

Syrian TV star flees to Britain after provoking a burka storm



Halla Diyab was the golden girl of the Middle East's media Bethany Clarke for The Times

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Ruth Gledhill Religion Correspondent
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An award-winning television presenter described as the “Christine Bleakley of the

Middle East” has fled to Britain after she was persecuted for speaking out against the burka.

Halla Diyab, who was born in Syria, became the golden girl of the Middle East’s media and drew comparisons with the *Daybreak* host after presenting a range of programmes. She has settled in Leicester where she has set up a production company.

“We don’t have laws in the Middle East that protect women,” she said. “Women go to work and are abused by men. They cannot go to the police or their mothers to talk about it.”

Diyab is now investigating extremism among young Muslims in Britain in a project sponsored by the Right Start Foundation in Birmingham.

Her 30-episode television soap opera *Ma Malakat Aymanukum*, or *Your Rightful Disposal*, a title taken from a verse of the Koran that talks about the enslavement of women, is playing on the Middle East channel MBC during Ramadan, as it did last year.

The drama, which she wrote and produced, has won two awards in the Middle East. It addresses homosexuality, sexual and physical abuse, the burka and the French ban, virginity and extremism. The central character is a woman who moved from the Middle East to France, the liberation she felt and experienced when she removed her burka and what happens when she returns home.

The TV show has led to her being accused of atheism. Her private life has been investigated by religious leaders who want to damage her reputation because of her focus on women’s rights. A Facebook page was set up to attack her but it has been taken down.

Several Islamic scholars tried to persuade the Government in Syria to ban her drama, and her mother was warned that Diyab was “harming Islam”. One cleric blamed it for Syria’s weather problems, arguing that God was withholding rain to punish the nation.

She has also been blamed by religious leaders for stirring up unrest. They claimed that the drama violated Islamic rules and polluted the minds of Arab women and called on her to repent. Diyab said that her work was about challenging “hypocrisy” where “religious men with beards preach Islam but live a different path themselves”. A main character in the drama, a female preacher who takes an Orthodox Islamic line, is revealed as a lesbian.

Diyab, who studied at Warwick and took a PhD at Leicester, said that she felt secure in England. “Although I love the Middle East, when I go there I feel I don’t fit in. I feel marginalised and I am always under fire in the Middle East media because of my liberal views, and because I strive to break the boundaries.

“Religious scholars want to silence women. The current uprising questions authority and clerics want Muslims to take Islam and the burka for granted and not to question them. Clerics make Muslim women busy thinking whether they should cover their face or hair, whether they should eat with their right or left hand, so they are immersed with

seeking the promised paradise instead of uprising by taking part in the society.”

She added: “One of my goals is to take Arab women from under the burka and help them to find freedom.”

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