Opinion

Hijab: An empowering choice in U.S., a symbol of oppression in Iran

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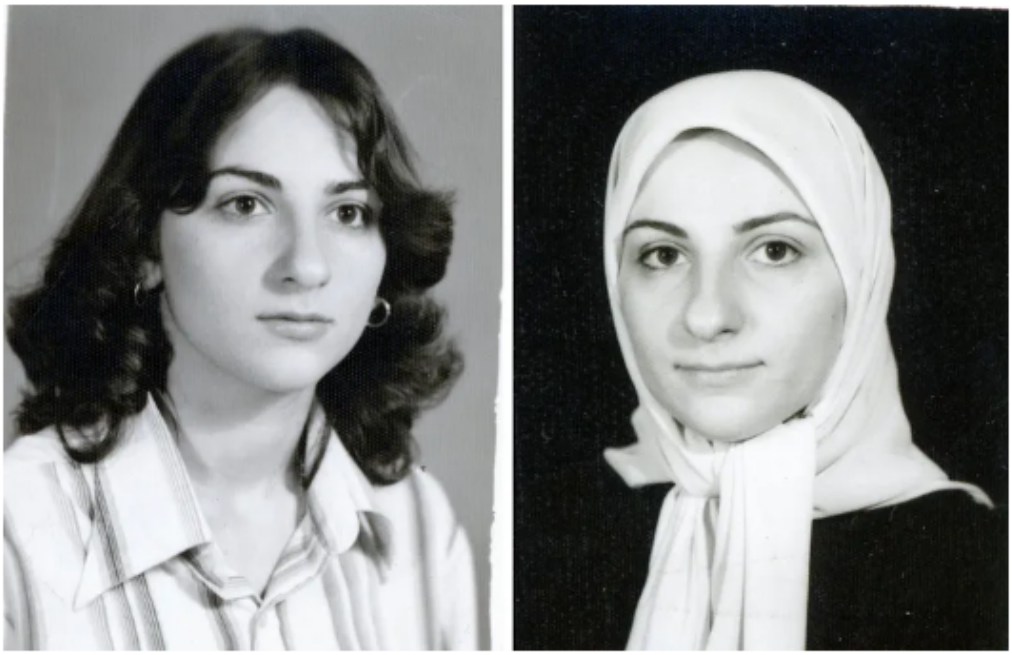

This combination photo shows the author as a teenager in Iran before the Islamic Revolution, left, and after. (Photos Courtesy of Jacqueline Saper)

By Jacqueline Saper

Special to The Times

Women in the United States are wearing hijab proudly to identify with their Muslim faith. However, while women in America wear hijab by choice, for the past 40 years, women in Iran are fighting for the choice not to wear one.

Hijab, meaning barrier in Arabic, refers to a strict code of dress that covers both the hair and the curves of a woman's body in the presence of men who are not close relatives. Some examples are the burqa and the chador that completely cover the body; head coverings such as the maghnaeh or a large headscarf; or the niqab, which hides the face but not the eyes. A woman who wears hijab is referred to as Muhaajaba.

I grew up unveiled and later wore hijab for eight years while living in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The history of hijab in Iran is complicated and interesting. In 1936, Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi king to modernize the country, imposed a decree that legally banned women from wearing hijab, who, until that time, had been veiled for centuries. Simply, being covered in public became a crime that would get a woman arrested. During the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, the second Pahlavi monarch, the prohibition against wearing hijab was lifted. Women could choose to wear hijab but were encouraged to dress as their American counterparts.

In the months preceding the civil unrest that led to the Iranian revolution of 1979, some women started to wear a stricter form of hijab as a political statement of empowerment to protest the Western-leaning monarchy. These same women cheered when the Shah was ousted, and the clerical establishment assumed power.

Shortly after assuming power, however, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, imposed a decree that forced women, who had been unveiled for decades, to wear hijab. Now hijab had become a visible political symbol of oppression instead of empowerment, curtailing many of the rights women had achieved under the previous regime.

All women, regardless of religious background or nationality, were subject to this rule. Therefore, as an Iranian Jewish teenager, I, too, had to dress as an orthodox Muslim woman. Indeed, "morality police" were tasked with patrolling the streets in order to arrest, fine, and imprison women and girls who dared show their hair or wear anything other than a loose shaped coat or an all-encompassing chador in defiance of the regime's modesty laws. By

1986, my 6-year-old daughter, as part of her first-grade school uniform, was also forced to dress like me.

My family emigrated to the United States in 1987, where I could once again practice the freedom to dress as I like. The women I left behind are now protesting hijab as a symbol of defiance in much the same way they did in 1979 when the decree was issued. This time, they are doing it by stripping themselves of hijab and using social media to spread their message. Iranian citizens also have created a smartphone app to warn users of nearby morality police.

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Hijab remains a controversial matter in both the West and the Middle East. Nothing better exemplifies this than the wide range of opinions surrounding the recent Sports Illustrated photo of Somali-American swimsuit model Halima Aden in hijab and burkini on the cover. Regardless of one's opinion on hijab, as an Iranian-American woman who has lived in both Iran and America, I know that there is a huge difference between wearing hijab in democratic versus undemocratic nations.

While for some women in the West, hijab is a choice and a means of expression, for many women in the authoritarian society of Iran, hijab is a symbol of oppression that strips away their most basic human rights and the dignity to wear what they want.

***Jacqueline Saper**: is the author of a memoir, "From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran." She lives in Illinois.*