

## From Kuwait

In 2003 Kuwaiti women will be able to vote and run as candidates in the elections. According to the foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, "The Cabinet was very pleased when the crown prince and prime minister, Sheikh Saad al-Abdallah al-Sabah, informed it of the emir's will to recognize the efficient role of women in building society and the responsibility women have shown in their service to the country." (*The Daily Star*, Monday May 17, 1999)

## From Jordan

Numerous are the news items that run as follows: "woman slaughtered by her father with a kitchen knife," "brother shoots his sister upon seeing her with a man in a restaurant," "man burns his wife to death". "Crimes of Honor" or "Honor Killings" are on the rise in Jordan. Statistics show that around 28 women are murdered each year by their male counterparts in an attempt to cleanse the honor of the family. (*An-Nahar Newspaper*, 1999)

## From Egypt

### It's Barbie vs. Laila and Sara in Mideast Culture War By Douglas Jehl, NY Times

It's not just that she's a blue-eyed blonde. Nor is it just the revealing clothes that show off her famous figure. The real trouble is that Barbie has a boyfriend. To put it plainly, that plastic icon of Western girlhood is seen in the Middle East, where modesty matters, as something of a tramp. As a better role model, children's advocates across the region are now staking their hopes on Laila and Sara, dark-haired, dark-eyed dolls who wouldn't be caught dead in a miniskirt and whose idea of a good time is hanging out with their brothers, not hopping into that vacation camper with Ken. "Barbie wears a bikini and drinks champagne," said Dr. Abla Ibrahiem, an official at the Cairo-based Arab League who has headed the drive to develop one of the new dolls. "We need to prevent our children from feeling torn between their Arab traditions and the life style that Barbie represents."

In capitals like Cairo and Tehran, many parents, who have grown tired of shelling out between \$30 and \$150 for imported Barbies that set the wrong examples, say they agree. "It is hard to explain to the kid just who that man is in Barbie's life," said Jihan Abdel Aal, a Cairo television producer who is the mother of a 7-year-old girl. Hanaa Maamoun, an interior designer who is the mother of an 8-year-old daughter, said she looks forward to the introduction of "a doll who looks like my girl, with dark hair and dark eyes — an Egyptian doll with an Egyptian spirit." "My daughter wants to wear high heels and miniskirts like Barbie's," Mrs. Maamoun said. "Of course I buy them, but I also tell her that when she is grown up, she should not wear clothes like that. It really is a horrible culture gap."

It used to be that censorship was the preferred method in the Middle East of fending away what was seen as a corrupting Western culture. Even today, in much of the

region, films, books and magazines are routinely subjected to a thorough scrub by government censors; in some countries, even Internet use is policed. What is new in the tale of Barbie and her rivals is that instead of banning what is no longer wanted, Middle East governments have poured resources into the development of alternatives — and plan to peddle the new, non-Western dolls with modern, Western-style marketing techniques.

Iran, an Islamic republic whose leaders have long shunned Western ways, is the home of the first project — the introduction (but not, of course, the unveiling) of Sara, who, in compliance with the country's strict dress codes, would be covered from head to toe in a severe black chador. The Iranian government first spoke of the idea three years ago, but the doll's debut has been delayed until later this year, so that it can be linked to a Hollywood-style merchandising blitz of films, cartoons, music and storybooks, said Majid Ghaderi, of the government's Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. The delay hasn't sapped the anticipation of Iranian parents, like those who stop in regularly at the Uncle New Year toy store, a leading shop in downtown Tehran, ask whether Sara and her brother Dara have arrived on the market, said Farshid Favili, the owner's son.

Cairo is the home of the other project, introducing Laila, styled by Ibrahiem, the Arab League official, as a "representative Arab girl." Since it decided last October to go forward with the project, the 22-member Arab League has conducted feasibility studies to persuade investors that there will be a lucrative market for the doll in all of the member countries, which range geographically from Mauritania to Iraq but do not include non-Arab Iran. The doll is to be manufactured privately, beginning sometime next year, once the Arab League chooses among several bidders. But the organization has already market-tested the name (Laila, a non-religious moniker, is

thought likely to appeal to both Christians and Muslims), the costumes (along with modern, Western-style outfits, they are to include traditional folkloric dress from Egypt, Syria, Palestinian areas, North Africa and the Persian Gulf region), the concept of a brother (still to be named) as best friend, and the very idea of what a "representative Arab girl" should look like.

In contrast to the decidedly post-pubescent Barbie, Laila is to be a girl somewhere between 10 and 12 years in age, with big black eyes, long lashes, pink cheeks, full lips and wavy black hair. Instead of bras and bikini panties, Ibrahiem said, she will wear children's underwear. In her Western-style clothing, Laila will show more skin than the chador-draped Sara. But by Barbie's standards, she will be an emblem of modesty. "This will be a doll with decent clothes and a brother, not a boyfriend," Ibrahiem said. Until now, dolls meant to look like the people who live here have been scarce in the Middle East, in large part because few toys are produced in the region. The prohibitive cost of imported raw materials, usually subject to high duties, has usually made it more economical for retailers to import finished goods, toy store owners say.

But Egyptian and Iranian officials said subsidies and exemptions would allow them to sell Laila and Sara for as little as \$10 — not cheap by the standards of an impoverished region, but a bargain compared with Barbie. The bigger obstacle may be whether marketing alone can overpower Western standards of beauty that are already entrenched even among pre-teens. After all, it is not just Barbie, but American television shows like "Baywatch" — available by satellite — that continue to set a kind of worldwide standard. "She is my best friend," said Nada Hamid, 7, of her Barbie. For an Egyptian girl, Nada's hair, a curly brown, is light in color, but Nada said she wished it were lighter. "I want my hair to be shiny and golden, too." (Taken from *NY Times*, June 2, 1999.)