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Understanding the Trump Administration's Updated Passport Photo Head Covering Guidance

(Current September 2025)

This educational document was produced by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), America's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization.

CAIR offices report apparently new, more invasive language in letters from the U.S. Department of State's (DoS) various passport agencies sent to applicants who wear a hijab in their photograph. While not every applicant receives such a letter, CAIR staff believe we are seeing an increase in the number of applicants receiving the letters.

This document serves as an overview and will be updated as facts evolve. This document is not and should not be read as legal advice. Readers should consult an attorney to address their specific circumstances.

What is happening?

If you wear a hijab and are applying for a passport, DoS requires that you provide an affirmation that the headwear is pursuant to a religious belief and that you are customarily observing that belief in your day-to-day life. Sometimes they will ask for the affirmation; sometimes they won't.

CAIR staff report complainants receiving letters requesting such an affirmation in the past. Newer versions appear more invasive, specifically a demand to know how long someone has worn the hijab and why not wearing it would be a burden to their free religious exercise.

The 2025 version of the letter says the following on this subject:

"If the hat or head covering is worn continuously in public as a part of a religious belief, include a signed statement that:

- Identifies the religion or faith (rather than a philosophy or lifestyle) connected to your regular practice of wearing this headwear;
- States whether you wear the hat or head covering continuously in public and for how long you have done so,
- Explains why providing a photo without a hat or head covering would burden your religious exercise, and
- Provides any other relevant information.

A comparative version of the letter from 2009 says, "The photographs you submitted could not be used because headgear may not be worn in passport photographs unless it is worn for medical reasons or as a part of daily religious attire. If this is the case, please submit a signed statement to that effect."

As of September 17, 2025, language similar to that in the 2009 letter [remains on the DoS website](#). This can possibly cause applicants to unintentionally fail to submit the appropriate materials, extending the amount of time needed to get their passport: "Take off your hat or head covering. If you wear one for religious purposes, submit a signed statement that says it is religious attire worn daily in public."

COMMON QUESTIONS REGARDING THE NEW PASSPORT LANGUAGE:

What do I say?

CAIR attorneys recommend the following language.

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To Whom It May Concern:

I write in response to the State Department's request for an explanation regarding my passport application photo, in which I am wearing a hijab. A hijab is a religiously inspired hair scarf worn by Muslim women that traditionally covers the hair, neck and ears.

I have continuously worn a hijab in public for [INSERT TIME] to fulfill what I consider a duty to God. Similar to Catholic nuns and orthodox Jewish women, I sincerely believe, as stated in the Quran, that the head covering must be worn and must not be removed in public.

This common practice of Islam falls within the religious accommodation that the State Department regularly grants passport applicants. I believe taking a photograph without a hijab would infringe on my sincerely held religious beliefs and therefore severely burden my religious exercise.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Q. What if I am mistreated?

Ask for the names and ID numbers of all the people involved in the incident. Be sure to write down this information. Write a statement of facts immediately after the incident, including date, time, and place. Be sure to include the flight number, the flight date and the name of the airline. Contact CAIR at www.cair.com/report or another civil rights organization if you feel you have been mistreated.

Q. What other resources relevant to travel and civil rights can CAIR provide?

CAIR Pocket-sized Community Member Protection Card

[Form for requesting a copy of the card is here.](#)

Trump Travel and Free Speech Specific Know Your Rights

[Understanding and Protecting Your Travel & Free Speech Rights Under the Trump Administration.](#) Information organized into three sections: non-citizen guidance, U.S. citizen guidance, and digital considerations for all travelers. (A [curated playlist of short, topic-specific videos.](#))

Know Your Rights

[Mosque KYR Posters](#): CAIR's masjid poster project. Free, ready to use kit for masjids featuring a set of posters with critical rights when approached by law enforcement and a QR code to report violations.

[Your Rights While Protesting](#)

[Your Rights with Law Enforcement](#)

[Know Your Rights as an Employee](#)

[Your Rights as an Airline Passenger](#)

[Your Rights While Travelling \(video\)](#)

[Know Your Rights as a Student](#)

Know Your Rights with Immigration and Customs Enforcement ([video](#)) ([pdf](#))

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