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## Let's Talk About Sex, habibi

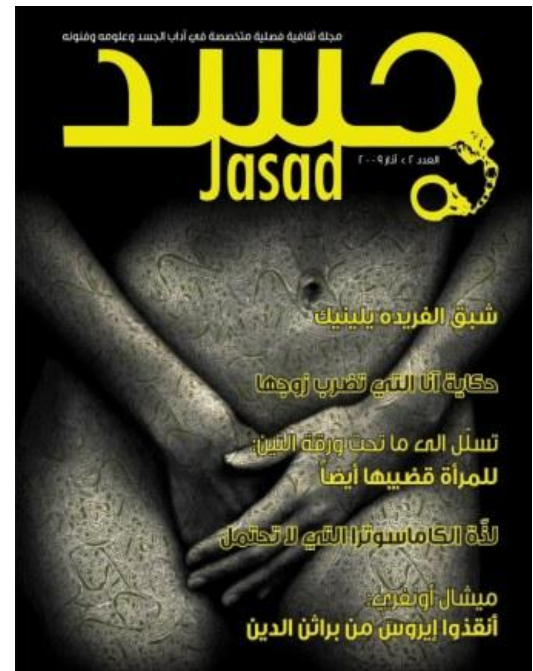
*Sexuality is a difficult topic to discuss in any society but in the Arab world it is notoriously problematic. Sex and sexuality are often seen as private matters that have no place in public debate and when it comes to more controversial aspects of sexual orientation, honest discourse is near impossible. Arab society, it seems, just doesn't want to talk about it. So when Joumana Haddad launched a new magazine in Lebanon, entirely dedicated to issues of sexuality, she knew was facing formidable opposition. Arwa Aburawa caught up with the talented poet and journalist to talk about changing attitudes to sexuality, censorship and how true social change can only come from within the Arab world.*

Despite the rumours you may have heard, JASAD or 'The Body' in Arabic, is a cultural magazine on the body's arts, sciences and literatures. It is not the Middle East's version of *Playboy* and it is not pornography. "Allow me, just by way of clarification, to announce loudly and clearly: Ladies and Gentlemen, JASAD is not a pornographic magazine" declares Haddad on the website. "It is a project related to the body, the body of life, the body of the mind, the body of the heart and the body of language." Judging by the uproar against the magazine in countries which have banned the publication and blocked the website as pornographic filth, the rest of the Arab world did not quite get the message.

"It is still difficult in the Arab world and it is almost impossible to sell the magazine in some countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain," explains Haddad. "Others have even blocked the website so that the only possibility is to provide the magazine via subscription- a great deal of which are from Saudi Arabia. Yeah I know, the irony of censorship! When someone's decides that something is bad, everyone wants to take a look at it." In fact, the first edition, which explored issues ranging from first times to foot fetishes, sold out in 10 days, selling around 3,000 copies across the Middle East.

The magazine clearly filled a gaping void in the Arab literature market and consequently gained a loyal following. "When I started discussing this project with my close circle, everyone was telling me that I was crazy and that this was not the time or place. So I prepared myself for everything and although I am having some quite negative reactions, the support on the other hand has been wonderful and I wasn't expecting it- especially from normal readers."

This positive feedback from mainstream readers has been very encouraging- if surprising- to Haddad as she believes that the simple act of talking about controversial issues is a vital step towards social change. "I do believe that expression is an important part of the healing process and just discussing the facts, disclosing information and being able to talk about



taboo subject is in itself something not to be taken lightly. Of course, it goes without saying that other things should be done but one of the scopes of this magazine is to provide a place to discuss and I truly hope that it will be able to do that.”

*Joumana Haddad - by Giorgio Pace, 2008*



Despite evidence of slowly changing attitudes, Haddad is still very sceptical over whether this is indicative of a wider shift in norms across the Arab world. She realises that compared to other countries in the Middle East, Lebanon is much more tolerant and that the current Lebanese government has been key in holding back concerted attempts to shut down the initiative. “I think it's too optimistic to say that there has been significant change. Lebanon is not an ideal place but it is more indulgent about discussing such issues and we shouldn't see this as an indication that things are changing in the Arab world. Also, this is a small, individual initiative and I don't think that it would be accurate to say that something is changing. I think that we are living in a dark era of our history.”

***"Haddad is busy shocking religious authorities by talking about -gasp- the penis."***

Joumana Haddad is also well aware of the real deep-rooted schizophrenia in the Arab world with regards to social attitudes. “There is a duality where we say something but believe something else which is widespread in the Arab world. So, we will have to really change the way we see things and judge things before we can talk about real change. This will take a lot of time but I am convinced that the mere fact of discussing these issues is very helpful in achieving this change.”

JASAD has even taken a step towards tackling this schizophrenia by refusing to publish the work of anonymous writers. The literature magazine states that it does not want to provide a space for secret debate between unknown counterparts but rather it wants honest and responsible discussion. It's a brave step in a world where many people take huge risks to say what they really believe but Haddad insists that “it is about being responsible for what you say and discussing the issues with your society.”

Haddad is also determined to keep pushing the barriers and tackling controversial issues of sexuality through the magazine. Whilst you may have assumed that these would be in traditional areas of 'sexual deviance' such as homosexuality, Haddad is busy shocking religious authorities by talking about -gasp- the penis. Yes that's right, the male body. “My dossier for the second magazine was the penis and it has raised a lot of eyebrows, I mean just the mere fact of talking about it. It as if we can't talk about it and that it doesn't exist and that the only body that we can talk about is the woman's body.”

The successful poet who openly writes about sexuality confesses that when she started the magazine, friends urged her to focus on less controversial issues to ease herself in. “I said no,” she admits, “this is what the magazine is about and it has to express itself right from the start or it doesn't have any real identity.”

Whilst JASAD is busy breaking taboos by talking openly about sexuality, Haddad sternly rejects criticisms that she is following a Western ideal of social progress. In fact, the award-winning writer insists that real change can only come through closer interaction with our Arab heritage and not by emulating the West. “We have come to a point in our Arabic culture and language where we feel ashamed to talk about our bodies and this is very unfortunate. Our Arabic culture has a wonderful heritage over the centuries of free discourse about the body in books like *One Thousand and One Nights* and *The Perfumed Garden* - these deal with sexuality in such a wonderful and liberated way. I just thought that this was something that has been kidnapped from us and that it was time to claim it back.”

This pride in the Arab world is evident in all of Haddad's work and despite the restrictions that she faces, she is not giving up on her homeland. “The only change I believe in is change from within the Arab world. This is why I decided to stay here although I have had many opportunities to live and work abroad. The fact that we are inside and banging our heads on

the walls and hurting ourselves is the only thing that will make these walls fall apart. Anything from the outside will always be from the outside.”

When I finally ask Haddad what hopes she has for the future, her response after a weary sigh is:

“This is such a difficult question because I have been raised in a country where I tried to be optimistic for so long and have had so many disillusionments along the way...What I can tell you is that I am stubborn, perseverant and insistent on staying here in the Arab world although many people are asking me leave. My own small dream for the next 20 years is that the magazine would be able to have a physical space where people could meet, talk and read - I have a small library on the topic of the body which I would love to share with other readers. This is not a dream that is possible in Beirut as it is now but I am hoping that it would be possible in five years time.”

In the end, all that JASAD is trying to do is to express an important aspect of Arab identity and heritage. It is providing an important outlet for positive sexual expression for the Arab world and it is representing a real alternative. Another option on the magazine rack; if you choose to pick it up. As Haddad asserts, “this project is not trying to impose itself on anyone who refuses it on principle. It is stored and sold in sealed nylon bags to adults only. You have the right to not to read as much as I have the right to do it and put it out there. I am respecting your rights, respect mine.”

For more information on JASAD see: [www.jasadmag.com](http://www.jasadmag.com)

**Review of *Madinah: City Stories from the Middle East*, edited by Joumana Haddad**

### **Homosexuality in the Arab world: recent news**

#### *UAE*

A BBC News story in March 2009 reported that the UAE government had launched a campaign to target 'masculine behaviour' among women. The government said the aim was to help women avoid 'delinquent behaviour'. Widely believed by human rights group and the media to mean homosexuality, UAE officials told local press that this behaviour was first spotted in schools and special care homes. A social worker in charge of the campaign, which was launched with the slogan 'excuse me I am a girl' said that girls may feel more secure in same-sex company and this can lead to them taking a male role by cutting their hair short and speaking with a deep voice.

#### *Iraq*

Many stories have surfaced in the media in recent years regarding the treatment of homosexual men and women in Iraq. Activists say a campaign against gay men has claimed 60 lives in the first quarter of 2009 alone. In Baghdad's Shia 'slum' Sadr City, ruled by radical cleric Moqtada al Sadr, posters have been put up listing alleged homosexuals by name, along with death threats. One Baghdad homosexual said the campaign started in 2004, when violence rocketed throughout the country following the US-led invasion the previous year, but that matters were much worse now. A number of Shia clerics have been giving sermons seen as homophobic incitement.

There have been numerous reports of police abuse of gay men in Iraq, but the Interior Ministry says it has no policy of arresting homosexuals just for being so and the government appears to be doing little to tackle homophobia. Homosexuality is seen, by officials, as an illness that should be treated. It is also believed that in some cases homosexuals have been killed by their own families, to protect the family name and honour. Many homosexuals have fled Iraq since 2004 and are now living in the West. In the UK, the *Iraq LGBT* (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender) is a support group working to raise funds so support activists back in Iraq and to help those facing persecution there.

#### *Lebanon*

Seen as the most liberal society of all the Arab countries, homosexuality is, however, still a crime here, under section 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code which criminalises 'unnatural sexual intercourse'. *Helem*, established in the country in 2004, was the first organisation in the Middle East to offer a community centre for LGBTs. *Helem* won the 2009 Felipa De Souza award from the US-based *International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission* for its pioneering work in the region.

#### *UK / International*

*I Can't Think Straight* is a film released in April about a love affair between a London-based Jordanian-Palestinian woman and Leyla, a British Asian woman, from director Shamim Sarif. The film - which includes an explicit lesbian sex scene -

is almost art mirroring life in that it resembles Sarif's own story. In the mid-90s, the British Indian director of Muslim origin met her female partner, a Jordanian-Palestinian. As Safir says: "In the Middle East it is extremely rare to be out" and both women faced strong opposition from their families - some of whom still do not speak to them to this day. Today they are married with two young children - they carried a child each and both have the same father - and live in London.



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