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Mannequins Wear a Message for Iraq's Women

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Four mannequins in Western dress in the Kadhimiya neighborhood. Text accompanying the display, put on by a mosque, had an uncompromising message: Men who look at women in such dress become voracious monsters; women who wear it burn through eternity.

BAGHDAD — Vendors around the Kadhimiya mosque in northern Baghdad sell all manner of women's clothing, from drape-like black abayas to racy evening wear. But on a recent afternoon, Hameed Ibrahim ushered his family toward a different kind of fashion display.

On a raised stage between two shops, four mannequins in Western dress, their blond hair peeking out under colored scarves, stood amid crepe-paper flames. To one side was a banner featuring lust-crazed male ghouls; behind the mannequins, images of eternal suffering.

And at the foot of the stage was a scripture from the mosque.

"Whoever fills his eyes with the forbidden, on judgment day God will fill them with fire."

For Mr. Ibrahim, it was a message that his wife and daughters — and all Iraqi women — sorely needed. "I brought them here so they can see this," he said. "Maybe everyone has forgotten about God, and they say that this is progress. Well, I call it depravity."

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's government in 2003, women's clothing has served as a barometer not just of fashion, but of the current ascendancy of religious values in a once secular society. On this busy thoroughfare, near Baghdad's largest holy shrine, what might be called the mannequin salvo in the Battle of the Abaya — between secularism and Shariah law — incites heated views on both sides. If revolution in the Arab world is sweeping Cairo's streets, the smaller strokes here represent forces no less urgent.

Mr. Ibrahim's wife, who gave her name as Um Noor, or mother of Noor, approved of the exhibit, which has been up for about a month. Like many on the street, she wore a loose-fitting black abaya that covered everything but her face, and she dressed her four daughters in kind.

"This is good because it will make women feel frightened and stop what they are doing and wearing," she said. "There are some people who are not afraid of God. Let them come and see this." The clothes on the mannequins were chaste by American or European standards. The sleeves and hems were long, and the necklines were high or covered by scarves. But the message was uncompromising: men who look at women in such dress become voracious monsters; women who wear it burn through eternity.

"We had this great idea after we saw the depravity and the way they dress and show their body,"

said a representative of the mosque, who gave his name only as Abu Karar, or father of Karar. "This is a small stage to show the punishment of God if they wear these kinds of clothes, showing their breast, their butt, their body."

The mosque, he added, offers free head scarves to women who agree to "keep their promise to God" and not wear clothes that will inflame men's imaginations.

Clerics have had only partial success imposing Islamic mores. Baghdad's government recently shuttered many bars and liquor stores for a 40-day Shiite holiday. But the minister of higher education rejected a cleric's call to separate men and women on campus. Women in scarves or abayas now predominate in the capital, but they move among others wearing the tight jeans or skirts seen in the Turkish television series that have swept Iraq.

"Religious parties are on top right now," said Dr. Nada Abed al-Majeed al-Ansari, dean of the College of Science for Women at Baghdad University, who recently organized a panel discussion on appropriate dress for women.

She said that the decades of war and sanctions had made Iraqis more religious, and that the end of Hussein-era prohibitions had created a bubble for religious zealotry, especially among Shiites, whose rituals were banned by the old government.

"I think everything will be settled in time," she said, "but not today." She said there was no movement for an official imposition of Islamic law. "No one is forcing anyone to wear the veil."

As in America's culture wars, both sides in the abaya battle say they are losing.

From Abu Karar's perspective, the decline has been steep. "We were witnessing bad depravity last year," he said, "and this year it is worse." Even in Kadhimiya, where two important Shiite imams are enshrined, he said that most women who come to the display "call me bad names."

But to Maysoon Ibrahim, 34, the display only encouraged men to harass women by making them less than human. Already, she said, the pressures to cover herself were getting stronger and uglier. Men who used to flirt now use nasty words, she said.

"Even if I wear perfume they say, 'Why are you using it?'" She added, "We are becoming like Iran." Still, she said she would not stop wearing tight jeans and skirts.

Abbas Hussein, 23, saw this sort of attitude as problematic. Since the influx of satellite television and DVDs, he said, Iraqi women have been getting ideas from the non-Muslim world — and putting men like him at moral risk.

"Yes," he admitted, "I do look at women when I see them dressed up with tight jeans. That is one of the problems. It means the devil is doing a good job."

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