On October 22, 1989 thousands of French Muslims staged a demonstration in Paris in support of three Muslim students who were expelled from the Gabriel-Havez secondary school in the Creil municipality. The students’ only crime was that they wore headscarves while attending school, in defiance of the French Education Minister’s decree that banned wearing any “ostentatious religious insignia” (Seljuq, 1997; Kaitlin, 2007). Two political events make the year 1989 particularly significant related to the headscarf controversy: The Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini’s religious decree (fatwa) that was in fact a death sentence for the British writer Salman Rushdie on the occasion of publishing his novel *Satanic Verses*; and the Algerian Muslim militants’ killing of several French residents that rekindled a debate on Islam’s alleged violent nature (McGillion, 2004). Later in the 1990s, the Gulf War and its aftermath exacerbated the situation not only in France but all over Europe (Seljuq, 1997). In this highly charged and tense political environment the French public and the media interpreted the wearing of headscarf by French Muslim students as a religious-political statement in defiance of the French principles of separation of church and state. Furthermore, opponents of the headscarf also argued that the Muslim girls were co-opted by Muslim fundamentalist groups who intended to advance their militant political agenda (Begag and Chaouits, 1990).

The headscarf controversy continued in the 1990s amid public demonstrations and law suits. But the matter appeared to be settled in 1996, as an appeal court in the city of Nancy in two separate cases ruled in favor of seven female Muslim students of North African origin, ordering the French government to pay compensation to one student and allow the other six to return to school while wearing the headscarf. But their victory was short-lived, as public opposition to this alleged “Islamic militancy” continued and forced the French government in July 2003 to set up a special investigation commission on
religion. Headed by Bernard Staci, the commission heard hundreds of witnesses and published its report in late 2003 recommending twenty three measures to guarantee both the state’s neutrality on religion and the equality of religious faiths. In addition to proposed legislation to clarify acceptable religious garb in school, the report also recommended addition of Muslim and Jewish holidays (Eid-al-Adha and Yom Kippur, respectively) as public holidays; instruction of “religious facts;” teaching “non-state” languages such as Kurdish and Berber in addition to state languages like Arabic or Turkish; and the rehabilitation of “urban ghettos” where most French Muslim immigrants resided. Acting on the Staci Commission’s recommendations in late 2003 the then French President Jacques Chirac proposed a law for constitutional review which was subsequently passed in early 2004 by the French National Assembly by a large majority. But ironically, the proposed law only focused on legislation against “ostentatious religious signs and dresses” which according to the Ministry of Education “whose wearing in public schools leads to the immediate recognition of the wearer’s religious belonging, which is to say the Islamic veil, whatever name one calls it, the Jewish Kippa, or a cross of massive dimensions.” Yet despite the claim for the law’s universality, it clearly focused on the hijab or the head covering worn by Muslim women (Silverstein, 2004).

The law banning conspicuous religious symbols in schools became effective in September 2004. But despite divided public opinion its enforcement was rather uneventful. According to one survey taken before the law’s passage in February 2004, the law was favored by 69 percent of the population while 29 percent opposed it. Among the French Muslims, 42 percent were supportive of the law while 53 percent opposed it (Anon, 2004). Even among the French Muslim female population 49 percent supported it while 43 percent opposed the law. France is home to the largest Muslim population in Europe outside Turkey, about five million or 8.3 percent of the population (Silverstein, 2004: 3). However, according to an opinion poll taken after September 11, 2001 only about 30 percent of France’s heterogeneous Muslim community described themselves as “practicing Muslims;” and the majority of them, or about 58 percent were non-practicing Muslims who can better be described as French persons of Muslim origin (Sondage IFOP, 2001). This might be an explanation for an absence of mass protest after the law’s passage. In all, once the law was enforced in schools
about 240 female students attended school wearing the headscarf, and reportedly 170 students later accepted to remove it and the rest had undergone “conciliation procedures” (Müller, 2005).

In the absence of an all-out protest against the 2004 law among France’s Muslim population and the prevalence of the more “moderate” French Muslim citizens and residents, it is more accurate to define them as a population that consider their faith as an Islamic version of “civil religion,” a term coined by the American sociologist Robert Bellah in the late 1960s (Bellah, 1967). This demographic reality begs the question of the reason for the rather harsh reaction by the French government in dealing with the Islamic headscarf. In a search for answers, two issues need to be examined more clearly: France’s colonial excursions in the Muslim world particularly in North Africa; and the socio-economic status of Muslim immigrants who have settled in French territories due to colonization, and more recently globalization.

The French Colonial Presence in North Africa

When in 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte was about to invade Egypt, he told his soldiers that they are about to be “engaged in a conquest whose consequences will be incalculable” (Hermassi, 1987: 33). What distinguished the French colonial expedition in Egypt from other European colonizers’ conquests was a group of French scientists who accompanied Bonaparte, in an apparent attempt to learn about the history, language and culture of the people who were about to be subjugated. Some have considered this new approach as an indication of Bonaparte’s keen interest in, and adherence to one of the main principles of the Enlightenment by acknowledging the common people’s basic human and legal rights vis-à-vis the arbitrary power of the dictators and the European aristocracy (Youssef, 1998). But other observers have interpreted it as “propaganda” to cover up the true imperialist (and later colonialist) intentions of the French in their overseas ventures (Cole, 2007). Clearly, the European expansion led to the emergence of an ideology rooted in the paternalistic belief that colonialists had a responsibility to govern and take care of their subjects who allegedly were incapable of doing so on their own. While the Anglo-Saxon colonialists justified their imperial intentions by promoting the “white man’s burden,” the French colonizers were prone to see themselves as being
on a mission to conquer and civilize the colonized people (‘la mission civilatrice’). Thus while the British were more interested to rule over and control their colonial subjects without forcing them to assimilate to the British way of life, the French did not vie for multiculturalism and considered the French culture superior to all other cultures in the colonies which made it necessary and a “noble” objective to impose it on the colonized (Nasr, 1999: 560–61; Lewis, 1980: 338).

During the 19th century France colonized Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco in north-west Africa, or what is known as the “Maghreb” (the West). While Tunisia and Morocco were decolonized relatively peacefully in 1956, the Algerians had to fight a bloody war to rid themselves from 130 years of brutal French colonization in 1962. In general, the Muslim “Magrebin” proved to be a tough challenge to French colonial ambitions, as they fiercely resented and resisted colonial domination which the French attributed to Islam and its theological doctrine that allegedly condones violence. According to Nasr (1999: 564), “Such Islamic doctrine as jihad, polygamy, strict obedience to religious law (shari’a), and the tendency to introduce Islamic values to public life were seen as evidence of Islam’s hostility to progress.”

**Muslim Immigrants in France**

Since the French census enumerators do not ask about religion or ethnic origin, there are no accurate statistics on French Muslims. Estimates for the French Muslim immigrant population range anywhere from 3 to 6 million, but one official estimate in 2000 put the total number at 4,145,000 of which about 3 million were from the Maghreb (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>1,750,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>350,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>315,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>550,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,145,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Haut Conseil à L’Intégration, 2000: 26
The most recent government data indicate that in 2004 there were five to six million Muslims in France or about 8–9.6 percent of total population, of which 70 percent have come from the Maghreb (NISES, 2004). France’s involvement in Algeria is of particular interest for this study, as the French were not only after economic gain but also total integration of Algeria into France. This led to the declaration of all Algerians as “French” in 1864, and recruitment of Algerian subjects who were then trained to serve as mercenaries fighting alongside the French in their colonial wars.

Historically speaking, the Algerian mercenaries were the first significant group of Muslim immigrants who settled in France. Known as the harkis, Algerian soldiers who fought along with the French colonial army to suppress the Algerian revolution were relocated and settled in France after 1962 to avoid reprisal and persecution by the triumphant Algerian resistance army (Haddad, 1999: 604). According to one estimate, there were about 450,000 harkis in France, the majority of whom being born and socialized in France (Seljuq, 1997). But the majority of France’s Muslim immigrants left their homelands due to France’s need for cheap labor during several crucial periods; such as 119,000 Algerians who came to France to work in factories in 1919, and many others who were needed to work in jobs left vacant by war casualties after WWII (Killian and Johnson, 2006: 62). Most immigrants were single men, or men who left their families behind, with inadequate housing and accommodations made available to them. This prompted the French government in the 1950s to build hostels mainly designed to house single men. The economic recession of the mid-1970s forced the French government to temporarily suspend entry of foreign workers, yet another change in immigration policy facilitated the migrant workers’ reunification with their families. This led to the so-called ‘feminization of foreign population’ (feminization de la population) from the late 1970s onward (Lequin, 1992). To bring one’s family, the policy required migrant workers to prove that they have adequate funds and salaries to support their families, and lodging large enough to house them. Although many workers did not qualify, their spouses often arrived with tourist visas who eventually extended their stay without legal permits (Killian and Johnson, 2006: 63).

The French government does not collect racial, ethnic, or religious data in its censuses, and since the constitution considers everyone to be “French” it follows a color-blind policy that leaves no room for affirmative action programs. Yet there is a consensus that discrimination based on religion, race or national/ethnic origin is prevalent and a
fact of life in France, particularly related to the French Muslim population (Mattack, 2005). In the absence of affirmative action policies to support immigrant families; presence of a subtle but persistent racism and disdain for the Muslim Maghrebi migrant workers and their families; and a *de facto* segregation of migrant workers in suburban working class neighborhoods around factories in French cities led to a deterioration of quality of life and housing conditions for many of the French residents of Maghrebi origin. As a consequence, concentration of Muslim immigrants in self-contained high-rise settlements similar to the “projects” in American cities, and unemployment rates double that of the national average have led to their marginalization in the French society.

In general, there is a prevalent opinion among the ghettoized and marginalized Muslim immigrants that there is a “conscious or unconscious national consensus in France to keep immigrants depressed so that they will always be around to do the dirty, low paid jobs that the French disdain” (Ibid.). This is supported by different studies and official statistics indicating that French Muslim immigrants from the Maghreb have historically had a much lower socio-economic status compared with the rest of the population. For instance, in 1992 French families of North African origin had a much lower rate of homeownership compared with French citizens and other immigrant populations (see Table 2). The findings of another study of immigrants in France indicated that the Maghrebin occupied the lowest levels of the social structure by mainly holding manual jobs in factories and construction sector, were poorly educated, and had much higher rate of unemployment compared with the general French population (Tribalat, 1995, 1996). A slow economic growth in France and across Europe in the new Millennium has perpetuated the plight of Maghrebi workers and their families, as by 2005 the unemployment rate for those under 25 was 50 percent compared with 22 percent for the country (Matlack, 2005).

Table 2. Home Ownership among French Citizens, Immigrants from North Africa and other Immigrant Groups, 1992

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Type</th>
<th>Home Ownership Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Own (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Immigrants</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrants of North African Origin</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kastenbaum and Vermés (1996: 44)
Within the above context, immigrants of Algerian origin have always been subjected to harsher treatment. According to Naravane (2005) a considerable number of French citizens feel that “Algeria was a part of France and should never have been granted independence;” consider continued presence of Algerians and other immigrants of North African origin as “adding insult to injury;” and who “cannot let go of sentiments of racial and colonial superiority.” This particularly places the French of Algerian origin at the center of the hijab controversy, and as I will explain in the following sections they represent an ethnic and national identity that challenges the French notion of Republicanism and ethnic identity.

French Republicanism and the Problematic of the Maghrebin Ethnicity

The opposition to wearing religious symbols in schools is based on a French law passed in 1905 that recognizes complete separation of church and state and prohibits the latter from funding or supporting any religion. The French term “laïcité” which sometimes is erroneously translated as “secularism,” in essence means creating a balance between public order and religious freedom. Related to educational institutions, the 1905 law enforced laïcité in schools in order to prevent the anti-democratic influences of Catholicism and the Catholic Church (Vaïss, 2004: 2). In fact, the French government does not have any officially sanctioned racial, ethnic, or religious group classification, and only recognizes individuals as citizens who in turn should pledge allegiance to the Republic. Furthermore, keeping schools as “religion-free zones” lies at the heart of the French idea of citizenship, and schools that are funded and operated by national or local governments are prohibited from endorsing any religious doctrine (Astier, 2004).

France has always promoted “French Republicanism” that is based on individualism and full assimilation of all individuals who have made a political choice of becoming a “French citizen.” Recent urban riots and the hijab controversy have led some to question the practicality of Republican ideals, yet the Anglo-Saxon/ American model of multiculturalism has not gained official support in France. Those opposed to multiculturalism often argue that allowing various ethnic groups and nationalities to express their “cultural particularities” will lead to the “fragmentation of society into several separate communities,” which in turn will ruin “the unity of the nation” (Kastoryano, 2006).
More specifically, the concept of “minority” does not have any relevance to French social relations, as the official policy is to legally and socially unify the population in accordance with the constitutional definition of the French Republic as “one and indivisible” (Open Society Institute, 2002: 71). In addition, France does not recognize rights of groups, and under the constitutional principles of “lāïcité” only individual rights are recognized (Haut Conseil à L’Intégration, 2000). In the context of the European Union, France has signed but not ratified the European Charter of Regional Minority Languages (ECRML), nor has she signed the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) (Open Society Institute, 2002: 72). This is highly problematic for religious groups and immigrant populations who are subjected to overt and covert forms of prejudice and discrimination and yet have no legal and political recourse to address their concerns.

French Muslims come from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds, but in the absence of any official recognition of immigrants’ ethnic and religious identity they are all lumped together and recognized as “French Muslims.” Being Muslim within the French context of “lāïcité” means being the “other” vis-à-vis the “Français de souche” (French by extraction) (Hervieu-Leger, 2000: 80). The French of Algerian origin comprise the most numerically significant immigrant population. But they are also the most prominent population within the context of French colonial history. For instance, Algeria was France’s major “settler colony” to which French citizens and their European allies migrated, expropriated land from the indigenous population, and effectively destroyed Algeria’s agrarian and nomadic economic, political and social structures (MacMaster, 1997). This led to massive displacement and emigration of Algeria’s indigenous population, mostly in search of employment. Since all colonial subjects were considered as French nationals, prior to Algeria’s independence from France in 1962 those Algerian migrant workers who went to France did not see themselves as leaving one country to enter another, rather as French citizens entitled to full economic, political and legal rights. However, the French government simply considered them as colonial subjects who were in France as temporary migrant workers. This was also the position of the Algerian government after the independence under two leaders, Ahmed Ben Bella (1962–1965) and Houari Boumediene (1965–1978). While France benefited from a supply of cheap migrant labor, the Algerian governments considered the perpetuation of their
citizens’ stay in France a product of neo-colonialism that continued to exploit Algerians even after independence (House, 2006).

France’s presence and involvement in colonial and post-colonial Algeria led to polarization and radicalization of Algerians both in their home country and in France. During the war of independence most Algerians sympathized with the National Liberation Front (FLN, *Front de Libération Nationale*). In addition, the French of Algerian origin played a decisive role in the Algerian war of independence by siding with the resistance movement during the 1954–1962 period. Since the French ruled Algeria as a settler colony, no Algerian comprador bourgeoisie class in its classic form was created. As a result, after the French defeat and withdrawal in 1962 there was no exodus of Algerian upper class out of fear of being persecuted by the revolutionaries. Instead, some segments of the *harkis*, those Algerians who fought alongside the French army against the FLN were evacuated and resettled in France. But they were mostly of lower class origins, and once in France they were “parked in unspeakable, filthy, crowded concentration camps for many long years and never benefited from any government aid—a nice reward for their sacrifice for France, of which they were, after all, legally citizens.” The *harkis*’ horrible treatment by the French government added them to the rank and file of other immigrants of Algerian origin who considered themselves second-class citizens after Algeria’s war of independence (Ireland, 2005).

During the three decade period after WWI, known as “*les trente glorieuses*” (30 glorious years of prosperity) both the older generation *Maghrebin* and their French-born off-springs were warehoused in high-rise low-income housing structures (HLM, or “Habitation à Loyer Modéré”) built in the suburbs of major French cities like Paris, Lyon, Toulouse, Lille and Nice, where most factories and industries were also situated. This effectively segregated the *Maghrebi* workers and their families in urban peripheries (“*les banlieues*”) where there were little or no provisions for shopping or leisure activities. Ireland (2005) vividly describes the present living conditions in the French HLM:

Now 30, 40, and 50 years old, these high-rise human warehouses in the isolated suburbs are today run-down, dilapidated, sinister places, with broken elevators that remain un-repaired, heating systems left dysfunctional in winter, dirt and dog-shit in the hallways, broken windows, and few commercial amenities—shopping for bare necessities is often quite limited and difficult, while entertainment and recreational facilities for youth are truncated and totally inadequate when they’re not non-existent.
Social Spheres and Maghrebi Muslim Identity: A New Frontier for Anti-colonial Resistance

Similar to the American “melting pot” approach, the assimilationist perspective espoused by supporters of French Republicanism assumes integration and cultural adjustment is a necessity for immigrant populations in order to survive in the host culture. But several studies indicate that the social and political conditions under which immigrants exit their country of origin, the social class background, differences in residence environments (i.e., rural vs. urban immigrants), and the socio-economic and political contexts of the host society are all significant variables that contribute to immigrants’ ability and willingness to integrate (Chaichian, 1997: 612–64; Portes and Borocz, 1989: 614–620). Studies of identity formation increasingly emphasize its interactive nature in a process of negotiation with other identities. For instance, Hall (1996: 4–5) argues that identities are constructed “through the relations to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the ‘positive’ meanings of any term—and thus its ‘identity’—can be constructed.” Identity formation and its maintenance is often stronger among the groups that have unequal access to a society’s social, cultural, political, and economic spheres. On the other hand, those who support the totalizing power of the French Republic, both French and assimilated immigrants, tend to resist and resent such identity formations. Khosrokhavar (1997: 37–38, cf. Open Society Institute, 2002: 77) succinctly describes this reactive tendency in post-colonial France particularly related to the Beur (second-generation French Muslims):

Access to French nationality for Maghrebian youth… involves Frenchmen granting to the children of the ex-colonized what was, formerly, the colonizers’ exclusive privilege. Frenchmen returning to France from Algeria (pied-noirs), Algerians who deliberately chose France (harkis) and a considerable number of other Frenchmen accept with difficulty [that] the offspring of the formerly colonized, who refused to belong to the French Empire, now call for French nationality after their parents fought against colonial France. An unresolved historical argument, a feeling that immigrants’ membership in the nation is fraudulent, the general feeling that young people with migrant origin reject French civilization by their ostentatious adhesion to Islam—all this generates discomfort, which deepens insofar as it has never been classified or publicly discussed.
The period between 1975 and 1985 has to be considered a transitional period during which a new political discourse emerged in France when both the French government officials and the media identified and recognized the “second-generation” French of Maghrebi origin in general and of Algerian origin in particular. Commonly known as the “Beur” (Arab) and born in France, they were the sons and daughters of the Maghrebi immigrants. Thus they were not immigrants per se, as they were born into the involuntary status of being a Maghrebi with French citizenship. Segregation, discrimination, and subhuman conditions in the suburban ghettos led to the mobilization of the Beur as a new political force who in 1983 organized a march from Lyon’s suburban high rise (Les Minguettes) to Paris, and demanded to be recognized as French like everyone else (“comme les autres”). In her discussion of the roots of urban riots in 2005, Cesari (2005) argues that spatial segregation of the Maghrebin in post-colonial France and the tension between the “poor suburbs” (the periphery) and French metropolises (the center) is at the core of any discourse about the merits of the French Republican ideals. Elia (1997: 47) observes that while their parents emigrated to France with the dream and illusion of a better life, the Beur generation has to deal with a tense reality of a day-to-day life of...

...[C]ommuting between a Muslim, Arabi-speaking home when tradition up-holding parents reminisce about North Africa as they prepare cous cous and meschwi, and the streets of the only city they know, the French metropolis with its corner bistros, its secular culture, and the growing racism of Jean-Marie le Pen supporters and Neo-Nazi skinheads.

In general, France’s resistance to the French Muslim identity has taken place within a highly gendered post-colonial discourse. On the one hand, young Algerian males are stereotyped as dangerous Islamic fundamentalists, juvenile delinquents, and criminals who allegedly refuse to obey the French civic laws and to integrate (House, 2006; Geesey, 1995: 139). On the other hand, young women of Algerian origin are represented as passive and submissive (“barriers to assimilation”) and yet prone to integration and assimilation into secular French society due to their subordinate status within the Maghrebian male dominant culture. Thus the French Maghrebian women “are alternately seen as potential agents of integration or victims of Islamic fundamentalist
agendas” (Geesey, 1995: 137). The conservative assimilationist camp in France also holds the position that the Maghrebi Muslim women who are subordinate to men will assimilate easier than men, since the latter “stand to lose a significant amount of control over female family members” if the former choose to do so by integrating into modern French society (Schnapper, 1991: 173). As Abdelkarim-Chikh (cf. Geesey, 1995: 144) argues, the characterization of Maghrebi women, particularly those married to non-Muslims, as willing agents of assimilation is rooted in the colonial ideology held by French Orientalists who “shed crocodile tears” over women’s oppressive conditions both in colonized Algeria and in contemporary post-colonial French society. However, she further characterizes the position as “narcissistic satisfaction evoking a symbolic abduction, or better yet, proof of self-admiration of one’s own values, in which the abducted woman is a consenting accomplice” (Abdelkrim-Chikh, 1990: 241). The French assimilationist approach is also problematic, by overlooking the significant role Islamic cultural values play in the lives of Maghrebi immigrants, both male and female.

Hijab as the Last Defensive Wall of the Colonized

Similar to Judaism, Islam is both a religion and a way of life that extends to all spheres for individuals living in Muslim communities. Both Islam and Judaism are also characterized by orthopraxy, or their dedication to correct practices as dictated by each faith (Denny, 1985: 43). Thus religious belonging and upbringing is an inseparable part of a Muslim society’s inherited culture. Although in different ways, the “headscarf controversy” in France reflects on the significance of Islamic cultural values for both older generations and the Beur (Babés, 1997). As a consequence, regardless of one’s level of adherence to Islamic theology Islamic culture continues to remain a strong component of one’s identity. There are indications that the percentage of “practicing” Muslims in France has been on the rise since the late 1980s. But findings of a 2001 survey indicated that only 36 percent of French Muslims declared themselves “believing and practicing.” The survey also indicated that among the upper-middle class French Muslims practicing families are more numerous than non-practicing ones (Open Society Institute, 2002: 76). As Hervieu-Léger (2000: 80) explains, Islamic values for French Muslims are “the only cultural and symbolic good that
they can specifically assert vis-à-vis the Français de souche (“French by extraction”) which enables them, at the same time, to transform exclusion into a voluntarily Assured difference.” This voluntary assumption of difference between a French Muslim of Magrebi origin and a person of French extraction is indicative of an identity that has emerged in France as a reaction to the government’s policy of total cultural and political domination in post-colonial France.

Another variable that is often overlooked in the popular media reporting and analysis, is the rural and tribal origins of the predominant majority of the French Maghrebin. In her examination of the status of North African female immigrants in France Geesey (1995: 140) observes that most studies focus on their most recognizable differences from the rest of the French society such as “illiteracy, modest or Islamic dress, rural origins, higher birth rates, poverty and physical seclusion.” However, most interpretations gloss over the immigrants’ rural, and particularly tribal cultural backgrounds, and instead quickly move to criticize the restrictions placed on women based on alleged Islamic teachings, without acknowledging the fact that Islamic movement had strong roots in tribal culture and lifestyle. There are no official statistics on the Maghrebian’s rural or tribal origins. But Chaker (2006: 3) estimates the number of immigrants in France who speak Berber (language of the Maghrebians with tribal roots, or the Kabyle) being close to 1,500,000 of which 1,000,000 are Algerians and 500,000 are of Moroccan origin. This indicates that almost two-thirds of French Muslims of Algerian origin come from tribal areas.¹

The Algerian Kabyle also come from a long tradition of fighting colonial domination, a historical reality that has certainly affected their identity both as Algerians and immigrants/citizens in France. It is within this historical context of colonial and post-colonial realities that one has to see the link between Islamic orthopraxy and tribal culture, particularly related to the meaning and utility of the hijab for Muslim women. Some studies of the Maghrebi women in France have made note of “negative pressure put on female family members

¹ The Kabyles are tribal people who live in the highlands of the Atlas Mountains in northeastern Algeria on the Mediterranean Sea. The term Kabyle is a truncated form of the original Arabic word “Al Qabayel” which literally means “tribes.” The kabyles are predominantly Sunni-Muslim and speak Kabyle which is a Berber language mainly spoken by tribal people in Algeria, Morocco, Mali and Libya (see Brett and Fentress, 1997).
who seek changes in their traditional lifestyle and status, even by relatives who are still living in their home country” (Taboada-Leonetti and Lévy, 1978: 168–178). Thus Muslim women are discouraged from adopting “foreign ways,” that go against their traditions out of fear of being ridiculed and censured by family members and neighbors (Geesey, 1995: 144). Muslims in general and Arab-Muslim societies in particular depend on a “bipolar” and seemingly harmonious and productive social order that creates two strictly separate, gender-specific spheres—women belong to and are in control of the interior of the home (private sphere) and men are in charge of the exterior world (public sphere) (see Bouhdiba, 1975: 43).

The strict division of male and female spheres of Maghrebian communities in France closely mirrors that of Arab and Kabyle communities in the Maghreb (North Africa). In his study of gender relations in 20th century Algeria, Knauss (1987: 4–5), using the French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis, explains in detail the rigid sexual segregation, stratification and patriarchal notion of “male honor” particularly among the Kabyle, or Algerians of tribal origin. Bourdieu (1979: 121–122) depicts a typical gender division among the tribal people:

The opposition between the inside and the outside is expressed correctly in the sharp division between the women’s sphere—the home and its garden…a closed, secret, protected space, away from intrusions and public gaze—and the men’s space—the place of assembly, the mosque, the café, the fields and the market.

Algerians have an expression that demarcates this gender-based social-spatial division: “Que la femme fasse le cous cous, et nous la politique” (let women make the couscous, and we will take care of politics) (Knauss, 1987: 5). In Kabyle tribal culture the men are also expected to protect women and the intimacy of the family (private sphere) while girls are socialized to expect to be protected by men (see Figure 1). Outside the home, women in most Muslim tribal cultures, including the Kabyle, are not protected by the veil, but an elaborate system of masculine and feminine pathways and public accommodations effectively keep men and women separate. As Bourdieu (1979: 122) explains, it is “in the urban world where men’s space and women’s space overlap” that female intimacy is “safeguarded by confinement and the wearing of the veil.” Thus the veil becomes a protective tool for tribal men who have to confront other
Dismantling the Defensive Wall of the Colonized

Figure 1. Gender-specific spaces in a Muslim Maghrebin rural-tribal culture

Figure 2. The veil (hejab) and its function in urban public spheres

men, strangers who may not necessarily belong to their own tribe. In her book *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi (1991: 85) explains in detail the rationale for the descent of the verse of the *veil* (curtain in Arabic) in the Qur’ān, and the fact that it was “not to put a barrier between a man and a woman, but between two men (see Figure 2).” She further argues that the concept of the word *hijab* has three interwoven dimensions:

The first dimension is a visual one: to hide something from sight…the second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold. And finally, the third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden (93).

It is the *hijab’s* third dimension, namely, the ethical that is imperative to the tribal culture of male honor that the Kabyle also prescribe to. Bourdieu (1979: 123) describes how the male members of the Kabyle are socialized to protect not only their women, but also the whole sphere of intimacy including internal family and tribal dissentions and shortcomings from strangers. Clearly, all aspects of the Kabyle’s cherished tribal culture are violated within the post-colonial French social context. First, the *Maghrebi* men are disenfranchised, discriminated
against and forced to live in dilapidated housing and to take low-paying jobs. They are also effectively cut off from the French political process: they no longer have any control over the public sphere and its associated politics in post-colonial France as they did back in their homeland. Second, women who joined their male relatives in the 1970s, as well as their French-born female offspring (Beur) are forced to live in the public housing complexes in the banlieus where there are no protective measures to keep their private spheres separate from the public sphere. This also exerts pressure on Maghrebi men who are expected to protect their women and their homes (private sphere) from strangers. Furthermore, Maghrebi women’s interactions with teachers, social workers and nurses exposes them to the nuances of a secular Western culture which the Maghrebi men come to consider as a “plot organized against them to dethrone them from a reign that is increasingly difficult to maintain” (Yahyaoui, 1989: 10). Third, in a tribal cultural context where men and women are expected to uphold endogamous marriages, the French Maghrebi women are exposed to the non-Muslim public sphere and have a chance to meet and marry non-Muslim men. Unable to control female spaces in urban France, as they used to do back home, the Muslim Maghrebi “parents, brothers, even cousins prevent girls in the family from going out,” and when they fail, they “place them under close surveillance” as dictated by their honor code (Begag and Chaouite, 1990: 66). Thus, being subdued and continuously exploited in post-colonial France, the Maghrebi men use the hijab as the last available cultural tool at their disposal to protect their shattered honor and violated private sphere from a hostile and domineering public sphere that continues to colonize them and their families.

The descent of the hijab during the Muslim prophet’s time was to protect the private sphere of the family from the dangers of unknown forces in the public urban sphere of Medina. But the resurgence of the hijab at the end of the 20th century in many Muslim countries and in post-colonial situations signifies a new era when Muslim societies and populations have not only lost their economic and political independence, but also their cultural identity. The confinement of women by Muslim men is seen as a solution for a crisis of global magnitude. As Mernissi (1991: 99) argues, “protecting women from change by veiling them and shutting them out of the world has echoes of closing the community to protect it from the West.” In brief, the French gov-
ernment’s handling of the *hijab* controversy and eventual banning of the headscarf in French schools is a clear example of using Muslim immigrant women’s bodies as a cultural and ideological battleground to subject the Muslim immigrant population to total submission to France’s post-colonial interests; and the Muslim communities’ pressure on women to wear the *hijab* in public is their last remaining defensive tool against invasive forces of globalization in the context of the French society.