

“Faith and Fun”

By Mai Al-Nakib

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A few days ago, I heard a story about a professor at one of the newly opened private universities here in Kuwait. Apparently, this professor walked into the classroom one morning and wrote rather dramatically across the blackboard: "RAMADAN IS NOT TELEVISION SERIALS!!!" Questions from students were brushed aside. This topic was not up for discussion. This, evidently, was incontrovertible fact.

Clearly the esteemed professor is not wrong. One of the main purposes of Ramadan is to cultivate in the devout a sense of empathy with the poor who suffer without food and water every day of the year. Many would even argue that shortening the workday, keeping restaurants closed all morning and afternoon, and overeating at *iftar* defeats the purpose of the holy month, since the poor are not afforded the same luxury during the rest of the year. But leaving aside such disputes for the moment, Ramadan is ideally meant to be a month of faith, charity, generosity, tolerance, community, kindness, and all the other good stuff that constitute the spirit, if not substance, of most religions.

Yet Ramadan is something more besides prayer and faith. It is a month of gathering together with family and friends; of succulent smells emanating not just from individual kitchens but from entire neighborhoods; of cooking more than one family can eat and delivering extras to unknown neighbors; of staying out until the wee hours and sleeping in late; of children going door to door singing for candy; of lambs in gardens blissfully unaware of their impending fate; of planning elaborate vacations for Eid break; and, without a doubt, Ramadan is a month of television serials. To believe otherwise is to ignore the indisputable evidence. It's no accident that the commencement of Ramadan coincided with the beginning of at least fifteen new television serials from all over the Arabic-speaking world. Talk to just about anyone and they'll probably list four or five shows they're avidly following. Needless to say, Ramadan is not *just* about television serials; but television serials *are* an important cultural component of the month.

Ramadan is primarily about fasting and faith. But it is also about feasting and fun. In the best of cases, it is a balanced mix of both. The twenty-first-century faithful enjoy television serials just as older generations enjoyed magazine serials. The twenty-first-century faithful, like the faithful before them, delight in sitting at outdoor cafés, laughing with friends, smoking *sheesha*, and eating *mezza*. The twenty-first-century faithful love live music (they used to adore visiting entertainment tents before the recent ban). The twenty-first century so far has not been an easy one for faithful Muslims in the Arab world, and the future is looking bleak. A little fun and levity in these dark times might not be such a bad thing. Indeed, it is very much in the spirit of faith to celebrate life in all its forms. Feasting after fasting is not faithless. Neither is fun.

Part of the real fun of Ramadan is that even non-Muslims, especially Arab non-Muslims, celebrate it. Some fast to experience what their Muslim

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friends do. Others enjoy sharing *iftar* with their Muslim neighbors. And in the evenings, friends of different faiths and nationalities get together, and the laughter they share crosses religious barriers. This too is Ramadan--an under-appreciated though deeply valuable aspect of the month. These expressions of inter-faith and international unity reflect a cosmopolitanism that was much more visible in Kuwait about a decade before the Gulf War. It is a cosmopolitanism that, for reasons too numerous to rehearse here, the events of 1990-91 did much to undermine. This causality of the war is not discussed nearly enough. Not as many people seem to mourn its passing the way I do. Sometimes I even wonder if this cosmopolitan society I grew up in is not simply a society of my imagination. But every once in a while, during Ramadan, for instance, I catch a glimpse of it reflected in the exuberant mix of people gathered together for meals, over mint tea and sweetmeats, in homes and cafés around the country. Every so often, when I see Christian friends together with Muslims, Palestinians with Kuwaitis, Arabs with Europeans or Americans, then I know that the Kuwait of my childhood has not ceased to exist, that there is still a spark of hope that it can once again develop into the sophisticated place it once was. To believe this is possible might be somewhat idealistic, maybe even naive. But not to believe it is to succumb to the pessimism and doom that keeps us politically passive and emotionally disheartened. Not to believe it is to hand over our future to forces that believe TV serials are evil.

This Ramadan, I hope that from beneath the rubble of rules, regulations, and dogma we rescue and resuscitate (or perhaps create anew) a world where tolerance, respect, kindness, generosity, diversity, creativity, enthusiasm, and, above all, peace can flourish. If we manage to let in a bit of fun as well, we'll probably be the better for it.