

Wearing Christian Louboutin to Appeal to a Christian World
The Archetype for the Arab First Lady

Author: Faisal Al-Juburi

December, 2012; Updated: March, 2013



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Heather Raffo has been enthralled for at least an hour, deep in conversation about the Arab world and the figures associated with it. She sits silent for a few moments, marinating on some thoughts, her face framed by her shaggy, dirty blonde hair. All of a sudden, she perks up with an ‘aha’ moment, signified by her signature girlish laugh that is always followed up with an intense gaze from her hazel eyes – a gaze that is meant to remind those around her that she is serious. Then, the epiphany is verbalized: “Imagine how far Saddam [Hussein] would have gotten if he had a nice half-and-half wife that he could have shipped around to dinner parties around the world.”

Provocative, in a word. An Arab American playwright and actress who rose to fame nearly ten years ago as the talent behind the critically-acclaimed *9 Parts of Desire*, a piece that details the lives of nine Iraqi women, Raffo knows too well the importance of image when trying to champion an Arab vantage point on American ground, albeit on a smaller platform than that of a woman married to a nation’s head of state. After all, it is Raffo’s physical appearance that undoubtedly enhanced her ability to disseminate her message, standing in stark contrast to the Western stereotype of an Arab woman and affording her features in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine*, where she discusses another ‘aha’ moment. Given her perceptive nature, it is not surprising that she seems to have several of them.

In her statement above, Raffo is, of course, making a reference to Queen Noor Al-Hussein of Jordan (née Lisa Najeeb Halaby), the beautiful and intelligent Arab American woman who rose to global prominence and became the chief ambassador for the Arab world upon marrying King Hussein in 1978 at the age of 26, noting that a wife in her style would have assisted the now deceased Iraqi dictator’s diplomatic efforts – if not shaping his views and actions, then at least masking them in the public eye as an effective ambassador can sometimes do. Regardless of how audacious such a statement may sound, she touches on a critical issue: those Arab leaders who best move forward their Western agendas do so through the use of an expertly positioned and packaged

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communicator, one in the form of a queen or first lady – depending upon the political system theoretically espoused.

When one assesses the prominent political personalities of the Arab world as viewed through Western eyes, the names that rise to the top are those with whom prominent news outlets have a particular interest. That interest derives from a need to feed audiences what they want, to ensure that subjects are curated in order to keep the audience's attention rapt. Therefore, two rough categories of figureheads present themselves: the stereotypical villain and the media darling, the modern woman who reads as 'us' in the Western psyche. Attractive, well-spoken, and fashionable women make for great television and print features – an easy pitch, according to a few journalists who spoke on the condition of anonymity but are familiar with the process of securing coverage for women in these positions.

While the former category may appear to be reserved for those the likes of Saddam Hussein, a struggle presents itself today for how to classify one of the most divisive figures in the region: Asma Al-Assad, First Lady of the crumbling Syria and wife of President Bashar Al-Assad.

In recent months, Syria has rarely left the headlines, serving as the focal point of citizen uprisings throughout the Arab world that have awakened many to regional struggles beyond the War in Iraq and the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Two years into what Syrian-born specialist on Middle East affairs Dr. Murhaf Jouejati refers to as “part and parcel of what has been called the Arab Spring,” nearly 60,000 civilians are confirmed dead, with estimates pointing to a more accurate figure of 70,000 to 100,000. It is a “metastasizing crisis,” as Jennifer Rubin of *The Washington Post* puts it. The United States, through State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland, compared the Al-Assad regime to a “mafia-like crime family” in an official press briefing. And, sexualized rape of women by government forces is quickly becoming a hallmark of the now-deemed civil war, a claim perpetuated by Ambassadors Peter Westmacott and Melanne Vermeer and journalist and director of Women Under Siege Lauren Wolfe.

Crimes against women – and humanity in general – are at direct odds with the message of a progressive society and leadership that was presented for more than a decade through the Western media, including the now-infamous feature article in the March, 2011, issue of American *Vogue* written by Joan Juliet Buck. When Bashar Al-Assad came into power



following the death of his father Hafez in 2000 and married Asma Al-Akhras, the new first couple was the ‘hope’ and ‘change’ of the Middle East, a vibrant match that represented great possibility. The first lady immediately became a bright light in the region, a more compelling figure than Queen Rania Al-Abdullah of Jordan and a woman very much in the same vein of wife that Raffo suggested would have been of benefit to Saddam Hussein. She was primed to be placed firmly in the media darling category, especially as Queen Rania began to retreat from the spotlight due to intensifying accusations of greed and corruption. But, Al-Assad now finds herself facing comparisons to Marie Antoinette and Lady MacBeth, with her hands stained red from blood.

Just a couple of years ago, however, red signified neither carnivorous hunger for material gain nor the destruction of a nation. Instead, it conjured images of passion for a homeland and high fashion, given her penchant for Christian Louboutin. After all, in elite Western culture, the red sole is the signature of famed shoe designer Louboutin and, by consequence, of all power women. So, it should come as no surprise that in the American *Vogue* profile, a reference to her footwear is made, establishing her immediately as thoroughly modern to readers who know, extending an olive branch to the Western world by using a common point of reference.

The article is what should have been the *pièce de résistance* of a public relations campaign, one that served as a primary point of introduction for many to this “rose in the desert.” It positioned Al-Assad in the mold arguably created by – and once thought only suited for – Queen Noor, the archetype who refashioned queenship into a role that was less ceremonial and more similar to the cause-driven Western first lady. If there was any worthy successor to the role of Arab political celebrity who leaves Western audiences salivating, it was Al-Assad: born, raised, and educated in the West; a successful career woman before marrying into political power; understatedly stylish; well-spoken. The parallels to Queen Noor are in great supply. In short, she seemed to be a beautiful symbol of the Syrian people, of the Syria that the West should have come to know, love, and respect. If she was not going to revitalize the perception of the region in the same way as Queen Noor did, then she would at least revitalize the perception of Syria.

But, fate quickly played a hand just as Al-Assad was personally cementing her highly visible position on the global political stage after a decade as first lady – an apparently calculated, methodically slow process thought by some to guard against overexposure before having established a legacy of action to which she could point. On the heels of the



American *Vogue* article came the uprising that has yet to subside. Onlookers were awakened to the smoke and mirrors employed by the regime and enhanced through increasing attention to Al-Assad herself. A communications crisis presented itself not only for her but also for those who believed her. And, questions arose that have yet to be answered, including perhaps the most important one: was Al-Assad merely a marionette or was she indeed self-mobilizing, with the opportunity to choose whether she served as a catalyst for change or personal gain?

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Queen Noor is always striking, whether in a chance encounter at the Ritz Carlton tea room on Central Park South or in the Grand Foyer of The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts where, dressed in a sapphire blue that matches her eyes, she prepares to enter into the Concert Hall for the 2009 birthday celebration of Senator Ted Kennedy – his last. Both of these meetings followed the passing of her husband King Hussein, so one can only imagine the awe she inspired in her prime, when she was the ultimate trailblazer balancing duties as a royal and mother of four.

There are those who question any attention paid today to the first Arab queen who simultaneously served as magazine cover girl, given that her influence in the region has been severely limited in the years since her official duties ceased. Gossip suggests that a territorial Queen Rania, her literal successor, has kept her from keeping a higher profile, gossip that may be substantiated by the royal pressure on Jordanian media to limit coverage of Queen Noor and constraints placed on the Noor Al-Hussein Foundation, the implementing arm of the King Hussein Foundation's community development initiatives, during the reign of King Abdullah II, minimizing its impact. But, Queen Noor still maintains a certain media presence, having recently served as a panelist at the inaugural Trust Women Conference in London, hosted by the Thomson Reuters Foundation and the International Herald Tribune. And, an assessment of her is critical when discussing Al-Assad. To understand why Al-Assad held so much promise in the eyes of civilians and decision makers within Syria and abroad, one must understand her regional predecessor and the torch that she was poised to carry. In doing so, one would recognize that it was not without reason to think that there was great potential there.

Lisa Halaby, the woman who would become Queen Noor, was a 25 year old American born, Princeton-educated Director of Facilities Planning and Design for Royal Jordanian

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Airlines when she was initially introduced to King Hussein in 1977 through her father Najeeb, or ‘Jeeb’ – the son of a Syrian immigrant and a United States aviation executive with stints as the head of the Federal Aviation Administration under President John F. Kennedy and chairman and chief executive officer of Pan American World Airways. It was the year that King Hussein was grieving the untimely death of his wife Queen Alia, who passed away in a helicopter crash. The following year, there is said to have been a whirlwind, six week romance between the two, a romance undoubtedly fueled by the alluring combination of her brains and beauty. Those six weeks led to a brief month-long engagement that culminated in a simple, traditional affair marking their nuptials. It has been painted as a love story numerous times by all parties, one of the great real life fairy tales of all time and a marriage highly anticipated by the American press as evidenced by a 5 June 1978 *People Magazine* article entitled “Portrait of a Princess to Be: Lisa Halaby’s Friends Tell of Her Life Before Hussein.”

It would be naive, however, not to suggest that King Hussein did not see more than love. As a leader of an Arab nation entrenched in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a conflict about which American rhetoric was decidedly pro-Israel according to Queen Noor in her 2003 memoir *Leap of Faith*, he was sure to have recognized the great potential in marrying an Arab American woman, one who could help to reframe the Western dialogue surrounding his country and serve as a bridge between cultures. It was a strategic, yet risky move. Raffo notes, “It could have backfired. He couldn’t have known it would work so well. His own people could have not embraced her. It turns out she’s an embraceable woman. She is a perfect ambassador. But, the Jordanian people could have been like, ‘She’s not really one of us. She’s not enough like us. She’s not conservative enough or anything.’ But they didn’t. The totally went with it.” Following a brief period of trepidation given her Christian and American background, Jordanians are said to have championed her as their queen, recognizing her conversion to Islam (a legal requirement before marriage) and seemingly genuine commitment to national causes.

In *The New York Times* bestselling *Leap of Faith*, written following the 1999 conclusion of her official duties and published mere months after the start of the War in Iraq, Queen Noor acknowledges her role as a bridge of sorts, fostering strong relationships both in her adopted home of Jordan and her birthplace of the United States. She explains,

This book was written in the spirit of reconciliation, which
I hope will contribute to a greater awareness, especially in



the West, of events that have shaped the modern Middle East, and encourage a deeper understanding of contemporary challenges facing the Arab world as well as an appreciation for the true values of Islam. I have often spoken about the need to build bridges between cultures as a way to promote constructive dialogue; it is my fervent hope that this book will inspire some of its readers to put those ideals into practice.

She embraced an opportunity provided to her by her husband, one that arguably and singlehandedly changed the Western narrative about the Middle East, even beyond the Arab world as it is defined. King Hussein maximized Jordan's role as an outlier in the region, as a country with a relatively favorable diplomatic relationship with the United States, when putting his wife in the spotlight. In contradicting the Orientalist fantasy, she became the model studied, noting the elements that made her the object of infatuation for spectators internationally. When it comes to royalty, she was rivaled only by Princess Diana in terms of public interest. And, at the time, it was thought that she was singularly capable of inhabiting the model that she crafted and employed, one that was respectful to a country's cultural and religious heritage but also informed by a life lived abroad.

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As one of the leading scholars on women in Islam and the chair of the Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Farzaneh Milani knows that the way in which a woman presents herself in the modern Middle East is layered with meaning. Just look at her *New York Times* op-ed "Lipstick Politics in Iran," a 1999 article that is said to have sent shockwaves throughout her homeland given its brazen discussion of extremism in Tehran. However, her expertise does not lie alone with Iran, and, when asked for a comment on the way in which certain figures present themselves in the public eye, she is quick to note over the telephone and in her thickly accented yet intoxicating voice – akin to a purr, really – that fashion is a tool used to open doors in all societies, that it is not something limited to the Muslim or Arab world. Then, after a brief pause, she encourages a study of the Queen of Sheba, or Saba, a cultural and religious figure featured in the Old Testament and the Quran – one that serves as evidence that there is a regional legacy of women assuming positions of political power and dressing for the role.

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In Judeo-Christian tradition, of which Islam has always been a part as an Abrahamic religion, the Queen of Sheba, a convert to Islam according to the Quran, is said to have ruled over the areas currently known as Yemen and Ethiopia in the African continent, the former of which is a member of the League of Arab States. It is widely accepted that she was the reigning queen, but there is speculation that, historically, she could have been the non-governing wife of a king in the same manner as Queen Noor, a possibility raised by Kenneth Anderson Kitchen, Professor Emeritus of Egyptology at the University of Liverpool in the United Kingdom, in his book *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Regardless, while religious text does not significantly detail her style sensibilities, it is assumed that she was dressed in the finest silks and accessorized in gold, a way not only to accentuate her stature but also to attract attention – as depicted in the 1959 film *Solomon and Sheba* starring Gina Lollobrigida.

She was “glamorous,” the same way that Mickey Boardman, editorial director of *Paper Magazine*, describes Queen Noor when he is asked for the one word that comes to mind with the mention of her name. It reportedly frustrates Queen Noor to know that she is associated with the artifice of external packaging, so to speak, making reference in her memoir to the notion that she was treated as an “useless accessory” by the American media following her marriage. But, the packaging attracted the attention that has, for more than three decades, afforded her the ability to serve as one of the leading voices on Islam and the Arab world, a voice that is heard by the West. Fashion was the point of entry. It helped to shape her as a media darling. Her strategic sartorial choices made her “more easily digest-able to the West,” according to Boardman, allowing her to commence a dialogue, with her assuming the role of ambassador for her adopted nation, region, and religion.

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“Even as some groups attempt to turn back the clock on Arab women’s rights using religious justification, Islam should not be considered the source of misogyny and women’s oppression in the region.”

These words were uttered by Queen Noor mere months ago at the aforementioned Trust Women Conference and quoted by *The New York Times* in a Stephen Castle article entitled “A Queen Expresses Hope on the Rights of Arab Women.” Fourteen years after



her official duties as queen ended, she remains a sought-after resource in the discussion on Islam and the Arab world, especially during this period of increasing unrest. Though muted and void of much inflection, her voice demands attention as she continues to use her title in support of a religion and people that still spark controversy and confusion in the West, a controversy and confusion exacerbated by the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the ensuing fallout.

Queen Noor's is a voice that breaks through social boundaries and preconceived notions that form psychological walls, especially surrounding the emotionally charged issues of race, religion, and the 'other.' It does so because she, in essence, is the crucial third-party endorsement that any new, unknown, or misconstrued entity seeks. To the public, she read as a thoroughly modern American woman who made a personal choice that in turn helped to validate, in Western eyes, all that she came to represent.

"I think there's almost like an isolationism going on that's a result of the United States because of concerns of what's happening: the turmoil with the Arab Spring; because of Iraq; because of what you're seeing in Israel," remarked Dina Habib Powell, former Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs and current Goldman Sachs Global Head of Corporate Engagement, at the 2012 Bridges of Understanding Conference in Washington, DC. There is arguably truth to Powell's statement, but it is hard to believe that the isolationism of which she speaks in such fervent tones is greater now than it was in 1978 when Queen Noor first assumed the role of ambassador – coinciding with the publication of Edward Said's famed *Orientalism* – and forced Americans and Europeans alike to reconsider what it meant to be Arab and Muslim.

Though such a comparison is certain to send traditionalists reeling, it is difficult to look at Queen Noor without seeing the parallels to another figure of great renown in Muslim history: Khadija, the first wife of Prophet Muhammad – the man to whom it is accepted that the word of God was revealed. According to Leila Ahmed, the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School and author *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, "Khadija became his [Prophet Muhammad's] first convert [to Islam]. The faith of this mature, wealthy woman of high standing in the community must have influenced others, particularly members of her own important clan, the Quraysh, to accept Islam." Queen Noor did something similar for Islam on Western grounds, using her clout as a member of a prominent, wealthy Christian



American family to position herself as a credible source in defense of a religion that was met with a suspicious eye.

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By leveraging physical appearance, intelligence, and commonalities in background, Queen Noor – and Khadija before her – employs the psychological construct that suggests similarity breeds acceptance and helps to forge legitimate, long-term relationships. In a 2000 article published by the American Psychological Association, Jill V. Hamm reviews decades of youth targeted research, asking, “Do Birds of a Feather Flock Together?” The answer appears to be yes, when focused in on an European American subset – an audience of critical importance, given its global influence, both today and as Queen Noor captured the spotlight nearly 35 years ago.

In summarizing the findings of social psychologists James Youniss and Jacqueline Smollar, Hamm explains that friendship is “most satisfying and beneficial when it occurs between peers who share similar views with respect to issues of fundamental importance to them.” She supports this assertion with an assessment from Theodore M. Newcomb, a pioneer in the field, stating, “Social psychological theory and research findings, too, demonstrate that similarity is a key platform for friendship selection.”

Hala M. Fattah, a practicing psychiatrist based in Pittsburg, California, who was born, raised, and educated in Baghdad, Iraq, has both personal experience with and a professional understanding of this topic, an assertion that she makes over her mobile phone as she drives her son to a middle school dance – juggling the duties of work and motherhood, a juggling act apparently present in every culture. She explains, “There are certain biases that people have against those who align with the physical attributes stereotypically associated with being Arab or Muslim” and that, more than a decade into the twenty-first century, one still has a greater inclination to associate with and trust those who look familiar, even in a theoretically liberal, progressive state like California. Why has Fattah met with a certain level of success in the United States, then, if such a bias against Arabs and Muslims exists? In the alleged words of a fellow, yet anonymous, psychiatrist and colleague, her success stems from the opinion that she is “not like the rest of *those* Muslims,” implying that she does not look or sound like *them* – whomever *they* may be.



Whether or not ‘passing for white,’ a phrase often used in racial identity discussions on fair-skinned African Americans, is a factor here may also be up for debate. It is a sensitive issue, for sure. But, conventional wisdom would seem to dictate that it does indeed play a part, or at least did when considering the period of Queen Noor’s ascent. In 1978, the United States had just come off the heels of the civil rights movement. American *Vogue* had only just four years earlier employed its first black cover girl in the form of model Beverly Johnson. And, the leading nation in the free world was years away from electing its first black president Barack Obama – a man who, it should be acknowledged, continues to deal with a form of thinly veiled racism when addressing lingering questions about his nationality and religion, navigating a distrust that would doubtfully be present were he to look more like his caucasian mother than African father.

Raffo strongly disagrees, saying,

The big thing from the American psyche, the general Western psyche but particularly American, is that [Arab Muslim] women are veiled. Women are property of the men. There is no such thing as an intelligent, powerful [woman] . . . I don’t think it has to do with whiteness . . . I think it’s all about that sense of education and dress that says, “I’m educated. I can move in your circle. I’m not walking in a burka.”

In her view, it is more about passing for Western than for white.

In any case, appearance is something that cannot be discounted due to the psychological ramifications that it implies. Therefore, it is a crucial component of the formula for success in positioning one as a media darling, in positioning one who represents the feared ‘other’ in front of a group of discriminating, or at least discerning, viewers. Appealing to the West’s senses becomes of primary concern in a successful campaign to be noticed, as being noticed allows one to be heard.

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According to famed Jungian psychologist Marie-Louise Von Franz in her 1972 book *Feminine in Fairy Tales*, “women in the Western World nowadays seem to seek images which could define their identity. This search is motivated by a kind of disorientation and a deep uncertainty in modern women.” In her observations, women seek these images in fairy tales, which, in the opening lines of her *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, are deemed as “the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic process.” Such a deep-seated cultural association with fairy tales may account for the interest, and even fascination, in Queen Noor, who is likened by Raffo to Grace Kelly, stating, “She was an American who went and became a queen, literally, which is, quite frankly, a completely different story than a woman born in the Middle East becoming a queen in the Middle East. She was an American woman who was queen of Jordan. And, that’s profound and extraordinary.”

It is profound and extraordinary perhaps first and foremost because her story captured the public’s attention with its element of fantasy fulfillment. Queen Noor was not groomed for royalty. While she certainly enjoyed an upper middle class upbringing, it was hardly a life that afforded the level of access, influence, and, yes, glamour that conveyed with her marriage. She was a young civilian who was plucked from relative obscurity to represent an exotic land – the basic premise of every treasured fairy tale.

Just as the world was grieving the end of her ‘happily ever after’ in February, 1999, with the death of King Hussein (a picture of the two on the cover of *Life Magazine*’s ‘love’ issue coinciding with his passing was burned into the public conscience), the beginning passages of another apparent fairy tale were being written, one set in the United Kingdom with Syria serving as the far away land. Asma Al-Akhras, the daughter of prominent Syrian immigrants (father, cardiologist; mother, diplomat), was being courted by Bashar Al-Assad, the man prepared to succeed his father Hafez as president of Syria.

Al-Akhras was a simple beauty, much in the same way as Queen Noor, whose physical appearance was complemented by her intelligence. Known as ‘Emma,’ she was educated at the prestigious King’s College London and served as an investment banker at JP Morgan at the time she became linked to her future husband. While few details are known of their courtship, it is understood that he sent for her after he assumed the role of president following the death of his father in June, 2000, leaving her to abandon plans for an MBA at Harvard Business School. Their wedding is said to have taken place in December of that year, but an official wedding date or pictures have never been shared

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publicly. She was 25 years old and, along with her husband, seen as the fresh, exciting face of a new Syria, one that would embrace its rich cultural and historical heritage but rid itself of a legacy littered with human rights atrocities. In short, she was poised to make history.

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Al-Akhras, now First Lady Asma Al-Assad, wore a shroud of humility from the start, as though it were the pashmina in which she is pictured in *American Vogue*. Despite an appreciation for high fashion, she seemed committed to setting a tone of simplicity, as she took her place as wife, eventual mother of three children (unconfirmed reports indicate that another may be on the way), and national representative committed to advancing women's rights and education – causes that were first espoused in the region on a significant scale by Queen Noor, establishing her as a humanitarian.

But, Al-Assad appeared to be an even stronger fit for her role than Queen Noor was for hers. Having been first generation Syrian-British and raised Muslim, she had a deep understanding of the people she came to represent and was more readily embraced domestically because of it. She was not saddled with a cultural learning curve. And, yet, her outlook and actions were also informed heavily by her British upbringing and education, making her a natural bridge between (Middle) East and West.

Journalist Andrew Tabler, author of the 2011 book *In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria*, worked in Syria from the 2001 to 2008 as a media adviser for the plethora of non-governmental organizations that Al-Assad established under "official patronage," one of which served as the parent company for the English language quarterly magazine *Syria Today* – a publication developed by Tabler in order to promote media transparency and fully endorsed in its beginning stages by Al-Assad. According to Tabler, "the first lady seemed committed to reform in Syria, and her NGOs . . . were everything the West wanted to see in Syria." Even as question marks increasingly surrounded Bashar Al-Assad, she instilled confidence. He states, "It wasn't just that she was the wife of the leader of Syria – she was the only remaining hope for her husband's reform promises. For me and the European diplomats, Asma Al-Assad was also a comprehensible and reasonable individual in an opaque regime."



Tabler’s sentiments are supported by prominent education advocate Elaine Wolfensohn, wife of former World Bank Group President James Wolfensohn. Upon receiving the 2012 Building Bridges Award presented by Bridges of Understanding to her and her husband, she said that, in the last decade, “good things were beginning to happen with certain people in the Middle East. I spent two days with Asma Al-Assad. If you had told me what Syria was going to do. You know, as an individual, as a human being, it’s incomprehensible. I can tell you all the good that was happening with education, with technology.”

Al-Assad established herself as a seemingly credible source over time, and, in doing so, helped to maintain at least a modicum of optimism regarding the future of Syria. She laid a strong foundation over the better part of a decade that allowed for the beginning of an intoxicating public relations campaign, reportedly supported in part by Washington, DC, firm Brown Lloyd James. While the campaign centered around her as chief communicator and used her chic style in order to capture the attention of the press, she was careful to be selective in her statements, so as not to appear self indulgent. The media may have been entranced by Al-Assad, but, in her words, the narrative was always about her country. According to her, she was just a woman given the opportunity to work in support of her people, telling Romanian news outlet *Stirile ProTV* that the “most powerful theme is participation and inclusion. And, that is about making sure that people are involved in our development within the country, not just as politicians or businesspeople but as regular people, as citizens.”

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In the two years leading up to the start of the Arab Spring, the Western media fell, well, head over (red-soled) heels for Al-Assad. She was on her way to becoming a full-fledged celebrity, with French *Elle* naming her one of the most stylish woman in world politics and the *Huffington Post* publishing an in-depth photo story. As is common with the construct of celebrity as shaped by the Western world, she was exalted to the level of near sainthood, with attention to her as a style icon, shrewd reformer, and humanitarian – all very reminiscent of Queen Noor.

It should come as no surprise, then, that American *Vogue*, the unofficial arbiter of taste, decided to give Al-Assad the formal seal of approval in one of the publication’s most desirable, widely-read issues of the year (March), recognizing that she had become a



mainstream media mainstay. Given the magazine's visibility and the unfortunate timing of the article with the Syrian uprising, American *Vogue*, its famed editor-in-chief Anna Wintour, and feature writer Buck came under scrutiny, with the piece eventually pulled from online archives and Buck relieved of her duties following the completion of her contract. Boardman, who is professionally acquainted with all involved parties, states, "I think it's great that they were doing a woman from the Arab world. But, at the same time, you know, if you write about the wife of basically a dictator, it's a very slippery slope. So, it's very hard. I would not have done it if I was *Vogue*."

It is easier in retrospect to say that the article was a misstep, though. During the period that it was written (December, 2010) and published (March, 2011), there was such hope, such optimism fueled at least partially by the Al-Assad communications strategy. That positive outlook extended beyond the initial weeks of the civilian uprisings in Syria and was not limited to style media outlets. In fact, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in a segment taped on 26 March 2011 – eleven days after demonstrations had begun – for the CBS news program "Face the Nation" that the United States would not get involved with Syria on matters related to the Arab Spring, claiming that both Democrat and Republican members of Congress considered Al-Assad's husband to be "a reformer."

Two years into the conflict, that is no longer the sentiment, with even Syrian government allies admitting in that the prospects for the regime are not favorable. In this time, Al-Assad has faltered more by association than anything, with reactions against her in the media fueled many times by raw emotion rather than reasoned intellect. That being said, some questionable actions have certainly presented themselves – including her ill-advised purchases of potentially-deemed extravagant material goods just as unrest was escalating during summer, 2011. Even though they led to European Union sanctions, these indulgences, documented in the leaked emails published by *The Guardian* in March, 2012, are not enough, however, to label her as the next Marie Antoinette, a figure who is regularly dramatized. As Raffo explains, "You'd have to prove that she's always been that material and got even more so once upon a time marrying a prince. And, that [she] led pretty much a life of excessive materialism at the height of her finances and now doesn't want to have to stop." That case has not been convincingly made. On the contrary, evidence suggests that she has lived modestly, relative to her peers in the region.

Additionally, those who draw comparisons to Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare's infamous blood-drenched character, do not seem to understand the implications. When Raffo, a



student of Shakespeare's text, is told that Al-Assad is referenced by select journalists as such, she is quick to note,

The point of 'Lady M' [Lady Macbeth] is that she's the instigator. And, how would that be, how would it be to her benefit to watch what's happening in Syria? To instigate? . . . In what way would she have that as a motive? . . . She doesn't have any power . . . even in good times, really. Starting some NGOs isn't [power]. It's not like she had real power . . . in the good times that now she wouldn't want to lose in bad times.

This view is reinforced by Tabler, who states, "No one can say what's happening behind closed doors, but I doubt she [Al-Assad] feels she has any control or would ultimately have much influence over what her husband is doing."

Moreover, calls for Al-Assad to speak out publicly against her husband seem to void of common sense, considering the fact that the family into which she married has been likened to the mafia by the United States government. In such a situation, it can be safely assumed that public appearances and emails are not the forums in which to denounce one who is capable of such atrocities, of one who stands accused of destroying a nation. Al-Assad's limited statements championing the regime may certainly reflect her true opinion, but there is no way to ensure that they are not instead the result of coercion, that they are not smoke and mirrors of their own kind forced upon her by the father of her children and a man who is capable of much worse. The vilification of Al-Assad, though, is not surprising when viewed in contexts of both the heartbreaking and angering situation at hand and Western celebrity, which neglects complex humanization and is as quick to tear down an individual as it is to raise her up.

Her greatest crime is that she misrepresented the Al-Assad regime to her people and to the world. Whether that was due to malicious intent or hopeful ignorance may never be confirmed. However, it does seem incredible that she would invest roughly a decade in her reform efforts that have been heavily detailed by Tabler and others if she did not see the potential to serve as a catalyst for progress. The question then becomes: did she sincerely think her husband was an agent of change, or did she more complicatedly assume that she would be able to influence him over time, only to find out that her work



had been in vain? Whatever the case may be, and regardless of the extent of trickery to which she may have fallen victim, her reputation has forever been tarnished, though that may be of minimal concern to her given that countless lives and her homeland are being irreparably torn apart at the seams.

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So, what of that other relic of the past that precipitated this conversation, that gave Raffo one of her ‘aha’ moments? Considering the case studies assessed, would a wife firmly situated within this dissected archetype have helped the Iraqi dictator known as Saddam Hussein? When looking at the story of Al-Assad, one can theorize that the answer is ‘yes.’ It would have helped to have a woman of this type serve as an ambassador on his behalf – up to a certain point. It would have helped up until the facade was stripped away by a series of organic yet unanticipated events, as was the case with Syria. It cannot be known in advance what or when that moment of exposure, of failure, will be. It can only be known that, as cliché as it may sound, the truth always comes out, no matter how perfect the representative or sophisticated the public relations campaign.

It is a difficult role for a woman to assume, that of first lady, of what essentially amounts to a communicator-in-chief. As Boardman suggests,

People are used where they can be used and if it backfires then they’re thrown under the bus . . . By definition, the first lady is a very reactionary position. It’s not very progressive . . . The role is very 1950s. So, it’s a hard balance for people to strike, especially coming from the Arab world. You want them to seem like good ambassadors, but not like [former First Lady of Argentina] Eva Peron or something. It really is a very difficult role, and I think, I assume, very often they are not prepared for it.

That may be why Boardman also chooses “bamboozled” as the one word to describe Al-Assad at the end of a long, almost philosophical conversation. The real or imagined promises that she, and many in similar situations, had at the time of taking on the role will never see the light of day, unless a memoir later in life is in the cards, as was the case

Wearing Christian Louboutin to Appeal to a Christian World
The Archetype for the Arab First Lady

Author: Faisal Al-Juburi

December, 2012; **Updated:** March, 2013



with Queen Noor. Even then, memoirs always have the luxury of a revisionist history, of a connecting of the dots that only happens in retrospect.

Queen Noor is not necessarily better – however that may be defined – than Al-Assad. Rather, she had the luxury of a better situation, of marrying a man, a leader, of integrity so that the image she presented to a global audience was in fact also the reality. She had a partnership with King Hussein that allowed her to instigate social and cultural advances with his full support, something that she readily admits was a differentiator. Had that not been the case, her long-term impact would have been far more minimal, and the general Western perception of her would not be that of the genuine, sincere woman seen today, of the woman for whom the West continues to seek a worthy successor.

Image must align with reality. As a representative of anything, one is defined by credibility, and, if that credibility is compromised, then all trust is lost. That is what happened to Al-Assad, making void all of her positive contributions and setting her up as the object of derision. She did not falter in fulfilling the basic components of the archetype as detailed. She read as a bird of the same Western feather. She did her job as an ambassador quite well – so well, actually, that when truth of Syria under the Al-Assad regime presented itself, the Western world – from the State Department to American *Vogue* – was taken aback. Al-Assad may have been bamboozled by her husband, but the Western public was bamboozled by her, resulting in feelings of shame, resentment, and anger and perhaps making it impossibly difficult to trust any ambassador in this form from the Arab world in the near future – though that remains to be seen. After all, another pair of Christian Louboutin heels may have the power to blind once again.

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Faisal Al-Juburi

T 917 703 7125

E faisal@faisalNYC.com

Full list of references furnished upon a request.