

Arab Women Speak Out

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By Bassam Michael Madany

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been engaged in a reform movement to bring the Kingdom into the modern age. Recently, he allowed Saudi women to drive cars. This was hailed as an important step forward. However, freedom has its limits. According to the Wall Street Journal, "[s]ince May, at least 18 activists have been arrested, of which four have been temporarily released. Many of them had [campaigned for women's rights](#), including for allowing women to drive, [a right that was granted in June](#). Among those arrested most recently is *Samar Badawi*, a prominent activist and sister of the jailed blogger *Raif Badawi*." (6 August 2018)

When Canada's minister for Foreign Affairs criticized the arrest of the human rights activists, Saudi Arabia retaliated by expelling the Canadian Ambassador in Riyadh. It also recalled its ambassador in Ottawa and went ahead with plans for stopping business with Canada and working on relocating the 7000 Saudi students studying at Canadian universities. Saudi reactions keep escalating. Even patients from the Kingdom who are receiving treatment at Canadian hospitals are being relocated elsewhere.

At the same time the dispute between Saudi authorities and the Canadian Government is going on; several Arab woman activists living outside the Kingdom are actively engaged in fighting discrimination against women going on in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Early in August 2018 a liberal website known as *Al-Hewar Al-Mutamadden* (Civilized Dialogue), dealt with the impact on the lives of two Arab women, when they were forced to wear the *hijab*.

Hind shares her story after visiting the office of a lady psychiatrist

"It was a traditional marriage. I had reached the marriage age and wanted to become a mother. I married a merchant who sold stationary; he was well-off and with a good reputation. First, he required me to wear the *hijab*, and then the *aba'ah* (a garb that covers the entire body) and now he wants me to wear the *niqab* (the face cover.)

"As a result, I fell into an overwhelming depression; like the symptoms described by the doctor. Now my children show less confidence in me. My older son behaves exactly like his father. My life is ruined." Hind added, "the doctor prescribed Zoloft, which is helping me to cope with my condition."

The Story of Suheir at the office of a psychiatrist

“Doctor let me tell you what’s going on at our universities.

“I entered the university in Egypt to receive a good education. During the past twenty years, the number of female students wearing the *hijab* has been steadily increasing. It’s as if they have just been converted to Islam, and that our forefathers had been *kuffar!*

“Add to that, the harassment of female students has been increasing greatly. When I refused to go with the crowd, my brother beat me, claiming that by not putting on the *hijab*, I was attempting to make myself attractive. In fact, I wear modest clothes, and don’t use any make-up.

“Several months passed, and I ended up wearing the *hijab*. Now, I feel melancholic. Should people ever get wind that I’ve consulted a psychiatrist, they’ll jump to the conclusion that I’m crazy! My life has been ruined.”

Comment

It’s not often we can read testimonies of Muslim women who were pressured to wear traditional Islamic clothing. In fact, the trend to Islamize women’s clothing in the Middle East is relatively new. I grew up in the Levant and lived in cities where both Muslims and Eastern Christians lived. Most young Muslim women didn’t wear the veil. The movies we saw were of Egyptian origin. They portrayed scenes in Cairo and Alexandria that were not that different from American movies. In fact, Egypt was one of the Middle Eastern countries where women activists had quite early in the past century, championed the cause of freedom and equality between men and women. This included the approval of Western styles of dress.

It was in the aftermath of the *Hazima* (total routing) of the Arab armies during the Six Day War of June 1967, that the Islamist *Sahwah* (Reveille) took place, spearheaded by the Muslim Brotherhood. This Awakening impacted the dress-code of women. The trend moved from Egypt to the rest of the Middle East.

Liberal forces in the Arab world have been pushing back against the re-Islamization of life. This can be noticed in the growth of Arab websites that challenge the Salafists through a critique of Islamic history and the authority of the sacred texts of Islam: the Qur’an, Hadith, and Sirat (Life of Muhammad.) I’m surprised to discover new websites where Arab intellectuals use forums to critique these texts, declaring them outdated and unsuitable for our times. Recently, I came across an Egyptian whose boldness surprised me. He has a podcast called “*Shaghel ‘Aqlaq* (Use your brains,) and

comments on certain Qur'anic passages pointing to their lack of logical sequence, and the meaninglessness of their phrases!

I don't mean to minimize the gravity of the spat between Saudi Arabia and Canada. However, I don't think that the Saudis will be able to hold out for long keeping women in an inferior position. The globalization of the world has in many ways abolished the boundaries between nations. Women's place in the modern world is ever expanding and the Old Guard in Arab countries cannot keep them in subjection forever. The pressure for the liberalization of Islamic societies will continue unabated. Perhaps some of the Saudi students who were studying at Canadian universities may eventually become human rights activists calling for much more than the right of women to drive automobiles!