

# Don't let Jacinda Ardern's headscarf send the wrong message

Ali Shakir 05:00, Oct 02 2019 STUFF

**OPINION:** Don't get me wrong, I respect the prime minister a lot, and I understand that she meant well. But when I saw [photos of her recent visit to Zayed College for Girls in Mangere](#), I couldn't help but cringe.

Enough with this disguise game, please, an inner voice screamed in protest.

It wasn't Ardern's first time wearing a hijab. [We all remember her in a black one](#), hugging and comforting the distressed relatives of the terrorist attacks' victims in Christchurch six months ago.

Her donning the headscarf then was a strong, heartfelt message of cohesiveness between the attacked parishioners and their fellow Kiwis. It was an act of empathy, rather than an endorsement of any particular religious symbol. There's quite a difference between the two, and a high possibility of misunderstanding as well.



LAWRENCE SMITH/STUFF

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern at the Islamic Women's Council annual conference at Zayed College for Girls in Mangere in August.

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\* [Headscarf movement 'means well but is cheap tokenism'](#)

- \* [My issue with Kiwis being encouraged to wear headscarves](#)
- \* [Headscarf 'a simple show of respect for Muslim community'](#)

Shortly after her gesture, a group of ladies organised an event titled "Headscarf for Harmony". Many Kiwi women took to the streets on March 21, covering their hair with scarves, and in no time the initiative became a social media hit. A friend sent me a link to a young girl's account on Facebook, where she'd posted a photo of herself wearing a scarf, and commented: "Guys, this is so cool. I got more than 500 likes for my hijab pic. How crazy is that?"

Unfortunately, it was uncool for the non-hijab-wearing women in my circle of friends, and I'm talking about consistent and practising Muslims who had cried their eyes out over the mosque attacks. For the zillionth time, they were made to witness their faith being politicised and reduced to a piece of cloth. Even worse, they felt their new homeland was robbing them of their spiritual identity, deeming them not Muslim enough because they refused to cover.

A few weeks later, I met a Syrian girl at the library. We were talking about the horrific Masjid Al Noor attack, and she said that her family was now pressuring her into veiling. Her brother chided her: "Aren't you ashamed to see all those foreigner girls and women honouring hijab, while you, a Muslim, aren't?"

The impact of iconising the hijab went beyond my Iraqi and Arab acquaintances in Auckland. Laila, my Malaysian friend, said: "I wholeheartedly sympathise with the victims' families and friends, but I cannot possibly bring myself to wear the headscarf again." Laila still recalls her high school days in Malaysia, where she was often punished, even insulted, for rebelling against hijab. I perfectly understood where she was coming from.

Having grown up in 1970s secular Baghdad, my earliest childhood memories are peaceful and hijab-free. Not one female in my family wore hijab. Our teachers at school didn't cover, and neither did our neighbours.



SUPPLIED

Ardern wearing a black headscarf in Christchurch, shortly after the mosque massacres. "It was an act of empathy, rather than an endorsement of any particular religious symbol," writes Ali Shakir. "There's quite a difference between the two, and a high possibility of misunderstanding as well."

The Baghdadi males and females of the time studied, worked, socialised, travelled, swam, danced, even drank together. Islam was a mere cultural component in people's lives, it hardly dictated anything.

And then came the pivotal year of 1979. Three major events took place that would later shape the future of many millions of Muslims around the world: the Islamic revolution in Iran, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The ensuing decades saw my liberal childhood world vanish.

When I finally left Iraq in 2006, only a few safira (uncovered) girls and women dared to be seen in the streets. They were subjected to harassment regularly.

Of course, not all hijab-wearing women are forced into it, and adults have the right to choose whatever clothes or accessories they prefer and feel comfortable in. That's precisely why Jacinda Ardern's latest veiled appearance concerned me.



LAWRENCE SMITH/STUFF

"Of course, not all hijab-wearing women are forced into it, and adults have the right to choose whatever clothes or accessories they prefer and feel comfortable in," writes Shakir. (File photo)

Among the audience were many minor girls. I saw them and remembered a short conversation I once had while transiting at Dubai International Airport. When the man noticed I was looking at his hijab-ed toddler, he asked me if I had children. I said I didn't, and he volunteered that once I'd had a baby girl, I should teach her to cover her hair at a very early age.

"But isn't observing hijab only expected of Muslim females when they hit puberty?" I asked. The man laughed at my naivety, and said: "That's true, but it is best that you make them get used to it in early childhood. Let it grow with and on them while they are easy to control."

His wife, who happened to be sitting next to him, listened to us without uttering a word. I couldn't see her facial expressions as her black burqa had them completely covered.

I wonder how many of the young attendees from Zayed College for Girls have actually chosen to veil. And how many of them would be allowed to take it off, if they so wished. I hope the next time Jacinda Ardern feels tempted to appear in a headscarf, she takes a moment first to consider that she could well be sending the Muslim girls of New Zealand, and the world, the wrong message.

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