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Muslim Headdresses Test Faith, Tolerance

By Alexandra Odynova

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A young woman in a headscarf waiting patiently as two officers patrolling the Tverskaya metro station in downtown Moscow examine her documents. **Igor Tabakov**

After twin attacks by female suicide bombers killed 40 people in the Moscow metro last March, media reports warned that women sporting a Muslim headdress in public may face verbal or even physical attacks.

The warnings were far from baseless, as several hate-related incidents took place hours after the bombing. One saw angry passengers throwing two scarf-wearing women off a metro train.

Attacks associated with radical Islamists make wearing a hijab — the piece of female attire that covers the head and is obligated by the religion — an everyday challenge for female Muslims in Moscow.

But most who make the decision to follow Islam's guidelines put up with occasional harassment — and rights activists say Muscovites may actually be growing more tolerant toward women in hijabs.

"I've been wearing a headscarf for four years now, and in the beginning it was quite a novel experience," Dana Akhilgova, a 20-year-old Moscow student, said in an interview with The Moscow Times.

"It was drawing attention, and there were people who even stopped talking to me," she said.

But Akhilgova said she has no regrets because she eventually learned to "take it easier," and unfaithful old friends were replaced by new, "even better ones."

A spokeswoman for the Russian Council of Muftis, Gulnur-Khanum Gaziyeva, said that "in Russia, the attitude has recently become more negative to women wearing the hijab because Islam is often associated with terrorism."

But Gaziyeva admitted that she personally did not feel any pressure.

"The police don't stop me, and people around me don't insult me," Gaziyeva, who wears a hijab and a long-sleeve dress, told The Moscow Times. "I believe that a lot depends on my own inner attitude."

The number of attacks on hijab-wearing women are limited to "a few cases a year," said Alexander Verkhovsky, head of the Sova xenophobia watchdog.

"Most of the attackers are not radicals, but just mentally unbalanced individuals," Verkhovsky said.

Gaziyeva and Akhilgova also said people who react inappropriately to the hijab are driven by stereotypes, often generated by the media. Gaziyeva added that "terrorism has no nation and no religion."

For a Muslim woman, wearing a hijab means modesty, as she is supposed to only show her hair to her husband, not to strangers, Gaziyeva said. "For a Muslim woman hijab means inner freedom," she said.

An early wave of hate and suspicion toward women in headscarves was triggered by a 2003 attack at a rock festival in Moscow's Tushino airfield, where two suicide bombers blew themselves up in a crowd, killing 16.

But the bombers actually wore no hijabs and even sported short skirts, witnesses said.

After the March metro blasts, the media circulated a photo of one of the bombers, the 17-year-old Dzhanet Abdullayeva, standing in a forest with a machine gun and wearing a black hijab. But the other attacker, Mariam Sharipova, described as Slavic-looking, was bare-headed in the only publicly available photo of her.

Sova watchdog's Verkhovsky said the metro bombings were followed by a certain surge in intolerance toward women with an "Islamic" appearance. Even one native of Armenia,

a Caucasus-located but predominantly Christian country, was reportedly attacked.

But there was less violence than after the 2003 Tushino blasts, he said. "Maybe people are getting used to" women in headscarves, Verkhovsky said.

Last week — shortly after another suicide bombing carried out by a male killed 36 in Domodedovo Airport — a Moskovsky Komsomolets reporter traveled around Moscow in a niqab, which is a more austere variation of an Islamic headdress that covers not just the hair, but the face as well, leaving only a slit for the eyes.

Some metro passengers were scared off by the niqab, while others reacted aggressively, shouting insults and forcing the guard accompanying the reporter to interfere, the newspaper said.

But the harsh reaction may be due to the fact that the niqab belongs to the Arabic tradition and, unlike the hijab, is very rare in Moscow.

"Most women wearing niqabs in Moscow are from abroad, and they are always accompanied by their husbands," Gaziyeva said.

Recent clashes over headscarves in Western Europe may also contribute to the negative attitude to the hijab in Russia, she said.

France has banned hijabs in schools nationwide in 2004, and several German provinces have also introduced restrictions on wearing headscarves in public. Limitations are under consideration by several other European countries, and polls indicate high public support for the move.

But the strict niqab is much more popular among the Muslim population of Europe than the hijab.

The Russian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression of national and cultural identity. There is no ban on the hijab in Moscow, though some precedents are to be found in regions with a higher percentage of Muslim populace.

In the Stavropol region, which borders on the North Caucasus, the administration of the local Pyatigorsk State Linguistic University introduced dress code recommendations for students and personnel, advising to avoid "bare feet, undressed bellies and aggressive religious features," including the hijab.

The rules caused a public scandal and were denounced as unconstitutional by local law enforcement agencies. Pyatigorsk police chief Savely Airapidi was quoted by RIA-Novosti as saying, "I think that it's illegal, we can't set a ban. It's the same as banning short skirts."

In Tatarstan, a stronghold of moderate Islam, the head of the town of Novosheshminsk, Vyacheslav Kozlov, reportedly banned headscarves in January, Islamnews.ru reported. Local Muslim groups staged a rally in Kazan last Friday to protest this and other pressure attempts.

Last year, a woman working in a car dealership in Kazan was forced to resign over a headscarf after two years at the job, Rossiiskaya Gazeta reported. The woman refused to work without

a hijab, which her bosses said was scaring off the clients.

Bans and restrictions may seem a lesser evil compared with the threat of attack from an ill-advised Islam hater in a city like Moscow.

"My parents are very afraid for me," Moscow student Akhilgova admitted.

But she said that despite all hazards, she will stick to her decision to wear a hijab.

She admitted experiencing "several unpleasant incidents" over the headscarf, but described them as insignificant.

"There were cases like after the metro attacks, when I saw people running away from me across the wagon," Akhilgova said. "But at the same time, there were people who gave me a seat."

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