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Region/Country: Kuwait

An article by Shafeeq Ghabra, a professor of political science at Kuwait University, distributed by the Common Ground News Service (CGNews) with permission from the author. The article covers Islam, modernity, feminism and other topics.

Kuwait City - Ramadan, which began on 22 August, offers an opportunity to reflect upon the surge in religious observance and ritual across the Muslim and Arab worlds and what the future might bring. For the last three decades, an Islamic revival has held the Muslim and Arab worlds in its grip. Although religious revival is a worldwide phenomenon, politicised Islam has run deeper than other religions. The secularism and mainstream Islam of the 1970s was replaced, to varying degrees, by a deep commitment to political Islam.

The Arab and Muslim worlds of the 1950s and 1960s had a forward-looking attitude with an eagerness to modernise. Trends in education, art, music, theatre and dress could be characterised as progressive. For example, in Kuwait in the 1950s, a group of young women burned their *abayas*, the cloth (usually black) that covers the entire body. Earlier, in 1923, Huda Sharawwi—a leading Egyptian feminist—publicly removed her veil in front of a crowd. Within a decade, few women in Egypt remained veiled.

Many scholars have hinted or insisted that nowhere in the Qur'an or Islamic texts is the *hijab*, the scarf covering the hair, mandatory. Qasim Ameen, a leading Arab thinker at the turn of the 20th century, wrote books and articles on the liberation of women from tradition and discrimination. His interpretation of Islam found no place for the *hijab* or other covering, or multiple wives.

A quick look at how Arab, Persian and other Muslim women of the 1960s and 1970s dressed in the Middle East reveals that few wore the *hijab* and even fewer donned an *abaya*. In the 1960s

in Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, Kuwait and Tehran, short skirts—even miniskirts—were the fashion of the day. Male and female swimmers occupied some of the same public beaches in Kuwait and other parts of the region.

Only Saudi Arabia, because of historical political factors particular to the Najd, a centre of conservative Islamic thinking, remained untouched by such trends and lifestyles. How then did the Arab and Muslim worlds go from adopting such dress codes to viewing the veil, *abaya*, and *hijab* as part of Islamic tradition?

The June 1967 war delivered a crippling blow to Arab secular nationalists. Individualism, secularism and elements of liberalism had yet to extend roots deep into the region. The Arab defeat by Israel contributed to the rise of the Islamic forces that filled the vacuum left by the secular nationalists led by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. After 1967 many politicians and leaders took refuge in orthodox religion. The Arab-Israeli conflict played a major role in interrupting the political and social evolution of the region along lines similar to those taken by Latin American nations and others.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution without a doubt also factored prominently in the revival of Islamic traditionalism. Its leaders used Islam as an ideology and banner in rejecting the failed policies of the shah and US influence in Iran. The revolution spearheaded the ascendance of an Islamic ideology in which the *hijab* became a symbol. Some 40,000 teachers were dismissed from Iranian schools, which adopted a new, Islamic curriculum that emphasised an isolationist orientation and had an anti-modern tilt.

These developments represent a world closing in on itself, turning away from Europe and the forward-looking attitude of an earlier era. On the other hand, some leaders in the region began to use religion specifically to avoid a revolution like the one in Iran. Several Arab governments formed alliances with rising Islamic trends and moved to implement a legal system based on Islamic principles, which was interpreted as restricting co-education and changing curricula, enforcing or encouraging dress codes for girls and women to include the *hijab*, and increasing public commitment to Islamic rituals.

The Egypt of President Anwar Sadat led the way, and other governments followed. The victory of the Afghan *mujahideen* fighters against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in 1989 provided strength and confidence to the rising Islamic movements. The war also made possible the alliance between Afghan, Arab and other Muslim fighters, including Osama bin Laden, the United States and Arab regimes.

The Muslim world today stands at a crossroads. An orthodox interpretation of Islam continues to prevail with a strong tilt toward political Islam. In addition, an undercurrent of a new movement in the Arab world seeks freedom of choice and a renewal of the aborted liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s.

The reform movement in Iran is symbolic of the climate for change in the region. The world today is witnessing the beginning of the end of the isolationist, political Islamic model in the

Middle East. The way religion and politics have interacted for the last 25 years is on the verge of transformation towards a different model. One of the challenges will be salvaging the humanism and equality of original Islam from the Islam of anti-modernism and fundamentalism that evolved from conflict with the outside world. Discovering Islam within Islam will be a long and turbulent journey.

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