



The Honorable Robert M. Gates
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Gates:

We are writing to bring to your attention a practice that needlessly endangers the lives of uniformed women who are deployed to Afghanistan.

Our organizations acknowledge that the war in Afghanistan is different from any war that we have previously fought and that the United States is under great international and domestic pressure to interrupt the momentum of the insurgents through any means necessary. Further, we appreciate that the U.S. military men and women charged with this difficult task will do whatever is necessary to succeed. We honor their courage, dedication and willingness to sacrifice for this cause.

As our troops engage with rural Afghan people, they must always be cognizant that these proud people hold very different beliefs, operate under different cultural mores and participate in many social practices that would not be acceptable in our society. It is exactly this engagement with the Afghan people that has led to allegations of a troubling practice by a few U.S. commanders which allows and, in some instances, encourages United States military women to remove their helmet (the Kevlar Helmet, Army/Personal Protective Equipment, Marine Corps) while on official military missions and don the Muslim hijab and/or wear the hijab as a uniform item under their helmets or around their necks.

We oppose the wearing of the hijab while engaging with the Afghan people for a number of reasons. First, removal of the helmet may place those Service members at undue risk unless the Commander has determined that the threat does not warrant the wear of the helmet and flak vests and has changed the policy but unless the commander has sought approval from his/her higher headquarters, this practice may potentially violate the Service policies that are in effect for their theatre/area of operations. For example, the U.S. Marine Corps specifies that if a subordinate commander in the theatre/area of operations supports a lower level of Personal Protective Equipment, then he/she must receive approval from higher levels of command prior to executing the change. Army Regulation 670-1, specifies that in a "field environment" when the Kevlar helmet is not worn that the patrol cap will be worn. Yet, even without the policy change, many troops are willing to remove their helmets. However, commanders, charged with the safety of their troops, should never allow a safety issue to be viewed as negotiable or an "optional practice". In the instance of the hijab, there is no situation where "cultural sensitivity" should take precedence over force protection. There are scores of examples where helmets have saved the lives of personnel but they don't work if the troops don't wear them. For our troops serving abroad, we should continue to provide them with information and guidelines about how to ensure their own safety in a variety of situations they may encounter both on and off duty. However, serving in volatile situations is always potentially dangerous.

Secondly, the hijab is an unauthorized item and should not be worn with the U.S. military uniform whether it is apparent or covered. For most service members, the proper wear of the uniform demonstrates good military bearing and discipline with unauthorized uniform items being treated as uniform infractions. Service members serving in Special Forces/Special Operations units are often governed by different guidelines that may or may not conform to the uniform and safety regulations applied to the “line troops;” however, the majority of our service members are not assigned to those units, so the regulations do apply.

Lastly, as representatives of the United States service members are first and foremost members of the U.S. Military who are in Afghanistan fulfilling an official military mission. Improper wearing of the uniform or wearing unauthorized items undermines the discipline of our military and does not present the United States as a professional force. Just as military men are not authorized to wear the turbans or keffiyehs of the host country while in uniform, military women are not authorized to wear the hijab as part of the military uniform. Respecting the Host Nation’s beliefs does not include compromising our own safety practices and standards in the process of accommodation.

In 2002, a situation arose where servicewomen were required to wear Muslim attire while serving in Saudi Arabia. The Congress found the practice unacceptable and legislation was passed prohibiting anyone in the Armed Forces from requiring or encouraging servicewomen stationed in Saudi Arabia to wear the Muslim abaya robe and head scarf. Although the language was focused on Saudi Arabia, and the policy applied mostly off duty, the intent of Congress was undeniable—servicewomen defending our nation should not be subjected to local Muslim customs that result in the wear of Muslim attire. The alleged situation in Afghanistan is potentially more serious because the uniformed military women are fulfilling official missions.

Secretary Gates, we urge you to proactively publish guidance to prohibit the unauthorized wear of any religious and/or cultural garb while in uniform representing the United States of America. Further, we ask that you ensure that no command pressure be applied to our troops to wear the religious and/or culture specific items of clothing of other nations during their off-duty periods, unless there is an overwhelming force protection reason to do so.

Sincerely,



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President
Alliance for National Defense



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