

# Culture in a Murky World: Hijab Trends in Jihadi Popular Culture

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**A**lthough at times subtle, the female Muslim community influences and shapes the international security environment and constitutes a rough median of 49 percent over the estimated 1.6 billion global Muslim population. <sup>[1], [2]</sup> At the nexus of security and culture, themes like *hijab* trends highlight cultural shifts and social undercurrents impacting women that have powerful effects on the International Community. Across Eurasia, state-actors ban hijab-styles domestically to counter radicalization, while jihadi-extremists target women with hijab-themed content to bolster recruitment. Considering that women are susceptible to extremist recruitment, how can we expand the perspective on issues affecting Eurasian Muslim women by understanding the jihadi popular culture?

## *Hijab memes in Jihadi popular culture*

Currently, hundreds of Russian and Turkish-speaking women have found themselves awaiting trial in Iraqi detainee camps due to their associations with designated terrorist groups, primarily Islamic State (IS) fighting in the Levant Region. <sup>[3], [4]</sup> Although the women awaiting trial number only around 1500, the sub-culture they cultivate has had an enormous impact on our world. While it may be tempting to label this a regional issue, the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of those detained in Iraq are quite diverse as evidenced by the French national who received a life sentence. <sup>[5]</sup> Despite the nationality marked on passports or government identification, many of the women define their identity based on ethnicity and ancestral culture. In this group, most of the detainees share the common languages of Russian and Turkish because they originate from the North Caucasus region, Central Asia, and Turkey.



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Although some women have joined groups like IS because they were following husbands, boyfriends or other family members, some pledged loyalty solely based on ideology. Many people join jihadi aligned groups with the hope of a new beginning and a saved afterlife. Inherently, the community of jihadi-supporters forms a unique popular culture or pop-culture. Jihadi pop-culture has its own rules which change depending on the group and the cultures surrounding it.

For IS and some AQ-aligned groups, public gender mixing is taboo without a familial connection. Since communication is segregated, contact between women and men occurs indirectly. Just like mainstream social media, the meme is popular among extremist supporters. The power of the meme lies in the combination of emotive images and sharp phrases making it simple yet effective. As such, the meme is one of the more prevalent content forms in extremist forums that target Muslim women.

In the mainstream Muslim world, hijab is considered an Islamic duty and is not an extremist symbol in and of itself. Hijab manifests in many forms like the Chador, Khimar, Niqab, Burka or Al-Amira,<sup>[6]</sup> and contemporary hijab fashion integrates styles from European haute-couture to Urban streetwear.<sup>[7]</sup> There is a belief held by some Muslims that hijab can determine a woman's place in the afterlife because it protects her honor, family, and marriage. Since hijab is a valued standard and normal aspect of daily life in many Muslim societies, jihadi groups create content using hijab themes to attract women. The associated captions on memes are similar to *Meme 1* translating from Turkish to English as: "I am not



Meme 1. Turkish Language, 2018.

searching the good life; I am searching the good afterlife”.

Extremist content urges Muslim women to cover themselves, and the Qur’an and the Hadith are used as the justification. Hijab memes created by IS supporters depict women in black Niqab with the eyes veiled or in Burqa which completely covers the face. Since the eyes are considered the windows to the soul, which can flirt and entice, guidance follows that either the eyes should be veiled or mostly covered. Exceptions may be made in combat situations. One of the more controversial aspects of hijab in jihadi circles is whether the face, including the eyes, should be covered. While most agree to cover the face, AQ-aligned groups hold a less strict rule on covering the eyes, as the crowned female Muslim cartoon in Niqab in *Meme 2*, shows verse one and two from Al-Muddaththir, Surah 74, “O you who are cloaked!! Arise and warn!” [8], [9]



Meme 2. Turkish Language, 2018.



Meme 3. Russian Language, 2015.

In jihadi content, hijab should not reveal the shape of the body, and must be in the tradition of black to prevent jealousy from female and male onlookers. Hijab obliges women to seek approval from God, not man, and discourages false worshiping of material goods like make-up and unnatural beauty. *Meme 3* translates from Russian as, “We don’t need compliments from boyfriends or recommendations from magazines to know we are pretty. We know that we are beautiful, we know that we are queens...”

There are several details involved in wearing hijab in accordance with jihadi codes, and women seek compliance according to the extremist groups’ recognized imams. Thick fabric for hijab is imperative because transparent cloth reveals the body. The hands

should be covered by gloves as should the feet by closed-toe shoes and socks. Eye make-up is permitted, however, limited to black eyeliner in the tradition of the Sunnah. Although not encouraged, hair coloring is permitted if it resembles one’s original hue except black hair dye shouldn’t be too dark. A woman’s hair should be long without resembling a man’s cut. There are constraints on waxing facial hair and nail polish. Notably, plucking eyebrows and applying lipstick is taboo as *Meme 4* streaks through penciled eyebrows and pink tinted lips, noting “this kind of thing does not exist in Islam.”



Meme 4. Russian Language, 2015.

In the jihadist view, women who choose not to wear hijab as prescribed go against God’s Law, and the content attempts to scare and shame women as illustrated in *Meme 5*. A modernly clad woman with uncovered hair wearing a daisy-duke jean skirt and pink tank top descends via escalator to the fires of Hell. Meanwhile, the woman in a loose-fitting black hijab ascends to the bright light of Heaven. The Russian Cyrillic warns, “Dressed and at the same time naked, swaying while walking, and these tempting [actions] men and women will not go to Heaven and will not even breathe Heaven’s fragrance.” This references Hadith 1633 from the Book of the Prohibited Actions, but it has been abbreviated heavily. <sup>[10]</sup>, <sup>[11]</sup> The paraphrasing of the Qur’an and Hadith is common with extremist propaganda, <sup>[12]</sup> and the consequence is reshaping ideology by novice followers on social media. When quotes from religious texts are without context or translated liberally, it contributes to misinterpretations that are splintering mainstream Muslim society. <sup>[13]</sup>



Meme 5. Russian Language, 2014.

Some Muslim women believe that one cannot truly abide by Islam while living in a country that does not enforce standards set by the Qu’ran and Sunnah. Also, appropriate clothing can be particularly challenging for Muslim women living in secular countries, and the mixed-gender social structures can cause stress. Groups like IS promote that women have the freedom to be proper Muslims within their community because ‘true’ hijab is mandatory and enforced. More so than other extremist groups, IS advertises a relaxed environment for women by establishing all-female shopping centers, city buses, and universities. By making an environment that appears conducive to these beliefs, extremist groups present women the opportunity to follow Islam easily.

Many hijab-inspired memes circulated on Russian and Turkish social media are not stamped with the moniker of an extremist organization. The content appears user-generated, which most of it likely is, and the popularity of the content is innately linked to this organic style of messaging. Since the content seems purely religious, the memes are shared pervasively across social media. The cultural themes in the content speak to truths about hijab, modest appearance, and women in society that resonate with social undercurrents impacting many Muslim communities.

### *Hijab memes in Muslim popular culture*

For many Muslim women, hijab is a personal subject influenced by family tradition. As such, hijab styles and norms in one country may be completely different than in another, and the same goes for families in the same country. For example, Niqab is the norm in Saudi Ara-

bia, but a headscarf and loose-fitting clothing are norms in Chechnya. In Turkey, hijab may be the norm for one family while the neighbor across the street does not conform to any style of hijab. Since neither Niqab nor Burqa are recent norms in Russian and Turkish-speaking communities, the social push online for this change indicates a cultural shift in these societies.

The principal argument against modern hijab styles in Russian and Turkish language content is the perceived negative influence of Western modernity on Muslim women. In Russian-speaking Muslim societies, many women wear headscarves and a combination of long or knee-length skirts, and full or three-quarter length tops. Generally, the style is fitted and colorful, and the headscarf does not always cover all the hair or the face. Women also wear makeup, color their hair, and wear high-heels.

In a rebuke against this trend, some users try to shame Muslim women through content like *Meme 6*, “Recognize! You are a modest Muslim woman, in agreement for the sake and satisfaction of Allah / or a show-off, pleasing Satan, and who doesn’t know the point of the veil.” In *Meme 7*, we see a woman wearing a fitted, full-length blue dress, ornate necklace, and a fitted headscarf. This is an example of current hijab fashion popular in Russia, in which the body and hair are covered, and the clothing is fitted and colorful. The creator of *Meme 7* contrasts an image of a woman dressed in Niqab; the quote reads, “Women who say, ‘tons of men chase after me’, Remember—the lowest price always attracts the most buyers.”



Meme 7. Russian Language, 2015.

defined by full length or three-quarter length overcoats, long skirts, loose-fitting tops, and a wrapped yet loose decorative headscarf. In *Meme 8*, we see two women modeling Turkish hijab fashion contrasted with a woman in black Burqa. The quote reads, “In your opinion, who is wearing hijab???” The point here is that Turkish hijab fashion does not represent ‘true’ hijab.

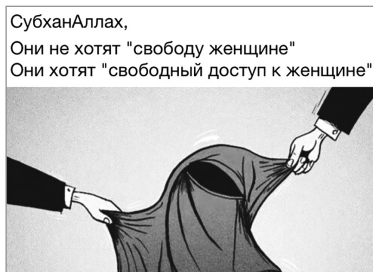


Meme 6. Russian Language, 2014.

Turkish fashion is popular among Muslim women throughout Eurasia, and there are many Russian-speaking Muslims in Turkey. Turkish hijab fashion can be very colorful and



Meme 8. Russian Language, 2014.



Meme 9. Russian Language, 2015.

never take it off. Remember that the undressed woman will fight off men like flies.”

Many Muslims believe hijab is an obligation to God, liberation from unattainable ideals of beauty, and protection from men and consumerism. Accepted truths about hijab and women in modern society appear in extremist content, and it makes the message reach a broader audience. To a lesser yet important extent, this recruitment dynamic reaches women from non-Muslim and un-religious backgrounds, [14]

because they are affected by the real issues layered within the content. At times Western societies misinterpret societal and cultural realities that affect Muslim women living abroad. This hinders our ability to appreciate the complexities behind extremist recruitment.

### *Hijab norms and cultural shifts*

In the context of international security, there is a fine line to tread interpreting the nuances of hijab and the correlation to violent extremism. How do we tell the difference between jihadi supporters and the simply religious? This is a struggle many families, communities, and state actors grapple with throughout the world. Before dangerous assumptions unravel liberty, it is imperative to recognize cultural and religious norms before identifying alarming changes in society.



Image 1. Daghestani Traditional headdress, Kamil Chutuev, 2009.

For some Muslim women, hijab is liberation from modern expectations of female appearance. In their view, fashion distorts beauty and objectifies women for money and the pursuits of men. *Meme 9* exclaims, “SubhannaAllah, They do not want ‘Free Women;’ They want ‘Free access to women.’” *Meme 10* illustrates an unwrapped lollipop to express the protection that hijab offers women, “Little sister, keep your hijab and

never take it off. Remember that the undressed woman will fight off men like flies.”



Meme 10. Russian Language, 2015.

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For women from the Gulf States like Saudi Arabia, Niqab, Abaya, and face-veils are a norm and do not necessarily correlate to extremism. There are hijab traditions endemic to Turkic and Caucasian women dating back to Ottoman times, which resemble Niqab and face-veils. [15], [16] In the Caucasus Region, some women wore cloaks with ornate adornments as seen by the Daghestani girl in *Image 1*. [17] While other women covered with Abaya styles as depicted in *Meme 11*; [18] the text declares, “Our ancestors didn’t know what ‘Hijab’ was. They knew what shame and Faith were.”

Conservative hijab is not a foreign concept for many Muslims but depending on the style some leaders of Muslim nations fear its revival. The Chechen Republic uses an elimination strategy against Wahhabism, which is associated negatively in the Caucasus region with all-black hijab and face-veils like Niqab. The fear is that a foreign, radical form of Islam will engulf the entire society and encourage the youth to join extremist groups. However, hijab is enforced socially in Chechnya, but it is limited to styles personifying Chechen heritage. <sup>[19]</sup> There are reports of Chechen men firing paintballs at younger women who are not fully covered, and some women find marriage without full-hijab difficult. <sup>[20]</sup>, <sup>[21]</sup> The concept is to foster Islam and piety among the population while maintaining cultural identity and fighting an ongoing twenty-year insurgency.



Meme 11. North Caucasian Women, 1900s.

For Chechnya at least, the governmental enforcement of hijab represents a shift when compared to Soviet times and post-Soviet 1990s, when many women did not wear headscarves and sported short sleeve shirts and shorter skirts as seen more commonly today in Dagestan. <sup>[22]</sup> Whether living in the Russian Federation or as refugees abroad, Muslim women from the North Caucasus are a particularly vulnerable population because their liberty is tied heavily to social perceptions of modesty, honor, and piety, which is only intensified by governmental influences that deviate from secularism. The extremist recruitment of women and the popularity of jihadi content among this demographic is not surprising given the circumstances.

Turkish women are known in the Caucasus Region and Central Asia for having many liberties such as the freedom to work, study, dress, drink, smoke, and socialize. This was further influenced after the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1924 by Kemal Ataturk, who spearheaded secular reforms that encouraged women to wear Western fashions and restricted the Ottoman-era veil in public institutions. <sup>[23]</sup> However, in 2013 the Turkish Republic removed the hijab-ban under the pretense of religious freedom, thus allowing women to wear the veil at work and university. <sup>[24]</sup> For some women, this means the freedom to express Islamic duties. Yet, some women in Turkey feel social pressure to wear hijab since the ban reversal, <sup>[25]</sup> and face harassment stereotyped as immodest for dressing in the secular tradition of their mothers. In the case of Turkey, lifting the ban gave religious freedom to those who felt marginalized for years, but it also forecasts the extremist environment in Turkey for the years to come.



Image 2. Traditional Tajik hijab, 2018.

Contrary to Chechnya and Turkey’s approach, other nation-states are taking counter-radicalization strategies that ban certain types of hijab. In Tajikistan, hijab trends like black Burqa deviate from traditional Tajik culture, as depicted in *Image 2*,<sup>[26]</sup> and authorities are reportedly banning the sale of Burqa in markets and barring it from public spaces.<sup>[27], [28]</sup> The State Islamic University in Indonesia, home to the world’s largest Muslim population, banned Burqa in 2018 due to the concern of extremist propagation.<sup>[29]</sup> Similarly, in European countries like France, Denmark, and the Netherlands, Burqa is viewed as dangerously close to terrorism, which resulted in these Western countries banning face-covering hijab

styles.<sup>[30], [31], [32]</sup> Hijab can represent a cultural shift too far from the norm for certain states that the only option seems to be banning the veil, which brings into question the effectiveness of limiting religious liberties to counter radicalism.

While it may seem decisive to ban face-veils and hijab to curb extremism, it can exasperate marginalized populations. Around 2013, the Russian Federation banned hijab in schools notably affecting a large Muslim population in Stavropol Krai.<sup>[33]</sup> Since the ban inhibits Muslim families from raising their children according to religious beliefs, it is viewed as just another aspect added to the difficult reality for life as a Muslim in Russia. Collectively, nationals who are descendant from ethnicities native to the Caucasus Region and Central Asia represent a large portion of IS and AQ-aligned group supporters.<sup>[34]</sup> Frequently, religious oppression such as banning hijab, regardless of the style, is cited as a reason for supporting a jihadi cause.

As with most trends in international security, nothing is clear-cut, and the social undercurrents affecting the female Muslim community are no exception. Ultimately, nations will have to find the balance between liberty and security to avoid creating oppressive environments that foster extremism. This is particularly challenging with immigration rising from war-torn countries, foreign fighters attempting to reenter society, and global communications enabling the proliferation of extremists’ ideology.

Regardless of the number of supporters, jihadi-groups inflict a disproportionate amount of damage on nations relative to their small sizes and seemingly innocuous pop-cultures. As of 2017, the US Government totaled the cost of Operation Inherent Resolve at 14.3 billion dollars.<sup>[35]</sup> Cultural Analytics only serves to enhance our efforts by injecting a different perspective on the people and communities influencing operations. The better our awareness of complex cultural nuances, the more apt our approach will be at recognizing its applicability and navigating the ambiguity of the international security environment.♥



**NOTES**

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