

*Alexandra Ainz Galende*

*Professor of Sociology at the University of Almería.*

*E-mail: aag486@ual.es*

## A CLOSER STUDY OF THE DISCOURSE OF *NIQABI* WOMEN IN SPAIN

### **Abstract**

This article aims to shed some light on how *niqabi* women in Spain present and define themselves according to the meaning they attach to the *niqab*. In addition, a specific objective of the study was to find out how these women articulate, formulate and explain the *niqab*. For the purpose of the study, we interviewed twelve women. The only common requirement for being part of the sample was to be a *niqabi* living in Spain. We therefore decided to use non-probability sampling. At the same time, we employed the «snowball» sampling technique whereby the sample was contacted in two specific ways: through different Internet social media and using key informants to recruit participants for the face-to-face interviews. The interviews focused on two very specific questions: what meaning do the women attach to the *niqab* and what are their political, religious and social motivations for wearing it.

The research findings point to growing support for the *niqab* and Muslim women are increasingly being encouraged to wear it.

### **Keywords**

*Niqab, niqabi women, Islam, fundamentalism, discourse analysis, Spain.*

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## A CLOSER STUDY OF THE DISCOURSE OF *NIQABI* WOMEN IN SPAIN

### INTRODUCTION

Today, Islam is spreading rapidly throughout Europe and particularly Spain, primarily on account of the various flows of migrants that settle in the area. According to the Pew Research Center, Muslims will make up 4.09 % of the population of the European Union by 2020 and the figure is expected to rise to 8.12 % by 2050. These estimates are mainly based on the lower average age of practising Muslims, higher fertility rates and immigration. According to data published, the Muslim population will grow faster in Spain, rising, in absolute terms, from 1.6 million in 2020 to almost four million by 2050. However, there is another factor that is contributing to the growth of the Muslim population: the steady increase in the number of converts to Islam. This issue is particularly visible in different Internet forums and social media such as Facebook. Muslim convert communities are becoming increasingly large in cities such as Córdoba, Granada and Valencia, where they are members of very active associations. Some studies claim that the phenomenon of conversion or the «return to Islam», as the converts call it, began with Francoism, when, according to the conclusions of Dietz's study, conversion was seen as an alternative to and a way of breaking with Catholic tradition.

Based on data from the Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (UCIDE), Muslims made up approximately 4 % of the population in December 2016. According to data published by the UCIDE, there are around 1,919,141 Muslims living in Spain. By Autonomous Community, Catalonia has the largest Muslim population, followed by

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1 PEW RESEARCH CENTER (2015). Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050 <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projection-table/2050/number/Europe/>.

2 In 2000 there was a website called *Islam en línea* (Islam Online) which had a particularly active forum where *dawah* or an invitation to share Islam was extended (proselytism). It was one of the most important Spanish websites devoted to Islam at the time. However, with the advent of social media, and particularly Facebook, the form of association has changed. There are currently several Facebook groups devoted to Islam where you will see this at work. Two of the most popular ones are *Islam en español para todos* (Islam in Spanish for everyone) and the more specialised group *Comunidad islámica de musulmanes conversos* (Muslim community of converts to Islam).

3 In the case of Granada, some publications trace the beginning of conversion to Islam to the end of the Spanish Civil War and highlight the growing number of women involved in the process, for example: DIETZ, Gunther. *Mujeres musulmanas en Granada: discursos sobre comunidad, exclusión de género y discriminación etnorreligiosa*. Red Migraciones Internacionales, 2004.

In the case of Valencia, mention must be given to the *Centro Cultural Islámico* whose chairperson until recently was a Spanish woman who had converted to Islam.

Andalusia and the Autonomous Community of Madrid. In the latter region, together with Ceuta, Melilla, the Canary Islands and, to a lesser extent, Extremadura, the percentage of Spanish Muslims is higher than foreign Muslims.

And, as followers of Islam increase in number, so too does their visibility in Spanish streets. Some Muslim men choose to wear a thick beard based on the teachings of the Sunna or the Prophet Muhammad, some women wear the *hijab* or Islamic veil and others choose the *niqab*, which is the focus of this article. It should be pointed out that the *hijab* is the veil or scarf that some Muslim women wear to cover their shoulders and sometimes chest, and which some Islamic theorists recommend wearing upon reaching puberty. The *hijab* has sparked numerous debates both within and outside the «Muslim community». Some groups claim that its use is mandatory, while others can find no clear or specific obligation with respect to this precept in the *surah*, *ayat* or *hadiths*.

The *niqab* has also aroused controversy and, in addition, sparked heated debates about the connotations associated with its use. For some years now different European countries have been questioning whether the use of the garment is compatible with women's human rights<sup>7</sup>. In Spain, the debate has recently developed as *niqabi women* —as we have decided to call them in our research— have become more visible. On the other hand, there are also people who question whether banning the *niqab* is a violation of individual rights<sup>8</sup>. In addition to these issues, a debate has emerged in many countries over the State's role in regulating

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4 OBSERVATORIO ANDALUSÍ (2017). Estudio demográfico de la población musulmana. <http://observatorio.hispanomuslim.es/estademograf.pdf>. Last accessed on 16 April 2017.

5 The two main cornerstones on which the very body of this religion is built: the Quran, or sacred book of Islam, and the Sunna. The Sunna is the record of the teachings the Prophet Muhammad left to his companions, which has been handed down as a model to be followed from generation to generation. The Sunna is reflected in the *hadiths*, which are short texts or instructions that Muslims can use as a guide or model for their day-to-day behaviour. In particular, one of the hadiths that makes reference to the beard states: «Be different from the idolaters; let the beard grow and trim the moustache».

6 A quotation from one of the ayat of the Quran that speaks (or not) about the mandatory use of the veil goes as follows: «Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and (...) guard their chastity. That is purer for them (...) And tell the believing women that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty and ornaments» (24, 30-31). And another ayat states as follows: «O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused» (pp. 33, 59).

7 TISSOT, Sylvie (2011). Excluding Muslim Women: From Hijab to Niqab, from School to Public Space. *Public Culture*, 23(1): 39-46.

8 ERLANGER, Steven (2009). Burqa furor scrambles the political debate in France. *New York Times* (online) [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/01/world/europe/01france.html?\\_r=0#](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/01/world/europe/01france.html?_r=0#)

the use of the *niqab* in public<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, even within the Muslim community there are differences of opinion concerning the *niqab*, as evidenced by the statements of politicians and religious authorities in various countries, some of whom support the *niqab*<sup>10</sup> and some of whom are completely opposed to its use<sup>11</sup>. In the UK, for instance, when asked whether Muslim women should wear the *niqab*, the leader of the Muslim Council of Britain, Muhammad Abdul Bari, gave a vague answer: «No one should be compelled to wear either the *hijab* (headscarf), the *niqab* (face-veil) or the burqa (full body covering). [But] Islam calls upon both men and women to dress modestly»<sup>12</sup>. Other religious leaders, however, have strongly refuted this argument and stressed that the *niqab* has nothing to do with Shariah [Islamic law]. And these issues have been reflected to an extent in the press, particularly when a dispute arises<sup>13</sup>, given the widespread media attention they tend to garner. However, if we leave aside the media and examine the scientific literature devoted to the *niqab* in Spain, we find that nothing has been published on the subject. Something similar occurs at the international level: only a few publications have dealt with the matter, and very few European ones. However, it must be said that from 2014 onwards literature began to focus more on the subject following the decision of the European Court of Human Rights to allow national authorities to ban use of the *niqab* in public places because it posed a threat to peaceful coexistence. In doing so, it upheld a ban imposed by France three years earlier on the wearing of face-covering veils in public. The ECHR judges thus determined that «the face played a significant role in social interaction» and that «veiling that conceals the face can violate the right of others to live in a space of socialisation that makes living together easier»<sup>14</sup>. In any event, aside from the publications that

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9 SHIRAZI, Faegheh, and MISHRA, Smeeta. Young Muslim women on the face veil (*niqab*). A tool of resistance in Europe but rejected in the United States. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2010, vol. 13, n.º 1, pp. 43-62.

10 RUITENBERG, Claudia (2008). B Is for Burqa, C Is for Censorship: The Miseducative Effects of Censoring Muslim Girls and Women's Sartorial Discourse. *Educational Studies*, 43(1): 17-28.

11 This issue is not only a source of controversy in Europe, but also in the so-called Arab Muslim countries. The *niqab* debate has led to various clashes in countries such as Egypt, where the president of Helwan University, Abdul Hayy Ebeid, sparked controversy by banning the use of the *niqab* on campus. The ban triggered numerous protests by men and women who support its use in public places.

12 COCHRANE, Kira (2013). The *niqab* debate: «Is the veil the biggest issue we face in the UK?» (online) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/16/veil-biggest-issue-uk-niqab-debate>, last accessed on 1 August 2016.

13 The Dutch government banned what it called the «full veil» in May 2005, thus stirring up major controversy. In September the same year, the story of the hate crime perpetrated by two men in Madrid who kicked a *niqabi woman* was picked up by the media. Similarly, the media also reported the incident in Corsica where Muslims attacked a tourist for taking pictures of a woman in a burkini. And in France and Italy, we have seen how women wearing burkinis were banned from bathing.

14 MESEGUER, Silvia (2016). Prohibición sobre la utilización del velo integral en el espacio público europeo y español (online), <http://publicaciones.usat.edu.pe/index.php/ius/article/view/323/318>.

address the debates on this decision, there are other publications that feature the views of Muslim women that do and do not wear the *hijab*, in addition to their opinion on the *niqab*<sup>15</sup>. Literature is also available on the reasons why people and political and legal authorities reject the *niqab*<sup>16</sup>. However, we were only able to find one publication that gives *niqabi* women a voice and it is Canadian. The Canadian Council of Muslim Women<sup>17</sup> conducted research and subsequently published the opinions of Muslim *niqabi* women. And this is the undertaking we focused on in our research: to obtain an insight into the opinions of these women and, based on their discourse, gain an understanding of what may well become the «*niqab* phenomenon».

## OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main objective of our research study is to provide an insight into the discourse of Muslim *niqabi* women in Spain, understand how they see themselves, discover the reasoning behind their decision to use the *niqab* and identify the religious basis underlying its use. For this purpose, we have developed two hypotheses: the first suggests that use of the *niqab* can be explained by two factors: religion and politics, both of which are based on fundamentalist conceptions of reality. The second aims to demonstrate that behind these women's arguments are ideological and political positions that they themselves are unaware of.

With regard to the sampling frame, it can be said that this is unknown. The only selection requirement for inclusion in the sample was, as mentioned previously, to interview *niqabi* women living in Spain. Therefore, we could say that the method used was non-probabilistic sampling, which was carried out using the snowball technique. However, we must stress that the only selection and interview requirement was that the women practised *niqab*. The fact that most of them are Moroccan was not intentional; the study did not discriminate between nationalities. The aim was not to interview «Moroccan Muslim *niqabi* women», but to identify some of the characteristics of the women, including the socio-demographic profile.

The table below shows some of the characteristics we *a priori* considered important and took into account when conducting and analysing the interviews.

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15 SHIRAZI, Faegheh, and MISHRA, Smeeta. Young Muslim women on the face veil (*niqab*). A tool of resistance in Europe but rejected in the United States. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2010.

16 BAKHT, Natasha (2012). *Veiled Objections: Facing Public Opposition to the Niqab*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

17 CLARKE, Lydia (2013). *Women in Niqab Speak. A Study of the Niqab in Canada*. Canada: Canadian Council of Muslim Women.

Name <sup>18</sup>	Age	Country of origin	Place of residence	Level of education	Occupation	Method of contact	Marital status
<b>Souad</b>	35	Morocco	Barcelona	Nursing assistant	Housewife	Facebook	Married
<b>Meryem/María</b>	39	Spain	Madrid	BA in Journalism	Housewife	Facebook	Single
<b>Farida</b>	23	Morocco	Salou	Baccalaureate	Housewife	Facebook	Single
<b>Ratsida</b>	21	Morocco	La Rioja	Baccalaureate	Unemployed	Facebook	Single
<b>Fatiha</b>	26	Morocco	Granada	Beautician (Vocational Training)	Housewife	Facebook	Single
<b>Naima</b>	31	Morocco	Jaén	Primary education	Housewife	Facebook	Single
<b>Firdaus</b>	27	Morocco	Berja	Secondary education	Housewife	Snowball	Married
<b>Samira</b>	31	Morocco	El Ejido	Baccalaureate	Housewife	Snowball	Married
<b>Ikram</b>	29	Morocco	Campo Hermoso	Secondary education	Housewife	Snowball	Married
<b>Fadila</b>	20	Morocco	Campo Hermoso	Secondary education	Housewife	Snowball	Married
<b>Karima</b>	19	Morocco	Las Norias	Baccalaureate	Unemployed	Snowball	Married
<b>Zyneb</b>	32	Morocco	Las Norias	Secondary education	Housewife	Snowball	Married

Table I: some characteristics of the niqabi women studied

The research technique used was the semi-structured interview. The duration of the interviews ranged from one hour to one and a half hours. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and then transcribed and coded using the Nudist NVivo software programme. This software allowed us to select the texts that refer to a series of «nodes» in the interview script. With regard to the interview script and the part of the script analysed in this paper, we would like to point out that it is subdivided into four large blocks structured according to our hypothesis and methodology: (1) the meaning of the *niqab*, (2) the religious dimension of the *niqab*, (3) the political dimension of the *niqab* and (4) the religious/theoretical bases underlying the use of the *niqab*.<sup>18</sup>

We would like to point out that, in general, it was difficult to obtain access to these women and that, after significant frustrated attempts and difficulties with the language, meeting spaces and times, etc., and we were eventually able to successfully conduct twelve in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted in two ways: via the Internet and face-to-face. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in different geographical areas of Almería province (Berja, Campo Hermoso, El Ejido and Las Norias). The Internet interviewees (via Skype) were contacted through various Islam-

<sup>18</sup> At the request of the interviewees, the names have been changed to protect their identity. All tables prepared by the authors.



themed Facebook groups and are therefore from different regions (Barcelona, Madrid, Salou, La Rioja, Granada and Jaén). In the case of the first group, social media networks played a key role as a means of establishing contact with the interviewees, most of whom are Moroccan nationals and Muslims. In the second group, interaction and communication was conducted with Muslim men and women over a period of several months, both via Facebook (through various Islam-themed «open» and «closed» groups) and WhatsApp groups.

## ANALYSIS

### *Niqabi Women; are they fundamentalists? Who they are and how they present themselves*

The *niqab* is commonly regarded as the veil that covers all of the face apart from the eyes and which some publications call the «face veil». However, one of the first things we noticed when we began the research was that we could not speak of «women with *niqabs*» or «women who wear *niqabs*» or even «women with face veils» because if we look at it through the eyes of these women, it can be said that some *niqabi* women, as they sometimes call themselves, also cover their hands and feet completely, using the *niqab* to conceal these parts of the body. Bearing this in mind, and also the fact that these women do not just associate the *niqab* with a garment, but with a whole way of being and seeing the world, we felt it more appropriate to refer to them as *niqabi* women or girls instead of using expressions such as *niqab*-wearing or «face veil», which do not reflect the full reality of the *niqab*, but merely the part that «attracts the most attention» in our society, i.e. the veil that covers all of the face except the eyes. By the same token, instead of speaking of putting on a *niqab* or wearing a *niqab*, we refer to it as practising *niqab* because we understand that the garment is only the visible part and that, in theory, the *niqab* is accompanied by a way of life which we will address in our research paper. The following excerpt from one of the interviews is very representative in this regard<sup>19</sup>:

«I cover my face because it is proper...there's no other explanation...you Spaniards only notice the face. But the *niqab* isn't just the face, it's more. Look, I cover my feet and only my hands can be seen and sometimes I wear gloves, and so what? The *niqab* is a way of living, of living correctly according to... according to me. If Spanish women... or Christian women... good Christian women... can go naked on the street or beach, why can't I proclaim to the world that the thing that matters most to me in this life is Allah? Don't they say this is a democracy? There will be none of us left here. Not me, not you, not Juan or Mohammed...some day you will remember what I said (*Ikram*)».

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<sup>19</sup> Throughout the article, particularly in the analysis, excerpts from the transcriptions of the interviews with the *niqabi women* are reproduced verbatim. It is our understanding that including these in the article provides important information, as they formed the basis of our analysis.

- After analysing the discourse of all the women, we have concluded that the *niqabi* women studied are fundamentalists, fundamentalism being a type of thought or religious action that aims to become the ultimate ethical-religious foundation of the polis: the political community that takes shape in the state must be based on a religious fraternity. What fundamentalism seeks is to re-establish a religious covenant based on the «holy book» at the centre of societies, supplanting the social contract underpinned by the rule of law<sup>20</sup>. In the interviews, we worked on the four principles that guide the behaviour of Muslim fundamentalists and were able to focus on two of the dimensions that characterise fundamentalism: the religious dimension and the political dimension<sup>21</sup>.
- Principle of Inerrancy: the holy book is considered as a totality of sense and meaning that cannot be freely interpreted by human reasoning. On this point, there are a multitude of texts and recommendations from «sages» where any interpretation other than the 'official' and literal one is openly rejected. An excerpt from one of the hadiths that supports this idea would be the following: «Therefore avoid the various paths along the way and be faithful to the body and the majority».
- Principle of Ahistoricity: human reasoning is not able to adapt the religious message to society's changing conditions. There are several books available on this subject, including that of Sheikh Abdur Rahman, which begins as follows: «And whatever the Messenger (Muhammad) gives you, take it, and whatever he forbids you, abstain (from it) And fear Allah. Verily, Allah is severe in punishment», going on to say: «Whoever innovates a matter in the Deen (our religion) which is not from it, it would be rejected»<sup>22</sup>.
- Principle of Superiority: divine law provides an integral model of a perfect society, superior to any other type of society invented or created by human beings. On this point, there are a multitude of references encouraging life in a community and criticising life outside or on the fringes of the community: «The reckless among us will try to divide the Muslim Umma (Islamic community) with such trivial matters as sitting under the shelter of the moon (...) we must guard against such persons and try to preserve the unity of the Umma (...)».
- Supremacy of the founding myth: the faithful are called on to adhere to and remain bound to all those who believe in the tenets of the sacred text. One

20 PACE, Enzo, and GUOLO, Renzo (2006). *Los fundamentalismos*. México. Siglo XXI.

21 AINZ, Alexandra (2010). *Del fundamentalismo al Terrorismo fundamentalista: ¿Es el II-M un caso de terrorismo fundamentalista?* Universidad de Almería.

22 AL SHEHA (undated), Abdurrahmaan, *Innovar en la religión es una forma de extraviarse*. (In English: Every Religious Innovation is a means of Misguidance) [www.IslamLand.com](http://www.IslamLand.com).



hadith that underpins this principle, among many others, is the following: «Hold fast to the Quran, whatever you find in it that is *halal* (lawful), declare it legal and whatever you find *haram* (unlawful), declare it illegal. What the Messenger of Allah has declared *haram*, Allah has declared *haram*».

On this point, we saw how the women interviewed look to the Sunna (religious dimension) for guidance on how to behave both in public and in private (political dimension):

«I practise niqab because I am Muslim, that's all. Why do you wear a ring in your nose? My imam, my faith, must be visible. Allah asks this of me, I'm simply fulfilling my obligation as a Muslim. Look, it's not just the *niqab*, I pray, I want to go to *hajj*, I try to be a good person every day and always follow the Sunna of the Prophet. The example I gave you earlier, I don't leave my money in a bank that would be usury, it is *haram*, the interest, that's what the Jews do» (Zyneb).

### *The meaning of the niqab*

If we look at the reasons the women give for practising *niqab*, we can see that they are varied and not mutually exclusive. Some of the women interviewed spoke of the obligation to practise *niqab* while others said its use was optional, but highly recommended. In any event, they all agreed that the reason for and the meaning of the *niqab* was religious and that the ultimate goal was to please *Allah*. On this point, and because the issue had not been raised up to now, we thought it appropriate to ask whether their husbands or partners had influenced their decision to wear the *niqab*. However, they all said that the *niqab* was a personal choice; some pointed out that they were neither married, engaged or in a relationship (five, to be precise) and that the *niqab* is a matter between *Allah* and them, and that there should be no middleman dictating or influencing their decisions in this regard, nor indeed in any other Islam-related matter. Only one of them said that her husband was very supportive of her decision and that, being the good Muslim he is, is very proud to have «a wife with a *niqab*». On this point, we would like to share the following statement:

«I've been wearing a *niqab* for years. When I arrived from Morocco, I didn't even wear a *hijab*. But after much research and thought, I made up my mind. The *niqab* is my choice, nobody forces me to wear it, I'm happy that Allah is pleased with me for wearing it. A lot of people think my husband is forcing me or something; but I'm single (laughs). And it isn't my family either, they're dead against it... they don't like this *niqab* business, they think someone has brainwashed me (laughs)» (Farida).

On this point, below is a summary table setting out the answers to this question in as quantifiable a way as possible.

Block I: the meaning of the <i>niqab</i>	Interview results
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— All women have multiple reasons for practising <i>niqab</i>.</li> <li>— In one way or another, all interviewees claim they <i>practise niqab</i> to please Allah.</li> <li>— All women speak of the religious nature of the <i>niqab</i>.</li> <li>— Ten women refer to the <i>niqab</i> when speaking about «good Islamic manners».</li> <li>— Two of the interviewees speak of the mandatory use of the <i>niqab</i> for Muslim women.</li> </ul>

Table II: the meaning of the *niqab*.

### Religious dimension of the *niqab*

With regard to the religious dimension, all women said that they chose to wear the *niqab* after reading the Quran and the Sunna. When we asked them where exactly in the holy books we could find or read the relevant passages, they were not sure. Many of the women recommended we search on the Internet. When asked if the passages contained a clear obligation concerning the *niqab*, most said yes and that, moreover, there are sages who support these arguments. Only three women mentioned that there were conflicting interpretations regarding the *niqab* and spoke of the different positions on the matter within the Muslim community. When asked if they had a *niqabi* woman role model, they said they had no contemporary role model as such, but that one of the main reasons they practised *niqab* was that the wives of the Prophet and those of his companions had chosen to wear it. Several women mentioned that practising *niqab* was the socially correct way to present themselves as Muslim women. Some of them also spoke of the *hijab* as being *halal* (lawful), but said that they felt much more comfortable and secure practising *niqab* because it definitely pleased Allah.

The following excerpt sums up the above ideas very well:

«My only purpose in this life is to please Allah, he gave me life, Alhamdulillah, and only imposed a few conditions, among which are to pray and practise *niqab* or at the very least *hijab*, as some of my sisters do. But a proper *hijab*, not like the tight ones some women wear. That's not *hijab*, that's nonsense. I have read how the wives of the Prophet practised *niqab* and they were without a doubt the best, therefore there is no question about it, we have to do like the wives of the Prophet. It's difficult, but Allah, *subhanahu wa taala*, will not forsake us. He will make the way easier for us» (Ratsida).

Below is a summary table showing the responses in relation to the religious dimension of the *niqab*.

<p><b>Block II: the religious dimension of the niqab</b></p> <p>The questions focus mainly on the principle of inerrancy and the principle of ahistoricity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— As arguments to support the use of the <i>niqab</i>, the women cite the Quran and the Sunna, but do not say where exactly in the Quran or the Sunna this obligation is stipulated.</li> <li>— Three interviewees mentioned that the surah of the Quran where this appears has sparked much controversy within the Muslim community; the others overlook this detail.</li> <li>— As role models for the <i>niqab</i>, they speak of the Prophet's wives and the women of that period.</li> <li>— Eight out of twelve of the interviewees are convinced that the <i>niqab</i> is the ideal and «correct» way to «cover oneself». The others also speak of the possibility to wear a <i>hijab</i>, claiming that this is legitimate and acceptable in the eyes of Allah.</li> <li>— All state that it is the «Islamic sages» who settle disputes in relation to the interpretation of the surah.</li> </ul>
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Table III: religious dimension of the *niqab*.

### *The political dimension of the niqab*

When asked about their ideal society, all unanimously agreed that it would be the times of the Prophet, referring to an idealised past that they hold as a paragon. All spoke of the Shariah as a model of justice, pointing out that what we have in the world today is not Shariah, particularly in relation to terrorist groups and their ideologies, which they reject. From these women's point of view, a perfect society is one which guarantees the rights of individuals based on Islamic precepts. These Islamic precepts would ensure that every woman could walk on the street wearing a *hijab* or *niqab* without being molested. Similarly, they stress that men would be educated in the values of Islam to ensure that they fully respect women, as they are required to do, at least in their opinion, by the Quran and the Sunna. When the women were asked whether there are currently many men with Islamic values who support them in their endeavour to practise *niqab*, they said yes. In particular, they spoke of the men they had met through the Internet, especially Facebook, who have been very supportive of their decision to practise *niqab* and, in other cases, to continue learning about good Islamic manners and practices.

The following excerpt sums up what was said in the previous paragraph very well:

«I feel free with my *niqab*: nobody comes near me. Before a *niqab* I wore a *hijab*, but even then boys would approach me. People think they are entitled to. But no, I go unmolested with my *niqab* and am keeping my feminine charms for my husband, if I marry, which will depend on what my Deen instructs me to do. We women are like pearls and we have to place a value on that. If we go around flaunting ourselves, how can we expect respect? In the times of the Prophet, this would never have happened because there was a religious law that the people observed» (Souad).

Below is a table showing the responses in relation to the theme: the political dimension of the *niqab*, collected in block III of the interview.

<p><b>Block III: the political dimension of the <i>niqab</i></b></p> <p>The questions primarily focus on the principle of superiority of the divine law and the supremacy of the founding myth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— When asked about their ideal society, all women state that the perfect society would be governed by Islamic Law (Shariah).</li> <li>— All believe that religion should be expressed publicly and that relations with one another should be based on the precepts found in the Quran and the Sunna.</li> <li>— Eight women implicitly or explicitly spoke of the <i>niqab</i> as a symbol of Muslim identity.</li> <li>— Six of these women refer to Facebook and the Islam-themed groups they follow and participate in as the mainstay and motivation for choosing to wear the <i>niqab</i>.</li> <li>— Four women say the reason they wear the <i>niqab</i> is to set a good example for their children and the generations to come and see the <i>niqab</i> as a symbol of modesty, purity and a sign of good Islamic manners.</li> <li>— Four women speak of protection.</li> </ul>
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Table IV: political dimension of the *niqab*.

### *Sources of reference and ideology*

In this part of the research, our aim was to identify the sources of influence for the women's decision to accept or reject the *niqab*. Given that the interviewees repeatedly referred back to the Quran and the Sunna, and the fact that the

researcher who conducted the study was aware that within the Muslim community there are differences of opinion as to how the surah and hadiths that speak of the *niqab* and even the hijab should be interpreted, she was determined to find out why some women regard the use of the *niqab* as obligatory while others see it as recommendable. However, when we tried to explore the issue in more depth, we realised that it was going to be very difficult for the women to give us the names of the sheikhs or «sages», as they call them, that they regard as an authority on the subject at the actual interview. Nevertheless, we managed to obtain three names: Sheikh Al-Albani, Sheikh Al-Fawzan and Sheikh Al-Ghudayyan, all of whom are Salafis. The women insist that their sources of reference are primarily the Internet and Facebook (especially the ones we contacted via this medium). It can be said that the other women's knowledge of Islam was less thorough and their discourse less articulate. They said they watched *Al Jazeera*; some of them watched *Córdoba Televisión* and especially YouTube videos, but were unable to say exactly which channels. When they have doubts about something, they mostly look to the Internet for clarification and, in a few specific cases, an imam. One of the women said that she did not like asking the imam because he sometimes regarded the *niqab* issue with suspicion. This point is very interesting because it demonstrates that the imam at the mosque does not influence the women's discourse on the use of the *niqab* or other issues that were discussed in the interviews, but that their discourse is shaped by what they find published on the Internet, thus supporting the theory that social media is the vehicle for conveying the most conservative Islamic ideology<sup>23</sup>.

«I don't know why, but some Muslims reject the *niqab*, there are even imams who don't like it and they avoid you like the plague (laughs) when you go to them with questions, which is what you were asking me. I don't go to the imam of the mosque; I search on the Internet, I look for reliable sources based on the Quran and the Sunna. I ask a lot in groups of fellow Muslim sisters and they are kind enough to help me find an answer. The Quran says that you have to cover yourself. Some people don't see this or don't want to see it, but that's why we have the great sages; it is ultimately their responsibility to tell us what to do. If you make a mistake, they pay for it, they look for the information, and do you know what I mean? Neither you, nor I, nor anyone is qualified to do this...I can't remember the names of these sheikhs right now, but there is one Saudi one that I really like. He's very clear and leaves no room for doubt. But then everyone just does as they please...» (Meryem).

Thematic block IV, which contains the answers to the questions about sources of reference and ideology, is summarised in the table below.

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23 AINZ, Alexandra; CHECA, Juan Carlos; and MORENO, María José (2011). Redes sociales y religión: El caso del grupo «Islam español en Facebook». *Prisma Social: Revista de ciencias sociales*.



<p><b>Block IV: sources of reference and ideology</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Six of the interviewees said their stance on the <i>niqab</i> was largely influenced by the people they interact with via the Internet, the videos they watch —mainly— on YouTube and the texts they read on this medium.</li> <li>— Six women say that most of what they learned was through the Internet.</li> <li>— Eleven interviewees say they watch Al Jazeera and four say they watch Córdoba Televisión.</li> <li>— All women contacted via Facebook claim they find very reliable information on the Internet and say they belong to several Islamic-themed groups in which the opinions of Islamic sages on everyday matters and religious concerns are expressed.</li> <li>— When asked about these sages or authorities on general matters, they could not say for sure, but two women spoke of Sheikh Al-Albani, Sheikh Al-Fawzan and Sheikh Al-Ghudayyan.</li> </ul>
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**Block V: sources of reference and ideology.**

## CONCLUSIONS

In reference to the hypotheses put forward, we can confirm that the decision to use the *niqab* is indeed determined by two characteristic dimensions of fundamentalism: religion and politics. The women state that they generally try to behave according to religious interpretations of reality. Their actions, they claim, are guided by religion, from the most trivial details, such as which side to sleep on, to the most significant ones, such as whom to marry and under what conditions. At the same time, they say that Islam also determines how they behave in private: how they interact within their homes with their family and with others, and guides their public life by telling them how and in what way to present themselves. These public actions based on religious interpretations include the practice of *niqab*. It has been demonstrated throughout the analysis that practising *niqab* is strictly a Weberian rationality, where the women weigh up the costs and benefits of the practice. Two variables come into their equation: the religious variable and the earthly variable. With regard to the first one, i.e. «pleasing Allah» by practising *niqab*, they believe this will have positive consequences in the afterlife. However, they also make a rational calculation of the status they are likely to attain within

the group by being a *niqabi* woman «in this life». It is important to point out that in the Internet, and particularly in Facebook, the *niqabi* women claim they have strong social support for their decision to practice *niqab*. Furthermore, it can be concluded from the interviews that after they have adopted the practice of niqab, they enjoy a certain degree of social prestige for their bravery, for putting the satisfaction of *Allah* before everything else (social image, possibility of work, etc.). Therefore, the possible risk of «rejection» on the streets of Spain by certain collectives is more than offset by the high prestige they are accorded by the group in which they move. We do not rule this out as a decisive reason for *niqabi* women who are in contact with one another via the internet choosing to wear the *niqab*. We find that their rationale is based on a combination of ends and values and that the catalyst for their actions continuously fluctuates between one type of rationality and the other.

In relation to our hypothesis that behind these women's arguments are ideological and political positions that they themselves are unaware of, we were indeed able to confirm that this is the case, given that the *niqabi* women interviewed not only deny the exercise of hermeneutics or free interpretation of the holy texts, but recognise that they seek out interpreters outside their circles (the three sages cited are fundamentalists). Interpretation of the holy books is provided ad hoc by people known as «Islamic sages» —all men— or by the opinions these express and which the women draw on to determine their stance on the *niqab* and indeed all other aspects of their lives. The interpretations, which give the women absolute legitimacy, are found on the Internet, particularly in various Facebook groups, in addition to YouTube and television channels such as *Córdoba Televisión* and *Al Jazeera*.

To conclude, we would like to emphasise that our study suggests that the women are indeed fundamentalists and that it can be inferred that they are against terrorism, although in a few cases the women are able to understand the motives behind the use of terror. And this point merits further consideration: if these *niqabi* women are willing to accept the interpretations of third parties that they regard as legitimate, allowing them total freedom of interpretation and not using their own critical capacity, what would happen, for example, if these interpreters gradually and succinctly begin to legitimise the use of violence in their discourse? This question, which was raised by the researcher, is not intended to present Muslim *niqabi* women as being misguided in their view of the world, or as being subservient and lacking critical capacity in general and independent critical thought in particular, because throughout the discussions it was observed that the women were very skilful in using part of the subversive, rebellious, liberating and modern discourse, even invoking feminist maxims. What the researcher is trying to bring into the open are the potential hazards of Islamic fundamentalism and the strategic role Muslim *niqabi* women play as re-producers of a fundamentalist ideology that is spreading throughout the Internet at lightning speed and which is being presented as the only legitimate Islam in a bid to eliminate an Islam that allows for more lax, flexible and modern interpretations.

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