

I wasn't new in Cairo and I thought I knew all about fundamentalists. They were sober and righteous and frighteningly conservative, and the women wore polyester chadors that fit like bin-liners and came in a wide range of colors all known as black.

Yet among themselves I saw even the most conservative women lift off their solemn chadors to reveal sassy European designs, some by Chanel and Dior. This was not a refutation of the West, but an adaptation of it. Throughout the Muslim world, Islamic style is being revamped and revived along with its accompanying political ideals.

"There's absolutely no contradiction between stylish and Islamic," a young Egyptian woman told me as she eased into a long gold and black sequined evening gown at Cairo's largest Islamic department store. "Do you think the gold veil is better or the sheer one in black?"

The English lessons didn't get far with Mohamed, who dumped them and me after I turned down his offer to be wife number two. He had also discovered the difficulty of enticing Western women into his shop, which sold no outer clothing because he believed women should not go out on the town but mostly stay home hanging out in racy negligees.

But from Soraya and her conservative Muslim sisters elsewhere in the Arab world, I learned a lot about what I have come to think of as Fundy Chic. The prospects are not nearly as black as painted.

My visit to Soraya's home in the gritty Bab Al-Luq district that early autumn morning was my first to an Islamic fundamentalist household. The walls of their tiny apartment were bare except for several framed Qor'anic verses. There was no stereo or television set, since these were considered blasphemous. Instead, the family had invested in a computer, to better manage the family clothing store and help Mohamed in his latest venture. He was preparing to move to Italy to study women's shoe design in hope of producing more tantalizing models for the Egyptian market.

"Islam is a very sexy religion. It is all about seduction. Hinting at the shape of the body is a lot more attractive than simply revealing it," a Muslim Egyptian friend once commented as we watched Kuwaiti women parade through the Cairo Intercontinental lobby during the Gulf War. Islamic chic is all about a rustle of black silk in the wind, the click of high heeled shoes, a

glimmer of red sleeve beneath the black, the wink of a darkly lined eye. It is all about enticing chadors, dusty raspberry veils, red negligees at breakfast.

My brief Cairo introduction to the urban and urbane Islamic world of the 1990s piqued my interest. That spring I moved to Algeria, a country observers say may still become the first Islamic state on the Mediterranean.

"Veils are meant to discourage sin, but that's not to say they always work. Sometimes they have the opposite effect," a founding member of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front told me recently as he stared at the ankle showing beneath my skirt.

Style in this former French colony has gone through dramatic upheavals in recent years as have the social and political scenery. Fashion and political statements have merged as young Algerians [chadors are never worn by women much over thirty, because they were raised before the country's "Arabization" policy began in the mid-1960s] search for authentic Islamic garb to suit their picky French-influenced taste. One of the first steps the Algerian government took to curb the Islamic trend was issue an ordinance discouraging citizens from wearing Islamic dress to the office. Tunisia took this one step further by banning certain types of veils altogether.

"Islam is the solution T-shirts," put out at different times by North African Islamic groups, continue to be harshly discouraged by Arab governments.

Fashion statements by Algerian Islamists, both male and female, have little to do with traditional Algerian dress. But the look entails a lot more than throwing a black sheet over the body or sprouting a beard. The weight and quality of fabric used is a decisive element in deciding what kind of statement your outfit will make, just as the wrong type of beard will label you as a communist. A possibly fatal style error.

There are numerous variations of the Islamist look, depending on the specific statement sought. Afghan hats and Palestinian checkered scarves mark the more militant; white creased robes offer a quieter Saudi approach. Hemline and color are also negotiable, depending on how you and your tailor interpret the guidelines set out in the *Qor'an* and its accompanying text, the *Hadith*, or traditions of the Prophet.

"There's a lot of room for maneuvering within the limitations set out by God," said Ibrahim El-Bahtohy, the owner of Cairo's Salam Islamic shopping center. "The main principles of Islamic style are quite simple. Only a woman's

hands and face should be visible (unless she is particularly beautiful or modest), and clothes should not be transparent or tight."

He refuted any holy ordinances against color or bold prints, and pointed out that metallic gold veils were selling very well at the moment.

"Inside the home or among those of the same sex, of course, anything goes," he added. "Arabs love lingerie and that's completely *halal* [morally acceptable]."

The *Qor'an*, which Muslims take as the word of God, says only that believing men should "lower their gaze and guard their modesty."

Women, in addition to lowering their gaze and guarding their modesty, are admonished not to "display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof." They must "draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children." They should also not "strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments [e.g. jingling ankle bracelets]."<sup>1</sup>

The *Hadith*, or traditions of the prophet, are more specific, forbidding cross-dressing<sup>2</sup>, dyeing the hair black<sup>3</sup> and refusing gifts of perfume<sup>4</sup>.

Men are specifically forbidden from shaving the beard<sup>5</sup> and wearing silk<sup>6</sup> or saffron-colored clothing<sup>7</sup> and are encouraged to wear white<sup>8</sup>. Gold jewelry

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<sup>1</sup>The Holy Qor'an translated into English by A. Yusuf Ali, Amanat Corporation Publishing, Maryland, 1983.

<sup>2</sup>Riyadh-Us-Saleheen, Arabic-English edition, compiled by Imam Abu Zakaria Yahya bin Sharaf An-Nawawi and translated by S.M. Madni Abbasi, International Islamic Publishing House, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. p.795-796.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p. 797

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p. 856

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p. 797-798

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p.433

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 864-865

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p. 422-424

is also outlawed for men and pajamas should hang half way up to the knee since "the part of the pajama below the ankles is destined for the fires of hell."<sup>9</sup>

Silk and gold are encouraged for women, and apart from a verse against wearing animal images, I could find no ground rules concerning colors, prints and types of fabric. Outerwear should be flowing, but not more than an arm's length of fabric should trail behind.<sup>10</sup>

On the streets of Algiers, women Islamists generally opt for a sheer veil covering the hair and fastened under the chin and at the top of the head, topped by one of three basic styles of Iranian chador, known locally as a *jilbab*. The look is completed by the optional *niqab*, or face covering, and gloves in a complementary tone. More fashion-conscious women I spoke to said metallic pumps were the best bet for accompanying footwear, since they permitted a longer silhouette and glimmered seductively when the wind caught fabric properly.

Rayon is the fabric of choice for many Islamic fashions, since it flows impressively and breathes, an essential quality given hotter climates and the four some meters of fabric needed for constructing the *Salafi*, or authentic, look. While heavier fabrics admittedly do little to conjure the imagination, light fabrics float seductively as one walks the breezy shopping streets of Algiers. The style shows increasing resemblance to the deconstructed Armani look (or vice versa), and favors the same range of neutral shades, especially for spring.

While the more conservative opt for heavy sleeves gathered in at the wrists, I was advised by one young woman that a long bit of fabric draped over the arms and chest instead of more standard sleeves was infinitely more "sexy", since it allowed for a glimpse of the dress (preferably Chanel) underneath, and was also more practical, since one could carry a handbag half-concealed.

Color is one of the most hotly disputed issues in the Algerian world of Islamic fashion. The Prophet Mohamed said only that the color "should not attract the eye." While all agree that red and pink are unacceptable colors for chadors, they are used for veils in Algeria, and chadors come as close as salmon and dusty raspberry. Algerian chadors also come in forest green, royal blue, deep purple and numerous shades of khaki, (in addition to the more traditional

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p. 427-429

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. 432

black and navy) and can be accented by wearing a veil, *niqab* and gloves of a complementary shade. One might don a pea green veil and gloves under a forest green chador or a deep purple chador accented by a lavender veil.

This spring, with chadors all the rage in Algiers, a white veil under grey or earth-tone chadors are the most popular alternative to basic black.

Although French designer names are preferential indoors, those with smaller shopping budgets make do with glitzy Egyptian or Syrian robes.

Men are just as style-conscious as their female counterparts. Some beards and robes are considered more authentically Islamic than others, and there are a wide range of accessories available to compete the look. The Islamist look for Algerian men distinguishes itself mainly by its hemline, which, unless one is opting for the full-length Saudi style, is generally mid-calf, so that the baggy trousers worn under the *kamis* are just visible. Cotton and poly-cotton blends which allow for slightly shinier whites are preferred, although more effeminate blacks and deep purples are seen on occasion. Although not in keeping with the goal of shunning the European clothes symbolic of the cultural domination of the West, this *salafi* look is generally completed by striped sport socks, ray bans and, for the exceptionally cool, a sprig of mint behind the ear. Although the origin of the "mint look" is unknown, some men in North Yemen and Southern Saudi Arabia are said to tuck sprigs of basil behind their ears, so this may be an Algerian revival of an Arabian tradition which has bypassed Egypt and the rest of the Middle East.

Another popular accessory is the *miswak*, a stick which is chewed and rubbed across the teeth and which was used in the age of Mohamed as a predecessor to the modern toothbrush. The afghan cap, although harder to come by now than several years ago, is always a welcome addition, although the political statement it makes is too hard-edged for those with softer sensibilities.

Beards are left studiously unkempt. The carefully trimmed goatee is too reminiscent of Lenin to be acceptable in the eyes of God. The problem here is that because beards have become the trademark of those who desire for an Islamic state, they have gotten many an innocent citizen tossed in the slammer. As politics heat up in Algeria, stubble becomes the intelligent answer to the long beard. It is respectable enough to see one through military roadblocks but sufficiently unkempt to smooth relations at the *souq*.

Egypt has long been one of the main sources of inspiration and influence for Islamists throughout the Arab world. While the Egyptian economy plummets and shops all over Cairo struggle to survive, two major clothing stores in town are doing a brisker business than ever before. Both are Islamic department stores, selling everything from long skirts to chador, glove and *niqab* ensembles.

"Brioni City", one of the two shops, ran a TV advertisement thanking Egyptian traffic police for controlling the mobs at its recent sale. The film showed thousands of veiled women pushing each other to get through the doors of the department store, blocking traffic on Cairo's Faisal Street.

The Sheikh of El-Azhar, one of the most influential Muslim authorities in the world, attended the opening of the Brioni City in Alexandria. The mobs of customers present jostled him so much that his cap, a sign of his religious piety, spun to the ground. This scandalized many Egyptians.

Cairo's Salam shopping center is also mobbed these days and an enthusiastic salesclerk in a shiny green pantsuit and blinding yellow veil said it was tough keeping chadors (*Izdal* in Egyptian Arabic) in stock. She said faintly military cumin green was the hottest color this year for chadors and *niqabs*, although the gloves were only available in white, grey, brown, and the always-chic standby: black.

Egypt has become the mixmaster of Islamic fashion, adopting the more severe black and white looks from the Muslim Holy Land, spicing them up with gold embroidery and color, and inspiring Islamic fashion in North Africa and the Middle East.

Islamic style has become an indicator of the Arab search for an authentically Muslim answer to corrupt Western-style regimes. All over the Arab world, men and women are revamping the "Days of Mohamed" look for modern needs. Nothing in the Holy Qor'an forbids red negligees and sultry make-up when breakfasting with the husband, or dusty raspberry chadors for shopping at the *souq*.

Women in chadors are no more religious than those who opt for Western-style clothing, and are just as likely to drink alcohol or have sex before marriage. Algerian and Egyptian gynecologists say the Islamic chic have the same incidence of pre-marital pregnancy as their bare-headed counterparts and contract the same venereal diseases.

Many Muslim women told me opting for the chador made it easier to attend universities and keep jobs outside the home and still be respected by their conservative families. Still others said veiling was an alternative form of social and political militancy and empowered them in ways that Western-style feminism did not. Veiling improves ones status and means greater respect in a society where respect is everything, I was told. Politically, it demonstrates courage and character and is a non-violent way of resisting Western-style regimes largely perceived as corrupt.

For still others, it's strictly a matter of style.

"I'm just too beautiful to go out bare," Soraya said earnestly, adjusting a red spaghetti strap as she explained how to step into a chador and what shoes to wear with it.

- K. R. H. \_\_\_\_\_

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