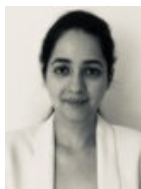


# Why veil restrictions increase the risk of terrorism in Europe



*Several countries across Europe have put restrictions on wearing veils in public spaces. Drawing on a new study, [Stuti Manchanda](#) and [Nilay Saiya](#) write that far from helping to combat extremism, these restrictions are strongly and positively correlated with an increase in terrorist activity. They suggest this may be due to veil restrictions generating resentment among Muslim communities and causing Muslim women to become more isolated from the rest of society.*

In 2011, France became the first European country to pass a nation-wide ban on the wearing of the full-face Islamic veil in public spaces – a law that was passed nearly unanimously by the French parliament and upheld by the European Court of Human Rights in 2014. Since then, several other European states – Belgium, Bulgaria, Austria, the Netherlands and Denmark – have followed suit in banning or restricting the wearing of Islamic face veils. Other countries like Italy, Spain and Switzerland enforce partial veil prohibitions in certain cities or regions. While these laws do not mention Islam or Islamic headgear by name, instead referring generally to any garments covering the face in order to avoid violating anti-discrimination provisions, they are widely believed to be targeted at Muslims and, for this reason, are often referred to as “burqa bans.”

Proponents of restrictions on Muslim veils make three main arguments. First, they claim that enveloping Islamic veils present a physical security threat, insofar as Muslim women might use these traditional Islamic garments to conceal weapons or explosives. “You could carry a rocket launcher under your veil”, as the former President of Latvia, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, put it. Similarly, Paul Nuttall, former leader of the UK Independence Party, justified banning the burqa on similar physical security grounds: “Obviously we have a heightened security risk at the moment and for CCTV to be effective, in an age of heightened terror, you need to be able to see people’s faces.” Finally, British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, [compared](#) Muslim women in veils to letter boxes and bank robbers.

A second claim made by proponents of veil restrictions is that the veil represents a lack of proper Muslim integration into mainstream European society, which, in turn, creates populations vulnerable to radicalisation. In this view, the different Islamic headgears cover the face and prevent the participation of Muslim women in society. By banning outward symbols of Islam, so the argument goes, European Muslims will be better able to integrate into mainstream culture. As explained by Belgian politician Bart Somers, “All clothing which covers nearly the entire face dehumanises the individual who wears it. It alters the capacities of the human being as a social, communicative, and participatory individual, as a human being capable of recognising others and able to be recognised in society.”

Finally, some see the veil as a powerful symbolic threat associated with terrorism. In this view, the veil and other traditional Muslim garb represents a symbol of Islamic extremism. Those who don it side with extremist Islam instead of the secular West and seek to promote a radical political ideology of Islamism throughout the continent.



Protest in Copenhagen against restrictions on the wearing of veils in public, Credit: [Klaus Berdiin Jensen](#) (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

All three of these arguments are grounded in what political scientist Jocelyn Cesari terms the “securitisation of Islam.” The securitisation of Islam constructs Islam as a direct security threat that needs to be addressed separately from normal legal and political processes, including restrictions on the dress of Muslim women. Some empirical studies have corroborated the securitisation thesis by revealing the considerable rise of governmental and societal discrimination against Muslims in western democracies in the name of national security.

In a [new study](#), we sought to test these claims about the veil against the empirical record. Using a unique dataset of Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe from 2003-17, we examined whether restrictions on the veil corresponded to an increase or decrease in Islamist terrorism. Specifically, we examined four different constructs of terrorism—terrorist attacks, fatalities from terrorist attacks, injuries from terrorist attacks, and both fatalities and injuries from terrorist attacks. We examined the predictive power of veil restrictions on terrorist attacks and casualties compared to a number of political, economic and demographic correlates of terrorism as established in previous studies.

Our analysis revealed that the presence of veil restrictions as a result of laws or policies prohibiting face coverings is strongly and positively correlated with terrorist activities, irrespective of the measure of terrorism we use and the inclusion of alternative explanations for terrorism. For example, we found that countries with veil restrictions experienced almost 15 times more cases of Islamist terrorist attacks than countries without such bans and 17 times more fatalities from these attacks.

Might it be that the positive relationship we find exists because terrorist attacks prompt countries to enforce veil restrictions? Our numerous statistical tests for this possibility revealed that terrorist strikes do not precede but rather follow veil restrictions. Moreover, we found that in countries that have enforced restrictions on the veil, only 8 terrorist attacks occurred before the restriction was put in place and 54 after.

What accounts for this relationship between the restriction on the veil and increased terrorism? We posit two explanations. First, instead of encouraging integration, veil restrictions result in greater isolation of Muslim women who feel as if they are not free to be themselves in public, owing to social stigmatisation, scapegoating and even physical attacks. This reality may lead women to becoming more accepting of the idea that violence is an appropriate way to change the status quo and make them less likely to impede the process of radicalisation. Sometimes, women themselves might even become involved in terrorism.

A second possibility is that veil restrictions, as a form of religious repression, lead to the generation of resentment among Muslim communities and heighten the likelihood that some within those communities will engage in violence against governments deemed to be acting unfairly towards them. Indeed, restrictions on veils have been used as a powerful recruitment tool by Islamist extremist groups who claim that such restrictions amount to an attack on Islam. Terrorists have cited limits on veiling as a key consideration in their decision to join militant organisations. In short, veil restrictions are dangerous because they engender grievances, facilitate collective action and, sometimes, provoke violent backlash.

Our analysis carries important policy ramifications as bans on Islamic headgear are currently being debated globally. Bans on Islamic face coverings can be critiqued from a human rights perspective, insofar as they violate rights to free religious expression and non-discrimination for Muslim women. But as our analysis shows, such bans also have dramatic security implications; countries imposing veil restrictions experience more terrorism events and casualties from those attacks. Our findings underscore the need for cultural and religious sensitivity towards immigrant groups as the foundation for effective national security policies.

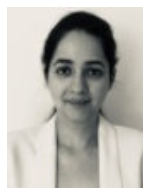
**For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in the [Journal of European Public Policy](#)**

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

---

## About the authors



**Stuti Manchanda** – *Nanyang Technological University*

Stuti Manchanda is a PhD Candidate in Public Policy and Global Affairs at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.



**Nilay Saiya** – *Nanyang Technological University*

Nilay Saiya is Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Global Affairs at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is author of the book *Weapon of Peace: How Religious Liberty Combats Terrorism* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).