

TAKING THE VEIL

How France's public schools became the battleground in a culture war.

BY JANE KRAMER

Not long ago, in Paris, I met a young Muslim woman named Djamila Benrehab, who, at the age of twenty, had donned not only a black head scarf but a billowy black *abaya* and, under it all, a tight black bandanna to her eyebrows that left only the circle of her face exposed. Djamila is a big, apple-cheeked, endearing person. She speaks a beautiful lilting French, and is intelligent and quite charming. Her dream is to leave Paris and go to Brooklyn, where, she has heard, Muslim girls go veiled and nobody minds, and, in any case, "it can't be worse than here." She wants to study international relations at Brooklyn College, and to qualify she is learning English at the University of Paris 13, six and a half miles from the housing projects of Garges-lès-Gonesse, where she lives with her parents, her two brothers, and a teen-age sister. But when she "made my choice . . . to announce my identity," she wasn't thinking of Brooklyn. She was married to a Muslim boy whom she knew from high school—and will not discuss except to say that his behavior was "not with God." She was so unhappy, she says, that she bought her first Koran and started to read, nights, while he was out drinking. It wasn't long before she left him and moved back to her parents' apartment. But she kept on reading. When she came to one of the passages about veils—which many Muslim feminists maintain do not so much prescribe veils as record that the wives of the Prophet went veiled and in this way were able to recognize one another and to be honored by other women for their distinction—she prayed and fasted and decided to wear one, too. Her mother, who comes from Algeria and had never been veiled, was horrified by her new clothes. "You'll waste your youth," she kept saying. But Djamila persisted. "I just said to my mom, 'I'm going to wear them.' I was attached to my decision. She didn't deter me, and now she's veiled, too."

It hasn't been easy for Djamila. She

left her first job, as a teacher's aide, after parents complained that a woman in veils was not a good role model for little girls. She asked for a week off to think this over, and then offered to compromise by wearing a high rolled collar and her scarf, "just something that would cover my neck and hair," but the complaints continued and she had to quit. She went for job interviews and was always turned down. But her robes got longer and more concealing. People swore at her in the Métro. Strangers accused her of carrying bombs in her book bag. ("I said to myself, '*Tant pis!* I am not a terrorist.'") Once, when we were leaving a Paris café, a man at the next table reached up and stroked her robe, though, it being a Left Bank café, he said "Chic!" and she said, "Thank you." The only job she could get, finally, was with a telemarketing service—where, of course, she was simply a nice French voice selling something on the phone.

By last year, she was going to mosque several times a week, and her life, by her own admission, was narrowing. The police told her that they couldn't renew her identity card with her head covered in the picture. (She uncovered it, crying, but, like the Strasbourg schoolgirl, much featured in the French press, who shaved her head rather than show her hair, she had taken the precaution of clipping hers so that no one who checked the card would see it.) Then the amateur theatre company where only a few years earlier she had starred as Andromache in Racine's tragedy and as Desdemona, in "Othello," said that she couldn't continue acting if she was veiled onstage. (She says that Othello, being a Moor in Venice, might easily insist that his wife be veiled and that Desdemona, being a loving, dutiful wife, might just as easily want to prove her loyalty by obliging him; it is, at the very least, an interesting interpretation.) Then the women's basketball team in her neighborhood said that she couldn't play unless she put on a uniform of shorts

and a T-shirt. And then she heard that you couldn't marry in city hall in Muslim clothes, and that distressed her, too, although she has no plans for getting remarried. The men she sees are her imam and the men in her family, and I suspect that any marriage she makes now will be arranged. She has found a Muslim women's basketball team and even a Muslim women's karate group, but she misses acting. She still rehearses in her sleep. "We are not the same as other people," she said, when I asked how she felt "excluded," but the truth is that, from the perspective of most other Frenchmen and Frenchwomen, she has excluded herself.

What does a secular Western society like France do with a woman like Djamila? The French tell you, as President Jacques Chirac told me when we talked at the Élysée last spring, that it begins with school, that "France" is an idea of citizenship, an identity forged in the

neutral space of its public schools—in what Jules Ferry, the nineteenth-century father of French secular education, is said to have called the "*école sanctuaire*." There is really no place for religious expression or exceptionalism in those public schools, but this is precisely what many of the country's Muslims—and there are five to six million of them, nearly a tenth of the population—are demanding. Muslims today are part of the biggest labor migration in Europe since the great migrations of the Roman Empire; some analysts at the European Union say that in fifteen years they could account for twenty per cent of its population. They are part of a vast post-colonial diaspora—uprooted, often recruited, and for the most part unwelcome, unassimilated, and poor—and in France today they are also part of a social revolution: "the war between Islamic fundamentalism and secular fundamentalism," as people on both sides say.

Four years ago, when Djamila began to follow Sharia, or traditional Islamic law, she was, according to French law, an adult, capable of choice. Her sister, who is seventeen, is by law a child. She isn't veiled, but she goes to high school with girls who have been since the age of twelve, and who see no reason that they shouldn't stay veiled in a French classroom. By last year, as many as two or three thousand girls were said to be going to school veiled in one manner or another in Islamic head scarves, and as often as not were told to remove them or be sent home. France's public-school teachers had been complaining for years about veils, and Chirac himself—normally a cautious President—was getting impatient. In August of 2003, he asked a highly respected former cabinet minister by the name of Bernard Stasi, who serves as his official ombudsman in matters involving French secularism, to put together a commission on what the President called "the application of the principle of *laïcité* in the Republic." Stasi selected nineteen members, among them three Muslims, three Jews, and six women. (Djamila's last mayor, Nelly Olin, was one of them.) What they had in common was a belief in the separation of church and state; they were chosen to determine whether the laws on that were sufficient or needed to be clarified.

Chirac clearly felt that the time had come to make a tough, resoundingly "French" statement on secularism. He wanted to seal his leadership in the spring elections (regional in March, European in June; both routs, as it happened). And he wanted to do it well before the school year that began this fall, with hundreds of thousands of Muslim children enrolled in the country's public-school system—if for no reason other than that the school year will end on the centenary of the law that formally and, everyone then assumed, irrevocably established the separation of church and state in France. Of course, in 1905 it was also assumed that the only possible challenge to the "sacred secularism" of a French public education lay not in the cut of a Muslim's scarf but in the size of the cross on a Catholic schoolgirl's gold chain.

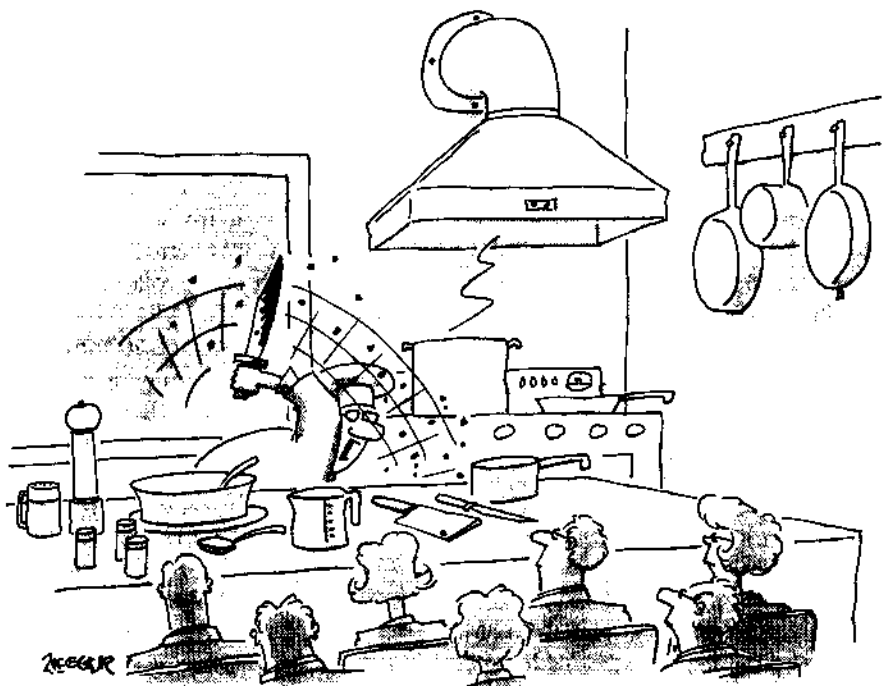
The politicians of 1905 had celebrated the end of a long struggle for reconciliation between the values of a republican state and its mainly Catholic citi-



"And it's close to the subway."

zens. When they thought about Muslim schoolgirls—assuming they thought about them at all—they kept those girls at some safe, imaginary remove, studying their Voltaire and their Balzac and their French rivers in the public schools and Catholic mission schools of the country's North African empire. (Most French Muslims are North African in origin.) No one then expected that by the turn of another century there would be millions of Muslims at home in France. Or that a lot of those Muslims would be young, angry, alienated, impressionable, and demanding their particular French "identity" in ways that not even the great prestidigitator of French identity, Charles de Gaulle, would have been able to accommodate. Or that a French President called Jacques Chirac—who got his start in a Gaullist cabinet and went on to become a Gaullist prime minister and then a Gaullist mayor of Paris, and was even now conducting a very Gaullist war of words with his American counterpart on just about every subject from the war in Iraq to the size of the European Union—would sponsor a ban on veils in French schools. But this is precisely what the President did. On March 15, 2004, he signed into law two sentences culled from the Stasi Commission's report, passed by both houses of France's parliament, and known officially as Article 141-5-1 of Law No. 2004-228 of the national Code d'Éducation: "In public elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools, it is forbidden to wear symbols or clothes through which students conspicuously"—*ostensiblement*—"display their religious affiliation. Internal rules require that a dialogue with the student precede the enforcement of any disciplinary procedure."

With those two sentences, as short and slippery as the Second Amendment, the French opened a box of troubles that flew onto the front page and the evening news. The British, congenitally anti-French, were pleasantly horrified by the law. The Germans—for years France's closest European allies—were embarrassed by it. Some Americans assumed that Satan was involved. Antonin Scalia, writing the dissent in a U.S. Supreme Court decision, in February, to uphold the right of states to deny public scholarship aid to Bible-ministry students, took the occasion to add that the French were "invoking interests in secu-



"Once the animal has been rendered lifeless, the rest is quite simple."

larism no less benign than those the court embraces today." Not long afterward, Attorney General John Ashcroft, pointedly challenging France's godless example, filed an amicus curiae on behalf of a veiled Muslim twelve-year-old who had recently been suspended from an Oklahoma elementary school.

In France itself, there were demonstrations of veiled women, demonstrations of unveiled women, endless television debates, rap wars on the Muslim hip-hop circuit, and windy discussions in all the important papers. (*Libération*, on the left, and *Le Figaro*, on the right, were for the law; *Le Monde*, always contrarian, was against it.) The arguments began months before the law was passed and went on long after the President signed it. They made for a good deal of inadvertent comedy, most notably from a couple of adolescent schoolgirls—daughters of an agnostic Jewish father and a Berber mother—who had scabbled together a book of their own *pensées* and were making the talk-show rounds wrapped up in color-coordinated pastel scarves, cashmere cardigans, and cowl-neck sweaters. But there was also a good deal of defiance. There were threats of schoolgirl strikes, threats of huge sympathy strikes, threats of mass

lawsuits, and, with them, of years of judicial snarl. And there were serious threats of violence—terrorist threats, threats of Islamist reprisals—as well as warnings that came in the form of carefully coded messages to the country's Muslim women's-rights activists. One was an open letter from Hani Ramadan, the head of a Geneva group that tracks the heresies and blasphemies of the Islamic diaspora in Europe. Ramadan is the grandson of the Egyptian cleric Hassan Al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood, and, as it happens, the brother of Tariq Ramadan, a celebrity scholar who travels the European lecture circuit promoting what could be called Islamism Lite for the Western world. (Tariq is best known in the United States as the professor whose visa to teach at Notre Dame was revoked by the Administration, for reasons suggesting that the government got the two Ramadan boys confused.) Hani Ramadan's letter was addressed to Nadia Amiri, a French feminist and former nurse with a master's degree in sociology. It said that a Muslim who forgets her duty to "submit entirely to God and only to God . . . turns ineluctably toward idolatry." Amiri was already on a police hot line. Today, when she gets a message

like that, a police car patrols her street.

Still, despite, or maybe because of, the reactions, there turned out to be a genuine, if fairly conflicted, desire on the part of the French to affirm the principle of secularism in their public schools. (And the law is only about those schools. It isn't about people on the street, or people at work, or people praying, or, for that matter, about people at universities, where all but a handful of students are over eighteen and, legally, adults, and perfectly free to come to class in anything they like; it is about minors who, by law, enter the protective custody of the secular state when they walk into a public-school classroom.) At least, enough people thought that an affirmation was necessary. Maybe the timing was wrong. Maybe the law was cynical. Certainly, it touched on only the surface of France's problems, doing nothing at all to redress a long history of indifference to the millions of French Muslim citizens still referred to mainly as "the immigrants." Even some Stasi Commission members complained that, of the twenty-six proposals in their report, many addressing significant social and economic inequities that Muslims in France face, only the one about head scarves was actually adopted.

"There was this rush to implement," one of them told me. "We'd seen all the notables, and all the people with problems, but most of the real people, the real part of our work—that was shrunk to the minimum. We had proposals on teaching religion in schools, on hospitals, on jobs. We weren't in such a hurry to focus on the veil." The "rush to implement" a veil law had effectively tabled those other proposals, but the commissioners also knew that passing along to the legislature a package of twenty-six complicated, costly proposals would mean a debate that could last for years, and nobody wanted that.

In the end, people said: Do it. Ninety-four per cent of the deputies who voted said yes to the new law, if not with enthusiasm then with a certain relief in being able to slip under the cover of such huge numbers. "We are world champions at lawmaking," Christine Ockrent, who has anchored the evening news on two channels, run the weekly *L'Express*, and, as she says, "seen everything," told me a few days after the law was signed. "We proceed not by consensus but by crises and fake collective agreements. . . .

LIGHT FINGERS

Feather duster in a child's grip
swished over bottles of Old Grand-Dad
in my father's liquor store,
my hand hovering briefly
above rolls of coin in the cash drawer,

other objects stolen from local merchants—
a magnifying glass,
a hi-lo thermometer, an Indian-rubber baseball,
novelties, candy, cigarettes—

if you wouldn't give me what I deserved,
what you seemed to promise,
then I would take it from you.
The splendor of scissors.
The consideration of a rubber stamp
"for your attention."

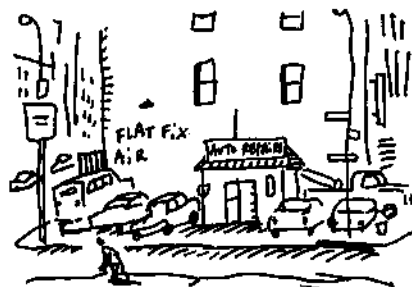
At some point, after the accumulation
of the objects of desire,
and later, after they became unforgettable,
beyond understanding and useless,

this is when I looked back and saw the boy
making a daring effort to be part
of the family's sadness.

Yes, nearly everyone voted for the law, but the most lucid said, "This law only revealed the basic incapacity of the system to integrate our immigrants."

To say that France rejects what it sees as America's persistent impulse toward a theocratized state—and even regards the rhetoric that drives our policy today as unnervingly close to the rhetoric of jihad—is merely to say that France was savaged by wars of religion for hundreds of years and that those wars have left most of the French, the President among them, with a dread of mixing government and God. Not that this guarantees *fraternité*, or even *égalité*, but it does

go some way toward explaining the peculiarities of French public life, such as the fact that political candidates do not make speeches or pose for campaign posters in front of a church (or for that matter a synagogue or a mosque); or that state funerals take place in deconsecrated churches, like the Panthéon, and not in Notre-Dame; or that the state absorbs eighty-five per cent of the costs at qualifying parochial schools precisely in order to keep the church out of the public classroom. "I'm not saying to export it, but laicity is part of the social contract in France," President Chirac said, simply, when I first asked him about the veil law. "The state does not put a foot in any belief. It is a very French conception, and we hold to it. . . . Religion is not a subject we impose on French children. The law is because of that." Most French people—including mainstream French Muslims—would agree, at least in principle. It is mainly foreigners who are mystified that a country which has tried as single-mindedly as France to avoid any unnecessary confrontations with the Muslim world would risk its obvious



All of the grief that preceded me—
war, fire, the destruction of culture,
the powerlessness of parents,
the compensations of shameful inward lives—

this, I perceived, is simply what it means
to be human. So now there is nothing
to wrest into myself,
for myself.

But there is the spirit leaping with dread

and exultation, demanding everything.
And the old cunning.

When Mrs. O'Brien suggested that Joseph,
her son, and I go to see his priest
about our common venal behavior,
my mother, a Holocaust survivor,
threw her out of the house.

I returned to my favorite pastime:
a book of sleight-of-hand tricks,
small objects, all objects, vanishing.

—Ron Slate

advantage with a law essentially about
scarves on schoolgirls.

In a way, Chirac personifies that inscrutable French logic with which his countrymen have identified so often and so predictably that it's almost redundant to state it. He is a prickly nationalist who, at the same time, wants to set the agenda, and reap the benefits, of Europe. He is an internationalist who nevertheless believes that "the world is little by little evolving into *grands blocs*," each of them utterly and perhaps irremediably itself—which is to say not French. He is a very successful politician with no notable achievements beyond the remarkable one of building the machine that has kept him at the center of power for nearly forty years, and President for nearly ten. He is an eloquent, agile, and frequently moving statesman who has nurtured an idea of France—an idea of high civilization and moral purpose—while fielding accusations of the most venal sorts of corruption at home, and who will in all likelihood be indicted for some of them once he is out of office and no longer immune

from prosecution. (One accusation had to do with his padding the family food bills when he was mayor of Paris by what amounts to more than a quarter of a million dollars a year.) He anoints dauphins, then turns on any of them who presume that they might succeed him. He is thick-skinned, seemingly impervious to attack, but unforgiving in matters of deference and respect. (One minister, none too useful to begin with, mentioned a Presidential hearing aid and was out of the cabinet in a matter of months.) He is personally quite appealing. Women like him, the possible exception being his wife, Bernadette, who talks wryly to reporters about her husband's infidelities, and told the *Times* that she turns off her cell phone on busy days, to keep the President from disturbing her "every fifteen minutes."

And Chirac is full of surprises, as his veil law proved. One diplomat told me about the "hidden" Chirac, a man who slips off to Japanese digs and is an enthusiast of Taino art and corresponds with Jiang Zemin on the subject of classical Chinese poetry. Never mind if the

Chirac most people see is an old fox who thrives on the exasperation he inspires, especially if it involves the United States. His distaste for George W. Bush is shared. Two years ago, with an Iraq weapons-inspection extension on the Security Council table, he dispatched his Foreign Minister, Dominique de Villepin, to the United Nations to tell a startled Colin Powell that, inspections or not, there were never going to be French soldiers fighting in Iraq unless the U.N. sent them, thus forcing the Security Council stalemate that ended with America's invasion. This summer, he sent Michel Barnier—the man who took over at the Quai d'Orsay when Villepin left to become Interior Minister—to call on Yasir Arafat at his compound at a moment when most European leaders had joined America in trying to replace him.

The French, however grudging, do not misread their President. Nor do they find him inconsistent. They may not love him. They may consider him imperious or ineffectual or wrong. But most of them raise a glass when he takes the high ground and scores a point for France, as he did at the D Day ceremonies this summer, welcoming Bush to Normandy with such cool good manners and gracious solemnity that Bush was reduced to a kind of glazed rage in his eyes and clenched fists. The French do not expect their Presidents to be honest or good, only that they be Presidential.

"To give you my vision of France, it's necessary first to give you my vision of the world," Chirac told me, when I asked him about French secularism. He wanted this clear: he does not believe that the world can be remade in France's image (and certainly not in anyone else's image), and this wasn't an unreasonable assessment, since France does not own large chunks of the world anymore or, indeed, have anything like the power to remake it. Nor does he doubt that most of the world holds values that are radically and perhaps irrevocably different from Western values. "The time when we imposed our values is over," he said, when I asked about his ongoing argument with America, and America's with him. He talked about the lessons of colonialism. "We made bad mistakes, we did many good things, but it's over." Given his map of the world as *grands blocs* with little in common except an ur-

gent need to avoid collision, and given the tensions among them now—with America, to his mind, playing the rogue *bloc*—he clearly feels that France's, and indeed Europe's, historical role will be to mediate those tensions. (He thinks that America would also do well, as he put it, somewhat more grandly, "to privilege dialogue over force.") The bottom line is that he will not bend France to anybody else's values, either. He is very precise about that. A Frenchman, and this means also a Muslim Frenchman, accepts that at home the values of France, and certainly its secular imperatives, are not up for negotiation—which is why,

now that the veil has come to be what he calls "the siege of a politics of Islamization," it has no place in a French public classroom.

Most people in France know Article 141-5-1 simply as the veil law—*la loi contre le voile*—or as the head-scarf law, or the chador or burka or hejab or *jalabib* or *abaya* or *nikab* or even *bandanna* law, or anything else they choose, mostly inaccurately, to call the clothing with which an increasing number of French Muslim schoolgirls had been covering their heads, and often their faces and bodies, and attempting to come to

class. ("Veil," in France, is the catchall word.) And never mind that, as of the latest hermeneutical negotiations, the veil law also applies to the Jewish skullcap, the Sikh turban, and to any cross that looks *ostensiblement* religious—a term that could be said to describe any religious symbol that's simply visible, or there.

"It is a small price to pay for tranquility" is how Michael Williams, the chief rabbi of the Synagogue Copernic, the oldest reform synagogue in France—and, in 1980, the first to be bombed by extremists—explains the fact that most French Christians and Jews, while not precisely in favor of laws like that, were



expressing anything more political than piety.

quite willing to accept one. In much of Europe today, a veiled girl in a public-school classroom is considered a provocation, and not always by her own choice. In the French Republic, with its huge Muslim population, she also stands for a very particular contemporary Islamic-diaspora politics having to do with the application of Koranic law (which is to say one narrow interpretation of Koranic law) to the comportment and rights of minors in the public spaces of a secular state. Ten years ago, young French-born Muslim women were seldom veiled, and the few who were veiled were often, like Djamil, expressing nothing more political than

piety or modesty or virtue. Today, they are more apt to be expressing subservience to (or fear of) the radical indoctrination of young French-born Muslim men. The politicians call it the "communitarian recruitment" of those young men—many of them born and raised in the huge housing projects, just across the ring roads of central Paris and the big industrial towns of the northeast, that the French call *les cités*—by Islamist provocateurs, protection racketeers, and preachers.

I saw my first Islamist recruitment in the mid-eighties in Dreux, a town near Chartres with a small but decent measure of assimilation. Dreux was losing its factories to the long attrition of a global oil crisis about twelve years earlier, and to the end of another kind of recruitment—the recruitment of unskilled labor that had already brought some six thousand Muslim workers to a town of twenty-four thousand people. With steadily rising unemployment, Dreux was having to deal with what amounted to an angry redneck generation of men thrown up by the seemingly unstoppable drift of labor from farm to factory. And this meant dealing with incursions not only of radical Islamist preachers but also of anti-immigrant agitators, from Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front party, into the projects where most of Dreux's workers, Christian and Muslim, lived. One of the North Africans I knew there was recruited by an itinerant holy man, a Muslim Brother who appeared one day at the gate of his factory. In no time at all, he had forsworn his chess nights, and even his nights out at the local café, for a men's group then devoted to studying the Koranic criteria for cutting off robbers' hands, and he was making plans to send his wife and three small daughters back home to a town in the Algerian desert, out of the way of wanton Western influence, their own small freedoms, and, of course, the National Front.

The Islamist network was fairly simple then. Saudis funded the Brotherhood through its leadership in Egypt; the Brotherhood, in turn, trained Algerian and Moroccan preachers and sent them off to conquer the diaspora in towns like Dreux. Those preachers were self-styled vigilantes. They stalked the North African schoolboys, demanding recruits for their after-school Koran classes—threatening and often beating the ones who re-

fused, but always offering free textbooks to the ones who came and "protection" to their parents. Within a few months, those boys were the vigilantes, exhorting their classmates to embrace the kind of Islam they had always mocked as something that, in France, only illiterate peasants from Anatolia practiced. The recruitment spread, acknowledged but as often as not ignored, since, from the point of view of the government, and certainly of the police, the preachers seemed to be serving a useful purpose: policing their own neighborhoods, keeping them quiet, and keeping violence contained and crime "disciplined." The veil made an easy symbol, perhaps because only women would have to wear it. And it represented another kind of discipline—the discipline of a profound revolt. In 1989, when no more than a few hundred schoolgirls were reported by their teachers or principals to be wearing head scarves, three Muslim girls were put on probation and sent home from a middle school in the working-class *cité* of Creil, north of Paris, for refusing to remove them. Their fathers, backed by the local Islamists, went to court. The court ruled for them. But the case itself, the first of its kind in France, got so much lurid attention—one manifesto, published in *Nouvel Observateur*, called the ruling "a scholastic Munich"—that Lionel Jospin, then the Education Minister in a Socialist cabinet, asked the Conseil d'État for teachers' "guidelines," thus sidestepping the problem of setting some himself or embarrassing his President, François Mitterrand, by demanding that *he* set them. The Conseil tossed the problem back to the schools, telling the principals to address the problem case by case, saying that it all depended on whether a principal found the clothes in question to be acceptable or defiant. (The term used then was *ostentatoire*, or ostentatious.)

No one was much guided by those guidelines. The left, whatever its old claims to being the guarantor of a secular state, was adrift in a sea of unforeseen (and almost comically unsettling) new imperatives having to do with multiculturalism and diversity and political correctness, unable to decide the relative merits of freedom of religious expression and freedom *from* religious expression. (Louisa Ferhat, an actress who tours the country speaking for an organization

of French Berber women, told me that whenever friends on the left would say, "Ah, but we must understand the culture of the veil," she would have to remind them that nearly two million of France's Muslims were Kabyle Berbers, not Arabs, and that Kabyle women were "culturally" never veiled in their own villages in Algeria, and only occasionally in the Arabs' cities.) Dominique Strauss-Kahn, a former Socialist Finance Minister and a shrewd observer of his party's wafflings, describes this now as a kind of Sophie's choice between "the democracy solution," which acknowledges differences, and "the republic solution," which says that when you're a citizen you behave like one. He told me that even in those comparatively tranquil days you were never going to be able to solve the problem of social neglect and Islamist subversion by reducing it "to a matter of a few thousand schoolgirls with a little piece of cotton on their heads."

No one, of course, knows what would have happened if a law like Article 141-5-1 had been proposed and debated and passed in 1989, though it's probably safe to say that the scarf in France was then the sign of a local problem, not a global one. France had lost thirteen people to terrorist bombings in the mid-eighties, and had since put a frankly self-serving—and fairly successful—purchase on safety, infuriating its European allies by negotiating that safety with Muslim groups and even Muslim governments. It was no secret that France was courting Middle Eastern clients, though the preference was clearly for states like Algeria and Iraq, where the power, however despotic, was secular, and where France had had a historical influence. Its dealings in the Middle East were hardly savory (though it has to be said that no one's were). By the first Gulf War, in the winter of 1990-91, the French had built a nuclear reactor for Iraq (Israel bombed it in 1981), and had sold Saddam Hussein more than twenty-three billion dollars' worth of arms and a fleet of Mirage bombers (including the intercept codes, a gesture of friendship which kept France's own bombers off the ground for the critical first two weeks of that war). By the time the current war in Iraq started, Saddam's debt to France amounted to upward of four billion dollars—one obvi-

ous reason for Chirac's reluctance to join it, as he had joined the first one and the war in Afghanistan in 2001. (There is now a French commander of NATO's Afghan occupation forces.)

I was in France during the first Gulf War, and the remarkable thing then was how calm the country stayed—which is to say how calm its Muslims stayed, how French their loyalties were, how marginal the Islamist preachers still seemed. That changed. In December of 1991, France stood by while its old colony of Algeria, a police state by anybody's standards, cancelled the results of elections that would have put a coalition of imams and Islamist parties in power—and then, covering its bases, accepted the Algerian Islamists who fled to France as religious refugees under the Geneva Convention. They arrived just as a new generation of French Algerians were starting high school in the *cités* where they were born—young citizens with French expectations and, maybe because of this, not much patience for French promises and French intolerance and French exclusion camouflaged by a very French rhetoric of equality and integration. That generation had no claims on a colonial past. What they inherited were the bitter myths of their parents' past, untempered by any of their parents' nostalgia or desperate gratitude. What they lived were the bitter realities of the present.

The *cités* themselves were a failed fantasy of a new life, a misbegotten experiment in social planning that began with Le Corbusier's famous *Unité d'Habitation*, in Marseilles, and spread through France and into the rest of northern Europe. Nothing that should have happened in the *cités* happened. Big businesses did not arrive; bourgeois families did not build housing estates next door; the projects themselves deteriorated, victim to construction boondoggles. The children of immigrants who had moved in, expecting a new life, became the prisoners of that life. The future they wanted shimmered across the ring roads of urban France, always receding into someone else's neighborhood. In their own neighborhoods, there was not much to look forward to besides a thwarted education (only four per cent of them make it to university) and no jobs (sixty per cent unemployment in some of the *cités* today) and the strained services of the

welfare state and, of course, the immigrant imams with their new promises, telling them that the world was theirs. They were going to take back their communities "for God," starting with the community of their own families—with the women, with the veil. As an exercise, it was not so different from what the Marxist psychiatrist Frantz Fanon described, forty-four years ago in French-colonial Algeria, when he wrote that the last "property" of a desperate man, a man who had lost everything, was his family—that to own a family was to own something. Fanon's patients, in the middle of another revolution against the French, had recurring nightmares of their wives and daughters and sisters spinning out of the orbit of their control, and it was nightmares like those that the Islamists tapped in France.

Then, of course, September 11th happened and, more to the point, the invasion of Iraq. It didn't matter that France stayed out of the war; France was the West, regardless. This was when the recruitment of young French Muslim men into the terror network feeding the Chechen and Afghan and Iraqi insurgencies picked up in earnest, with Osama making his *début* as a start-up image on cell phones and Islamist Web sites—an action hero brandishing a Kalashnikov. It was also when an increasing number of Muslim schoolgirls started attempting to enter classrooms draped in clothing that had less to do with the places their families came from than with a kind of global ur-Islam, which may be why it was dismissed, for a while, as some sort of adolescent fad. Sometimes it was. But more often those girls were under orders from their fathers and uncles and brothers and even their male classmates. For the boys, transforming a bluejeaned teen-age sister into a docile and observant "Muslim" virgin was a *rite de passage* into authority, the fast track to becoming a man and, more important, a Muslim man. For the girls themselves, it was the beginning of a series of small exemptions from Frenchness—no sports, no biology, no Voltaire—that in the end had nothing to do with diversity and everything to do with isolation. It was also a license for violence. Girls who did not conform were excoriated, or chased, or beaten by fanatical young men meting out "Islamic justice." Sometimes, the girls were gang-

raped. In 2002, an unveiled Muslim girl in the *city* of Vitry-sur-Seine was burned alive by a boy she had turned down.

Jacques Chirac turns seventy-two this month and will be nearly seventy-five when the next Presidential election is held. But, by all evidence, he is determined to run for what would be his third term, and many of the people who swept him into office last time now feel that his last dauphin and latest rival, Nicolas Sarkozy—a self-made lawyer who claims to come from “reality,” which is to say not from the icy heights of the *École Nationale d’Administration*, where most French leaders, including the President, are groomed and stamped “ruling class”—would do much better at maneuvering the country through its new Islamist thickets. Sarkozy was, at any rate, the one government minister to speak publicly against the veil law, perhaps because he was already courting the Muslim vote in his own Presidential bid. That vote has been pretty much untapped since the end of the Algerian War, in 1962, brought the first great wave of North African immigrants to France. No Muslim candidates from any of the big parties have been given a shot at election districts they might actually win; there still isn’t a French Muslim in the National Assembly or the Senate. And, given the alienation of the Muslim poor, not to mention the fact that French law forbids census questions about religious or ethnic affiliation, it is impossible for anyone (except, presumably, the secret services) to know how many Muslims vote anyway.

Sarkozy spent two years as Minister of the Interior, and it was from that post that he started his run for the Presidency, in 2003, sponsoring and then accrediting a Muslim umbrella group called the French Council of the Muslim Religion. He argued, with some justice, that French Catholics were already represented by the Church hierarchy, and that Protestants and Jews had independent consistories to represent their interests, whereas French Muslims had been represented, if at all, only by Dalil Boubakeur, the aging rector of Paris’s Grand Mosque, and a group of state-vetted imams. (Within the government, he argued that this was really a way to monitor Islamist activity.) Boubakeur, as France’s senior Muslim cleric, became the titular president of the

new council. Not much later, he testified to the Stasi Commission on behalf of “school peace.” (When I visited him at the mosque, he told me, “I see these girls in veils, I ask them, ‘What do you know of Islam? Nothing? Not even the Islamic dates?’ I say to them, ‘Learn something about all this. Learn your religion before you go out and make a spectacle of yourselves in the streets.’”) But Boubakeur was not a neutral party. He owes his job to the government in Algiers, which supports the Grand Mosque and underwrites his salary. He is paid to be diplomatic and accommodating in Algeria’s interests, and from the point of view of the Islamists—and not only the Islamists—that compromised whatever claim he had to authority over the Muslim community in France.

The real power in the new Muslim council was easily seized by a French-educated Islamist named Fouad Alaoui,

the secretary-general of a large, well-financed fundamentalist group, the Union of French Islamic Organizations, which was planning to support the lawsuits of veiled schoolgirls. Alaoui called for a moratorium on defiance a few days after two French journalists—Georges Malbrunot, of *Le Figaro*, and Christian Chesnot, of Radio France—and their Syrian driver were kidnapped on the road to Faluja, on August 20th, by Islamists demanding the revocation of the veil law in exchange, presumably, for their lives. And he was much in the news in September, when he joined a delegation of French Muslim clerics sent to Iraq to try to free them. But there is not much doubt about Alaoui’s agenda. “The French have always had a problem with religion—it’s a reflex action,” he told me when I visited him at his offices, above a La Courneuve mosque, off a long hall full of men waiting around,



“There’s the guy who deserves the credit for putting us back to work.”

talking, and secretaries in long gray head scarves moving silently past them, taking orders and running errands, never smiling, their eyes trained on the ground. "And they have a huge problem with women. They think that their model of emancipation is *the* emancipation. But girls who want to stay in school, girls who want to be doctors—that's not the only model." Alaoui has followers all over France. He claims that a hundred thousand people came to the last yearly meeting of his Islamic union, in Le Bourget, and that both men and women had been invited to participate. But the women who did come were seated apart from the men, and most of them were enveloped in caftans and shawls.

Alaoui is not a particularly pleasant character. He is a French Moroccan with none of the grace or humor of a Moroccan host and most of the arrogance of a French bureaucrat. He had a list of grievances, some of them true, and some of them shared by other Frenchmen: Chirac, before putting together his commission with Bernard Stasi, had essentially cancelled funding for the part-time high-

school jobs that thousands of students counted on for a small salary (true); the commission itself had called a hundred and sixty-nine witnesses, but "only ten or fifteen were against the veil law" (false). He neglected to mention that when one veiled woman was called to testify a man in her family whispered instructions in her ear, insulted the commissioners, and then accused them of harassment. And Alaoui had nothing at all to say on the subject of veil enthusiasts like the French-Tunisian writer Fawzia Zouari, who maintained, improbably, that the veil wasn't a sign of religious submission but an emblem of feminism, a way of saying "*Je m'en fou d'hommes!*" and "like Islamic architecture, a way you can see out but no one can see in." Or, you could say, the veil as a bad hair day. A month later, she insisted to me that there were no laws forcing women to veil in Iran, only "advisories."

There has been a good deal of discussion about the veil law among women who consider themselves to be strong French feminists. Ségolène Royal is a popular Socialist deputy and the new

governor of Poitou-Charentes, and a refreshingly outspoken presence in the snuffy male sanctum of French politics. She has reservations about the new law, although she voted for it. She says she is more concerned about the effect of pornography on children than she is about scarves (which, to her mind, can be "very pretty . . . like the bonnets in Africa"). She told me, "Yes, I would say that the veil is a symbol of the oppression and segregation of women, but how do you resolve the problems of Muslim women in a society like this, where all the bus kiosks have advertising posters with naked women on them?" She worries about what will happen to those Muslim women if there is a blanket enforcement of sexual integration. But many feminists would argue that the Islamist obsession with covering up women's bodies is a deeper form of pornography than an obsession with uncovering them.

Anne Hidalgo, the deputy mayor of Paris, whose portfolio includes women's rights (the French say "equality between men and women"), has no reservations about the law. She told me about some of the storefront prayer rooms she has helped open in immigrant neighborhoods—neighborhoods where Muslims had nowhere to pray but the sidewalks—and said that *she* worries about new preachers coming in and trying to undermine the law, and even preventing girls and women from taking part in mosque activities. She and the mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, are Socialists, though they have been much more inventive than most politicians in their party in making French Muslims feel welcome. They sponsor Friday lunches at high schools in Muslim neighborhoods, so the girls and their teachers can get together and talk things over. They throw a big party at city hall to celebrate the end of Ramadan each year. But they believe that head scarves in schools are only the beginning of Islamist demands for exceptional status within French law. (Hidalgo's friend Martine Aubry, the Socialist mayor of Lille, has stretched the law to meet Islamist sensibilities by closing municipal pools to men for several hours a week so that Muslim women can bathe alone.)

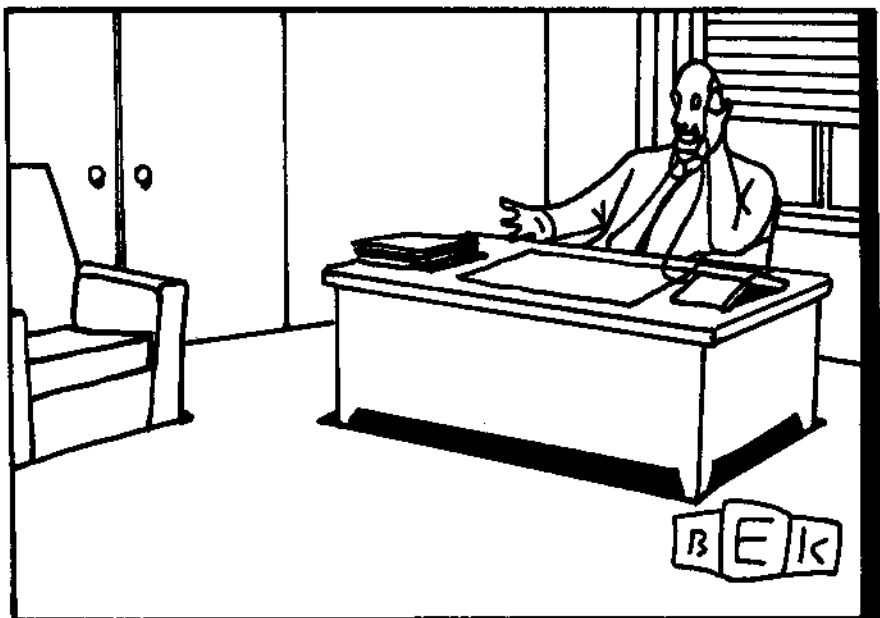
Hidalgo, who is the daughter of Spanish Republican immigrants, said, "We've been very perturbed about the veil. To see those very young girls veiled . . . The 'evolution' of the veil here isn't about



choice, or religion. Perhaps the veil once said something religious, but now it's a sign of oppression. It isn't God, it's men who want it." Last year, Hidalgo had to suspend a Muslim woman who worked at city hall and was not only demanding to wear her Islamist robes and head scarves but refusing to shake hands with or even look at any of the men she was supposed to greet and help. "There are rules about public space," Hidalgo told me. "It was unthinkable that a person representing the collectivity go veiled."

On the other hand, Françoise Gaspard, a former Socialist deputy who is now France's representative for women's rights at the United Nations, came out publicly against the veil law, claiming that it would keep the daughters of Islamist families from getting to go to school at all, and they would end up "martyrs" to the Islamist cause. Her companion, the feminist writer Claude Servan-Schreiber, talks about visiting schools and being told by one Muslim girl after another: If you forbid the veil, my parents send me away to North Africa to be married off. (Those girls are much in demand among older men looking for access to French visas and work permits.) "It changed my mind completely," she said. "I decided we had to fight so that those girls were not excluded." Other feminists point to the alternatives. There are accredited correspondence courses. There is monitored homeschooling. There is the possibility of Muslim parochial schools—Lille now has one—which by meeting state education standards would be eligible for state support. Most feminists acknowledge that, whatever the law, there will always be some attrition in an education system. Gaspard shocked those feminists by militating against the veil law, especially because she had been the driving force behind a political parity law that went into effect in France in 2000. "I was very alone," Gaspard said, when I asked about the reaction, adding that France's own record on women's rights was hardly splendid, and that even the Jacobins of the French Revolution had outlawed pants on women. Other feminists reminded me that Frenchwomen couldn't open bank accounts or apply for passports until the late thirties, and couldn't even vote until 1945. For a long time in France, *le citoyen* meant mainly the rights of men.

The feminist philosopher Sylviane



"We're done—there's nothing left in the world to bastardize."

Agacinski, who wrote a book about parity and lobbied for it (she is married to Lionel Jospin, who was Prime Minister when the parity law passed), told me that, unlike Gaspard or Servan-Schreiber, she had become convinced that a veil law was necessary. "Today, clearly, the criteria of the rights of man are the rights of women," she told me. "The law was made to protect the bodies of girls, of minors. It's easy to be against it in retrospect, and to say that now those girls will be 'twice victims'—victims of Islam, victims of French exclusion. But the veil here isn't Islam, it's politics." One extremely exercised Muslim feminist had told the Stasi Commission that the parents of veiled schoolgirls deserved to be put in jail for child abuse, and Agacinski thinks that, however egregious arguments like that are, especially when no serious attempt has been made to integrate those parents, there is an argument to be made that the veil is as much a challenge to France's laws on human rights as it is to France's laws on secularism. She finds it a sad irony that, at a time when Muslim women are claiming, and winning, some of those rights in countries like Morocco—even in the face of a harsh Islamist revival—French Muslim women have been sacrificing theirs to archaic religious strictures. "All fundamentalisms pretend that religion is ahistoric, but religions evolve,"

she said. "Islamist boys today come to school in bluejeans." Agacinski counts as something of an expert on what people, in the name of religion, wear. She has been writing about veils—beginning with the Christian women who wore them for five hundred years, long before there were any Muslim women to put them on—and has spent the past four years reading Augustine, Tertullian, Paul, and all the other Christian fathers who demanded that women wear them, as a sign of their subordination to men. The wedding veil, of course, began as an oblation—a ritual offering of bride to husband. Today, not even most nuns, perpetual brides of Christ, wear them. In Germany, nuns are now forbidden to wear their wimples if they are teaching in a public school.

The veil, of course, is only one skirmish in the battle between Muslim practice and French law. There is the problem of divorce, consensual in France but, for some Muslims, simply a matter of a man repudiating a wife. There is the problem of polygamy, illegal in France but often, in older Muslim families, a social given. There are the welfare laws requiring the state to maintain poor households at acceptable French family standards—which, in the case of a Muslim polygamist, can mean four households, four wives, four sets of children. Then there is the problem of female genital mutilation. In France,



THE CELEBRATED WITS OF THE RADISSON ROUND TABLE.

the *exciseuses*—women who traditionally remove the clitoris and labia from little girls—are illegal, but many still practice secretly. Most of their clients are African Muslims, and the operation has come to be incorporated into “acceptable” Islamist practice—which, of course, it’s not. A feminist lawyer named Linda Weil-Curiel has argued more than thirty excision cases as a *partie civile* before the Cour d’Assises. And in the process she has managed to get the practice reclassified as a high crime, carrying a prison term for the *exciseuses* and often a damages penalty of thirty thousand dollars for the fathers—who invariably pay for the operation but whose liability had almost always been waived on their claim that excision was “women’s business.” (Genital mutilation used to be handled by local correctional courts.) Weil-Curiel began her crusade in the early eighties, after a baby girl bled to death from the operation because her father refused to call an ambulance for two days. The baby arrived at the hospital, Weil-

Curiel said, without a drop of blood in her body. That was one of her first cases, though by no means the first death. Most genital mutilations go unreported; damaged children are rarely brought to hospitals unless they are quite sick. And Muslim women often suffer the same neglect, either because they are not brought to a hospital at all or are quickly removed from the hospital if no female doctors can see them. Alaoui had told me, “A patient has the right to refuse and choose her doctor. A hospital is a public service.” Weil-Curiel said, “I’m for the veil law because it all starts there, it indicates a comportment. . . . And I’ll take Chirac, with all his *casseroles*, because his position on that”—on the veil—“has been, well, noble. The women I see in court, the African women, were never veiled. They are now.”

It’s clear to anyone, after a certain amount of time in France, that the veil involves a much broader politics than French domestic politics. It has to do with

the Middle East and the war in Iraq and the Palestinian intifada. People in France have come to regard the veil through the lens of their own response to conflicts having very little to do with schoolgirls. There have been at least three hundred attacks on Jews and Jewish property in France this year, many of them said to involve Muslims, and Chirac has had to walk a tightrope between Jewish fears and Muslim sensitivities. Some six hundred thousand French citizens are Jews—roughly one-tenth the Muslim population—and it is to Chirac’s credit that there has been no “Jewish” position on the veil or, for that matter, on the Middle East, or on France’s role in the Middle East. (Many prominent Jews have come out against the veil law and against the President’s Iraq policy, most notably Bernard Kouchner, the founder of Médecins du Monde and today one of the country’s most popular Socialists.) But the attacks on Jews have continued, to the extent that the Interior Ministry now calls this wave of anti-Semitism a threat to French society. And, in part because of the attacks, some Jewish boys and girls have begun reclaiming their “identity” with as much intensity as the Muslim schoolchildren, though arguably with less violence. If you go to the bottom of the Champs-Élysées—the Häagen-Dazs stop, kids call it—at noon on Saturday, when school gets out, you will sometimes see the boys from Betar, which is a kind of Jewish Defense League, and the Muslim boys from the *cités* squaring off on opposite sides of the avenue, shouting insults at each other and sometimes flinging themselves into a brawl in the middle of the punishing traffic. The Jewish boys are performing for the Jewish girls—known, in the argot of the day, as *chales*, or shawls—who stand on the Häagen-Dazs side of the street, licking their ice-cream cones and flaunting enormous designer scarves. The Muslim girls are not invited, but that, along with the sadly obvious poverty of most of the Muslim kids, is the only difference. The hatred is now the same.

Rémy Schwartz, the *conseiller d’état* who in effect ran Stasi’s commission and oversaw its hearings, told me about the first veil hearings, in 1989. “There was one common thread,” he said. “We were there to judge law, not souls. But this time I was reinforced in my conviction that a

new law was necessary. The older laws were not applicable to the situation now. What we have now is part of a global politics of anti-Semitism, and it had to be limited." Schwartz reminded me that in six years the majority of citizens in Holland's four biggest cities will be Muslim, and even so there is still no common policy on secularism in Europe. There is not even a common policy on schools. (Germany, like France, wants the veil out of public schools, but, unlike France, permits religious education in those schools; Britain, where the majority of Muslim families are Pakistani, allows the veil as traditional dress.) Schwartz thought it was time for France, at least, to determine its own policy. My friend Tahar Ben Jelloun, the French-Moroccan writer, told me about being invited to speak at a Muslim public high school in Amsterdam—the Dutch, resolute multiculturalists, have opened thirty-two—and arriving to find that all the girls and teachers in the room were wrapped in scarves. "When I protested, one girl said to me, 'I've come back to God. Don't you believe in God?' I said, 'My beliefs are private.'" Ben Jelloun thinks that all those veils are really "a transfer of the Palestinian drama to the schools and the *cités*," where the Islamists can exploit a confusion of anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiment that is by no means limited to teen-age children. He worries that those children will exhaust themselves in Islamic politics and that, if nothing changes, the exclusion they suffer now in France will only get worse.

Ghislaine Hudson, who sat on the Stasi Commission, is the principal of the Lycée Joliot-Curie, a few miles from both a large *cité* and a middle-class suburb, about an hour and a quarter from Paris. It is really two lycées—a vocational high school with eight hundred students, about half of them children of North African immigrants, and a classical lycée with eight hundred students, nearly all of them "French"—and she and her husband live in an apartment above the administrative offices. "This is a tough school," she told me, when I drove out to see her. It was an understatement. Last year, somebody tossed a homemade Molotov cocktail into the vocational dean's office in the middle of the night, destroying most of the building. (There was no arrest, and Hudson is glad about that.) Hudson was sleeping next door when the explosion

came, but it left her, if anything, more determined to stay in a job that she finds at least as gratifying as her last one; she used to be headmistress at the Lycée Français, in Manhattan. Hudson is a beloved educator. Her teachers have presented her with a homemade *légion d'honneur* (she has a real one) commending her for her "contributions" to the cause of French education—yellow curtains in the reception room, flowers, plants, Christmas decorations, beds for teachers between apartments. It hangs in her office, along with a list of professors' birthdays and a big poster called "Intolerance," which is half black, half white, with a pair of scissors ripping through the middle. Her twin schools are like that poster. The students do not—she says will not—mix. Not at all. It was obvious when we walked through the two buildings, and even more obvious when a buildings inspector turned up for a surprise visit. The lycée students filed out, talking. The vocational students milled about in their corridor, sullen and even hostile, and some of the boys stood their ground when Hudson tried, smiling, to shoo them out. One gave her the finger and swore. She kept on smiling.

"The problem is I don't see a difference in France since I came home," she told me, back in her office. "Not in France, not in the police. These children are not integrated. I see the veil as more about social exclusion than about this revival of 'communities.' We've had veils, but our rule has been that once children come into the administration buildings and the schoolrooms—no veil. Occasionally, you bump into a girl who's kept it on. It's hard to convince her. She'll take it off, and there's a bandanna under it." Hudson voted for the veil law. "School, at least, should be free," she said. "The time you're in school should be free. Muslim girls should be given the choice to be free young women. And the law was aimed at protecting the minds of those girls."

In some ways, it protects more. For girls, the burden of choosing not to veil is gone, too, and with it the fear of punish-

ment at home. ("We had this fear of our brothers," a French Muslim woman who fled Lille for New York at eighteen, once told me. "There were a lot of murders in my city.") For teachers and principals like Hudson, another burden is gone: the decision to say yes or no to a veiled girl is no longer in their hands. Hudson is pleased, though, that the law will come under review at the end of the school year—the Socialists' condition for supporting it—and be open to revision. She thinks that it needs review. She thinks that questions of what is or is not *ostensible* belong as much in the talks you have with students as in the middle of a statute. "We've always managed to solve the problem with dialogue, with talking," she told me, but she sounded uncertain, saying it. As it turned out, only about two hundred and fifty girls defied the veil ban after public schools opened in the fall (along with a handful of Sikh boys who arrived in turbans). And, at any rate, none of those girls came veiled to Joliot-Curie. For a while, Alaoui's moratorium on defiance held. By mid-October, after some seven hundred "dialogues," fewer than eighty girls were still arriving at school in head scarves. Sixty-two of them were spending their school-days sitting alone in empty offices or unused classrooms. Nine had been expelled.

France's Islamists, faced with the kidnapping of French journalists by other Islamists, were clearly worried about reprisals, given the kidnappers' demand. Their moratorium was about that. But by late October, with the hostages still missing, the moratorium was over. Alaoui's Union of French Islamic Organizations had cancelled it, announcing that the country's Muslims would no longer be "blackmailed" into silence. The group took up where it had left off, urging schoolgirls to defy and sue. Guy Canivet, the president of the Cour de Cassation and, as such, France's senior jurist, had told me when the law was signed, "With the fixation on veils"—he meant on both sides—"we will not come out of this easily." He said that there were bound to be legal questions raised, questions of prejudice—the prejudice, say, that every scarf is a religious symbol—and that from the point of view of French law those questions were important. Most people expect that, one way or another, the veil will be back at the door to the classroom and the court. ♦

