

Conference

Friday 23 September 2011

St Antony's College, University of Oxford

**“Coercion or Empowerment?
Official Anti-Veiling Campaigns in the Middle East and Central Asia”**

The recent decision by the French National Assembly to ban the wearing of the *niqab* (Muslim face-veil) in public has sparked an intense controversy. Similar anti-*niqab* campaigns are taking place in a range of European countries

The immense symbolic significance which the *niqab*, sometimes mistakenly referred to as the *burqa*, has acquired, both for its supporters and its opponents, is a marked feature of this controversy. Both sides claim to speak for women's empowerment, but are divided by issues of secularism versus religious belief, and identity versus integration.

Yet neither the anti-veiling campaigns in contemporary Europe, nor the debates which rage around them, are new. They are strikingly pre-figured by similar campaigns and debates which occurred across the Islamic world in the early decades of the twentieth century, particularly in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Although these countries were ruled by very different regimes, in Turkey a republican regime based on the army, modernizing monarchs, Reza Shah and King Amanullah, in Iran and Afghanistan, and communist parties in Central Asia, their anti-veiling campaigns bore profound similarities. Whether communist or elite nationalist, all disliked what they viewed as the reactionary forces of Islam and tradition, forces which they equated and conflated, and all wished to create a new and modern woman, unveiled, educated and integrated into the workforce.

These anti-veiling campaigns were everywhere presented as emancipatory. However, they were conducted by regimes which were in every sense authoritarian while the state's sponsorship of aggressive and authoritarian anti-veiling campaigns led to an intense politicization of the issue. Unveiling became a battleground on which enemies of the regimes might mobilize a more general opposition. For the secular elites, unveiling remained a signifier of modernity. For their opponents, unveiling became symptomatic of a loss of cultural integrity and a capitulation to European imperialism. Many also saw unveiling as a deliberate attempt to weaken religious feeling, the last means by which European power might be resisted.

The conference will look at these official anti-veiling campaigns in the interwar Middle East and Central Asia from a comparative historical perspective. It will examine as wide a range of historical episodes as possible and draw conclusions about the nature, objectives, achievements and failures of these campaigns, which have such a striking contemporary resonance.