

# The Light In Her Eyes

A film about a women's school in Syria allows Muslim women to control their own narrative.

BY MARWA ABED



**I**N 1986, 17-YEAR-OLD HOUDA AL-Habash opened a school. Even more extraordinary, the school was in Syria, a country that had—and continues to be—devastated by a secular dictatorship and a conservative class that doesn't welcome women in leadership positions.

About 25 years after the school's inception, filmmakers Julia Meltzer and Laura Nix traveled to Syria to bring light to her story and highlight the increasingly significant role of Muslim women in Eastern society and the backlash that they face.

Al-Habash battled conservative elements in her society and founded one of the first all-girls Quran schools in Damascus: Al-Zahra. The school and Al-Habash's story inspired the documentary, "The Light in Her Eyes." A common Arabic phrase, "light in her eyes" refers to the purity or passion of a person.

The documentary does not follow her road to success or the actual founding of the school, but shows the present-day institution and its developments. The school, a year-round academy, teaches secular knowledge

throughout the regular school year and an optional Quran program hosted during the summer.

"The Light in Her Eyes" is unique in that it is a documentary that allows for an unprecedented look into the rarely seen and seldomly independently defined world of Muslim women. The documentary is progressive in that it simply allows Al-Habash to tell her story herself, rather than allow her to fit into a pre-constructed narrative of either oppression or feminism.

Filmmakers Meltzer and Nix had the odds of bias against them. Two Western, white women writing about the Other; how would this be perceived? However, the film was almost void of an Orientalist taint, not looking down upon her story or mission, and nor looking toward saving the image of Muslim women. Instead, the film allowed viewers an additional dimension to the oftentimes limited discourse on gender roles within Islam and its correlation to education.

The documentary invites viewers into looking at a place where Muslim women

pave spaces for themselves into a globally male-dominated society, asking in particular, where do Muslim women find themselves within the realm of the mosque?

Mosques have become central hubs for Muslim community life, yet Muslim women are still navigating the system. With Al-Habash in charge of what was perceived as a women's mosque, was she challenging her traditional role or was she crossing over into a terrain of blasphemy?

The film quotes clerics who cite that Muslim women should avoid the mosque, stating their "homes are better for them" and education is not mandatory. Al-Habash sets the perfect tone in rebuttal by saying, "For a woman, the Quran is protection. The Quran can teach a woman her rights so she is not misled in a culture-based society who might not value these rights."

Al-Habash never clearly defines her role on the ambivalent spectrum of religiosity, with modernity usually on one end of the spectrum and fundamentalism on the other. This is where the film succeeds. Muslim women—in the media, in conversation, in society—must be allowed to break free of stereotypical and limiting definitions of self. Instead Al-Habash is allowed to express her views on leadership, what she believes about marriage and domestication, and beyond.

Al-Habash pushes Muslim women to educate themselves, not only challenging traditional male domination, but also challenging the limitations Muslim women sometimes internalize. Al-Zahra is a model



for a shift in understanding that gives women the tools to disseminate cultural bounds and truly understand the pure form of Islam.

The documentary ends with the rise of the revolution in Syria. Al-Habash is forced to close her school due to the escalation in violence and eventually leaves the country. Her mother represents an aging generation but sheds timeless wisdom when she closes the documentary by saying, "Education is the foundation of every household. Even a mansion can be destroyed by ignorance."

"The Light in Her Eyes" is a must-see documentary that can open up an array of conversations on gender, politics and religion, and is also a film that introduces the viewer to the stories of real people, outside of the lens of judgment. ■

Marwa Abed is a Palestinian American, Chicago-based freelance writer who works in immigration.

*A remarkable documentary... the first feature film to be made inside the women's side of a mosque in Syria.*  
— KAMRAN PASHA  
*The Huffington Post*

**THE LIGHT IN HER EYES**

Official Selection **idfa 2011** **Dubai** International Film Festival 2011 **TRANSILVANIA** International Film Festival 2012 **POV** **MOVIES THAT MATTER** 2012

Shot right before the uprising in Syria erupted, an extraordinary portrait of a leader who challenges the women of her community to live according to Islam, without giving up their dreams.

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TRIBUTE

# Yameen Zubairi

Pakistani-American scientist and community activist  
1936 – 2012

**D**R. YAMEEN ZUBAIRI PASSED AWAY ON MAY 15, FOLLOWING A MAJOR STROKE and cardiac event. He was laid to rest on May 15 in Laurel, Md. A memorial service was held May 19, at the Muslim Community Center in Silver Spring, Md., to celebrate more than 50 years of his professional and community life in science and international relations in the U.S. and abroad.

Zubairi served as professor, research worker and administrator in the departments of biology, human physiology, medical biochemistry and toxicology in several institutions, including the universities of California, Berkeley; Wisconsin-Madison; Minnesota; and Maryland, Baltimore. He also served at the U.S. National Cancer Institute; National Institute of Child Health (NIH), and Center For Scientific Grants Review. He was senior grants review administrator in the U.S. Army Cancer Research Program as chief of the sections on Breast Cancer, Clinical & Experimental Therapeutics and Neurofibromatosis. He was the scientific review administrator in the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the Oncological Translational Clinical Branch.

Zubairi held several posts in senior academic positions overseas, including visiting professor in Karachi's College of Physicians and Surgeons, and as faculty of University of Karachi, University of Faisalabad, S.M. College, and the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research. He served as advisor for various educational institutions including the University of Karachi, Hamdard University and UN Development Project. He headed Transknowledge International, an educational consulting firm.

Zubairi wrote both in English and Urdu and authored books and more than 100 articles, including the first Urdu-Hindi novel of North America: "Khush Raho Ahle Watan," and "The Purpose of Islam."

He served as an adviser and chairman of a standing committee in the U.S. Association for Asian Studies, as editor and columnist of D.C.'s "Eastern Times" and Chicago's "Unity Times," as president of Pak-American Institute of Science and Technology and Citizens For Peace in South Asia, and as founding trustee of American Institute of Pakistan Studies.

He also served as an adjunct professor of Islamic studies in the Towson State University Md., president of Islamic Society of University of Minnesota, and president of Islamic Students Organization of Karachi University. Zubairi supervised the Z-Journal. Some of his published poems can be visited on [www.poetry.co](http://www.poetry.co).

As a community worker and activist, he served in positions such as the president of Pakistan Association of Greater Washington, and founder of Pakistan Festival, Washington, D.C., and the Washington Policy Analysis Group.

Zubairi received NIH Star Award for his contribution in professionally disbursing the \$5 billion ARRA fund through NIH grants. He participated in the management of RC-3 and SBIR grants sections, an enormous undertaking assigned by President Barack Obama to NIH in a special executive order.

Survivors include his wife of 42 years, Sabiha Qadri Zubairi of Potomac; two sons, Rahel Zubairi of Great Falls and Daniel Zubairi of Bethesda; and three grandchildren. ■

(Contributed by Zubair Saleem, Ph.D.)