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Unveiling French hypocrisy

Forcing women to uncover their faces will not create some form of 'moderate Islam' but it does unveil French bigotry

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In one of my earlier pieces on the Arab revolutions ([Tunisia's tide of defiance](#)), I cautioned those brave souls risking life and limb for the cause of freedom in the Arab world to "beware the French" by being vigilant against their "behind the scenes machinations and manoeuvrings".

Remarkably, my fear of French deceit has been realised far quicker than I imagined. After first colonising and then propping up for decades some of the worst despots in North Africa with economic, financial and political support, the French government found itself wrong-footed by the overthrow of Tunisia's long-running autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Let us not forget that just days before Ben Ali was deposed in January, French officials - in the form of the now discredited former foreign minister Michele Alliot-Marie - offered the Tunisian regime security assistance in quelling the protests, while the same officials were making merriment in Tunisia on private holidays paid for by Ben Ali's cronies.

To quote again from my previous article: "How often are the French wont to proclaim liberté, égalité, fraternité as their most fundamental values? As far as French policy in North Africa is concerned, we may add another: Fallacy." As recent events have unfolded, however, I admit that I erred by overlooking one more very official French value: Hypocrisy.

In an effort not to be completely left behind by the massive political convulsions currently shaking the Middle East region, French political cunningness has been on ample display recently under the guise of offering French support to downtrodden Arab populations. At the receiving

end of French ire have been the forces of Muammar Gaddafi of Libya. The French political and military establishment has been desperately trying to redeem itself from its earlier Tunisian debacle by attempting to take the lead in bombing Gaddafi's forces, albeit under a UN mandate, and thereby advertising its humanity.

However, the irony of the French unleashing their prestigious Rafale fighter jets on Gaddafi's forces, the very same jets that France sought to sell Libya following a \$6.5bn arms sale in 2007, is glaring. Back then, Gaddafi was obviously a good guy and selling him sophisticated weapons was nothing but a noble enterprise, especially when so many business opportunities were at stake. Besides, it was not like Gaddafi was going to use the planes against his own people, right?

A faux pas (if indeed that is what it was) by the French interior minister, Claude Guéant, has not helped the French cause: He boldly described his country's military action in Libya as a "crusade," a choice of words that will not be lost on Libyans and Arabs, more widely. The French and other Europeans have carried out many a 'crusade' against the Middle East throughout history, leading to the deaths of millions of people. It is not for nothing that modern Algeria is known as balad el million shaheed in honour of the million or so martyrs who perished at the hands of the French during the war of independence in 1954-1962.

Given France's penchant for selectivity, therefore, was there really any surprise when the Polish prime minister, Donald Tusk, condemned Europe's participation in bombing Libya as "hypocrisy"? Tusk said such actions gave the impression that Europe only intervened when oil interests were at stake. Perhaps the French establishment would concur.

Where is the liberté at home?

Now you would think that given France's belated rush to save North African, and mostly Muslim, lives, the country was a model of solid social relations and stability at home. Suppose those Libyan civilians fleeing daily barrages from Gaddafi's tanks fled to France, they would enjoy a peaceful future there free from stigmatisation and social isolation, right? Well, no. The men may get by but the women, if they choose to wear the niqab, had better stay in Libya.

As of today, the French state will forbid face coverings in public, a measure which, while couched in generalisations, is aimed specifically at outlawing some 2,000 or so Muslim women from deciding how they dress and conform to their religion.

The government of President Nicholas Sarkozy has pledged the full force of the law to enforce these measures. Furthermore, in a bid to outdo the fascist tendencies in the country, Sarkozy's ruling party, the UMP, has gone to such extremes as to question the role of Islam in republican France. Apparently Islamic values and practices are not compatible with the French way of life.

Beware Libyans, Tunisians, Egyptians and a whole plethora of other political refugees currently battling repression. If you are thinking of escaping to France, know that your "alien" values may not be welcome there.

The startling thing about France's actions is not just the audacity with which these policies are

pursued but also the belief that such measures will have no bearing on external relations.

While the two faces of France are now on public display, this hypocrisy barely raises any questions at home.

Sarkozy's arms dealer and business acquaintances will rush to the Middle East, to the Gulf, to North Africa, at the next available opportunity to sign multi-billion euro contracts. Here they will intermingle with Muslims, male and female (yes females also step out of their homes in the Arab world) who, lo and behold, may be veiled.

Why are they veiled? Not because their husbands beat them into covering their heads and faces but because they have chosen to do so. (Is it really so hard to believe that they can decide for themselves?) Now France may well have a problem with such a choice. Then it should make a point by breaking all relations with this region, so that the rest of the world knows what the French feel about the practice of niqab, and, for that matter, halal food and Islamic finance. And, for good measure, perhaps male circumcision too. It is always good to know where people and governments stand on certain issues. Sarkozy and his coterie should have enough courage to declare publicly their animosity towards Islamic practices, if indeed that is what they harbour.

French government policy will not create some form of 'moderate Islam' by forcing women to uncover their faces. If it has achieved anything, it has successfully unveiled French hypocrisy and bigotry towards Muslims. The people of the Middle East are not fooled by France's diversionary tactics in pretending to back human rights in Libya.

Lest anyone ask how Gaddafi's brutality should be dealt with if not militarily, that is not the point of contention. The Gaddafi gang rightly needs to be defeated with broad international, including Arab, military support. Suffice to say that France need not overexert itself in this endeavour given how bankrupt its recent policies have proven. A tiresome, hypocritical, wannabe global power will not redeem itself so easily.