A few facts about the burqa/niqab debate in France

**A debate is under way; no legal decision has yet been taken.**

- Given the small but seemingly growing number of women who wear the burqa and the niqab in France, in his June 2009 speech to the French Congress [joint meeting of National Assembly and Senate at Versailles] President Nicolas Sarkozy maintained the need for a parliamentary debate on the subject.

- So in June 2009, Parliament established a Fact-Finding Mission, which conducted a six-month investigation.

* This consisted of 32 deputies representing all political groups (majority and opposition parties).
* The Mission’s task was to assess how widespread the wearing of the burqa/niqab is and encourage “exchanges and dialogue” on the issue throughout French society.

- The Mission issued its conclusions on 26 January 2010. It proposes:

* the adoption of a parliamentary resolution condemning the wearing of full-body veils as contrary to the Republic’s values,
* the adoption of legislation making it illegal for people to conceal their faces in public service institutions, including on public transport.

**There are three core issues in this debate.**

- Human dignity

* By entirely covering a woman’s body and face, the niqab and burqa inhibit recognition of and respect for her identity as an individual.
* The burqa and niqab are at odds with our concept of human dignity, in particular the dignity of women, and respect for the principle of gender equality a fundamental principle of the Republic.

- Integration

* The issue is whether wearing the niqab or burqa ends up cutting women off from all contacts that create social ties, thus endangering their integration.
* In French society, traditional ways of interacting and engaging in conversation involve being able to see the other’s face and communicating with him/her as someone with a specific, recognizable identity.

- Law and order

* France is questioning whether wearing the burqa or niqab, insofar as they are favoured and encouraged by extremist movements, might eventually give rise to problems of law and order or even a shift towards sectarianism.

**This debate in no way aims to restrict the freedom of religion and belief.**

- The French Republic respects all beliefs

* Laïcité (secularism), as enshrined in the French Constitution, guarantees freedom of conscience and free exercise of religion. It is a principle of neutrality respectful of religions and beliefs.
* It is in this spirit, for example, that the 2004 Act prohibited the wearing of conspicuous symbols of religious affiliation in State schools.

- Organizations representing the Muslim community point out that:

* the Koran does not stipulate the need to wear the niqab or burqa, as Mohamed Moussaoui, President of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), has noted. For him, it is a “practice that does not allow women to lead a normal social life.”

The burqa, of Pashtun origin, preceded the birth of Islam. Only fundamentalists advocate the wearing of the niqab and it contrary to the practice of the vast majority of Muslims.