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In Lebanon, 'Jasad' Magazine Defies Taboos

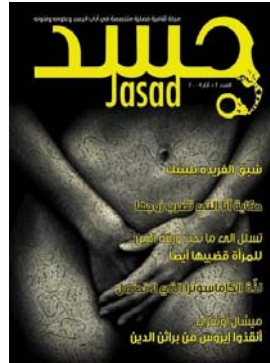
Posted: 2009-03-15

By Lynette Lee Corporal

BANGKOK, Mar 16 (AMF)

— 'Jasad', a Lebanese magazine that is challenging taboos in the Arab world, has gone full speed ahead with its second issue this month - at the risk of earning the ire of more conservative sectors.

In contrast to its first issue that presented a suggestive photo of a naked woman wrapped in red silken fabric, the quarterly magazine's latest cover shows a naked women's intricately painted torso with only a pair of hands covering her genitals.



If the cover does not give fundamentalist groups a heart attack, then the contents will as they tackle forbidden issues on sex, eroticism, homosexuality, body mutilation, fetishes, and even cannibalism.

According to its 'declaration' on www.jasadmag.com, the magazine is a "serious cultural, intellectual, literary, scientific and artistic project" and tackles topics related to the 'jasad' (Arabic for 'body'), including the 'bodies' of life, the mind, heart and language.

"Contrary to what people are saying, 'Jasad' is a magazine for both sexes because males and females need to be more knowledgeable about their bodies. In fact, I've received wonderful feedback from both sexes when the first issue came out and yes, we do have male subscribers," Beirut-based editor-in-chief and publisher Joumana Haddad told AMF in a telephone interview.

According to Haddad, men seem to be more caught up in the taboos in her country due to their "own cliches about their bodies and denial of their weaknesses". She believes though that the magazine will encourage women writers to express themselves more freely.

"Women don't always find it easy to express themselves especially on issues relating to their bodies. I believe this magazine will be a good forum for them to finally talk freely about their bodies, including their sexuality, and this is always a good thing," said Haddad, a thirtysomething Lebanese poet, translator and journalist. She is head of the cultural page of Lebanon's 'An Nahar' newspaper and is an administrator of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, that Arabic equivalent of the prestigious Booker Prize.

Haddad has gone through major challenges in putting up the

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WHAT'S NEW

Global Group Launches Safety Service, Code for Journo's

The International News Safety Institute, a coalition of news organisations, journalist support groups and individuals exclusively dedicated to the safety of news media staff working in dangerous environments, on Jan 15 launched a Gaza safety advice service on its website at www.newssafety.com.

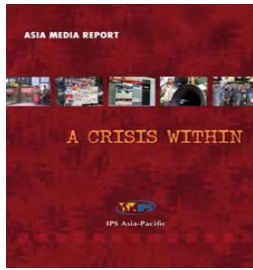
The service is aimed at providing the news media with a running update from the ground of safety-related information during the crisis. News organisations and individuals are enjoined to contribute useful information to the service. Interested parties are invited to email INSI director Rodney Pinder at rodney.pinder@newssafety.org or deputy director Sarah de Jong at sarah.dejong@newssafety.org.

To view the service, visit www.newssafety.com.

The INSI also released a safety code for journalists and news organisations, especially those covering conflict areas. In its statement, the INSI said that the organisation will strive for the "elimination of unnecessary risk, in peace and in war" and is dedicated "to the right of all journalists to exercise their profession free from persecution, physical attack and other dangers to life and limb".

To access the INSI Safety Code, click [here](#).

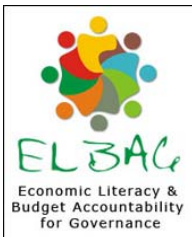
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magazine, which was conceptualised two years ago. These have included a falling out with a business partner due to editorial differences, attempts by Hezbollah, the powerful Lebanese Shiite movement, to close down the 'Jasad' stand at a bookfair in December 2008, critics panning the magazine and getting insults and threats in the mail.

"My friends advised me not to do it, as it was not the right time. Every time they said that, the more I wanted to push through with it. I love challenges and I've always believed that we need to create the time for anything," said Haddad, who is Greek Orthodox Christian.

Fortunately for her, Lebanon is, in many ways, more open than other Arab societies and other places in the Middle East. Haddad simply applied — and got — a licence to publish a cultural magazine.

"Elsewhere, if you want to publish a book, for instance, you've to take it to a censorship committee. That is not the case in Lebanon. Officials from the internal affairs ministry don't review the publication before it goes to print. You might have some problems with religious authorities later on and get complaints though," she explained.

But while the magazine prides itself for its pioneering move to expose and discuss long-held taboos, naysayers are not impressed.

Journalist Saseen Kawzally, in an article that appeared on the bilingual Arab news website Menassat (www.menassat.com) on Feb. 2, 2009, described the magazine as "very confusing", with varied material that is not "entirely coherent".

"Ironically, the endless 193 pages of 'Jasad' are void of 'any contemplation, thinking, research, challenge or revolt', as Haddad's opening editorial promises -- towards the lashes of religion on our living bodies," stated Kawzally.

The author also made references to Haddad's remarks about 10th-century Arabic writers "who speak about these topics in a beautiful free way" which she said is a very rich cultural and literary heritage.

"A magazine in Arabic about the issues of the body is expected to harvest from the rich tradition of Arabic writings on the body. Still, it is telling in terms of where, as supposed Arab intellectuals, we derive our concepts and ideas about issues that are, in fact, taboo in our culture, or thought to still be taboo," said Kawzally.

Although reportedly banned in Saudi Arabia because it is seen as pornographic, the 'Jasad' website is getting popular in the online community. An article about 'Jasad' published on the Muslimah Media Watch (www.muslimahmediawatch.org), an online forum of Muslim feminists, generated lots of supportive comments from users.

In defence of the magazine, one online reader's comment was pragmatic: "Of course, when dealing with issues of the human body, there's going to be talk of sexuality."

"By calling something pornographic without scrutinising and

Green Radio Tackles Touchy Subjects

A solar-powered Green Radio is making waves among environmentalists in Jakarta for daring to be "unique and bold" in its tackling of pertinent environmental issues on air. 'The Jakarta Globe' reporter takes an in-depth look at the country's first environment-friendly radio programme.

Paparazzis' New Pet: Big Spenders

Western tabloid media have always peered into the excesses of the rich and famous with a mix of puritan disapproval and voyeurism. But these outlets and other news organisations are now recording troubling uses of taxpayer money at country clubs, private airports and glamorous retreats and, in so doing, explicitly tapping into a fierce populist anger at corporate America, and even pressuring Congress to hold companies accountable.

Japanese Media Turn to 'Entertainment' in Hard Times

Are Japanese media in denial about the present economic downturn? asks 'Japan Times' writer Philip Brasor in a recent article. While major media companies have not yet resorted to mass layoffs, observers say that it's only a matter of time before they do.

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analysing it first, it shows both a complete refusal and immaturity to deal with the very subject of sex and sexuality," said another, who thought the magazine was a "highly commendable effort".

Sold in Lebanese bookstores, the magazine is said to also have hundreds of subscribers abroad. Interested parties can also order copies online.

Haddad said she is not sure what the impact of the magazine is to the Arab media in general. " I hope it will allow the Arab culture to reconcile with its heritage. We need to remember this heritage and embrace and celebrate it again," she said.

Future articles will cover topics on weight-loss disorders, obsession about cosmetic surgery and other health issues related, naturally, to the body. Readers have also requested discussion of other topics.

Despite this seeming willingness of some sectors to tackle certain sensitive issues, Haddad does not think it has reached that point of "doors and windows really opening up".

"That is the main problem. There is still a big gap, a very huge problem of schizophrenia in Arab society. I don't think we've reached a point where we can talk of windows opening up. Unfortunately, we are closing windows sometimes in Lebanon," said Haddad. (END/IPSAP/AMF/LLC/JS/150309)

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