

Gatineau Monde lecture series

Monia Mazigh defends the Hijab

Reuel S. Amdur

Monia Mazigh assured the Gatineau Monde audience on February 5 that her hijab (Islamic scarf that leaves the face uncovered) is not a symbol of submission to her husband Maher Arar. Nor does she hide behind it to preach her religion.

Ms Mazigh asserted that debates over the status of Muslim women has been ongoing for over a century. Today, she held, the debate over religious attire has become part of the debates over separation of church and state and of God versus Caesar. It is now a way of mining votes for the next election.

Historically, British and French colonialists in Egypt and Algeria argued that their conquests were liberating Muslim women from oppression. In fact, this was just an excuse for stealing land and furthering economic exploitation. She cited Lord Cramer, the British Consul in Egypt, who justified England's intervention there because Islam maltreated women. Yet, this same man was active in opposing the English suffragettes. Today, she remarked, Americans are urged to support the intervention in Afghanistan "to save Afghan women."

For conservatives, the hijab has been a symbol of religious purity and defense of values. However, it has also represented resistance against the invaders. Thus, while for some it had spiritual significance and represented obedience to men, it also became "a symbol of resistance, a political symbol, a symbol of a new Islamic feminism for some."

Ms Mazigh finds herself struggling against two opposing viewpoints. On the one hand are the liberals who, to save her from oppression, want to dictate what she may wear. On the other, are the conservatives who see the hijab as "a symbol of sublime piety" or of submission to males.

For Ms Mazigh, the hijab blends with her personality. She wears it for many reasons—spiritual, cultural, religious, social, and aesthetic. She comes from Tunisia, where under the Bourguiba government in the 1980s the hijab was banned in educational and public institutions. Under dictator Ben Ali the ban was also extended into the private sphere. Where before in Tunisia the hijab had been only a conservative symbol, when the dictatorship tried to ban it, and in response to the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the symbolism changed radically for many into one of political resistance.

"It has become a symbol of resistance to the American invasion, a means of showing religiosity in a world more and more based on materialism, a way of denouncing the hypersexualization of women and of



Monia Mazigh lectured at Gatineau Monde Feb 5

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consumerism." And it was also a symbol of opposition to dictatorship, male domination, and sexual harassment.

On the other hand, in Saudi Arabia and Iran, women are forced to wear extreme coverings. They must express their rebellion in other ways, such as driving in Saudi Arabia. "It is unfortunate that a woman's body and hair have become an obsession for law-makers and religious extremists." Women, she urged, must be allowed to "find their own way."

When asked about the hijab and Quebec's Charter of Values, she recalled that when she came to Montreal from Tunisia she delighted in the freedom that she had to be herself and dress as she pleased. Her explanation of the opposition to the hijab expressed in the Charter is that it is related to the spirit of the Quiet Revolution. Quebec society has struggled to throw off the dominant role of religion in Quebec life. Now here come all these people arriving who take their religion seriously. Many Quebecers experience that as threatening.