### 2. The Political Unveiled

While the previous section focused on the decline of the veil in the West, another important factor is the resurgence of the veil in the East in the late twentieth century because the East also saw periods of rises and falls in veil use (Turkey and Iran even banned the veil for periods of the twentieth century). While scholars such as Ahmed, and El-Guindi examine this question in particular, one of the most illuminating sources on the resurgence of the veil comes from Frantz Fanon in his essay “Algeria Unveiled.”

As Fanon recounts, the veil’s reawakening occurs as a result of colonial conflict (in this case the Algerian revolution). During the French colonial era, the colonizers viewed the veil in the same terms that contemporary media uses: a leftover form of medieval oppression of women. But Fanon highlights how for the French colonial administration wiping out the veil would also destroy the people’s originality and resistance. He writes, “The officials of the French administration in Algeria, committed to destroying the people’s originality … were to concentrate their efforts on the wearing of the veil, which was looked upon at this juncture as a symbol of the status of the Algerian woman” (37). Fanon argues that a “a blanket indictment against the”sadistic and vampirish" Alge­rian attitude toward women was prepared and drawn up" (38); however, this attitude towards the veil existed well before. He may be right that the modern propaganda and media coverage of the veil began in Algeria but the attitudes themselves develop well before. Nevertheless, the idea that “[b]ehind the visible, manifest patriarchy, the more significant existence of a basic matriarchy was affirmed” informed the decision to target the veil: the way to colonial dominance was through the women. Thus, Fanon likens the rendering of the veil to the act of rape:

Unveiling this woman is revealing her beauty; it is baring her secret, breaking her resistance, making her available for adventure. Hiding the face is also disguising a secret; it is also creating a world of mystery, of the hidden...to make her a possible object of possession...Thus the rape of the Algerian woman in the dream of a European is always preceded by a rending of the veil. (43-5)

Yet the decision to unveil the Algerian women had the opposite effect. The veil “helped the Algerian woman to meet the new problems created by the struggle” (63) by allowing them to carry weapons of the resistance. Under the cover over their veils, they carried the guns revolutionaries would use to attack the French police. Eventually when the colonizers clued on to this use of the veil and started screening people at the French quarter’s entry points, the Algerian women donned French clothes. Yet this too had the opposite effect. As Fanon writes, “The veil protects, reassures, isolates” (59). When performing terrorist activities like planting bombs, the sense of being watched heightens. An extreme sense of discomfort occurs. Combining this feeling with the already alien feeling of being out of the veil and under the male’s gaze at bar, then it is no surprise that the young women of Algeria would find comfort in the veil.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet another effect occurred from “his [the colonizer] endeavor to unveil the women, to make of them an ally in the work of cultural destruction, [that] had the effect of strengthening the traditional patterns of behavior” (49); women re-donned the veil after wearing French clothes for terrorist activity. For these women, to wear the veil was to belong to a group that opposed the colonizer: to reaffirm their identity and their resistance to the colonial powers. Fanon recounts, “Spontaneously and without being told, the Algerian women who had long since dropped the veil once again donned the hai’k, thus affirming that it was not true that woman liberated herself at the invitation of France and of General de Gaulle” (62). The veil became a “positive, self-affirming political force” (Yegenoglu 560). This position as a political force and symbol for identification in the twentieth century enters the veil into a discussion with Carl Schmitt’s concept of the political.

In his work *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt lays out what he sees as the essence of politics: the friend-enemy grouping. In a pithy comment, Schmitt explains, ““Tell me who your enemy is, and I will tell you who you are” (Theory of the Partisan). As *Orientalism* demonstrates, the Occident and the Orient come to define one another. In fact, Schmitt himself alludes to this relationship”Never in the thousand-year struggle between Christians and Moslems did it occur to a Christian to surrender rather than defend Europe out of love toward the Saracens or Turks" (Concept of the Political). But Schmitt’s gets really interesting (because of the relation to his Christianity and the above quote) when he says that the political enmity exists devoid of the religious enmity:

Emotionally the enemy is easily treated as being evil and ugly, because every distinction, most of all the political, as the strongest and most intense of the distinctions and categorizations, draws upon other distinctions for support. This does not alter the autonomy of such distinctions. Consequently, the reverse is also true: the morally evil, aesthetically ugly or economically damaging need not necessarily be the enemy; the morally good, aesthetically beautiful, and economically profitable need not necessarily become the friend in the specifically political sense of the word. Thereby the inherently objective nature and autonomy of the political becomes evident by virtue of its being able to treat, distinguish, and comprehend the friend-enemy antithesis independently of other antitheses. ()

Schmitt basically argues that the friend-enemy grouping informs the religious hatred and not the other way around. This formation occurs because “[t]he political is the most intense and extreme antagonism” and the Other, in this case the Muslim, “is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible” (). Schmitt attempts to purify the political realm from any other factors and demonstrate that life and death struggles, whether for religious or economic reasons, emanate from the political. The heightened rhetoric of say religion results from this political struggle. In a way, Said argues similarly; the Athenians had their barbarians and in turn the Christians have their Muslims and, in my argument as well as Fanon’s, the veil has the unveiled. These aggressions seep out of the political core. What Schmitt fears most is the loss of this distinction where society can longer easily identify the political dimension: “they turn into empty and ghostlike abstractions when this situation disappears. Words such as state, republic, society, class, as well as sovereignty, … so on, are incomprehensible if one does not know exactly who is to be affected, combated, refuted, or negated by such a term” (). Yet, his description fits our contemporary society struggle with terrorism. The enemies no longer clearly identify themselves. They live in our midst. What lies at the heart of Schmitt essential of the political is not just the friend-enemy grouping but also the public-private distinction.

Because Schmitt’s friend-enemy grouping materializes in the public realm, it leaves the private realm open to cordial or business relationships with the enemy: “An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy…The enemy in the political sense need not be hated personally, and in the private sphere only does it make sense to love one’s enemy, i.e., one’s adversary” (28-9). This theory does reflect medieval relationships between Europe and the Ottoman Empire, and wars throughout the Enlightenment and up to after the Second World War. Trade and cultural exchange occurred between the Ottoman’s and Europe even though, they consider each other enemies just as the Germans could have a soccer (football) match with the English between battles in the first World War. Yet, Alex Thomson summarizes Derrida who points out the problems in this distinction:

If the public enemy and the private enemy cannot be rigorously discriminated, the purity of the political must be interminably suspended. Derrida suggests that ... when this border is threatened, fragile, porous, contestable ... the Schmittian discourse collapses. It is against the threat of this ruin that his discourse takes form.  
Elsewhere Derrida asks: “Why does Schmitt take no account of the fact that the police and spy network — precisely the police qua spy network ... ‐ points to what, precisely in the service of the State, ruins in advance and  
\_*from within*\_ the possibility of the political, the distinction between public and private? (156)

Derrida points to the secret police as an example of the collapse but in the veil we see a similar conflict. El Guindi argues that privacy as a concept varies between the West and the East. Dress in general but veiling in particular are “privacy’s visual metaphor” (“The Sacred in the Veil: ‘Hijab’”). She writes, “Arab privacy does not connote the personal,” the “secret” or the individuated space.” It concerns two core spheres – women and the family. For both, privacy is sacred and carefully guarded. For women it is both a right and an exclusive privilege, and is reflected in dress, space, architecture and proxemic behavior" (“The Sacred in the Veil: ‘Hijab’”). This conflict of connotations plays out in the Western media often and featured prominently in the niqab debate in Canada. The anxiety around women in the niqab centered on the idea of “what could they be hiding from us” as if Canada was in the midst of the Algerian Revolution. In the West, a public face has emerged as a public right when in the public space. Yet, as El Guindi points out the veil, the veil permeates the public space in the Arab world. In her text, Meyda Yegenoglu takes Schmitt’s fear in a more general direction when she argues that the external enemy becomes the internal enemy in Europe; Europe is in the process of defending the public secular sphere from an encroaching Islam that seeks to turn the public into a twin of the private religious sphere. In this sense, the niqab represents a visual assault on the public’s secular image.

To quell this fear of a spectral enemy, Schmitt turns to the sovereign decision. The sovereign is the ultimate authority who decides between the enemy and friend: “Schmitt argues that there must be an ultimate instance in the state—“the sovereign”—who decides when there is a state of exception. This sovereign decision should not be possible to question; its power should be unconditional and indivisible” (Hagglund 180). In the Canadian debate, the election became a debate on who to hand that authority to.

1. Gilles Pontecorvo’s film *The Battle of Algiers* wonderfully captures this sense of discomfort while it chronicles the actions of women during the revolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)