

# USCIRF Concerned by France's Expanding Interpretation of Ban on Religious Outfits in Public Schools

Sep 8, 2023

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Washington, DC – The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (**USCIRF**) is troubled by France's decision to prohibit the wearing of abayas (loose, robe-like garments) in public schools. A **2004 law** prohibits the wearing of religious symbols or clothing in schools, such as Jewish kippas, Christian crosses, or Islamic headscarves. In recent months, French public debate had questioned whether wearing an abaya to school violates the French policy of laïcité or secularism. Many school authorities who sought to comply with the 2004 law were unsure how to regulate abayas, which are mainly worn by Muslims to reflect one's personal modesty that for many is a religious obligation. Due to lack of consensus on whether the clothing constituted religious dress, the education minister released standard guidance this month that officially barred students from wearing abayas to school.

*"In a misguided effort to promote the French value of laïcité, the government is encroaching on religious freedom,"* said USCIRF Chair **Abraham Cooper**. *"France continues to wield a specific interpretation of secularism to target and intimidate religious groups, particularly Muslims. While no government should use its authority to impose a specific religion on its population, it is equally condemnable to restrict the peaceful practice of individuals' religious beliefs to promote secularism."*

While the 2004 law has impacted all religious groups in France, Muslim girls have faced particular scrutiny and restrictions since its passage. During la rentrée, or the first day of the French school year, nearly 300 girls **went** to school wearing abayas; while many eventually changed their clothes so they could attend classes, dozens of girls refused, on the basis of their religion, and were sent home.

France's actions are in direct contrast to Article 18 of both the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** (ICCPR) and **the Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (UDHR), which guarantee religious freedom to every person, including the freedom to manifest one's religious beliefs through symbols or clothing. France was instrumental in the drafting of the UDHR and voted for its adoption 75 years ago this December, and it is a state party to the ICCPR.

*"Muslim girls in France should not have to put aside their religious beliefs and practices when stepping into a classroom, nor should they have to compromise their basic human rights, including their right to an education, in order to uphold their beliefs,"* said USCIRF Commissioner **Nury Turkel**. *"The international community should continue to speak out against laws that threaten the religious freedom of all people in France, as well as other countries in Europe."*

In its **2023 Annual Report**, USCIRF detailed religious freedom issues in Europe, which included violations in France. In July 2023, USCIRF released a **report** highlighting concerns about freedom of religion or belief in the European Union, which outlined French restrictions on religious clothing and laws and policies that particularly target Muslims.

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*The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief. To interview a Commissioner, please contact USCIRF at **media@uscirf.gov**.*

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