

ment of Islam as independent from the problem of immigration. It also means a space for religion in the public sphere as well as the space specifically created through a state initiative. Secular concepts and the frontiers of the French public sphere are a subject of public controversy, but the terms of the debate were national and with an emphasis on French exceptionalism rather than with an eye to the future orientation of Europe.

When it comes to discussing these things in relation to Europe, the question is: are we going to handle this issue through a kind of 'didactic democracy', one taught through legislation, a kind of authoritarian intervention in which, for instance, you forbid the veil? (Ironically, this reminds me of Turkish secularism. Historically, this was adopted from French *laïcité*; today, Turkish forms of state control of religion turn out to be a model of reference.) Or do we have other ways of thinking about democracy as a way of inventing new forms of commonality? The definition of a new commonality demands that we reconsider the nature of the public space on a European scale. So far, the public space has been defined by the nation state and by institutionally defined religions; borders were imposed by the very state and religious institutions that Europe is now trying to override. Yet we still take this national public space for granted. Can we open it up? Redefine it as European public space? Not only through means of legislation, but also as an imagined space of shared common values. Conceiving a European public space and a European citizenship could help us to go beyond the national scale and the confrontational definitions of civilisations to focus on daily life experiences and interactions. Why not imagine a European public space as an ethical and physical frame that enables us to develop a common citizenship drawn from liberal pluralism as well as the plurality of religious experience? □

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COVER UP

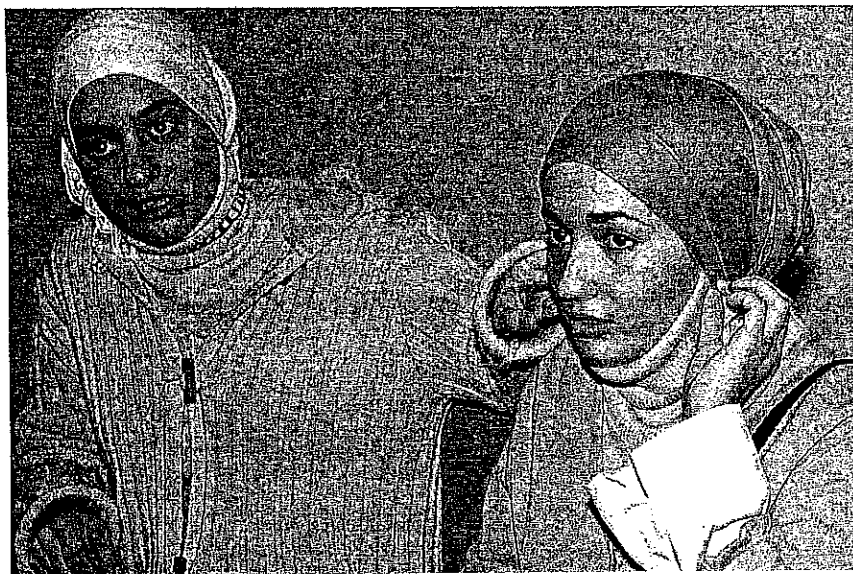
ALMA & LILA LEVY

The Levy sisters Alma and Lila, 16 and 18 respectively and both French Muslims, were excluded from the Lycée Henri-Wallon in Aubervilliers in October 2003 for refusing to take off their headscarves in class. In the following excerpts from their book, published earlier this year by Éditions La Découverte but not yet translated, they talk about the situation and explain their decision. At the time, the French government's decision to ban the headscarf in public places initiated a massive national debate that split families and communities. The majority of French Muslims do not claim the right to wear the headscarf and look on those who do with indifference if not outright hostility. While many favour the new law outlawing it in school, the views of official bodies representing French Muslims remain ambiguous and divided. The contradictions dividing society are reflected within the Levy family: the girls' father is a Jewish lawyer 'without a God'; their mother, a Berber from North Africa, was brought up a Catholic but is now an atheist.

The authorities were expecting trouble in September this year at the start of the new school term when the law came into force. In the event, things passed off better than anyone could have supposed. The kidnapping of two French journalists in Iraq rallied public sympathy in France and French Muslims demonstrated their solidarity as French citizens. Only a handful of girls returned to school wearing the scarf and were dealt with more sympathetically than Alma and Lila with the help of counselling and advice at school. A storm in a teacup was the general verdict, but many are of the opinion that the French Muslim question will not be so easily settled in the long term.

JVH

Alma I started the new school year on Tuesday 3 September, Lila would have started the next day. I arrived at the school gate wearing a scarf that covered my hair, a polo-neck jumper, trousers and a short plain skirt. I had taken off my veil leaving only the scarf covering my hair. The headmaster said, 'To the left, Miss.' There were nine other girls wearing something on their heads, but you could see the chignon, their ears and necks. I was obviously the most covered; I was the 'Iranian' among them. Other girls were sent to join us until by the end there were 14 of us.



Alma and Lila Levy, 2004

The headmaster took us into his office and read us Article 24 of the school's regulations recapitulating the terms of the Bayrou circular [on the new law banning the headscarf and other religious symbols in schools]: 'The wearing by students of discreet symbols of their faith and beliefs, notably religious, is allowed in school; but the wearing of "ostentatious" symbols, which by their very nature are intended to proselytise or single a person out, are forbidden.' We had a right to speak out on this; I wanted to object, but he silenced me (clearly he didn't want the others to benefit from my arguments). Though we were all together in his office, he spoke to each of us individually. 'You (surname and first name), you have a choice: either you take off your veil and go to your class, or you go back home until I have had a chance to talk to your parents on Saturday.'

One by one, we made our exit. The girls were in tears: they thought this really was forbidden. They went up to their classes, some without the headscarf, others promising to remove it the next day. In the end, only two of us were left. The other girl said, 'So! Go and summon my father!' She gave her name as did I and then we left the office. Despite everything, we were sent

to the classes we had opted for. As far as I was concerned, everything was fine. Except that when the teacher gave out the cards with the school regulations, he stared at me and said, 'There is a young woman in this class who illustrates perfectly Article 24.' I told him I was not in the least concerned. The headmaster came round to the class to introduce himself. When he saw me, he and the teacher started to shout at me to get out of the classroom, adding that I should at least have had the courtesy to inform him of what I had done. I went out, saying that there had been a misunderstanding. The same thing happened to the other girl.

Véronique Giraud Did you have any hesitation when you were confronted with the alternatives? What did you feel when you saw the other girls taking off their scarves?

Alma Not a moment's hesitation. As I told you, I knew we'd be leaned on but not like that. As to my friends, I thought, 'Poor things.' They slammed the door on the headmaster and insulted him, whereas I remained polite throughout, which seemed only to enrage him further. In the corridor, I met the girl who had also given him a categorical no. She was crying and terrified of her father's reaction. He's a Berber and had already beaten her several times in the summer for wearing her scarf. But since he thought she only wore it out of doors, he didn't envisage any problem at school. But when he got home that same night, after having been called by the headmaster, he beat her badly. Her back was in ribbons. Since then, she takes the scarf off at the gate, and puts it on again in the yard when no one's looking – only to take it off again in the classroom. A number of girls do the same, constantly on the watch, and being dragged off to the headmaster's office if he sees them as he's crossing the yard.

Lila We called our father the moment Alma got home. He was a bit jumpy and told us to go to school the next day as though nothing had happened. The next day, it was my first day back at school and I knew what to expect. My father told me to dress carefully, so I wore black trousers with a short white skirt over them, a pale blue jumper and a white scarf tied at the back of my head. But black or white scarves are completely out at school: too redolent of religion. Last year, Alma was allowed to wear a scarf as long as it wasn't white or black; the teachers even banned navy blue – too close to black.

But Alma hadn't warned me. I got to the place in the yard where our names and courses were pinned up. I found my classroom and started to go up. I didn't know a soul. A man called to me in the corridor and, without even looking at me, told me to report to the headmaster. I asked why and he told me he didn't know – I thought he sounded a bit shifty; if he was summoning me without knowing me it must be because of the scarf! He pointed out the headmaster's office and I was kept waiting there for almost an hour. I told him I had been sent to him but hadn't been told why. He simply said, 'Well, take that thing off your head!' When I said no way, he said he would summon my father. When he heard my name, he flew into a rage: he refused to enrol me, he already had my sister and that was quite enough for him. I told him I was on the list. He then told me to get out, saying that I would be treated the same way as Alma. I went back to see him and said he couldn't exclude me like that but must put the matter to the disciplinary committee. But he said he alone could make the decision. When I finally left his office, he ran after me and escorted me to the gate to make sure I didn't go back to my class as Alma had done. Once I was outside, I called my father, who again suggested I should go back as though I had misunderstood. He thought it impossible that I could be sent away like that.

It took just a week for our readmission the following Monday or Tuesday, but a lot had happened in that time. The day after my first day back, we both went to school at 8am. 'Go home!' We went back every hour. Each time, entry was conditional on our removing our scarves. They said, 'Girls, you must take off a layer.' When we said we already had, that wasn't enough for them: they wanted us to remove everything. The girls who had returned to school had done that . . .

[On 26 September 2003, the school's disciplinary committee agreed on the girls' exclusion. This decision was confirmed by the academic appeals committee.]

VG Have you ever fallen in love? Do you have boyfriends?

Alma I've already told you I'm a boy manqué! I have found someone I like, but not in that way. I found that really messes things up. I've got a girlfriend who goes out with a boy. Even if things didn't go too far and they weren't really in love, I found it disgusting, particularly since she had another the next month. The boys check out their mates, the girls the others, it's a way

of showing you are desired. I've seen girls who have no need to go out with this or that boy, but who do it anyway to look like the rest, because that makes them look good . . .

VG You've never wanted a sexual relationship with a boy, not even to hug one, to hold hands, hold him in your arms?

Lila I find the thought grotesque. It reminds me of Beverly Hills and other shows that I hate. Neither Alma nor I have ever been out with a boy. I've never felt a difference between what I feel for a boy and for my sister, or for a girlfriend or for my family. It's always the same kind of affection.

Alma I have a girlfriend who is truly in love and she pours out her heart to me all day about her boyfriend. It's different with the boys; they treat me like a mate, as though I were a boy, and talk to me openly. I've seen both sides and I really think the girls are poor cows. The boys just want to play around, or collect trophies. I've seen these boys of 18 who still want to amuse themselves in this way. I've told them to get a PlayStation if they want to entertain themselves and asked them how they would like it if someone else behaved the same way with their sister or, later, their daughter. Then they stop talking in front of me. All boys want the same thing. Even the nicest among them say that they love their girlfriend, but they don't want to settle down with her. I don't need to amuse myself this way; I don't see the point. One can admire and look at a handsome boy as you would a beautiful girl or a great car. Often, the good-looking boys are too aware of their looks and that makes them loathsome. At our age, you're attracted to things and to people that will not be the same 20 years on. I don't need to waste my time at the mercy of my changing tastes. I'd rather wait.

Lila When someone makes a mistake, it's not only that person who suffers the consequences but everyone around her. We've seen enough of our boy and girlfriends go astray! I've always known that I wouldn't go with a boy unless it was really serious and I was going to marry him. It seems more logical that way.

VG Do you wear the veil and declare your faith because that changes your relationship to boys? If I understand you properly, there are certain taboos for a woman; things thought of as sins.



Paris 2003: French Muslim women retain the scarf in the streets after the ban on wearing it in 'public places'. Credit: Rex Features

Lila And for men!

VG Yes. But a woman cannot be discovered alone with a man . . .

Lila And by the same token, nor can a man! Before you go out with a boy, you should first have visited him, shaken his hand, given him a kiss. That's where temptation lies and it gets so easy to give in. If you avoid temptation, you can avoid the sin. Before marriage, a man and woman should not be alone, nor should they touch each other. Nor should they go around together. There's no instance of that in Islam.

VG What do you think of people who have sex before marriage?

Alma We're not trying to impose our way of life or views on anyone else. Personally, I don't think it's right, but it doesn't bother me what other people do. It's forbidden in Islam, but only for Muslims.

VG But suppose you were crazy about someone, what would you do before the wedding was announced? Would you kiss him, hold his hand?

Lila Nothing. You have to wait. But it only takes a couple of minutes to announce a wedding! And we can see each other, go for walks – just not alone. Some scholars say that people who are engaged can walk together in public places; others disagree. I'd never go to the cinema with a boy: it's dark, no one's paying any attention to you and it encourages sin. Seduction should come after marriage. It's even strongly advised. The couple get dressed up for each other, play and laugh together. There are books that give advice on all that. If a wife makes herself attractive for her husband, she will reap the benefit, and vice versa. A Companion of the Prophet laughed at him when he saw him tidying his hair and his beard before going home. The Prophet replied that he hadn't the slightest interest in looking handsome outside when his wife was at home preparing herself for his return. And in a country like France, given what men see in the street and on posters, if women don't make that effort, they've lost at the outset! It's not like that in a society where they don't see any other woman. Men and women both have their weaknesses, and it's in indulging them at home that they can get the greatest pleasure. Besides, Islam advises people to avoid monotony and gives practical advice on how to make a marriage last. There is no limit to seduction after marriage!

In the same way, though modesty prevents a male and female from shaking hands, it actually depends enormously on the particular situation. The gesture means different things in different countries. It's a matter of culture: the same thing doesn't have the same meaning universally. In France, a girl and a boy may kiss on the cheek without it going any further; in the Maghrib, on the other hand, better stick to the handshake since the peck on the cheek means something quite different. In Afghanistan, even to look at someone or shake a hand can be totally out of place. You always have to consider the context. Each of us is different, sees things differently and interprets them differently. When we do something, we know how it

affects us, what we intend, but we've no idea what it means for the other person. If a Muslim man holds out his hand, knowing that he shouldn't, I reckon that's a provocation. But if it's a man who doesn't know the rules, I'll shake his hand – at least the first time. If I see him again, I'll explain why I prefer not to do this.

Yves Sintomer Why has God required women to cover their heads? Is it simply a matter of modesty?

Alma Men are also instructed to be modest! When they play football in shorts, they are disobeying the *hadith* [traditions]. Men should be covered from their navel to their knees and, unless they work in the mines or in intense heat, they should cover their upper body and shoulders – ideally, it should be from their wrists to their ankles.

Lila The Prophet said that the best garment for a man is the one that covers most. If you look at Aladdin, when you see men with bare chests, they are wearing baggy pants that come up to their chest and at least down to their knees.

YS But they don't cover their head, or nape of their neck, or ears. Why don't the same rules apply to them?

Lila It would be difficult to cover your ears without covering your hair. But it's stressed over and over again that we should not confuse men and women: if they wore exactly the same clothes, that would complicate things, lead to mistakes. However, they are advised to cover their heads. The traditions of the Prophets would rather they didn't walk around bare-headed. But if we're being logical – and I'm not sure this has anything to do with logic – it's difficult for a man to conceal his neck and his ears with a hat, a *chechia* [man's hat worn in North Africa] or a turban.

VG But why don't we ever see a veiled man?

Alma As we've told you already, men and women should make their differences apparent. Everyone in his rightful place.

VG So what is a man's place? Or a woman's?

Lila That's a huge question! But one thing's for sure: while there are places like Saudi Arabia where women can't drive or do certain jobs, this has nothing to do with anything in the Quran. In some countries – or in certain circles or families – when children of both sexes live at home with their parents, the boy will be sent to school while the girl is kept at home to help in the house. You have to understand that from a religious point of view, it is very serious not to put your son and daughter on an equal footing. It is categorically forbidden not to give the same rights to all your children. We're not talking here about what we think personally, but about what is written in the Quran and Sunna [sayings of the Prophet]: 'Bring up your children without discriminating between them.' Education should be equal; time for study and for helping in the house should be shared. Teaching a daughter to read and write, to learn – whether it is religious knowledge or learning generally – equally with a son, will bring merit.

There is no profession, not a single activity that is forbidden to a woman. In the end, a woman has fewer obligations than a man. While he is obliged to feed his family, the woman has the right to work for a wage and to keep whatever she earns. She can do what she likes with that money while the man must use what he earns to keep the family. He has no right to the money earned by his wife, but she has every right to his. It's this that allows a man to forbid his wife to do certain things, and I don't think she has any right to go against his wishes. It's justified by the fact that if, say, the wife has an accident or whatever, the husband is responsible for looking after her. In the same way, if he goes off leaving his wife to starve in his absence, he is to blame in the sight of God. He must feed and clothe her as well as he can.

Alma The Prophet helped his wives around the house. His daughter Fatima was married to her father's cousin, Ali [fourth Caliph of Islam], and because they were so poor, she helped him in his work. These are the people we should take as our examples. Having said that, though, frankly I'd prefer to stay at home and look after my children than work in a mine. You might even think it unfair that a man has to work and guarantee his family's livelihood! Why is it the woman who gives birth and feeds the baby? Because God created us this way. □