

# Ayha

**Ayha Seif, 18, Student, Palestinian-American**

“I started wearing the hijab when I went back to Jordan [five years ago]. I went to visit my family, and I just saw all of my family, all the girls wearing it. I was inspired by them. But I also was inspired by my cousin, Sana, since she wore it starting in sixth grade. And I was like, ‘Wow, she wore it when she was so young.’ So it really inspired me because I was looking at her and I was like, ‘She’s two years younger than me, and she just wears it with so much confidence and intellect. So I was like, ‘If she can do it, then I can definitely do it. So she definitely also inspired me.’ I love her.

The hijab is part of my identity now and it shows my Muslim faith and who I am. At the same time, it’s also something that is mandatory. Allah told us to wear it, and I think [one of the reasons] is to protect us from the male gaze. I feel like you can define it as escaping the beauty standards that society has set for us. It’s a chance for us to be who we are, instead of being judged for how we look.

I feel like there’s a lot of misinformation [that the media tries to portray] and they try to depict us as bad people when we’re not. They try to dehumanize us, and honestly, growing up and seeing all of that made me feel very, very anxious and self-conscious about my identity as a Muslim. I used to hide that from people, and it was because I was afraid of how they would react and what they would say. I’ve had some experiences where I’ve told some people that I’m Muslim, and then they just flat out said something really prejudiced and ignorant, just because of what they saw on the media. Also, with some shows, I feel like they just don’t know how to represent Muslims at all. They correlate it with being oppressed. [The media is] not that well educated about it, as we would like them to be, which is so unfortunate.

[With all of this,] I continue to wear it because, first of all, it’s a symbol of my faith. And it’s also something that has made me feel closer to God because it’s mandatory and something that he wants us to do. So it just makes me feel closer to my religion, and just being easily identified as a Muslim. It brings me so much happiness because whenever I’ll be walking somewhere, or going out, there is always at least one Muslim coming up to me. I feel like that’s so cool.

The hijab is not a form of oppression. If anything, it’s a form of liberation because I can get to be myself. There’s no compulsion in religion; you can’t force someone to wear the hijab, that is wrong. It basically takes away the meaning of it. I wish people knew that [the hijab] is not a symbol of oppression, and that it’s honestly a symbol of freedom.”

”