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RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

## Ban on Head Scarves Takes Effect in France

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

**P**ARIS, Sept. 2 - A law banning Islamic head scarves and other religious symbols from French public schools took effect peacefully on Thursday, transforming the first day of school into a nationwide show of defiance of a demand by the kidnapers of two French journalists in Iraq that the law be rescinded.

Most Muslim schoolgirls arrived bareheaded at the country's 70,000 elementary and high schools, and most of those who had swathed their heads in varying pieces of fabric removed them on request.

Instead of dividing the country, as perhaps the kidnapers had hoped, intellectuals, journalists, religious leaders - even France's Muslims - joined forces with the center-right government to tell the captors of the two journalists, Georges Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot, to stay out of France's affairs.

"Today we have to worry about the fate of the two hostages," said Muhammad Bechari, vice president of the French Council for the Muslim Religion, before heading to Baghdad as part of a delegation to win the two men's release. "The political battle, a purely French one, for religious freedom will resume later on."

France, he added, "is not at war with the Islamic faith."

Although the ban on "conspicuous" religious symbols also applies to Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses, there was never any doubt that it was primarily aimed at France's five million Muslims and what is widely perceived as creeping fundamentalism in their midst.

The education minister, François Fillon, toured a number of schools with large numbers of Muslim students on the outskirts of Paris on Thursday, saying at one of them that opening day was "marked by fraternity, the idea that all children are treated fairly and equally."

The seizure of the two French journalists has stunned France and exposed the complexity of the country's struggle to integrate its growing Muslim population at home as it tests the strength of its longstanding network of alliances and personal friendships with Arab leaders.

The government mounted a relentless campaign to free the hostages by wooing the far corners of the Muslim world and enlisting its political, religious and intelligence allies to serve as intermediaries with the kidnapers. Hope that the two journalists might be freed soon was raised by reports late on Thursday that the kidnapers had turned the men over to another group that favored their release.

Many of the intermediaries have portrayed France as a friend of the Arabs that, because it opposed the war in Iraq, should not be punished.

At the same time, France is determined to enforce its tradition of strict secularism by banning the Muslim head scarf from its public schools - even if this alienates Muslims around the world.

Paradoxically, for the first time, French Muslims have united on a major political issue and rallied behind the French government. They essentially told the hostage-takers that they should stay out of France's affairs.

"We have seen an extraordinary display of national unity by the Muslim community here saying, 'First, we are French,'" said Olivier Roy, a leading French scholar of Islam. "They may disagree on the law of the veil but they are saying, 'This is our fight and don't interfere.' This is a pivotal moment."

Even some of the most outspoken critics of the law, including the Geneva-based author and philosophy professor Tariq Ramadan, shifted course and told students to comply.

Still, much of the Muslim world remains convinced that the new law is an unfortunate affront to Islam. Arguments by French officials

since the law was passed in March, to explain it as a desirable way to preserve France's republican values, have not been understood.

Even the interior minister, Dominique de Villepin, who was foreign minister when the bill was passed, argued against it, predicting rightly that it would be seen as an act against veils rather one for secularism.

"The Muslim world simply doesn't understand the law," said Abderrahim Lamchichi, a political science professor at the University of Picardie in Amiens. "It is deplorable that even liberal Muslims think that the law is against Islam. It's absurd."

Similarly, in countries where multiculturalism is protected, even celebrated, like the United States and Britain, there has been little sympathy for the French position.

So the French government followed a two-pronged approach in dealing with the hostage crisis: focusing on the criminality of hostage-taking under Islam and explaining why the law should not be seen as anti-Islam.

Aside from purely humanitarian concerns, there are other reasons why the nation has been fixated on freeing the two men.

First, there was a need to highlight that France, too, is a victim of terrorism, despite its opposition to the American-led war in Iraq and its refusal to send troops as part of an occupation or training force.

French officials point to the threat broadcast in February by Ayman Zawahiri, the No. 2 figure in the Qaeda terrorist network, that criticized the scarf ban as an affront to decency, adding that such anti-Muslim acts by the West should be answered with tank shells and missiles.

Indeed, France has suffered more terrorist attacks and uncovered more plots by Arab or Muslim radicals in the past decade than any other European country. Since Sept. 11, 2001, 11 French technicians were killed by a bomb in Karachi, Pakistan, and a French tanker was attacked off the coast of Yemen, both apparently by Al Qaeda.

Second, there are strong memories here of French citizens being taken hostage by Islamic radicals in Lebanon in the mid-1980's and the intense negotiations they required with Syria and Iran.

Third, the hostages are journalists, whose profession enjoys much higher standing in France than in the United States.

"These are people who are exposed, who find themselves in wars as they seek the truth," said Bernard-Henri Lévy, author of the best-selling book, "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" about the American journalist slain by Islamic radicals in Pakistan. "The journalist is a figure of modern heroism in France."

Mr. Chirac and Mr. de Villepin had predicted that the war in Iraq would unleash a new wave of terrorism and that no country would be immune.

They never said openly that fear of becoming a target of terrorism was one reason France had stayed out of the war, although many here believed that French citizens might be spared the wrath of hostage-takers in Iraq.

Amid the condemnations of the hostage-taking, there have been strains of schadenfreude.

A newspaper controlled by the party of Iraq's prime minister, Ayad Allawi, on Thursday blamed France for the kidnapping.

"Chirac, who wants to present himself as fair, must take his share of responsibility in the kidnapping of his two compatriots as he opposed all international resolutions aimed at restoring Iraqis' security," one editorial said. Another editorial complained that France had remained silent while "terrorist attacks were being carried out against the Iraqi people and infrastructure."

Even inside France, there are those who faulted the presumption of immunity from terrorism in Iraq.

"The French have fallen from their heights because they were sure they would be safe, thanks to Chirac's standing with the man on the street in the Middle East," said Mr. Lévy. "There was a perception that France's pro-Arab policy would protect us. But that was an illusion. Now the French are waking up and finding out that these people don't make any distinction."