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Anti-Muslim Hate on the Eastern Shores of the Mediterranean: 
Lebanon, the Hijab, and Modernity/Coloniality

Ali Kassem, University of Sussex, UK
a.kassem@sussex.ac.uk, Twitter: akassem68, Linkedin: ali-kassem689, ORCID: 0000-0001-6527-2304

Abstract:
Informed by the theorisation of the modernity/(de)coloniality studies collective, this paper thinks alongside hijabi women in Lebanon – a small Arab Mediterranean country – and their lived experiences in ‘mainstream Lebanese society’. Drawing on six-months of qualitative fieldwork through in-depth interviews and focus groups with photo-elicitation, the paper documents and analyses lived experiences of discrimination, exclusion and erasure. Identifying dehumanisation, civility and progress, and a present potent wider rejection of Islam in Lebanon, it argues that participant’s shared experiences can be understood as anti-Muslim racism under modernity/coloniality and highlights the need to de-exceptionalise the region and the analytical tools mobilised to understand it.

Keywords: Anti-Muslim hate, Racism, Hijab, Lebanon, Islam, Decolonial.

Introduction
Discrimination against hijabi women is a prevalent and mounting phenomenon across the western space. Receiving growing attention over the past years, it has been increasingly acknowledged as a form of racism, of anti-Muslim hate. Often, this is assumed to be limited to the west and corresponding experiences in the Global South, particularly in the Arabic-speaking world or Muslim-majority communities, are seldom documented, acknowledged or theorised. Overwhelmingly, region-specific concepts are used to analyse lived experiences in such contexts – with sectarianism occupying a central position in this respect.

Thinking alongside hijabi women in Lebanon, an Arab state on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, this paper will set out to document and explore lived experiences of potent wounding and aggression in the small country. Building on the theorisation of the modernity/(de)coloniality studies collective and on six-months of qualitative fieldwork with in-depth interviews and focus groups, it brings out the subaltern wounded voices of hijabi women to showcase their prevalent abjection in mainstream Lebanese society – ranging from the public to the most private – and to note the spatialization, heterogeneity, and entanglements of this exclusion. Based on this analysis, I conclude that this discrimination must be acknowledged as a manifestation of globalised and connected anti-Muslim hate as a form of racism conceptualised as a hierarchy of (de)humanisation under Modernity/coloniality. Doing this, I argue against Orientalising and exceptionalising narratives of the region and highlight the need for research and analysis through lenses besides sectarianism.
Scholarship around the Islamic Hijabi

Over the past decades, the Islamic hijab has emerged as a prime topic of public, political and scholarly debate. Despite this, hijabi lived experiences mostly remained absented and ‘Western Liberal feminism’ (Massad 2015) dominated the conversation. Seeking to redress this, emerging scholarship has explored hijabi women’s racialisation across the Global North (Brayson 2019; Hancock 2015; Ho 2007; Lazaridis and Wadia 2015; Macdonald 2006). With state and non-state practices converging, a colonially structured cultural racism is here shown to hide ‘itself under the guise of anti-sexist and even feminist liberatory discourse’ transformed into an erasing European civilisation (Al-Saji 2010: 788; Brayson 2019; Farris 2017; Ho 2007; Volpp 2013; Zempi and Chakraborti 2014).

While this racism has greatly impacted the lives of hijabi women, and Muslims more generally, the ‘specific nature, extent and impact of Islamophobic victimization experienced by hijab-wearing Muslim women and its consequences for victims, their families and wider communities’ remains inadequately understood and under-researched (Zempi and Chakraborty 2014: 3; Allen 2015). Indeed, insufficient attention has been given to this assault through empirical study, as the conversation around the hijab seems cloistered in (at many times extremely valuable, at others extremely harmful) theoretical and legal debates.

Zempi and Chakraborti (2012, 2015) have worked against this in the UK to provide a gendered analysis of Islamophobia’s lived effects (Chakraborti and Zempi 2012: 276). In their work, they conclude that Islamophobic hate crimes on women in Islamic dress, especially when covering their faces, produce harm ‘far more than ordinary crimes’ where ‘it is victim’s intrinsic identity that is targeted’ as the wearer and their family are pushed into a detrimental state of isolation and exclusion (Zempi and Chakraborty 2015: 53). Focusing on experiences unfolding in the public sphere, Allen (2015) similarly discusses a ‘demarcation of difference’ to explore the gendered assault on the hijab as Islamophobic aggression and theorise the complex interplay of the hijabi’s condition trapped between ‘excess antagonising visibility’ and ‘silencing invisibility’.

In France, Parvez (2011a, 2011b) has similarly worked with niqabi women to identify the politicisation of the Islamic dress and the ensuing legal measure’s production of a condition where the streets, the schools and all other common places French citizens are entitled to freely roam become off-limit to the practicing Muslim woman. Accordingly, hijabi women today are standardly ‘facing the burden’ of anti-Muslim hate, as ‘their movements, their postures, their
gestures, and their attire become objects of intensified surveillance’ and aggressive erasing behaviour (Magearu 2018: 136; Afshar 2008). In the public sphere, hijabis are particularly prone to (spatialised) experiences of discrimination as they appear to make others ‘uncomfortable’ as they themselves are made to feel as outsiders (Bowen 2008; Itaoui 2016; Lagasi 2013).

On a similar level, hijabis – stereotyped with a host of negative attitudes – are documented as particularly and increasingly subject to various forms of Islamophobic discrimination in the work-sphere (Koura 2018; Mahmud and Swami 2010). While emerging scholarship here is rarely in-depth, it points to the lack of research on discrimination based on religious attire and presents ‘direct evidence for both formal and interpersonal discrimination and low expectations of receiving job offers among Hijabis’ (Ghumman and Ryan 2013: 692; Abdelhadi 2019; Ghumman and Jackson 2010; Strabac et al. 2016). Such research suggests that, in the U.S. context, ‘demographic (age and ethnicity), human capital (education) and household composition (marriage and childbearing) variables’ mitigate the ‘hijab effect’ in excluding Muslim women (Abdelhadi 2019: 32). In France, similar results have been found where ‘l’aïcité, post-feminism and neoliberalism’ intersect and imbue education and the workforce to racialize and ‘erect barriers to Muslim women’s employment opportunities’ (Rootham 2015: 983).

While Islamophobia is at times assumed to be limited to Europe and North America, research indicates its global prevalence today. Despite this, its study has been ‘largely dismissed in Muslim countries’, as it has been presented as a western phenomenon (Yel and Nas 2014: 568; El Zahed 2019; Bayrakli and Hafez 2018). In this sense, much in the literature and wider discourses assumes that ‘in a majority Muslim context, a particular item of Islamic dress such as the veil is not a contested issue and therefore is not questioned’ (Wagner et al. 2012: 532; Gole 1997; Kaya 2000; Sandikci and Ger 2001; Smith-Hefner 2007). While some of this work has acknowledged the anti-hijab movement in westernising projects across Muslim-majority contexts during the last century, this is mostly perceived to have ended: ‘all women (Muslim and non-Muslim) were veiled before 1925. By the 1950s, a veiled woman in the Egyptian cities was a rarity. In the 1970s, the veil started reappearing in the streets, but it was by then a strictly Islamic product. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, unveiled women became a one-off’ (Saleh 2010: 34; Ahmed 2014).
Yel and Nas (2014) take the case of Turkey to explore the intricate workings of Islamophobia and how the ‘peculiar image of Islamic lifestyle, which is hierarchically positioned lower than the representations of secular lifestyle’, permeates Turkish society (Yel and Nas 2014: 569). They argue for reading the ongoing modernist, secularist, and capitalist Turkish project as one of systematic anti-Muslim racism and find Islamic dress (for women) functioning as a prime site and symbol of this Islamophobia where its wearers ‘are considered as the signifier of Islam and the anxiety that stems from it’ (Yel and Nas 2014: 578).

Auerbach (2017), focusing on university students in Turkey, finds that hijabis are consistently disadvantaged in the labour market, consistently paid less, and forced to relinquish various social, political, and economic activities and events. In analysing how the hijab is combatted, Auerbach (2017) also identifies a key role for space where a ‘policing [of] the borders of cultural territory and reinforcing the symbolic significance of a particular cultural orientation to a particular place’ pushes the hijabi into a position of exclusion through ‘neighbourhood pressure’ (Auerbach 2017: 228). In the case of her participants, this primarily involved negative looks and comments from family, peers, professors, neighbours, and strangers (Auerbach 2017: 229). Despite this variation, the majority of experiences are reported to occur in public spaces, with strangers. At multiple junctures, such exclusions have been acknowledged as the ‘trauma of forced unveiling’ (Kahf 2008). Yet, eventually, little work beyond the Turkish context exists, especially in Arabic-speaking countries.

In the specific case of Lebanon, Deeb’s (2006) work on Lebanese Shias draws hijabis as highly ‘modern women’: educated, urban, tech-savvy, and rational. In this, she offers the hijab as a ‘pious modern’ as she explores the formation of Islamic identities in Beirut’s southern suburb (Dahieh). Presenting an original analysis centring piety for both the understanding of the hijab and participant’s subjectivities, Deeb (2006) also notes that the hijab ‘stigma’ in mainstream Lebanese society persists whereby ‘the headscarf also figured into the stereotyping of Shi‘is as backward and nonmodern, reflecting the discourses that link modern-ness with secularism’ (Deeb 2006: 113). Yet, her work does not offer clear data about the materialisation of this amalgamation and its effect on lived experiences. Further, the focus of this narrative suggests a stigmatisation limited to non-Shia segments of the population, leading one to think that the stigma has been erased within the Shia community, perhaps within the wider Muslim one. Throughout, acts of lived discrimination are not presented or discussed and the hijabi’s experiences of/in Lebanese society are left undocumented and unexplored. Itani (2016), on the other hand, specifically worked with hijabis at the American University of Beirut to discuss
the need for their ‘integration’ as she acknowledges their rejection without documenting or exploring their quotidian lived experiences.

Theoretical Framework: Decoloniality and Race
This paper builds on the work of the Modernity/(de)Coloniality collective whose framing and conceptual tools are found to powerfully convey, reflect, and engage participant’s shared experiences. For the collective, the contemporary world is conceptualised as being that of a Eurocentric rhetorical narrative: modernity as seen from the outside of Europe being the Colonial/Imperial pursuit of a uni-versal world where Europe as a locus of enunciation is the present of history and the geographic centre of the world (Vázquez 2009; Mignolo 2011). Accordingly, modernity has a darker side: coloniality as the movement of exclusions, negations, and erasures. Conceptualised as a ‘colonial matrix of power’, this darker side works through a series of techniques where “the cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups [is exercised] by dominant racialized/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administration” (Grosfoguel 2010: 74).

Crucial to the colonial matrix of power’s functioning is racism: not ‘a classification of human beings according to the colour of their skin but rather a classification according to a certain standard of “humanity”’ upon which subjugation and exploitation thrive (Mignolo 2012: 55; Grosfoguel 2016). Race is thus defined as a ‘global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human’ produced by the institutions of modernity/coloniality ‘politically, culturally and economically’ (Grosfoguel 2016: 10). ‘Humanity’, it must be realised, is not here ‘a transcendental and neutral essence that just anyone can appropriate and describe’ but is rather a particular enunciation born out of the western episteme and ‘based on epistemic and ontological colonial difference’ (Mignolo 2009: 17).

Race is, therefore, the dehumanising ‘structuring process’ in the post-1500 world working toward the establishment of the global colonial matrix of power. Accordingly, racism is understood as ‘an instrumental term in which the colonial difference is built, and the colonial wound infringed’ (Mignolo 2012: 56). In line with its definition, race is not uniform: we have ‘diverse forms of racisms’ which can be ‘constructed through various racial markers’ in different geographies and times that can include (and have included) ‘colour, ethnicity, language, culture and/or religion’ (Grosfoguel et al. 2015: 636).
Produced and reproduced for centuries, it is upheld ‘by the institutions of the “capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system”’ (Grosfoguel 2016: 10). In this sense, racialisation is the ‘hidden logic’ of the coloniality of power playing out throughout the world: it is the means used ‘to degrade whatever does not correspond to the imperial ideals of Modernity and to persecute and destroy whoever disagrees with the racial classification of the world’ (Mignolo 2012: 56). Racism is, accordingly, never limited to ‘prejudice or stereotypes, but above all an institutional/structural hierarchy related to the materiality of domination’ that is entwined with a specific narrative of linear time and futurity where Europe’s geographic Others are turned into its temporal Others (Grosfoguel 2016: 11; Vázquez 2009).

In line with the decolonial definition of racism presented above, anti-Muslim hate can therefore be conceptualised as racism where the marker is religion; specifically Islam. In this respect, it is as a global phenomenon that needs to be understood as a hierarchisation produced by coloniality and its reproduction in relation to the supremacy of the Christian, the secular, and the western (Grosfoguel and Martín-Muñoz 2010; Bayrakli and Hafez 2018). In this vein, anti-Muslim racism (or Islamophobia) is a question of structural domination that imbues lived experiences in the pursuit of the Eurocentric horizon’s establishment and the subordination and erasure of its Other. An important component of this racism and its globality – allowing it to permeate Muslim communities – is Orientalism and self-Orientalism as a mechanism producing the colonised as inferior in their own eyes. In this sense, it situates Muslims in a position and zone of internalised subordination eliciting within their subjectivity a desire to distance oneself from Islam constructed as an inherent deficiency, even by/for ‘practicing believers’ (see Bayrakli and Hafez 2018; Grosfoguel and Mielants 2006). With various manifestations in varying contexts, it is eventually a phenomenon that mobilizes westernised elites and westernised institutions to subjugate and dominate the representations and being of Islam, the Islamic, and Muslims.

Research Methods: Decolonial Listening
As a specific exercise of decolonial listening, this paper pursues a voicing and an analysis of subalternised lived experiences (Mignolo 2012; Vázquez 2012). Research here is therefore understood as the attempt to make “visible the invisible” and analyse “the mechanisms that produce such invisibility or distorted visibility” through an exercise of engagement with the “invisible” people themselves (Maldonado-Torres 2010: 116). This requires, consequently, a
heavy reliance and featuring of direct quotes from participants in an attempt to voice and convey, to let speak.

This paper, in this respect, does not claim to represent an external reality it has identified or the conditions of what is, but rather to listen and work with how the subaltern experience a specific aspect of their reality and its problems. As a case study, it works with hijabi women in Lebanon – Muslim women wearing covering dress socially deemed as ‘Islamic’ in any of its varieties – to conceptualise and theorise their dwelling in the modern world. Accordingly, this exploration does not claim a representation, particularly not of an abstracted ‘hijabi woman’, and does not argue that the experiences presented are those of all hijabi women or of Lebanese life. Surely, it does not suggest a homogenous or uniform hijabi experience.

Methodologically, all data presented here was collected in Lebanon by myself, a Lebanese Shia Muslim male based in the English academy, between May 2018 and December 2018. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups with photo-elicitation, fieldwork covered Lebanon’s urban and peri-urban geography closing with eighty-eight hijabi Lebanese with an approximately equal distribution between Sunnis and Shias. Despite this, urban locales were over-represented, especially Beirut. There was also a significant bias toward younger age groups. All data was collected in colloquial Lebanese Arabic, transcribed into English, and then analysed with the assistance of NVIVO.

With a complex positionality, recruitment and access were made easier by the intersection of my gender, religion, ethnicity, cultural belonging and nationality. In interviews with Shia participants, my sect was prime while in interviews with Sunni participants it was my nationality and educational status, for example. In this respect, drawing on varying aspects of my identity depending on the context, legitimacy and rapport were fostered for generative and rich conversations. It is important to acknowledge here that, throughout, male privilege played an important role in facilitating fieldwork in line with Lebanon’s modern patriarchal order.

Context: Lebanon, Identity, and Religion
A multiparty confessional republic on the shores of the Mediterranean, Lebanon was invented and expanded in pursuit of independence from the rest of the region in the inter-war period. As part of the Franco-British colonial partitions, it was set up with eighteen official religious sects under Maronite domination and a special relationship with France as a beacon of its ‘civilising mission’ (Traboulsi 2007; Maktabi 1999; Salibi 1998).
These sects, it is crucial to realise, were hierarchically positioned where the nation’s establishment hinged on religion acting as a key structuring variable across social, political, and economic spheres pushing for a westernising and modernising agenda (Firro 2002; Kaufman 2004; Zogheib 2014; Womack 2012). In the years following independence from the French mandate the country’s Christian ethos was further institutionalised within and beyond the state. This dominance, nevertheless, crumbled under the pressure of the Lebanese civil war and surrounding regional and global geopolitics (Traboulsi 2007; Tabar 2014).

Lebanon survives through a delicate confessional power balance between its three main religious constituencies (Christian Maronites, Sunni Muslims, and Shia Muslims) as it continues to navigate multiple lines of global division under a weak state with an ongoing project of neo-liberal westernisation (Hajjar 2009; Hermez 2015; Hakim 2013; Peri 2014). In this respect, sectarianism is often offered as the standard lens to analyse Lebanon’s various problems, contradictions, and instability where Sunni-Shia divisions have increasingly attracted attention (Baytiyeh 2017; Bray Collins 2016; Cammett 2014; Gade 2017).

The country today remains a ‘complex and perplexed’ space with distinct groups having vast differences in the dynamics governing their socio-political lives (Baytiyeh 2017; Cleveland et al. 2013; Farah and Samad 2014; Nammour 2007; Salamey and Tabar 2008). Through a ‘Western-oriented Lebanese subjectivity’ where cosmopolitanism, tourism, and the habitus of merchants are prime (Maasri 2016: 138), the Lebanese cultural scene can nevertheless be said to revolve around a westernised set of practices across the country. In this sense, Lebanon is a prime space where coloniality can be explored.

From Discrimination to Islamophobic Racism

In the following paragraphs, I will pursue an exploration of the Lebanese hijabi’s lived experiences from across her quotidian life in Lebanon. In the first instance, I will show that she dwells as a subject of exclusion with great parallels to anti-Muslim hate in the west. Secondly, I will evidence the prevalence of this discrimination within Muslim communities and within the hijabi’s domestic sphere to argue that it cannot be reduced to sectarian conflict

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1 It is important to note here that this Christian hegemony was in line with a gendered enforced secular-religious binary, one that was common across post-colonial settings (Al-Ali 2000; Kandiyoti 1999). An exploration of this remains beyond the scope of this paper, see in this respect Maldonado-Torres (2014).

2 Lebanon is governed by what can be described as a hybrid political order with significant complexity. The entwinement of the Lebanese state with contemporary coloniality and historical colonialism and the production of the ensuing order require an exploration and research that remains to be done, falling outside the scope of this paper.
or communal competition. In the third sub-section, I will contend that this discrimination reveals, and belongs to, broader anti-Muslim hate structured by coloniality by identifying three elements within the experiences my participants shared: the dehumanising dimension, the entanglement with the questions of civility and backwardness, and the association with wider elements of ‘Islamicness’.

Anti-Hijab Discrimination
Throughout the field, participants shared various experiences of overt and covert discrimination, of hate crimes, and of their perceived difference in mainstream Lebanese society (as an etic category) in reaction to their Islamic dress:

A lot [of discrimination][painfully] Like out of the things I’ve heard is: ‘Oh you’ve put on the diaper!’ For example…‘So, you’re diaper-wearing now’…you hear that. [Focus Group, Dahieh]

The other day they had this march, for women. And all the organisation went to march together demanding women’s rights. But one of the signs they were holding, said something like ‘You will not oppress me with your hijab’, like saying be free of the hijab, you are oppressed, something like that. We [hijabis] are outside. [Interview, South Lebanon]

Not long ago there was this public beach that prohibited the burkini, in Lebanon…This is outrageous for me! Me going to a beach, public, and having one of the municipality workers come to me and say: ‘No, Syrians and hijabis are not allowed’. This happened! So this is something. And then even private beaches. If someone is wearing a burkini, she can’t go to most private beaches in Lebanon. So, no. there are many things, rights, many things missing. [Interview, Beirut]

From streets to shops, she is consistently subject to insults and disrespect, to harassment and rejection, subtle and explicit. As a abaya wearing participant explained, she could not even exercise in public because ‘I was considered not to have the right’. The parallels to Zempi and Chakaraborti’s (2014) participants explaining their lack of rights in the UK and Parvez’s (2011a) presentation of her participants being systematically robbed of their rights to life in France were astounding. Unable to tread on some streets, to demand ‘civil rights’, to practice leisure activities, with her habitus of Otherness, horrific insults and words that wound, she dwelled under aggressive discrimination across scales of her social world. With the hegemonic reiteration of ‘liberal feminism’ by various public figures, including media characters and

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3 It is important here to acknowledge and affirm the prevalence of various other forms of exclusion in Lebanon, from anti-blackness and colourism to migratism and the Kafala system.
members of parliament (such as MP Wiam Wahhab) liking the niqab to a ‘trash bag’, for example, the hijabi’s anomatisation was public and overt.

P1: And there is more. There are companies and job ads, they put a flagrant specification: not hijabi.
P2: Yes, yes there are those. And there are places when you call them, they immediately ask ‘Are you hijabi or not?’ And if you say you are, they would say ‘No that doesn’t work for us’.

[verbal agreement]
P3: I applied to a school once. From the start of the interview, she said to me: ‘Look, miss, to say this as it is, we don’t hire hijabis’. And that was that. [Focus group, Beirut]

As was the case across the west, the hijabi was excluded from the labour market, a market that formed a strong front for her assault. In a country where state provisions, welfare, and social security are alienated concepts, this exclusion from the workforce is suffocating, posing myriad challenges.

Soon into fieldwork, I realized that the hijabi was completely absented from the country’s service sector. Inquiring, my participants explained that such work, that of the major sector of the Lebanese economy, was simply not for the hijabi. Such work which represented modern Lebanon the tourism hub – as dreamed – was not for the hijabi. Here, the role of Lebanon’s imagined identity and the image of the ideal Lebanese as ‘a modern’ echoed again and again. Indeed, here it appeared that the imagined identity of the post-colonial land played a similar role to that of the imagined identity of ‘western civilisation’ in excluding and aggressing the Muslim Other, as referenced above. Eventually, the extent and violence of this exclusion indicate that its detriment might be higher than that experienced in many regions of the Global North where the spoils of empire have produced a (relative, selective, and limited) state of social security and/or provision.

This discrimination, both in public and in the work sphere, was not homogenous but was rather subject to two main variables: perceived conservatism of the dress and geography. On the first level, the equation was simple: the more conservative – and consequently the more ‘Islamic’ – the dress was deemed to be, the more extreme the incidents were. As documented across the west where most conservative forms of the hijab were at higher risk of assault, so it was in Lebanon. For those wearing the face-veil, the scene was the most aggressive:

4 The service sector is a key sector of the Lebanese economy and has long played a central role in imagining Lebanon as being a distinct sphere within the Arab world. See, for example, Maasri (2016) and Kardahji (2015) for an analysis of Lebanon’s postcolonial formation by a westernised elite as a laissez-faire haven for commerce, finance and tourism.
[chuckles]…they still don’t accept me. I would be walking in the street, the stares, it’s unbelievable. Especially when I drive…Like, they would look in this way, and they almost get into a car accident just because they keep staring at me and giving me looks. And this is the easy part. There are those who say things…I used to stay quiet, but not anymore…Like ‘ninja’, this is the least [bad] word, ninja. And they swear at me. Some have even tried to run me over when I’m driving. [Interview, Beirut]

As analysed in the UK by Allen (2015), the hijabi was stuck between excess antagonising visibility and silencing invisibility that intensified as her dress’ conservatism increased. Furthermore, geography similarly influenced her experiences:

Let me tell you this story. Once we were, in the summer, in Zahle [touristic Christian-majority city]. So my kid and I got out of the car to get some ice cream from [shop name]. When I first walked in, I asked for ice cream. He said they don’t have any. And the ice cream was right next to me! I was like: ‘But it’s here, that’s ice cream’. He just repeated that they don’t have any to sell me. [Focus group, Beirut]

P1: Like in Ashrafieh or Dekweneh, [Christian middle-class areas] if you’re a hijabi and walking on the street...like...
P2: That’s not accepted... [Focus group, Beirut]

Once I was doing fieldwork in Ashrafieh and there were some Syrian refugees [sitting] on the street there, hijabis. They have some [hijabi Syrians] there, apparently. Everyone there insisted that I was Syrian and treated me in a way that was not acceptable. Like not acceptable at all, at all! They said they wanted to call the police, that I was taking pictures. And this guy, who had nothing to do with anyone, like a nobody, took me to the notary, and he started…like in a very unacceptable way…he insisted I was Syrian. I was like, ‘What is wrong with you? I don’t have a Syrian accent to begin with!’ And I feel that if I weren’t hijabi, he wouldn’t like…never said I was Syrian! Right or not? [Interview, Beirut]

In many regions, your mere presence, the simplest act of walking on the street, was ‘not accepted’. Public spaces, it became apparent, was off-limits for the hijabi in Lebanon just as it was off-limits for the hijabi across the west, and beyond the west (for example, refer to Auerbach 2017). This rejection was not subtle: it was vocalised, expressed, enforced by everyone from shop owners to pedestrians as the association with racialised and subalternised Syrians in Lebanon (Chalcraft 2009; Thorleifsson 2016) echoed throughout. Not unlike ghettoization, space had plenty to say in this discrimination.5

Discrimination – beyond Sectarianism

In analysing this, the spatialization of religious and sectarian differences in Lebanon emerges

5 A key finding of this research was the consistency of these experiences across sects, although some minor variations do exist. Evidencing this consistency and exploring these minor variations remains beyond the scope of this paper and its argument.
as a prime determinant of these experiences where Christian regions powerfully figure in the hijabi’s abjection. Surely, an analysis of this discrimination requires a sectarian lens and a thinking through inter-communal antagonisms contextualised within Lebanon’s post-colonial imagination and its confessional system, especially with its religious communities’ ongoing competition and recent (and ongoing) history of civil war and strife. Yet, things were more complex:

There are even institutions in Dahieh [Shia-majority region and Hezbollah stronghold] that are not accepting. Not outside only. They are requiring that she be non-hijabi. Why? Because they are considering that the employee needs to be presentable and chic and the hijab is ruining that. There are institutions, in our regions, having it as a condition. It’s a policy thing. [Focus group, Dahieh]

P3: Even our religious community, inside of Dahieh, would prefer that she not be wearing a abaya because it is more comfortable for him [the employer].
P1: It always happened, once she arrives at an interview, they go: ‘We apologise’.
P2: And we had this centre for children with special needs [in Dahieh] and this girl wearing the abaya, they told her: ‘We accept you but you must take off the abaya because this appearance reflects something negative on kids…’ [Focus group, Dahieh]

Even in Tripoli, which is this very conservative Islamic place, you don't see hijabis in banks. All those at the bank are non-hijabi. Where did they find them? Really, it's so bad. [Focus group, Beirut]

In spaces considered as the countries’ most Islamic/conservative (Dahieh and Tripoli), some Lebanese hijabis were so excluded as to be made to feel a ‘negative’ sight for children and a tarnishing of the employer’s reputation. The hijab was not presentable, it was not tolerable, as it threatened the employer and their image, their success, their belonging. Throughout, the niqab was especially problematic:

But the niqab, the Lebanese Muslim society, in particular, rejects it. [painfully] How do we know this? I first came as a niqabi to the school. They said ‘Yes sure, but inside the school, you must take it off. Ok, for young kids, I take it off, but when I am asked that even in parent-teacher meetings I need to take it off? You, as an Islamic institution you did not help me, you hurt me! And this isn’t new. This has nothing to do with ISIS, it has to do with the profile of the school. Parents are registering their kids, if they see a niqabi, they won’t like it, they’d get scared. The purpose of the school is to gain, gain students. [Interview, Beirut]

In tears, my participant, who had given up the niqab completely by the time of our interview, told me of her deep sense of violation forced by her need for employment. As a teacher at an ‘Islamic primary school’ in Beirut, she explained how the rejection of the hijabi was common in the Muslim community of Beirut and how it was even present in ‘Islamic institutions’. These were, I came to realize, wary of excess in excess and did not want to be ‘too Islamic’ (see
Haddad and Golson 2007; Khandaker 2017). Women’s bodies seemed the evident space on which this ‘moderate’ and ‘secularized’ Islam could be projected to appeal and attract.

Another participant, in a similar example, told of how ‘everyone’ including ‘committed Muslim men [employers] choose non-hijabis’ in the Haret Saida region because they feel ‘they simply cannot’ choose otherwise if they wish to attract customers and preserve their commercial interests. Accordingly, exclusion was not only normalised but also rendered necessary, an inevitable strategy dictated by Lebanon’s ‘diversity’, ‘reality’, and ‘economic interests’, as she explained. Diversity and the entangled economic question here, it appeared, meant the concealment of any difference in relation to the modern secular and a push to homogenise the shared space into the modern/colonial universe. Employers, regardless of their identities or their beliefs, yielded to this logic.

Further still, this aggression infiltrated the hijabi’s home:

It was a fight to wear it [the hijab]. When I did, no one in the family spoke to me for a week. My dad didn’t speak to me for two weeks. So it was this atmosphere where everyone was saying: ‘Uf, why? What happened? What are you doing? How will you even find a job? How will you get married?’ How and how… [Focus group, Saida]

As my participant went on to explain, her family considered her choice to wear the hijab as one that will ‘doom’ her to failure and, simultaneously, be understood by the community as a manifestation of failed parenting. In this sense, her choice harmed her family and, at the same time, harmed her own future and prospects. Her family’s behaviours, she explained, were only a result of the ‘ideas they had’ and their will to protect her.

So I wore the hijab… I used to be beaten every day at home. Not once, multiple times. My mother would take off my hijab, and I would wear it. She would take it off and I would put it back on. She used to say: ‘I don’t have girls who wear the hijab’. I stuck to it by force…And I kept suffering…Yes, I went through a lot with my mother. A lot, a lot, a lot of suffering with my mother because of the hijab. Generally in the family, they don’t like the hijab, they see it as backward…[Interview, Southern Lebanon]

My interviewee, like many other participants, explained how her experiences were ‘justified’ by her mother through an insistence on the inferiority and ‘backwardness’ of Islam and the East and on the need to look like ‘Europeans and Christians’ and ‘civilised people’ if one is to ‘progress in life’. The hijab, her mother believed, condemned her daughter’s future and negated what she herself had built for both herself and her household in the ‘world of today’.
While this was most prominent in families deemed to be ‘not very religious’, it was even present in families that can be socially deemed as ‘religious’ but who are also seeking ‘to better their children’s chances in life’ [Interview, South Lebanon], my participants insisted and my data powerfully documented:

My parents, who are generally practicing and all, were really against it. They said I was young, that I didn’t know what it means, or what it does, that I should wait, maybe till after I get married. They said a lot of things. They really tried to stop me from wearing it at that time, it was really painful [Interview, Lebanese North].

Eventually, across social divides, some experienced their choice of the hijab, inside their homes, as physical pain. Others experienced it as a psychological assault: an ostracization where family members simply ignored one’s presence, or left. For many, it was a combination of both, complemented by a bombardment of aggressive and hurtful comments, attacks, and insults. Exclusion was here care motivated by love; erasure was benevolence. With the responsibility of (colonised) Muslim parents to equip their children with the necessary forms of capital, with the necessary norms, codes, and practices that could render them successful dwellers of the modern world, the hijabi was robbed from her primary carers’ support and made to, instead, live the brunt of their ‘duties’.

Further, the aggression persisted throughout the hijabi’s life under a global patriarchal order as it moved to her marriage:

There were many problems and a lot of fights with them [husband’s family], for me not to wear the hijab. I got married and I wasn’t hijabi and then later I wanted to wear it. […] My husband’s mother went hysterical. To this day she wears sleeveless shirts and things like that and keeps telling me things like ‘what have you done to yourself?’…My husband at first was not convinced at all…he left the house for over a week…because I put on the hijab…and then with time things rebalanced. But I don’t know where God gave me all that strength from. I was so insistent, I said there was no way for me to take it off. No matter what. No matter where I was going to reach, even if it was divorce. I hung in there. [Focus group, Beirut]

The question of husbands concerned about their image was omnipresent throughout the field. Indeed, I encountered myriad stories of women who wanted to wear the hijab but could not as it would ‘destroy their marriage’. In this vein, a niqabi wife, my participants explained, could mean social suicide and, as Hoda told of her own experience, was faced with complete rejection even from a (privately) upper-middle-class ‘practicing devout Muslim husband’. This, my data indicates, further seemed to hold a class dimension where, particularly, middle and upper-class men’s social standing, social circles, and even occupation could be threatened by a hijabi wife.
Indeed, class appeared as an important category in this respect, and one that was deeply entangled with anti-Muslim hate where it both offered participants privilege that allowed them to navigate Lebanon’s extant Islamophobia as it, simultaneously, complicated their visibly Islamic practice and aggressed it. Eventually, the hijab’s rejection – particularly for the more conservative forms of the dress – increased as one moved socio-economically ‘upwards’.

Ultimately, the colonial patriarchal system transferred ‘responsibility’ from parents to husbands. Unlike what has been recorded in the scholarship, the hijabi’s policing was in this sense concentrated in the public sphere but rather infiltrated her most intimate of relationships and haunted her most private of spheres. This domestic dimension remains with few documented parallels in the Global North. In parallel, religion is pushed into the private sphere, policed out of the public to be absented and invisibilised under a global order of secular hegemony.

Based on this prevalence of anti-hijab discrimination, this was a phenomenon that could not be reduced to sectarian conflict or inter-communal competition as it could not be fully explained by reference to Lebanese history of war and conflict. Rather, as a phenomenon that existed within Muslim communities, and as a practice reproduced even by practicing Muslims, it needs to be understood in its entanglement with western secular hegemony and coloniality, with modern patriarchy, and with the invention and ongoing imagination of the post-colonial nation-state of Lebanon.

**Making Sense of the Hijabi’s Discrimination: Racialisation under Coloniality**

In trying to analyse and conceptualise this discrimination, three key elements that emerged from my fieldwork are of great relevance. Firstly, my participants explained that the hijabi’s discrimination must be related to the question of her humanity:

> Loads of times, I’d be walking on the street, and I see kids yell out and start screaming to their moms [scared of me]. But who is behind this? Why is he scared? I take him to the side and show my face, or give him a lollipop. Or anything. Just to show him that I am human like him… [Focus group, Saida]

> I would love for them to realise that I am not a human being that different from what you are…that I am like you. But it’s done for them, they consider that I am not like them. I do not dress like them, I do not speak like them, I do not act like them. You know? [Interview, Dahieh]

> We would pass by places and people would yell: ‘Look at the ninja!’ Or things like: ‘Look at the black garbage bag!’ The words would be that harsh, they would say those
things to us. [Focus group, Dahieh]

As a threat, the hijabi was a subject of hate, of hate crimes. The first recount quoted above happened on the streets of Saida: one of the country’s most conservative Sunni towns in the South of Lebanon. My participants explained how these micro-aggressions were often not about the hijab. Rather, they are about the hijabi. She was not wearing a black garbage bag. She was a black garbage bag. The similarity to, for example, Mason-Bish and Zempi’s (2019) or Zempi and Chakraborti’s (2015) explorations of assault and objectification in the UK was resounding: the experiences were the same as the movement from ‘first world’ to ‘third world’, from North to South, changed little. In discussing this, many participants explained how Muslims have historically been ‘second-class citizens’ in Lebanon and that this meant them being ‘second-class humans’. The issue indeed was not of simplistic sectarian competition. It was, I contend, an objectifying difference from the imagined secularised Christian modern European as the full human:

They see the one without a full hijab, she is normal, like other humans, not from another planet [laughs]. [Interview, Dahieh]

Other humans, my participant explained, meant ‘normal people’. When asked again, she specified people ‘who wear pants and shirts, you know’. In this respect, the centrality of ‘modern western’ wear revealed itself as norm-setting, not simply for dress but also for normality, for humanity, and for related questions of rights and dignity.

This, it must be further clarified, was strongly linked to questions of progress, of civility, and of European primacy:

[They say] backward, retard, know nothing, [stuck] in history, if she speaks then it’s like “oh shame on you why are you speaking”. What, do I not have a voice? [...] The hijab in general, in general, for those people who are not committed, they see the hijab as backwardness. As soon as they see a hijabi, she is classified as a backward person. When they speak to her and start knowing she is cultured and knows things, they get shocked and don’t believe it. That she has a thinking mind, no way. But why? We are human beings, like you! [Interview, Beirut]

In this sense, for mainstream Lebanese society as identified by my participants, ‘backwardness’ was the second key axis of the hijabi’s abjection. The hijabi predicament, it became apparent, was deeply rooted in specific understandings of a linear time where Europe is the present whereas Islam, and Arabness, are in the past. Indeed, they revealed themselves in a past that was always stuck in its backwardness; failing to enter the contemporary. As a subject of the
past, stuck in the past, civility –deeply entwined with hierarchized humanity – emerged as central.

Thirdly, and in line with this, my participants explained how their experiences must not be understood as ones exclusively relating to the hijab, but that these were often experiences that had to do with Islam and any of its signifiers:

Let me give you an example, I wear this [fashionable hijab] usually, but sometimes if I’m just jumping to go somewhere I quickly put on the khaliji abaya [Gulf-style cloak]. The same person, Christian, when I was wearing this [fashionable hijab] they were Ok with me. When I went wearing the abaya, she said please don’t come this way. She said: “please don’t come this way, please you look too Muslim like this”. That’s exactly what she said. It’s even worse than that. Once I was putting on Oud [with the hijab], someone said: “that is too Muslim, please don’t put that smell on.” [Interview, Dahieh]

Islam stimulated rejection and aggression, my data indicated, and the rejection of the hijab needed to be contextualised within the presence of this overt and aggressive rejection of ‘the Islamic’. In this respect, my participants explained that the discrimination they endured was at times significantly more violent when their aggressors identify other Islamic signs with the hijab: from Islamic-sounding names to Islamic cultural customs, or even diet. While this was not omnipresent, with the main exception being the case of some (and not all) other practicing Muslims, it was a powerful and widespread phenomenon, my participants established. In contrast, they affirmed, this could be alleviated through an association with western practices. Speaking in English or French, for example, seemed to offer the hijabi an improved chance of being tolerated within the space of modern Lebanon, of being perceived as a potentially deserving citizen, as a potentially deserving human:

Hijab means Muslim, and they don’t want any of this. That is why we have all this [discrimination]. [Focus group, Dahieh]

Indeed, as issues that transcend the borders of Lebanon, the Islamic dimensions of this discrimination strongly problematise a narrative that limits it to sectarian Lebanese competition. Most importantly, these powerfully indicate this discrimination’s embeddedness in global structures of civilizational hierarchization. As identified in Turkey, an Islamic lifestyle and all that is associated with it are hierarchically positioned at the bottom and identified the subject as ‘lesser’. Accordingly, such lifestyles are the cause of hate-inducing anxieties, in the west and across the Mediterranean. The question was, ultimately, that of a

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6 It should be noted that Muslims are prohibited from buying homes in a number of Christian regions across Lebanon, often through official municipal decisions.
global structure enforcing a hierarchy in humanity across contexts and spaces: it was a question of racialisation and racism under the “capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system” (Grosfoguel 2016: 10).

Conclusions
This paper has sought to make visible and analyse Lebanese hijabi women’s lived experiences of wounding and subalternation in contemporary Lebanon ‘from below’. With great echoes but also with distinctive features as compared to the case of hijabi women in the west and in previous decades, I have here explored this discrimination’s prevalence across divides and its embeddedness in westernising and orientalising discourses. Further, its spatialised, heterogenous, and layered dimensions were identified as it was shown to be entangled with both patriarchy and class. As a violent and overt exclusion, it was further shown to permeate both public and private spheres as secularity reigned hegemonic and a European model was pursued. Based on this analysis and identifying dehumanisation, linear time/progress with Europe as horizon, as well as an entanglement with other ‘Islamic signifiers’, the paper concluded that anti-hijab discrimination in Lebanon can be understood as a form of (modern) anti-Muslim racism.

Accordingly, I have here shown how participant’s lived experiences cannot be understood solely in reference to Lebanon’s sectarian competition and inter-communal conflict as is standardly done in both academic and public discourses. Rather, a centring of the connected, global, and modern/colonial nature of these experiences and the governing structures in Lebanon making them possible is required. Ultimately, much remains to be researched and theorised in this respect, including various intersections with issues as varied as citizenship and refugeeeness to racism within sexual minority settings, in the pursuit of an anti-racist liberation.

References


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