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# Why I took off my headscarf... only to put it back on again

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**A woman's headscarf is a garment which is heavy in symbolism in Muslim countries and, having finally decided to shed mine, I will have to don it again after being appointed as Pakistan correspondent.**

My family's old photo albums from the 1950s and 60s speak volumes about Egypt's social and political change - not just because of the men, lots of my relatives in army uniform, but because of the women.

There they are in short-sleeved dresses, impeccably cinched at the waist. The dresses of some of the younger ones actually stopped well above the knee. And the hair!

The beautiful and complicated hairdos that my aunts and their friends pulled off just to go shopping or to their universities looked like something out of a vintage glamour magazine.

But times change. In the 1980s and 90s the strict Wahhabi version of Islam was arriving in Egypt - brought back by the millions of Egyptians who'd gone to work in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.



Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser and his family, 1960

Political Islamic movements were gaining ground too, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood. Soon all the adult women in my family were wearing the headscarf or the hijab.

The debate on whether or not it's an Islamic obligation for women is a long, complicated and, at times, hostile one.

An often-quoted verse in the Koran urges Muslim women to cover their heads and part of their chests. But Islamic scholars interpret that in different ways. They also can't agree on a hadith, or teaching of the prophet Muhammad, in which he points to the face and hands of a woman indicating that everything else should be covered up.

I didn't start wearing the headscarf until I was in my 20s - and I wasn't forced to do it - despite several years of pressure from my mother.

"What are you waiting for?" she'd ask. "What if something happens to you? Will you meet God looking like this?" she would say, pointing at my trousers or T-shirt.

Sometimes I would nod, smile and walk away. On other occasions I'd fight and argue.

But deep down it was becoming ingrained in me that wearing the headscarf was the right thing to do. So, towards, the end of 2002 I decided it was finally time to "do the right thing".

So in the next ten years, during which I moved to London and started working at the BBC, I wore the hijab.



My motto was: "I'm a BBC journalist, not a headscarf-wearing BBC journalist."

There were some raised eyebrows outside the corporation when I appeared on TV. "How could the BBC allow a woman in a headscarf to go out reporting?" Fortunately, that was never an issue with any of my editors.

Then, last year, I went through a very personal and private journey of questioning many things about my religion: about practice and belief, what was I doing out of conviction and what out of habit?

### **"It took me 30 minutes just getting out of the door"**

How much of my faith did I want to exhibit? Would I, I asked finally and crucially, be any less Muslim if I took off the headscarf? The final answer was no.

So, after months of indecision, the day came when I'd decided to remove it. It took me hours to get dressed and when the time came when I'd normally put the headscarf on, I just didn't.

For the first time in more than ten years I started considering my hair. Did it look right? What about those grey hairs? What would happen if it rained?

Finally it was time to leave the house. That was very difficult. It took me 30 minutes just getting out of the door. I kept running back to the mirror. Are you sure? Are you sure?

When I finally made it out onto the street, a million thoughts went through my head. Perhaps God would punish me for this - somehow. Would people on the street look at me and say "Shaimaa! What have you done?"

Well of course none of that happened. Most of my friends, family and work colleagues were supportive, if curious. Some were disapproving. I was accused on social media of abandoning my religion.

That's simply not true. I am still Muslim - just not so visibly.



Women in Cairo during the 2011 uprising

The reaction I was most frightened of was my family's. One relative said to me on the phone: "Enna lellah wa enna ellayehee raje'oon (To Allah we belong and To Allah we shall return)."

Now that's a prayer you say normally when someone dies or there's been a catastrophe.

And now, just to add to the major changes of this eventful year, I'm taking up a new position as the BBC's Pakistan correspondent. In some conservative areas of the country I will have to wear a headscarf for cultural and security reasons.

Oh the irony. It means of course that after finally plucking up the courage to cast off the headscarf, I'll have to start wearing it again - at least some of the time.

It's just as well I didn't throw all those old headscarves away.



Women in Pakistan during Eid