

French woman arrested, fined for wearing Muslim headscarf on Cannes beach

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In a fundamental attack on freedom of religion, a French Muslim woman was detained and fined by police solely because she was wearing a Muslim headscarf. Siam, a former flight attendant from Toulouse who was vacationing with her family in Cannes, was on the beach when police received a call criticizing the “ostentatious” character of her headscarf.

Mathilde Cusin, a France4 journalist who was on the same beach, told the story to *NouvelObs*: “I saw three policemen who were watching the beach. Two of them had their fingers on the trigger of their tear gas grenades, probably pepper spray. Then I saw them cross the beach, moving towards a veiled woman who was just wearing a headscarf on her hair.” Though it is legal to wear a headscarf in France, local police demanded that the young woman leave the beach, citing a recent ordinance against the burkini body-covering swimsuit.

Siam told *NouvelObs*, “[A policewoman] said, ‘Are you aware that there is an ordinance in the city of Cannes?’ I said no, that I did not know exactly what this was all about, that I had not followed the controversy.” The confrontation with police mounted, and according to Siam, “My children were crying, they witnessed my humiliation, together with my family. ... I myself was unable to stop myself from crying. They were humiliating us.”

A hostile crowd, that Cusin described as “pretty violent,” gathered around Siam, who recounted later that “Racist speech has been totally liberated. I was stunned. I heard things that no one has ever said to my face, like, ‘Leave and go home!’ or ‘Ma’am, the law is the law, we are tired of your trouble-making’ or ‘Here we are all Catholics!’”

Siam’s family and their friends asked, “If you are targeting ostentatious religious signs, as you say, why

are you not looking for crosses?” and the police replied: “We will not hunt for crosses. Go on the road, ma’am, we have asked you to leave the beach.”

Siam concluded that it is her practice of Islam that was the issue, as police implied by telling her, “You will understand that in the current climate, we have to write you up.”

Siam later concluded, “Because people who have nothing to do with my religion kill people, I no longer have the right to go to the beach! Because they commit terrorist attacks, I am deprived of my rights. We are in France, I have the right to go where I want! It’s scandalous ... Today, we are not allowed on the beach. Tomorrow, on the street? The day after tomorrow, will we be banned from practising our religion at home? In the land of the Rights of Man, I see no trace of liberty, equality, or fraternity. I am revolted that this can have happened in France.”

Siam was later forced to leave Cannes, *NouvelObs* reported: “The person who was hosting them in Cannes was ‘uneasy,’ and asked them not to prolong their stay in Cannes as planned, a bit because of the ‘shame’ of the scandal, too.”

Siam complained to the Collective against Islamophobia in France in order to publicize the event. She declared, “I concluded that we cannot let this go in our country. On top of it all, I am not an immigrant. My parents are French, my grandparents are French ... When people tell me ‘Leave and go home,’ I just have to laugh, it’s really hard-core racism.”

The persecution of Siam is the product of the burkini bans imposed by several right-wing and PS mayors after far-right protests in Corsica over a brawl between locals and a Muslim family, one of whose members was wearing a burkini. The mayors decreed ordinances banning the burkini amid a hysterical campaign in

French media denouncing the body-covering swimwear.

The general director for public services in the city of Cannes, Thierry Migoule, told AFP: “We are not banning the wearing of religious signs on the beach, but ostentatious outfits that refer to an allegiance to terrorist movements that are at war with us.”

Under cover of the “war on terror” and a so-called defense of secularism and women’s rights, the French state is carrying out unprecedented and drastic attacks on the Muslim population. Such statements, like the police’s decision to write up Siam, amount to an attempt to criminalize the practice of Islam. The clear implication of Migoule’s statement is that a Muslim woman, simply because she is wearing a headscarf as a visible sign of her religious faith, can be treated as a supporter of Islamist terrorism.

This is a repugnant political lie. In fact, the terror attacks in France are above all the product of the foreign policy of the NATO alliance, including the French state, in the Middle East.

Paris and the other NATO capitals back Islamist militias fighting the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, falsely claiming that they represent a popular, democratic uprising against Assad. Today, the same terrorist methods are used in France by Islamist forces trained in Syria, who have exploited the protection that they enjoy from the security services, as instruments of French foreign policy, as cover to organize attacks on European soil.

These terrorist attacks, which always involve individuals known to and watched by the state, are then exploited to shred democratic rights and impose the state of emergency in France.

A few days after Siam was written up, the Council of State issued a ruling suspending the mayors’ decision to ban the burkini on public beaches. Remarkably, the mayors and Prime Minister Manuel Valls publicly defied the ruling, insisting that they are determined to step up their hysterical anti-Muslim campaign.

According to Valls, “The ruling of the Council of State does not settle the debate.” He added that “remaining silent, as in the past, is a little betrayal. It’s one more capitulation.”

Such comments are a warning to the working class. President François Hollande’s decision to impose a state of emergency and his proposal to inscribe the

principle of deprivation of nationality in the constitution—legitimizing a measure that allowed the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime to launch the Holocaust of the Jews in France—was neither an accident nor an anti-terrorist measure. It corresponded to a deep crisis of French democracy, amid the escalation of war and social opposition, notably against the PS’ reactionary labor law scrapping workers’ social rights.

In the French ruling elite, powerful forces are debating whether to react to this crisis by establishing an authoritarian regime that would carry out a policy of persecuting entire religious communities, or even of outright ethnic cleansing.

Hollande had to back down earlier this year when he tried to inscribe deprivation of nationality in the constitution; the mood of social opposition among workers and youth was too explosive in the run-up to the protests against the labor law, and the political situation was not ripe for such a policy. Now, with its persecution of veiled women, the ruling class is back on the offensive.



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