

SPECIAL REPORT

insight

A conversation with Hayat Alyaqout

Making Muslims want to carry out their obligations the work of society

Dress code no business of State

By Valiya S. Sajjad
Arab Times Staff

She is representative of the changing face of Kuwait as a very enterprising, daring and educated young generation emerges to play a crucial role in the nation's future. Her ideas smack of a balance between modernity and religious values.

Hayat Alyaqout, at her young age, is already an author and has showed the pluck to explore the possibilities of e-publishing to reach out her ideas. She has her definitive view on important social and political issues and expresses herself in no equivocal terms.

Q: You seem to be taking on very grave issues in your articles such as hijab and prophet's cartoon row. What kind of responses do you get for your articles?

A: I get different types of responses; some are commending, others are criticizing, and I cherish both equally. I think that writing is not a one-way process, it is a sort of interaction with others. Publishing is a market, where you display your ideas, some would "buy" and adopt them, others would ask for improvements, and some others will never buy, but will really amuse you that they are ready to dedicate some of their time for your intellectual product.

Q: I'm a person who feels very happy when someone shows care towards what I write (even if that care shows out as critique), because when I write, that ignites discourse by which I get new ideas, and also rectify some of my ideas and assumptions. I owe a lot to my readers.

Q: You seem to be a strong advocate of hijab. What is your take on Islamist MPs trying to enforce hijab on female MPs?

A: Hijab is a duty in Islam, period. But is there anything in Islam that says that the state should take measures to force each and every woman to wear it. Well, I'm afraid not. And this is a very contentious issue, some scholars say yes, but if we think carefully about it, we will find that prayer is a must, fasting is a must but there is nothing that says that Muslims should force each other legally to pray or fast. The state however should take the necessary measure to guarantee that these obligations are facilitated. For example, the right to have a prayer break at work, and when it comes to the issue of hijab, the state should make hijab a desirable thing to do, laws should for instance should make sure that women who choose to wear the hijab should not be discriminated, or are forced to perform something that contradicts with the way they dress. Other than that, it's the work of the society not the state, in making Muslims want to do their obligations.

And I think that the specific issue of the hijab of female MPs falls under what I said. Now, I know there is a law that says the female candidates and voters should observe "Islamic principles", but that is an awfully vague clause, it is left to the interpretations, and the court had its say about it.

I know that the MPs who introduced that law meant well, but I think they forgot some other issues. They wanted to protect the eyes of male MPs from seduction, and I'm not blaming them for that, but I'm blaming them of not thinking of women too. When didn't the law include anything that male MPs have also to observe Islamic principles? Men (and also women) are asked to "lower their gaze", in other words they should not harass women by looking at them with lust. Now, the MPs want to protect the eyes of men from seduction, why didn't they also make sure that women are also protected from the not so innocent gazes. And this should be the crux of the argument, I think.

Q: You have keenly analyzed hijab and its ramifications? What do you mean by men's hijab in your articles?

A: Non-Muslims often raise a very legitimate question which is "why Muslim men don't wear hijab too?"

Unfortunately, many Muslims get angry when such questions are raised, and that is unislamic. Questioning and wondering are most welcome in Islam. In the Holy Qur'an the angles - which are the most pious and pure and heeding creatures - asked Allah why He chose humans to be the guardian of the earth although they are capable of destroying and corrupting. Allah later on answered their question practically by showing them the abilities that Adam has. He did not put them in hell, he answered their question. We have to wonder to ponder, and pondering is a type of worship in Islam. Allah commends those who think and reflect because their faith is genuine and hard-earned.

Back to the issue of men's hijab, I raised this question in an article which I wrote both in Arabic and in English. My main point to answer this question was that women and men have different psychological makeup; they are attracted to different things in each other. External beauty means a lot to men, they are easily distracted or



Hayat Alyaqout

biography

Name: Hayat Alyaqout

Born on Feb 25, 1981

Education

- Master's degree in Library and information science (MLIS), College of Social Sciences, Kuwait University.
- BA in political science (major) and English language and literature (minor), College of Social Sciences, Kuwait University.

Volunteer Work

- Head of Muntaha Alawj for Arts and Intellect.
- Founder and Editor-in-Chief of I-MAG, a non-profit magazine.
- Founder and Editor-in-Chief of Nashiri, a non-profit e-publishing house.

Published Books

- Author and photographer of "Man Tha Allathi Qaddada Albayaan"
- Contributor to "Know thy Prophet", edited by Ibrahim Babeli, published by Aljumuah Magazine for Editing and Publishing.

Writing and Publishing Activities

- Freelance writer and translator, founder and Editor-in-Chief of Nashiri e-publishing house, the first free non-profit electronic library and e-publishing house in the Arab world.
- Writer in Al Itihad magazine issued by the National Union of Kuwait

Students.

- Published articles in numerous newspapers, magazines and websites.

Seminars, exhibitions, participations and awards

- Participated in the "Corporate Social Responsibility" exhibition with a booth on my book.
- Member in the Libraries Day Organizing Committee.
- Participated in the Libraries Day Exhibition with a booth for Nashiri E-publishing House.
- Participated in the symposium on "Information Education in the Arabian Gulf Region: Status and Prospects".
- Sheikh Salem Al Ali Sabah Internet Contest Award 2005.
- Lecture on electronic publishing for Dr. Sultan Aldaihani's "Information Skills".
- Ghiras Electro 2 Special Honor Award for www.nashiri.net.
- Honored by Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah as a holder of honors degree in 2005.
- The prize for "The Ideal Woman" in 2004 by Coalitional Student List.
- Honored by HH the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Jaber Al Ahmad Al Sabah as a holder of honors degree in 2003.

lured with the explicit beauty of women, while women look for implicit beauty in men. A woman would easily reject a super handsome man if he is not so generous, or if he is a coward, while with men, let's admit it, external beauty wins the golden, silver, and bronze medals in a row. Other factors get a consolation prize!

Women do not put much reliance on the external looks, ergo men do not need to cover up. It's not about equality, it is about justice; giving each sex the dress code that suits it.

Q: What are the social and political implications of hijab? How has it helped you or restricted you in your personal and professional life?

A: As a Kuwaiti woman, hijab is not an issue neither in terms of restricting women, nor in giving them a professional privilege. But I'm so concerned about fellow Muslim women around the globe who are punished because they chose to wear the hijab, women who are deprived of education or work only because the way they dress.

Q: You have written about bans slapped by Muslim countries on the west for the alleged defamation of our prophet (PBUH)? What are your concerns in that regard?

A: As a Muslim I am aggrieved when someone defames Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing be upon him), but I'm aggrieved even more to know that people do that because they do not know enough about Islam, maybe they know a lot about Muslims, a lot too much about Muslims to the point that makes them unable to conceive Islam as a religion, they see our practices as Muslims which include a lot of our culture which does not necessarily conform with what Islam says. As someone once said, Islam is a very good cause, but we are bad lawyers.

When the Danish cartoons ordeal took place, it showed what bad lawyers we are. I'm not saying that people should not boy-

cott when they feel insulted, my point was that most of the defamation Islam faces comes from the fact that people do not know enough about Islam. Did we do what we have to do to give them access to the essence of Islam? I don't think so.

When Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing be upon him) went to Altaif to convey the message of Islam to its people, they did not receive him well, they even asked their kids to stone him away out of their town, and they hurt his feet. Then

Allah sent an angle offering that he smashes the people of the town by brining the two mountains that were close to their town. The Prophet declined the offer and said in utter forgiveness and wisdom that he hopes that their offspring and next generation would become Muslims and worship Allah. He was referring to the same children whom they sent to stone him away; he forgave them and wished the best for them because they didn't know. And I think we should do the same, before think-

ing of punishing them by boycotting them (which might work by the way), let's think of giving them the change of knowledge, and let's also give ourselves the chance to be good lawyers, or at least try to.

Q: What in your opinion are the most important social and political issues in Kuwait? What can be done to resolve them?

A: We are blessed in Kuwait, we have an enviable democracy, but we do have a lot of political "shouting". I think the main concern should be sustaining our democracy and coupling that with hard work. On a social level, I can see many people who are just apathetic, and that breaks my heart. We need to prove our love to Kuwait by working hard on improving ourselves instead of blaming X and Y. We need to be dedicated workers, active volunteers, and to emancipate ourselves from the consumption waste that we are drowning in. I dream of seeing Kuwaitis read in the malls instead of window shopping and hanging out. Let's stop blaming politicians for our laziness, the first command in the Holy Qur'an was "read", I think if we follow this command, many things will be resolved.

Q: Can you tell us something about the books you have authored?

A: I wrote a book in Arabic called "Who Tore the Eloquence? Photographed Linguistic Mistakes and Sins". I'm not a specialist in linguistics; my BA was in political science with a minor in English, and my master's degree was in library and information science, but I've always been fond of languages, and I can't hide how bad I feel when I see a sign that is misspelled or has a grammar mistake in Arabic, for it is the language of the Holy Qur'an, and the language the people in the paradise use. How come we make such mistakes in cold blood? Actually this is common all over the Arab world because we speak different dialects of Arabic, but we write in classical Arabic, and education strategies in the

Arab world are not doing what they have to do, that's why we find a plethora of such mistakes all over the streets and even in some publications.

What I used to do was taking photographs of such mistakes on my mobile phone. That was my catharsis, I felt happy for documenting the crime and collecting probes. And one day I thought that I should compile a book out of these pictures and give some quick grammar guidelines that would be an interesting and fun way to learn Arabic grammar rules. This way at least someone will learn something out of these mistakes. I was so zealous, I compiled the book and printed it in 3 months, at first it was a big flop; no one bought it. But after two year, it was sold out. Financially it was not a very happy experience because I had to self-publish it, but I was happy with the feedback I received. Now the book is available free online at nashiri.net, and people can download their free copy.

I also contributed to a book called "Know Thy Prophet" which was published by Aljumu'ah Magazine. The idea of the book was to let Muslims know their Prophet (PBUH), know him really well, and know about some aspects of his life and teaching that they did not pay attention to before.

Q: Tell us something about the I-MAG? What is your objective behind starting the magazine? What subjects do you deal with?

A: I-MAG stands for Islamic Magazine. It's a free online non-profit magazine. We were trying to reflect the soul of Islam in this magazine, by presenting a content that challenges the mind, but also pleases the eye. We are not teaching or preaching in I-MAG, we are showing, showing people examples of successful Muslims who are achievers and also pious. We try to touch some issues and questions that the non-Muslim reader has in an unbiased way. It is people's right to ask and question and wonder, and I-MAG is a magazine that welcomes these questions. Our slogan is "Enlighten You I" and by "I" we mean yourself, and we also your "eye", because we do have several sections that deal with art and photography. I invite everyone to visit www.i-mag.org and download their free copy of I-MAG.

We published 10 issues between 2005 and 2008, and decided to stop to assess our performance and to look for volunteers. We have very high standards, and being a magazine that has no funding and depending totally on volunteers, there was a lot of instability, but we do hope to come back.

Q: As a person who is closely connected with the web, how do you think it is influencing and bringing about change in Kuwait? Are blogs playing a part in transforming the society?

A: Technology is here to stay and to prosper, and I think we should get ourselves ready to deal with it not as a luxury, but as a part of our lives. E-publishing is the future, and I daresay that we will one day look at books as archaic things, people will get used to reading from computer screens or whatever devices that will be developed in future. Maybe not this generation, but I'm sure this will happen in the future.

And since e-publishing is going to be the norm, many things are changing and will change by time. Information is disseminated a lot easier, but the quality control is not there, the authoritativeness of information is jeopardized, and that's an issue we need to think of from now. Also the legal aspects of electronic publications are something that we have not dealt with. There is no law that protects intellectual property on the web, or that explicitly deals with e-crimes.

So, in a nut shell, the Internet has changed a lot, and will change a lot more, but are we ready for the change?

Q: As a person who interacts a lot with the youth in this country, what do you think are their aspirations? What are the basic problems they face in Kuwait? Are you anxious about their future?

A: I don't want to speak on behalf of the Kuwaiti youth, but what I am sure of is that we have our hopes, we have our aspirations, we - as Martin Luther once said - have a dream, we actually have dreams not just a dream.

Those dreams won't materialize without having three things: A religious education that connects youth with their past not in nostalgic ways, but in an inspirational way; a strong education for children and young adults, and education that invests in building critical minds not good memories that do nothing but rot; and a strategy for making use of the spare time that the youth have.

The Kuwaiti youth are eager for ways to make them quench their thirst to do something useful and interesting at the same time. The civic society should do more on that, and the corporate sector should also feel socially responsible. Or else we will end up with generations whose favorite hobby is eating and trying a new restaurant every weekend.