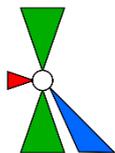


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<772/c>	state education. To his credit, Cheniere did attempt a conciliatory gesture when he suggested that the three adolescents could wear <u>their scarves</u> at school outside class hours. The girls insist that it is their fundamental right to wear <u>their scarves</u> at all times, just as some of their fellow students wear skullcaps or the cross. They say they do not understand why their headmaster is so intent on persecuting them when 20 Jewish students do not attend school on Saturdays, a normal part of the school week in France. Confronted with this, Cheniere retorts that there are some differences that are more salient than others. Let them wear <u>their scarves</u> at home, he adds; this school is French and secular. The 'Affair of <u>the Scarf</u> ', as it has become known, has taken the French media by storm. In the past month, not a day has gone by without national newspapers devoting reams of print to the issue, asking in big headlines, as Le Point put it, 'Should we let Islam colonise our schools?' The left-leaning weekly Le Nouvel Observateur has invited anthropologists, philosophers of many persuasions, feminists (mostly French) and Muslim intellectuals (men) to pronounce their verdicts. Opinion polls have been taken by Le Figaro and L'Evenement du Jeudi, with wildly differing results, readers have been encouraged to write and religious leaders of all shades have been called upon to give the benefit of their wisdom. Today in France, the Koran is the flavour of the day as 'specialists' dissect its verses and explain the mysteries of Islam to the lay masses. Yet it remains that, for the first time in 15 years and since the controversy over abortion, opinions are divided so haphazardly that traditional political alliances have ceased to operate. No sooner had the Minister of Education, Lionel Jospin, stated that <u>the scarves</u> could not be a motive for excluding the girls from school than the teachers' union, traditionally close to the Socialist Party, called him a traitor and 50 of his deputies signed a petition publicly disaffiliating themselves from his line and asking for his resignation. They found themselves rubbing shoulders with right-wing MPs, the same who in 1984 organised a million-strong demonstration in support of private schools and for the right of the parents to choose, and who today declare themselves staunch supporters of the state secular education system. Mme Mitterrand's support of the girls, in the name of respect of religious cultures within the bounds of secularity, brought an angry reaction from French feminists. Along with four other intellectuals, including Regis Debray, feminist writer Elisabeth Badinter signed an open letter to Mr Jospin, saying that <u>the scarf</u> is
 <p>Key: Footprint ConEn1 Footprint ConEn2 Footprint ConEn3</p>	<p><u>a symbol</u> of <u>Muslim women's oppression</u></p>
	<p>and warning him not to capitulate. A compromise on this issue, they wrote, would damage all that the French Republic has stood for since the Revolution. Remarkably, the voice of those primarily concerned by the issue, namely <u>Arab women</u>, has been totally missing. Les Nanas Beurs, an organisation of women of North African descent, believe that <u>the scarf</u> battle has to be fought. 'As Arab feminists of Muslim culture, we believe that fundamentalism in all its forms is dangerous and that <u>the scarf</u> is <u>oppressive</u>,' said spokeswoman Souad Benani. 'But it should not be used as a pretext to exclude 12- or 13-year-old girls from school</p>

when it is precisely these secular schools that should offer them the opportunity to learn, grow and make their own choices.’ For her organisation, as well as for SOS Racisme, the mass movement of young French of immigrant descent, this debate hides another agenda. What is really being debated, according to Hayat Boudjema, vice-president of SOS Racisme, is immigration and the integration of migrants and their children in French society. Already the opposition has united to set up a working group on immigration, with a view to formulating a new bill. Boudjema believes that the opposition parties are settling a score with the Socialist government and using the schoolgirls as a scapegoat. There’s more and more talk about the inability or unwillingness of the North Africans to adapt and conform. ‘This controversy has been tainted by racism parading as a concern for the adolescents’ welfare,’ says Boudjema. ‘The scarves are being used to fan the age-old fear of the Arab which has been dormant - simmering - since the Algerian war.’ For her the real issue is the second generation’s right to education, but not any old education. ‘We are still being taught about ‘our ancestors, the Gauls’. The history of our countries of origin in Africa, Asia or the Arab world has remained totally obliterated.’ Boudjema, who is of Algerian descent, says she was totally shocked when she first heard of the Affair of the Scarf. ‘When women in North Africa and the Arab world are struggling so hard for equality and respect, it is ironic that here in France a fundamentalist minority is pushing them to conform to tradition. But we can’t sacrifice these girls on the altar of a sacrosanct secularity which, in my view, needs to be urgently redefined and adapted to a multiracial society.’ As the debate goes on and the political parties bid for votes and support, Leila, Fatima and Samira are still confined to the library. In the