

Army now allows soldiers to wear turbans, beards, and headscarves

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [February 15, 2017](#) issue

New army regulations will allow Sikh and Muslim soldiers to wear turbans, beards, and hijabs—the headscarves worn by some Muslim women—under most circumstances.

“Based on the successful examples of soldiers currently serving with these accommodations, I have determined that brigade-level commanders may approve requests for these accommodations,” wrote Secretary of the Army Eric K. Fanning in a memo.

In March 2016, the army concluded that permitting beards for medical reasons but banning them for religious reasons is a discriminatory bar to service for Sikhs, who are forbidden by their faith to cut their hair and beards.

With that decision, Capt. Simratpal Singh, a West Point graduate and Bronze Star Medal recipient, was the first to win army approval to continue on active duty while maintaining his religiously mandated beard and turban.

Harsimran Kaur, legal director for the Sikh Coalition, which serves as cocounsel for Singh with the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, hailed the decision but said more work is needed.

“While we still seek a permanent policy change that enables all religious minorities to freely serve without exception,” Kaur said in a statement, “we are pleased with the progress that this new policy represents for religious tolerance and diversity by our nation’s largest employer.”

Soldiers will not be granted approval for accommodations if a commander determines “the request is not based on a sincerely held religious belief,” the memo states. And the accommodation can be denied if there is a “specific, concrete hazard . . . that cannot be mitigated by reasonable measures.”

After the memo’s release in January, previously accommodated soldiers received official approval that will continue through their careers, barring exceptions.

Fanning said the army is researching protective masks that can be used in hazardous environments by bearded soldiers. Until then, soldiers given these accommodations will not be permitted to attend military schools that require training on toxic chemical agents and may have to be clean-shaven in certain tactical situations.

The regulations note that hijabs should be “made of a subdued material in a color that closely resembles the assigned uniform.” A camouflage pattern can be used to match the combat uniform, and a soldier may be required to use flame-resistant material for the hijab.

The new directive includes illustrations detailing how the hijab should surround the face (not covering areas from the eyebrows to the chin) and the length of beards (two inches maximum). Beards longer than two inches “must be rolled and/or tied to achieve the required length,” according to the rules. —Religion News Service