The Qur’ânic Jilbâb

 Alla jilbab ahsherعي

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In the name of Allah

The Most Compassionate, The Most Merciful

One of the most important but often neglected issues pertaining to the Islamic modest dress (al-hijab al-shar‘î) is the issue of jilbâb or the outer garment that must be worn by Muslim women.

Unfortunately, it has been instilled in the minds of many people that hijâb only means wearing a headscarf and covering one’s hair. Hijab does mean covering one’s hair but it also means much more than that.

Hijab means concealment: a true Islamic hijab conceals the body; it neither reveals nor outlines the body parts. The Islamic modest dress includes wearing the headcovering (khimâr), as discussed in Verse 31 Surah 24 of the Holy Quran. It also includes wearing the jilbâb, as required by the Holy Quran in Verse 59 of Surah 33. Hence:

Islamic modest dress = khimâr + jilbâb
What does Jilbâb Mean?

If we look at the contemporary usage of the word jilbâb in Arabic and other Islamic languages, it is very easy to get confused and misguided. In Indonesian, for example, people use the word jilbâb to refer to the headcovering (khimâr). In modern Arabic, people often use the word jilbâb as a synonym of abâya.

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the Qurânic jilbâb (which is the jilbâb that was worn by the wives, daughters and female companions of the Prophet, peace be upon him) and all other garments which were later called jilbâb in the different parts of the Muslim world. Not every jilbâb is Quranic jilbâb.

From the outset, let us look closely at what Our Creator says about the jilbâb in the Surah al-Ahzâb. Allah – Praise be to Him – says:

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\text{يَتَأْلِيٌّ أَلَّمَّيْنِ قُل لَّأَرُوْحُ جَاهِكَ وَبَنَاتَكَ وَنَسَآهُ قَالُوْيَا إِلَّاَلْمُؤْمِينِ}
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\text{يُدَّنِيرُ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ جَلَّيْـبَيْهِنَّ}
\]
O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers

To cast their outer garments [jalâbēb, plural of jilbâb]

Over their persons [Quran 33:59]

From this holy verse, we learn that wearing the jilbâb is a requirement of the Shariâh. But what does the Quranic jilbâb look like?

A Linguistic Approach

According to the *Lisan-al-Arab* dictionary, the jilbâb is: ‘the outer garment, mantle or cloak of a Muslim woman. Jilbâb is the outer sheet or covering which a woman wraps around her on top of her garments to cover herself from head to toe. The jilbâb covers a woman’s body completely.’

Ibn Hazm writes: ‘In the Arabic language of the Prophet, jilbâb is the outer garment that covers the entire body. A piece of cloth which is too small to cover the entire body cannot be called jilbâb.’

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1 Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab* Vol. 7 p.273
The Quranic Jilbab Covers the Head

We should mention that unlike the modern abâya, the Quranic jilbâb is an outer garment that starts from over the headcovering (khimâr) and not from the shoulders. The jilbâb covers the head; and the scholars do not seem to have differences of opinion on this issue. Therefore, the Quranic jilbâb is one thing and the typical abâya is something else.

Umm Salamah – May Allah be pleased with her – said: ‘When the verse ‘to draw their cloaks all over their persons’ was revealed, the women of the Helpers (Ansâr) came out as if there were crows on their heads, because of their black outer garments (jalâbêb). [Abu Dawud 4101]

A’isha – May Allah be pleased with her – said: The woman must bring down her jilbâb from over her head and then place it upon her face. [Bukhari 6:60 282; Abu Dawud 32:4091]
Does the Quranic Jilbab Cover the Face?

It is an undisputed fact that the Mothers of the Believers and the female companions of the Blessed Prophet covered their faces with their jilbâb. Whether other Muslim women are required to cover their faces is a point of debate. Now, it may be asked: ‘Does the Quranic jilbâb cover the face?’

My answer to this question: the Quranic jilbâb can be worn in such a way as to cover the face.³

In order to explain my view, I will need to give you a few examples from the Sunnah:

(*) Ā’ísha – May Allah be pleased with her – said: The riders would pass us when we were with the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, according to the interpretation of certain companions of the Prophet, this [covering the face] is the correct way to wear the jilbâb: Muhammad ibn Sirin said: ‘I asked Abidah al-Salmani about this verse ‘to draw cloaks all over their persons.’ So he draped a blanket around him, concealed his face with it, and covered his entire head. [Ruh al Maáni 22:89]’ The woman twists the jilbâb above the forehead and tightens it…she conceals the chest and most of the face. [Ruh al Maani 22:89]

³ According to the interpretation of certain companions of the Prophet, this [covering the face] is the correct way to wear the jilbâb: Muhammad ibn Sirin said: ‘I asked Abidah al-Salmani about this verse ‘to draw cloaks all over their persons.’ So he draped a blanket around him, concealed his face with it, andcovered his entire head. [Ruh al Maáni 22:89]’ The woman twists the jilbâb above the forehead and tightens it…she conceals the chest and most of the face. [Ruh al Maani 22:89]
in the state of iḥrām. When the riders approached, each of us [women] would lower her jilbāb from her head over her face, and when they went away, we would uncover our faces. (Abu Dawūd 1833)

Firstly, like the afore-mentioned aḥadith, this hadith proves that the Quranic jilbāb is not like the typical abāya: this is because Lady A’isha – May Allah be pleased with her – described the jilbāb as coming from her head and not from her shoulders; also because it is not possible to cover the face with a modern abāya.

Secondly, this hadith proves that the Quranic jilbāb is not something like the Afghani burqa: Lady Á’isha says ‘When they left us, we would uncover our faces.’ For a woman who is wearing the burqa, it would be impossible to uncover only the face.

(*) Aīsha – May Allah be pleased with her – said: …His [Safwan’s] recital of this Quranic verse woke me up and I covered my face with my jilbāb. (Bukhari 5:59:462)
It is noteworthy that in this hadith Lady A’isha – May Allah be pleased with her – says: ‘I covered my face with my jilbāb’: she does not say ‘I wore my jilbāb immediately.’ This implies that she was already wearing the jilbāb. She was covering her entire body from head to toe and had left only the face uncovered. As soon as she realised a non-mahram man was approaching her, she ‘covered her face with her jilbāb.’

Like the previously-mentioned hadith, this tradition also makes it clear that the Quranic jilbāb is not the Afghan burqa. Otherwise, it would make no sense to say: ‘I covered my face with my jilbāb’; it would be sufficient for her to say ‘I wore my jilbāb’ and everyone would understand that she covered her face.

In brief: It is possible to wear the jilbāb and uncover the face. It is also possible to wear the jilbāb and cover the face: this latter way was how the wives of the Prophet and the female companions wore their jilbāb – as we understand from the ahādīth.

**Thus, the Qurānic jilbāb is a loose garment that starts from over the head (where the khimār is already worn) and goes all the way down to the feet without outlining a woman’s body and even without explicitly defining her shoulders.**
Since one picture is worth a thousand words, I hope this picture conveys the meaning. The first three women (from right to left) are wearing different forms of the Quranic jilbāb. The fourth woman (or first from the left) is wearing a typical abâya that starts from the shoulders. The abâya is still a form of Islamic modest dress but it is not the same as the jilbāb which is mentioned in the Quran and was worn by the female companions. The shoulder-abâya may be concealing compared to many of the modern trends that have appeared in recent years, but it has at least three disadvantages:

- Firstly, it outlines the form of the shoulders, whereas a true jilbāb must conceal the entire body.

- Secondly, it is similar to the abâya commonly worn by men.

- Thirdly, it is not possible to cover the face with it. For a sister who is wearing the Quranic jilbāb, it is very easy to cover the face when a non-mahram approaches her or starts gazing at her. The same is not possible for a sister who is wearing a khimār and a shoulder abâya, unless she also wears a separate affixed veil (niqâb).
Conditions of the Jilbâb

The following conditions are well-known for a woman’s outer garment. For further discussion of their evidences, one can refer to the books on Islamic jurisprudence:

1. The outer garment must be made of thick material that does not show what is underneath. It should not be transparent nor should it cling to the body.

2. The jilbâb must cover the entire body, from head to toe, and be loose enough so that it does not show the shape.

3. It should not have any adornments or colours that attract attention: it must not be worn for *tabarruj*.

4. It should not resemble the dress of non-Muslims; likewise, it should not resemble the dress of men.

References and Links:
