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High schools in Antwerp, Hoboken to ban headscarf Muslims protest Belgian school ban on veil



Demonstrators protested the school ban Sunday (Courtesy of Belga)

DUBAI (Al Arabiya)

About a hundred people gathered in Antwerp Sunday to protest a ban on veils imposed over the weekend at the only remaining high school in Belgium that permitted them, according to press reports over the weekend.

High schools in Antwerp and Hoboken announced over the weekend they intended to, follow in the footsteps of other Belgian schools and prohibit Muslims from wearing the veil starting with the next academic term.

The school said the ban refers to all religious and political symbols.

The protesters held placards bearing slogans like "Freedom for all, except us" and "Democracy not discrimination," according to a local TV station

It is expected affect about 50 percent of the school's female students according to Nordin al-Taweel, former president of the Muslim Executive of Belgium, the official national organization of Muslim Belgians, told the London-based daily Asharq al-Awsat.

School administrators, however, said the number of veiled girls in the school did not exceed five and that they would have reconsidered the matter if it affected more people.

"We notice that the equality and freedom of our students is suffering," the school administrations said in a statement. "It is possible that students feel obliged due to social pressure to wear political and religious symbols. Therefore we will not allow it anymore."

Taweel said that out of 148 elementary and middle schools, only 23 allowed the veil, and that the high

schools were the only remaining that permitted students to wear it.

About 100 Muslims, including several students, gathered at Antwerp's Sint-Jansplein to protest the ban, according to local press reports, following a call by Taweel to stage a demonstration. He also urged parents to boycott the school by not sending their children.

"We feel that the identity of the Muslim woman is targeted," he told the paper. "Women bring up generations. If they are lost, all Muslims will be lost, too."

Antwerp is home to a large Muslim community, made up largely of Moroccans and Turks.

But the call for a boycott stirred mixed reactions among Muslims and Belgians.

Mohamed Bouziani, the head of the Moroccan Initiative Networks, said he thought calls for a boycott went too far.

"However, we object to banning the headscarf," he added

Moroccan-Belgian Naema Langri, a member of the Christian Democrat party, said the timing of Taweel's calls for boycott was not appropriate and Flemish Education Minister Frank Vandenbroucke labeled Taweel's call "unacceptable."

According to the far right Vlaams Belang party, Taweel is paving the way for founding an Islamic school, a step the party considers unacceptable.

He denied those allegations in several media statements.

"I am in favor of dialogue," he said. "I call for negotiating with the schools involved although they did not think of opening a dialogue with the schoolgirls or their parents before deciding to ban the veil."

Taweel is a volunteer preacher at the Islamic Center in Brussels and was the imam of an Antwerp mosque in 2005. He was then elected to the Muslim Executive of Belgium.

His detractors accuse him of appearing moderate to the public while behind the scenes he portrays fundamentalist views.

(Translated from the Arabic by Sonia Farid)