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# **BURQA BANS**

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**JUSTINE BRIAN**



DEBATING MATTERS  
**TOPIC  
GUIDES**

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**MOTION:**

**“EUROPEAN  
COUNTRIES SHOULD  
TAKE A LEAD FROM  
FRANCE AND BAN  
THE BURQA”**

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## KEY TERMS

Ban

Burqa

Freedom

Niqab

# INTRODUCTION

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# NOTES

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On 11 April 2011 France became the first country to pass and enact legislation preventing the wearing of certain types of dress in public. The new law, having been approved almost unanimously by the French Parliament in 2010, forbids people from concealing their faces in public. Although the law does not explicitly mention religious dress, nor the Muslim burqa, niqab or full-face veils [Ref: [BBC News](#)], it is widely recognised that these are the forms of dress the new law was specifically created for after president Nicolas Sarkozy's speech to the French parliament in 2009 [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Women clad in burqas or niqabs covering their faces risk a €150 fine and mandatory lessons on French citizenship. A man found guilty of forcing a woman to wear a veil faces a fine of €30,000 and a jail term. This decision by France, home to Europe's largest Muslim community, has not happened in isolation; it follows other recent bans on face-veils elsewhere and is part of a larger discussion within Europe about cultural values. In 2010 the city of Barcelona banned the wearing of burqas and niqabs in government buildings, citing issues of identification and security [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] and in the same year Belgium passed similar legislation, which came into force in 2011 [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)], and under which two women have already been prosecuted. Italy is currently drafting a new law, and Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland are now also considering bans. But the French ban, more than others to date, has provoked world-wide discussion about contemporary social and political issues such as freedom of choice, religious tolerance, cultural integration and cultural clashes.



### “Cultural apartheid...”?

For some commentators wearing the burqa or any type of full veil is more than just a matter of personal dress and more than a physical expression of religious belief, which many would want to protect and uphold the unhindered right to express. Instead it's seen as an assertion of cultural separation and difference and the wearing of such garments, its critics argue, helps prevent the integration of Muslim communities into European societies and encourages a state of “cultural apartheid”. Supporters of the ban argue that “... these women implicitly...declare every time they walk in our streets: ‘I may be walking among you, but I will never be part of you: I reject your entire culture and everything you stand for’” [Ref: [Catholic Herald](#)]. Supporters of the French and other bans argue that they are neither anti-Muslim nor antithetical to democratic constitutions allowing freedom of expression and religious worship. Such bans should instead be seen as a positive assertion of upholding majority cultural values, such as the equality of men and women, which the acceptance of veils in public challenges [Ref: [Forbes](#)]. The issue of national security is also raised by the wearing of face coverings with supporters arguing that the increasing need to be able to identify people negates the possibility of hiding ones face. One of French President Sarkozy's arguments against full-veils was that they are “a sign of debasement that imprison women” [Ref: [BBC News](#)] and many supporters of the ban both in France and elsewhere argue they seek to support and defend subjugated and alienated Muslim women oppressed by religious or cultural demands that they cover themselves. Even those who are uncomfortable with the notion of enacting bans to secure individual liberties argue that in the context of upholding western cultural norms the ban

sends a strong message to a vocal minority of Islamic extremists within Europe and further afield that their ideas will not take hold in liberal, western democracies [Ref: [Independent](#)].

### A counter-productive policy?

Those critical of the French ban, which has been the most highly debated, argue that banning the veil in public makes a mockery of Western liberal tolerance - the very principal those in support of a ban will claim to be upholding [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. Attacking the free choice of a woman to wear a veil in public also sanctions state interference in private beliefs and thought. Many Muslim women and feminists have highlighted the irony of defending women's rights by dictating what they can and can't wear, in a similar manner to the religious strictures those in support of bans are supposedly arguing against [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Even those supporters of multi-cultural ideas of tolerance and mutual respect, who would ideally prefer not to have to defend a woman's right to ‘oppress herself’ with a veil, argue that the French ban is an irrational over-reaction to something that affects a tiny number of people within Europe, and which must surely be seen as a symbol of women's oppression rather than the cause. Current estimates suggest that in France only a couple of thousand women wear the burqa (and many of those women are French-born citizens). If these estimates are correct, what does that say about the wearing of the burqa today? Some argue that the number of women choosing to wear such clothing has more to do with making a statement about their personal identity (by choosing to visibly separate themselves from the majority) than one of religious faith or extremism [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Ultimately the question of freedom of choice and

## DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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the defence of tolerance is paramount, argue the bans critics, regardless of what that freedom means people might choose to do in the case of personal choices about dress or religious expression [Ref: [spiked](#)].

### What values are being defended?

The assertion of cultural norms and national identities is at the heart of both the recent French ban and the wider global discussion about the veil. Supporters of banning the veil argue that the wearing of it is a hostile act in western society, an assertion of otherness and a rejection of the values of the very society European Muslims are a part of. Opponents of banning the veil argue that the small number of people affected by such a ban make it a political and cultural statement of values rather than a workable and defensible law. As such, the ban isolates and potentially victimises a very small number of Muslim women in Europe without positively asserting what those values are that we might want to uphold and promote. When western cultural values appear to be under attack from an increasingly vocal extremist Islamic tradition isn't it right for European and Western countries to take a stand and defend enlightenment values of individual liberty and tolerance? Or in the very act of asserting those values through restrictions and bans do we fundamentally destroy the very culture we seek to preserve? With both sides in this debate claiming to be defending what the other side is destroying, what does it mean to be liberal and tolerant today and how might we better assert our shared values?



## ESSENTIAL READING

Would the burqa ban stand up at the European Court?

Joshua Rozenberg *Guardian* 13 April 2011

Can Sarkozy Justify Banning the Veil?

Peter Berkowitz *Wall Street Journal* 5 April 2010

### FOR

Wearing the burqa in our streets is a hostile act: the French are right to ban it

William Oddie *Catholic Herald* 20 April 2011

Liberté, Egalité, And France's Courageous Banning Of the Veil

Abigail R. Esman *Forbes* 18 April 2011

A Veiled Threat: Lessons from Paris

Oliver Duggan *Independent* 12 April 2011

France's burka ban is a victory for tolerance

William Langley *Telegraph* 11 April 2011

They are right to ban the burka, even if it is for the wrong reasons

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown *Independent* 8 January 2010

### AGAINST

Banning things and liberal values

David Allen Green *New Statesman* 11 April 2011

Banning the burqa: an assault on freedom

Brendan O'Neill *spiked* 11 April 2011

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Liberté, égalité, fraternité – unless, of course, you would like to wear a burqa

Viv Groskop *Observer* 10 April 2011

Behind France's burka ban: What harm comes to society from women with their faces covered?

Timothy Garton Ash *Los Angeles Times* 7 April 2011

Banning the burka is a lot of hot air

Adrian Hamilton *Independent* 15 July 2010

### IN DEPTH

A melting pot gone cold

Suzanne Fields *Washington Times* 20 April 2011

Why banning the veil would only cover up the real problems for British Muslims

Andrew Gilligan *Telegraph* 16 April 2011

Banning the burqa

Gavin Hewitt *BBC News* 11 April 2011

Burka ban: Why must I cast off the veil?

Nesrine Malik *Telegraph* 17 July 2010

Why France is banning the veil

Ruth Harris *Prospect* 14 July 2010

Behind the burqa

Sandeep Gopalan *New York Times* 27 January 2010



## BACKGROUNDERS

Lifting the Veil: Muslim Women Explain Their Choice

Asma Khalid *NPR* 21 April 2011

We too should ban the burka

Allison Pearson *Telegraph* 13 April 2011

The absence of evidence for banning burqas

Martin Robbins *Guardian* 12 April 2011

Veiled Threats?

Martha Nussbaum *New York Times* 11 July 2010

Banning the burqa compromises the very principles that we value

Thorbjørn Jagland *Independent* 7 July 2010

Are Women's Rights Really the Issue?

*Spiegel* 24 June 2010

Thinly veiled threat

Mehdi Hasan *New Statesman* 28 May 2010

Is France right to ban wearing the burka in public?

*Observer* 21 March 2010

For and against the face-veil

*Aljazeera* 28 January 2010

Why the burka is part of Britain

Cassandra Jardine *Telegraph* 24 June 2009

In Graphics: Muslim Veils

*BBC News*

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**FILMCLUB**

### RECOMMENDS:

• 'La Haine' (15), 1995

• 'Persepolis' (12), 2007

• Find out more about our partnership with the education charity FILMCLUB, how you can bring the power of films into your school debates, and this autumn's recommendations from the FILMCLUB team for Debating Matters!



## IN THE NEWS

Challenge to burqa ban as first women prosecuted in Belgium  
*Guardian* 17 August 2011

Italy drafts law to ban burka  
*Telegraph* 3 August 2011

Belgium's Burqa Ban Divides Christians  
*Huffington Post* 27th July 2011

France's Islamic veil ban spurs passionate reaction worldwide  
*CNN* 27 April 2011

Calls grow for burka ban in Britain as French outlaw Islamic 'walking coffins'  
*Daily Mail* 14 April 2011

Muslim leaders condemn burqa bans in France  
*Hindu* 14 April 2011

Angry protests mark the first day of France's controversial veil ban  
*Daily Mirror* 12 April 2011

France begins ban on niqab and burqa  
*Guardian* 11 April 2011

French burka ban: police arrest two veiled women  
*Telegraph* 11 April 2011

Arrests As France Enforces Veil Ban  
*Sky News* 11 April 2011

'Burqa ban' in France: housewife vows to face jail rather than submit  
*Observer* 10 April 2011

French Parliament Passes Law Banning Burqas  
*Wall Street Journal* 15 September 2010

Now Syria bans the burka and niqab in universities as backlash against Muslim veil grows  
*Daily Mail* 20 July 2010

French MPs vote to ban Islamic full veil in public  
*BBC News* 13 July 2010

Barcelona bans burkas in public buildings  
*Telegraph* 14 June 2010

Belgian lawmakers pass burka ban  
*BBC News* 30 April 2010

Sarkozy launches new law to ban the burka  
*Independent* 22 April 2010

Sarkozy stirs French burka debate  
*BBC News* 22 June 2009

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## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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**“TEENAGE CITIZENS  
THINKING DEEPLY  
ABOUT...SOCIAL  
ISSUES”**

**IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA**

