

Boris Johnson Both Mocks and Fears the Burqa

by Hugh Fitzgerald



As everyone knows by now, Boris Johnson, no longer the British Foreign Secretary, but still a prominent MP and force in the Tory Party as well as, again, a journalist for The Telegraph, recently delivered himself of his views on the burqa/niqab. Here is some of [what he wrote](#):

If you say that it is weird and bullying to expect women to cover their faces, then I totally agree.

I would go further and say that it is absolutely ridiculous that people should choose to go around looking like letter boxes.

And he added that “a female student turned up at school or at a university lecture looking like a bank robber” he would ask her to remove it to speak to her.

Mr Johnson, who quit as Foreign Secretary last month over

Brexit, said it was “sensible” to be able to read each others facial expressions and humans “must be able to see each other’s faces.”

“He said that individual businesses or branches of Government should be free to enforce a dress code that enables their workers to best interact with customers – which could involve removing the veils.

The Tory grandees made the expected tut-tutting about his language. Tory chair Brandon Lewis asked Johnson to apologize; others merely asked him to watch his language. Apparently Theresa May has gone along with an investigation to be conducted of Johnson’s remarks, the announcement of which has caused “a civil war” in Tory ranks. So far, Boris Johnson has shown no signs of apologizing; he knows that a great many of the Tory rank-and-file share his views on the niqab, and in a showdown over this issue, he will win.

Meanwhile, Lady Warsi, the Muslimah who now sits as a peer in the House of Lords, [was enraged](#):

Johnson’s words send out a message that Muslim women are fair game...As a feminist what really disgusts me in this whole episode is that Muslim women are simply political fodder, their lives a convenient battleground on which to stake out a leadership bid,” she wrote. “Well, this approach is not just offensive, it’s dangerous. Johnson’s words have once again validated the view of those that ‘other’ Muslims. They send out a message that Muslim women are fair game. What starts as useful targets for ‘colorful political language’ and the odd bit of toxic campaigning ends up in attacks on our streets.”

She went on to make clear that she considered Johnson’s words would encourage hate crimes. **“So, as much as Johnson thinks he’s being his usual clever self, he’s helping to create an environment in which hate crime is more likely.”** She offered

no evidence for this, and it seemed she was trying to create the impression that criticism of the niqab was almost a hate crime in itself. Then Sayeeda Warsi offered to give Boris Johnson lessons in diversity training herself. It's an offer I'm certain he will refuse.

So far, so predictable. But was Johnson wrong? Isn't the burqa, isn't the niqab, a security risk? Does Sayeeda Warsi know that in Mecca, during worship, the face-covering is banned? What does she think of that? Why should the full face covering be banned at the Ka'aba and not, say, at Wembley Stadium, or just outside Buckingham Palace, or in Regents Park?

And now a respected Muslim scholar, Taj Hargey, the imam at Oxford Islamic Congregation, has taken part in the debate. Hargey has been in the news many times before for his moderate stance. He once so angered the Muslim Weekly that the paper declared him to be a "Qadiani" only pretending as a Muslim ("Qadiani" is the pejorative name for Ahmadis, whom other Muslims do not regard as real Muslims) – and such a charge made him a potential target for attack. Hargey, a Sunni Muslim, sued the publication, and won a high five-figure settlement for defamation.

[Hargey has entered the lists](#), firmly in support of Boris Johnson against his hysterical detractors:

Taj Hargey, the imam at Oxford Islamic Congregation, said Mr Johnson should "not apologise for telling the truth."

"The burka and niqab are hideous tribal ninja-like garments that are pre-Islamic, non-Koranic and therefore un-Muslim."

"Although this deliberate identity-concealing contraption is banned at the Kaaba in Mecca it is permitted in Britain, thus precipitating security risks, accelerating vitamin D deficiency, endorsing gender-inequality, and inhibiting community cohesion."

“In reality it is a toxic patriarchy controlling women.”

*“Is it any wonder that many younger women have internalised this poisonous chauvinism by asserting that it is their human right to hide their faces? **Johnson did not go far enough.**”*

Boris Johnson has gone off, unfazed, and unapologetic, on holiday abroad.

What does Sayeeda Warsi, stewing in her own malevolence and hate, make of the fact that the Qur'an does not require the niqab? And will she be willing to agree that the niqab could in many circumstances be a “security risk”? Why does she think that in the West, including Great Britain, Muslim women must remove the face-covering for their passport photos? What does Sayeeda Warsi think of the opinion given by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Haji Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, a renowned scholar and head of the Islamic world's preeminent religious institute, who has stated that **“the niqab is a cultural tradition and has nothing to do with Islam.”**

Warsi can foam at the mouth about provoking “hate crimes” all she wants, but Boris Johnson will return serenely from his vacation, cite Imam Taj Hargey and Sheikh Tantawy of Al-Azhar on the niqab, refuse to apologize, and watch, bemused, as Theresa May squirms, not knowing quite how to deal with this loose cannon in her ranks. The Tory investigation will take place, dutifully and perfunctorily, and conclude with some anodyne statement about “watching one's words.” And that will be it. Johnson will not be kicked out of the Party, as the Muslim peer Lord Sheikh, founder of the Conservative Muslim Forum, has demanded. He will be stronger than ever.

The most recent poll has 60 percent of British voters not only backing Johnson's remarks, but going even further than he did by calling for a complete ban on the niqab, which Johnson himself has so far opposed. What's a poor prime minister to do, if her benighted people insist on backing Boris? Nothing.

That's what the waffling Theresa May will do: nothing.

And that will be a victory for Boris Johnson, and for Great Britain, now brought one step closer to banning the niqab, just like Austria, France, and Denmark.

As for Johnson's joke about burqas making women look like letter-boxes, the last word should go to the comedian Rowan Atkinson ("Mr. Bean"), who wrote to *The Times*: "An almost perfect visual simile and a joke that, whether Mr Johnson apologises for it or not, will stay in the public consciousness for some time to come."

First published in