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## Lebanese Magazine Lifts Veil on Sex in the Arab World



From explicit articles about masturbation and homosexuality to columns about "My First Time", Joumana Haddad is out to lift the veil on Arab cultural taboos with a glossy magazine that is already the focus of controversy.

The first quarterly issue of "Jasad" -- "Body" in Arabic -- hit the stands in Lebanon last December. Tongues have wagged ever since about a

daring venture into uncharted territory in the largely conservative and Muslim Middle East.

"It's true that this is a first in the Arab world," Haddad, 38, a writer and poet, told AFP in an interview. "I put open handcuffs near the word 'Jasad' on the cover of the magazine to illustrate that I wanted to unlock a taboo.

"We need to stop treating our bodies, especially we women, as if they're something to be ashamed of," she added. "We have so many issues to deal with without having the extra weight of needing to cover our bodies."

The December issue of "Jasad", which sold for 10 dollars, includes articles on self-mutilation and cannibalism. The cover story of the March issue focuses on the penis.

Other articles deal with battered men and women, transsexuals and the Kama Sutra. A regular feature is "My First Time", in which a well-known figure talks about his or her first sexual encounter and subsequent sex life.

Sexually graphic images -- including reproductions of works by famous artists such as Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso or Francis Bacon -- accompany the articles by authors from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia and Syria.

Pseudonyms are not allowed.

Although such a magazine would barely raise an eyebrow in the West, it has drawn the wrath of religious authorities and women's organizations in Lebanon who are calling for its closure on the grounds that it amounts to pornography.

"We are all in favor of modernity... but this magazine, under cover of being cultural, appeals to sexual instincts," said Aman Kabbara Shaarani, head of the Lebanese Council of Women, an umbrella group of several organizations.

"Subjects that teach our youngsters how to make love do not fit in with our moral values and civic education."

Shaarani said she had written to the highest religious authorities in the country -- both Christian and Muslim -- as well as to cabinet members and the censorship bureau calling for "Jasad" to be banned.

"I will not give up because there needs to be a media watchdog for these sorts of publications," she said. "We are considering

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taking this before the courts."

For now Lebanese authorities appear content to let publication continue, however.

Haddad, who is also culture editor of the well-known Lebanese liberal daily An-Nahar, argues that her publication does not target minors and is sold in a sealed plastic envelope clearly marked for adults only.

She said she regularly receives hate mail and her website has been hacked into 15 times and had the words "There is no god but God" in Arabic left on the server.

Haddad is not moved by such threats and stands ready to defend herself. "I'm not afraid of controversy," she said. "I am passionate, I believe in this project and sales have demonstrated there was a need for it."

The magazine's first issue -- all 3,000 copies -- sold out within 11 days. Sales of the second issue, printed at 4,000 copies, have so far been brisk, Haddad said.

Outside Lebanon the magazine is sold by subscription only as no bookstore in the Arab world would dare stock it, she said. "The highest number of subscribers, 282 out of some 400, are in Saudi Arabia where the magazine was met with much enthusiasm," said Haddad, who financed the project herself.

So far advertisers have shied away for the most part, fearing a backlash.

While Haddad admits that some of the articles and pictures in "Jasad" may be shocking to some, she rejects any notion that the Middle East is not yet ready for such a publication.

"Why should we treat the Arab world as a minor?" she said. "People against this project should go back to our own literary heritage which includes 'The Perfumed Garden' and 'Thousand and One Nights'. (AFP)

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