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## From Voyeur's Corner to My First Time: new magazine attempts to lift veil on Arab taboos

Lebanese glossy featuring sex and human body causes outrage in Middle East

**Ian Black**, Middle East editor  
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Joumana Haddad, who founded *Jasad*, says the quarterly magazine will encourage free discussion of the body. Photograph: Martin Argles

On any western coffee table it would not look out of place: a magazine with a slightly risqué cover and articles ranging from sexuality to fetishism and the human body. But on the newsstands of the [Middle East](#) it's a different matter. In the run-up to its launch next week, the glossy quarterly *Jasad* ("body" in Arabic) has been generating plenty of curiosity and hostility as it prepares to take on some of the most powerful taboos in Arab culture.

Issue one of the Lebanese title includes articles on self-mutilation and cannibalism as well as stories on sexual themes by authors from Egypt, Morocco, Syria and Palestine. Pseudonyms are not permitted. Regular features will include *Body-Talk*, *Voyeur's Corner* and *My First Time*.

The quarterly, licensed as required by the Lebanese government, is the brainchild of the writer and poet Joumana Haddad, whose day job is culture editor of Beirut's famed *An-Nahar* newspaper.

"The body is a quintessential part of Arab culture that has been veiled," Haddad told the *Guardian*. "I'm not trying to introduce something alien. We have wonderful erotic texts in Arabic like the *Scented Garden* or the non-censored texts of a *Thousand and One Nights*. These are all part of our heritage and we have come to deny it."

In a region where the majority are Muslims, Arabic is revered as the language of the *Qur'an* and the trend is for bodies to be covered up rather than exposed - let alone in all

their intimacy - this daring experiment has triggered both anger and excitement.

Officials of Hizbullah, the powerful Lebanese Shia movement, tried to close Jasad's stand at this week's Beirut book fair. One outraged visitor ripped down a poster, complaining that the subject matter was "haram" - forbidden. Visitors to the website of the popular al-Arabiya TV have attacked it. "Stop promoting this blatant vulgarity and obscenity," was one furious comment. But another said: "Amazing magazine! Oh Lord, please let it be distributed in Jordan!" A Saudi man pledged to buy 50,000 copies and distribute them free "to open people's minds".

Jasad will be on sale in sealed plastic envelopes in Lebanon but elsewhere it will be delivered directly to subscribers' homes for \$130 (£88) for four issues to avoid censorship. Subscribers in Saudi Arabia, the most conservative of Arab countries, number in "the hundreds", according to Haddad. Egyptians are finding it pricey but she has high hopes for the "more permissive" countries of the Maghreb such as Tunisia and Morocco.

The Jasad website features a keyhole with erotic pictures, statues and other provocative images sliding past tantalisingly behind it. The cover of the first issue pictures a naked woman sheathed in bright crimson silk fabric like a flower.

Its 200 pages of articles and illustrations are of a quality that would not be out of place in Paris, New York or London. The Arabic "J" of the title is linked to a set of handcuffs, hinting at the restrictions on free discussion of the body.

Haddad is firm that while Jasad is an "adult publication" that should not be sold to minors, it is "artistic and cultural", is far from pornography- and represents a return to authenticity. "Some of the things that people wrote in Arabic a long time ago would make the Marquis de Sade blush," she said, laughing. "Now even the word 'breast' in Arabic would be shocking in certain circles. The language has gone backwards because of the influence of religion in daily life. This is about the reappropriation of our language. It's been stolen along the way. We have rotten political systems that increase the power of religion."

The real issue, she argues, is about personal liberation. "People ... want something but can't talk about it in public ... The whole education system teaches us to be hypocritical."

Only in the "oasis" of Lebanon - where pornography is banned but magazines and videos are sold and lax laws allow a porn film industry to function - would it be possible to legally publish a magazine such as Jasad. Yet it is still not easy.

"Muslims will go further in expressing their disapproval," predicted Haddad, a lapsed Greek Orthodox Christian. "But Christians disapprove too, and some of them are very traditional.

"I don't mind having people thinking differently from me. I respect the right of people not to accept these things, but I don't accept it when they try to stop me doing what I want to do. This is not a political project. The magazine is about love for the culture of the body. It's not a cause - but it does hope to break taboos."

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## **World of contradictions**

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Sexuality is a largely hidden topic in the Arab world, though attitudes vary according to social norms and regime. Lebanon is a liberal island in a conservative sea, but even there frank discussion of sexual issues is frowned on.

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Contradictions abound: Syrian women buy daring lingerie for their trousseaux, but suffer a high incidence of violence from husbands or fathers. Egypt was scandalised by the sex in Alaa al-Aswany's bestselling novel, *The Yacoubian Building*. But Egyptian films have tackled issues such as pressure on women to remain virgins until marriage. French influence has left a liberal mark on the Maghreb, but freedoms tend to be confined to westernised elites. Saudi Arabia is the intolerant heartland where the religious establishment polices personal morality. Homosexuality is widely criminalised.

But attitudes everywhere are under pressure from globalisation and its tentacles - including foreign travel, satellite television and the internet. An Arabic-language erotic magazine delivered by courier is the latest manifestation of this unstoppable revolution.

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