

THE JEWISH-MUSLIM SISTERHOOD OF THE VEIL

By [Avirama Golan](#) Haaretz 20 07 2011

Muslim and Jewish women who embrace orthodoxy have a sense of ethnic-moral supremacy, and feel that they are leading a revolution that will change society.

A few weeks ago a rather slim book was published in French that is already causing a firestorm, as would be expected considering its title, which translates as "Islam Pride: Behind the Veil."

The volume's author, Hele Beji, is a Tunisian intellectual and writer and the founder of the International College of Tunis. Her tract is another in a long line of similar books by Muslim women from North Africa and France, but it presents an innovative stance of importance beyond its geographic location.

Beji's book opens with a confession. As a committed secularist, she cannot stand veils, burkas or any of the other head coverings that have been spreading like wildfire in recent years.

Beji's style is sharp and beautiful, the revulsion she expresses at the beginning of the book so deep and her cultural reasoning so daring that it arouses suspicion that this is a little book that yet again presents the enlightened West versus a purportedly backward Islam.

But in the second chapter, Beji goes on to deconstruct her feelings and analyze the complexity of the background behind the dizzying triumph of the veil.

The phenomenon does not constitute a retreat of hundreds of years, Beji says in taking issue with French feminism. It is not (only) male oppression or false consciousness on the part of women, misled by a world of chauvinistic-religious values, returning them to submissive status and relegating them to dealing with the kitchen and the children.

Instead it is an up-to-date expression of contemporary culture and its consequences, and involves stretching the feminist-liberal interpretation to its limits.

Young Tunisian women, like their counterparts in France and elsewhere, oppose secularism because the decision to cover oneself up to the eyes and strictly conform to the commandments of the Koran embodies a choice made freely. You women are such liberals, mocks her female relative, who received the same broad Western education she did, if you don't understand that the decision to oppose liberalism is actually the height of liberalism!

Beji's text faithfully represents the cultural conflict to which the secular West turns its back and of which it is so horrified. The author fondly recalls that mythological moment in which her uncle, former Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba, lifted an amazed young woman's veil and told her: Look squarely at the world and it will look squarely at you.

But Beji thereby recognizes that the eradication of religiosity in her country was also violent, and that Bourguiba, like Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, who influenced the Tunisian leader, was an autocrat.

Bourguiba imposed a process that another one of Ataturk's admirers, David Ben-Gurion, didn't dare or didn't want to carry out, even though his administration was the closest to an autocracy. The result in both cultures was similar, however.

The religious element that was suppressed, or gave in, is bursting forth with renewed vigor. Beji makes clear it is a mistake to view this as a return to the past. The veil is an external characteristic, a trademark, shaping identity in the spirit of the times. It is Islam pride.

Secular Israelis have a hard time deciphering the religious revolution taking place before their eyes because they are used to quarreling with ultra-Orthodox Jews who represent a stable and conservative form of religiosity.

They are confused by nationalist ultra-Orthodox Jews, also known by their Hebrew acronym Hardal. In many respects, the new national ultra-Orthodox Jewish woman, educated career women who grew up with a moderate religious education and chose to be more extreme in the hallmarks of their religiosity, are amazingly similar to the new Muslim women. This includes the Jewish women's comprehensive acceptance of rabbinical authority, an increased birthrate and stricter modesty.

Both groups of women, Muslim and Jewish, have a sense of ethnic-moral supremacy. Both feel that they are leading a revolution that will change society as a whole, including the government.

Beji, who does a good job analyzing the fundamental weakness of the secular liberal and consumerist-globalized West in the face of religious influence, proposes a gentle form of a culture war. Showing understanding for extremist motives, she seeks to open religiosity to renewed discussion that will render insularity unnecessary.

Such a brave step, however, will require that society deal with all of its demons and repressed issues and here secular people will be asked to resolutely define their identities, and not as a frightened counter-reaction, in the face of the hazy concept of the "Jewish State."

It is doubtful if Israelis will demonstrate the power to do that. In the interim, it appears, they would be inclined to give in entirely to the national ultra-Orthodox.