

Air France stewardesses mutiny over order to wear headscarves

Air France stewardesses, furious at being ordered to wear headscarves in Tehran, say they will refuse to fly to the Iranian capital when the airline resumes the service later this month.

Female members of flight crews have been ordered to cover their hair once they disembark in Tehran and unions are demanding that the flights be made voluntary for women.

The resumption of a thrice-weekly service between Paris and Tehran, planned for April 17 after an eight-year break, follows a thaw in relations since Iran agreed to dismantle large sections of its nuclear programme.

French women see Islamic headscarves and veils as an affront to their dignity. Headscarves are banned in French state schools and offices, and it is illegal to wear the full-face Muslim veil in public.

Flore Arrighi, head of the UNAC flight crews' union, said: "It is not our role to pass judgement on the wearing of headscarves or veils in Iran. What we are denouncing is that it is being made compulsory. Stewardesses must be given the right to refuse these flights." She added that female staff were entitled to exercise "individual freedoms".

The financially ailing French airline, which sees the resumption of Tehran flights as an "excellent" business development, pointed out that other airline staff were obliged to comply with Iranian rules. "Tolerance and respect for the

customs of the countries we serve are part of the values of our company," Air France argued that French law allows "the restriction of individual liberties" if "justified by the nature of the task to be accomplished."

Françoise Redolfi of the UNSA union said Air France had told staff it was restoring rules that applied before 2008, when Air France discontinued flights to Iran as the country's relations with western nations deteriorated over concerns that it was seeking to develop nuclear weapons. "The general environment now is much more sensitive," she said. "Many female members of flight crews have informed us that it is out of the question that they be obliged to wear headscarves. It is not professional and they see it as an insult to their dignity."