, curious children chatted with her respectfully and some men pretended not to see her. She said the pool’s management — told that she was writing a column on the burkini — had encouraged her to inform readers on how to buy one.

As in any country, there are naysayers. In June, the mayor of Neutraubling, a small town in Bavaria, banned the wearing of burkinis in public pools. In the state of Brandenburg, the parliamentary group of Alternative for Germany, the populist nationalist party, has demanded that burkinis be banned.

But such views seem to be in the minority. After the parents of a Muslim girl in Frankfurt asked that she be exempted from swimming classes that included boys, the Federal Administrative Court in September 2013 ruled that she could wear a burkini as a compromise.

Italy



A couple in Monterosso, Italy.
Credit Dave Yoder for The New York Times

In Italy, which has a sizable population of Muslim immigrants, the French burkini bans have elicited strong reactions.

Izzeddin Elzir, the imam of a mosque in Florence and the president of the Union of Islamic Communities in Italy, posted on his Facebook page a photo of nuns frolicking in the waves at a beach.

Some interpreted Mr. Elzir's post as suggesting that nuns should be banned from wearing their habits at the beach. But Mr. Elzir countered that he had merely posted a photograph that spoke for itself.

"I just wanted to get people to stop and think," he said. "That's why I posted the photo alone, without writing a single word. I didn't want to take sides but rather to spur a healthy debate."

Russia



The beach this month in Gelendzhik, a resort town on the Black Sea.

Some Russian resorts have banned the burkini as unhygienic.

Credit Valery Matytsin/TASS, via Getty Images

In Russia, the burkini has been banned or rebuked in some quarters as an affront to hygiene and local culture.

The Rus health resort in Yessentuki, a city at the base of the Caucasus Mountains, banned women this month from wearing full-body swimsuits, saying that guests had complained; the resort's head doctor called the swimsuit unhygienic.

A correspondent for the newspaper Moskovsky Komsomolets showed up on a Moscow beach wearing a burkini to see how locals would react, and found that while most people were not bothered, some objected rudely.

"If you're bundling yourself up in a burkini, it's better to stay home, to sit in warmth, in a comfy chair, to enjoy life," one observer told the interviewer. "Here, you should undress and sunbathe."

Still, others called for a live-and-let-live attitude. “Let her swim,” another Moscovite told the newspaper. “She’s not scaring anyone.”

The prominent opposition figure Aleksei A. Navalny endorsed a column by the editor in chief of Deutsche Welle, the German broadcaster, that framed the decision to ban the burkini as an example of “a liberal constitutional state decisively acting against the enemies of liberalism.”

Muslims have not raced to the swimwear’s defense. Al’bir Rifkatovich Kurganov, a mufti, or Islamic legal scholar, in Moscow, has said that a French-style ban would be irrelevant for Russians, since practicing Muslims would not be visiting secular beaches in the first place.

The United States



A woman in Newport Beach, Calif., in 2007
in swimwear designed for Muslim women.
Credit Chris Carlson/Associated Press

American Muslims have greeted France’s burkini ban with bemusement and dismay. In northern New Jersey, which has a vibrant Muslim population, the newspaper The Record reported that the burkini ban had “mystified” many locals. The newspaper talked to two Muslim sisters, Sara and Sondos Elnakib, who said they wore yoga pants and long-sleeve shirts to show modesty at the beach.

The sisters have sold burkinis at a pop-up store — one is called The Hepburn — to appeal to fashion-conscious women. Women interviewed by the newspaper rejected the notion that burkinis encouraged radicalism, and compared it to the conservative attire of Orthodox Jews or Catholic clergy.

Reporting was contributed by Aida Alami from Marrakesh, Morocco; Jaime Yaya Barry and Dionne Searcey from Dakar, Senegal; Victor Homola from Berlin; Lincoln Pigman from Moscow; and Elisabetta Povoledo from Rome.