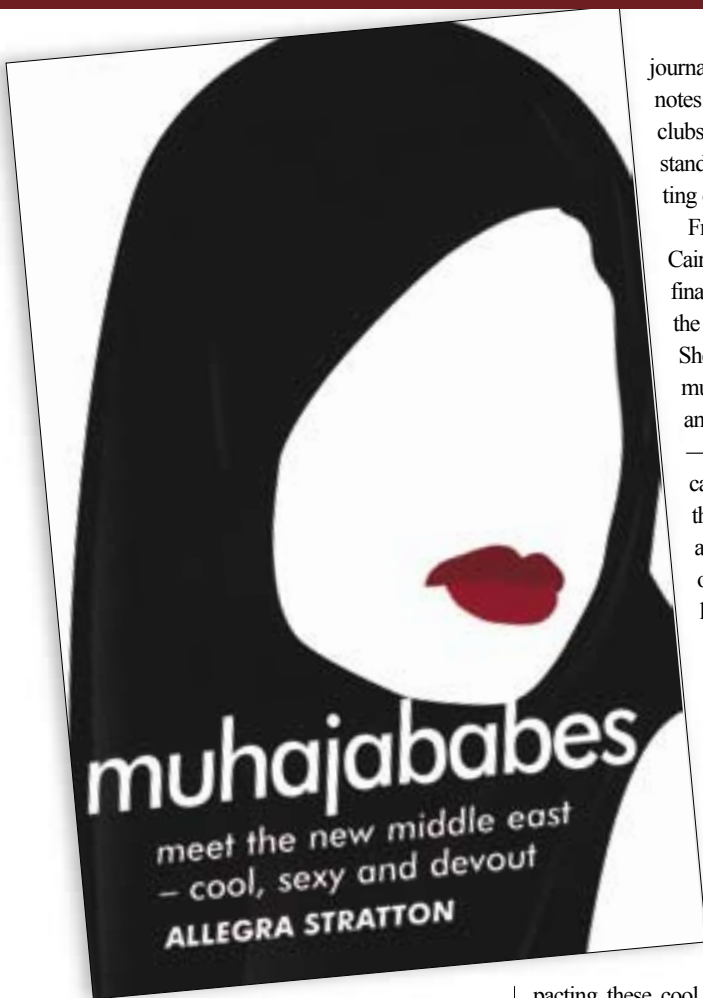


et Book reviews



By Marwa Helal

MUHAJABABES

ALLEGRA STRATTON • CONSTABLE AND ROBINSON • 2006

Muhajababes is the result of one young woman's quest to understand the Middle East. At the age of 24 and during the climax of the conflict in Iraq, BBC Reporter Allegra Stratton, unsatisfied by the answers given by so-called experts and images on the "telly," begins her quest with some poignant questions, "[Are Arabs] very similar or different from me? What did the middle class Arab kids look like?"

Muhajababes is the answer to Stratton's questions. Her methodology in piecing the book together is simple: She sets out to "...talk to everyone I met who seemed my age." This is combined with an old-school

journalism approach: "I made notes lying in bed, in night-clubs, in taxis, private cars, standing in the street and sitting on the curb."

From Beirut to Amman, Cairo, Dubai, Kuwait City and finally Damascus, she takes the reader along for a journey. She playfully calls her subjects muhajabboys, muhajaboffins and, of course, muhajababes — a name that succinctly captures the dichotomy of the "old and new," "sleazy and conservative," "religiosity and rebellion," which has come to define the Middle East.

Stratton reserves the title of muhajaboss, however, for the popular religious leader and television personality Amr Khaled, code-named "AK" throughout the book. Stratton pinpoints AK as the most influential leader im-

pacting these cool, yet devout young people. The characters Stratton comes across on her voyage are a live bunch of raw, steaming — and at times confused — young people.

She concludes, "muhajababes will have the last laugh. In the eclectic mix-and-match spirit of youth everywhere, they are still surreptitiously contradicting AK teachings — on smoking, makeup, plucking eyebrows, tight trousers, revealing swimwear, having sex. If they are boys — drinking, driving too fast and not playing enough sport to mask the effects of their lust for a girl in her swimsuit. But by following AK they get to feel like they are good young Muslims, or at least trying to be good."

Keeping in mind that more than two-thirds of the Arab population are below age 25, Stratton's choice to connect with her Arab peers is key to capturing a genuine impression of the region.

Though British by birth, the author gives

readers the impression that she somehow belongs to the region, in part through her use of colloquialisms. Terms like *wasta* (connections) and *superstar* (pronounced with a 'b', as in the region), are used seamlessly alongside her own. This playful appropriation of her subjects' language (and consequently, an element of their culture) sets Stratton apart from other Western authors who have similarly tried to articulate the wave of change the region is undergoing. From a position of proximity, she attempts to tell the story as one of them, giving the illusion that she may herself be one of her titular heroines — a muhajababe.

Her ability to capture the emotion and logic of her interviewees also deserves praise. Through conversations with would-be suicide bombers, a gay exhibitionist who insists Islamist segregation encourages homosexual relationships, and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, the reader penetrates further into the hidden world of energy and inner conflict of Middle Eastern youth. At times, the author pierces through the contradictions even those of us living in the region can't seem to describe or fathom. For example, she writes, "[These girls] are unveiled Arabs who smoked shisha in both the chichi cafes of the Edgware Road and grubbier, greasier male-dominated shisha cafes of less salubrious areas. They fast, pray and believe, but they also drink vodka Red Bull and smoke." We all know those girls. In fact, some of us are those girls (or boys) and that's what makes this book so relevant.

If any criticism is to be made of the book, it is its failure to touch on the ever-prevalent problem of poverty in the region. But Stratton skillfully dodges this criticism by clearly setting her intention at the beginning of the book — that she will be seeking the story of the middle class of the Middle East.

The book is listed in the current affairs/politics category, but after reading it, one wonders if it would be better placed in the self-help section — Stratton gets that close to the psyche of the Middle East. Time will tell if the muhajababes really do get the last laugh or if this, like any other youth trend, is just a passing phase. et

