



MEI Kaleidoscope | Photographers Shifting the Lens on the Middle East

By **ZAFIRAH MOHAMED ZEIN**

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Iraq by Latif Al-Ani

The images that have emerged from the Middle East and onto our newsstands over the last fifty years often paint a monolithic picture of the region that revolves around the common tropes of conflict and extremism. The photographs usually bolster narratives that ignore the complexity, vibrancy and humanity of the region.

Going back further in time, photography from the Middle East has historically been dominated by the works of foreigners traveling or living in the region. The advent of photography as a valuable art form coincided with the influx of Europeans into the region. Regardless of why they traveled, they were drawn to document the rich cultures of the Middle East, symbolized by the historical and religious monuments that dotted the region's urban landscape between the ninth and fifteenth century.

However, this appreciation for the region's culture amidst other developments during the era of colonialism caused orientalism to thrive and take root in Middle Eastern photography. Photography collections of that time, now exhibited in museums and preserved in research archives worldwide, often depicted indigenous communities as exotic subjects that fit the narrative of inferiority promulgated by the European colonizers.

Only recently has the world begun to appreciate the work of contemporary photographers breaking the stereotypes long perpetuated by orientalist photography in the Middle East, much like today's othering of Middle Eastern societies in the media. The late Moroccan photojournalist Leila Alaoui, for instance, attempted to show "a world beyond African and Muslim stereotypes"¹ in her "The Moroccans" portrait series that captured the different ethnic tribes in the country in their cultural dress.

In the global art and photography landscape, native photographers from the Middle East remain woefully under-represented. The largest art and history museums rarely feature legendary photographers such as Latif Al-Ani, the father of Iraqi photography, or Karimeh Abbud, the first Palestinian and Arab female photographer to set up her own studio in 1930s Palestine.



Iraq by Latif Al-Ani

¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/leila-alaouis-the-moroccans-shows-a-world-beyond-african-and-muslim-stereotypes-a6842356.html>

Al-Ani was said to have been a unique force in the region's photography, capturing rare shots of Iraq's 'golden age' of cosmopolitanism. Commissioned at the start of his career by the Iraq Petroleum Company, his photographs provide us an exceptional view of the times – when the region's oil boom led to the flourishing of economies and ethnic and religious accord augmented the region's prosperity.

On Abbud, who captured social landscapes and people of the middle-class at their best, she was described as “not only the first female professional photographer, but also the first among the region to set aside European style traditions in portrait art and photography. [Her subjects] were neither dignified rulers, generals, pashas and religious clerics, nor do they resemble the biblical scene or the ethnographic obsessions of the European viewers. It is thanks to the work of this pioneering woman that faces of the Palestinians before their catastrophe of 1948 show their kindness, their simplicity and their tranquility.”²



Photographs by Karimeh Abbud

Today, contemporary photographers and visual artists from the region are documenting the region through their eyes, exploring issues such as identity, politics, religion and society in powerful, poignant and multi-layered ways. Not only do their works counter pre-conceived notions of the Middle East; they also address and confront the status quo in their homelands.

² <https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2017/karimeh-abbud/>

Here are five photographers from the Middle East who are shattering stereotypes and challenging social norms through their work.

ALI AL SHARJI

Ali Al Sharji is a self-taught conceptual photographer and visual artist from Oman. His work touches on the themes of Orientalism and Arab women, and are often an artistic response to his social environment. Although his photography largely reflects his Middle Eastern heritage, he addresses universal concepts such as identity, belonging and materialism.



“Most of my pieces integrate the concept of empowering women, and modernizing traditions in a way to sustain cultures for the next generations coming from the same background as me.”



YUMNA AL-ARASHI

Yumna Al-Arashi is a Yemeni-American photographer and filmmaker. Both artist and journalist, she has documented the fading history of tattoos of matriarchs across North Africa, and shot cinematic films that explore sexuality, feminine power and spirituality in Middle Eastern societies. Her latest film on the mystical traditions of Islam, *The 99 Names of God*, was screened at the 2018 Tribeca Film Festival.



More of her work on the dying tradition of female facial tattoos can be found here:

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-photographs-preserving-vanishing-tradition-female-facial-tattoos>

OMAR IMAM

Omar Imam is a Beirut-based Syrian photographer who left his hometown of Damascus in 2012. His work is often described as surrealist humanitarian photography, in which he applies a conceptual, ironic approach to the conflict in his home country.

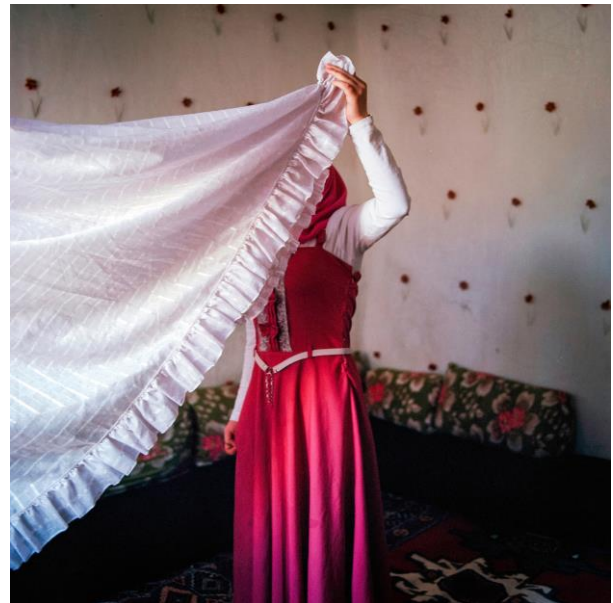
“I wanted to discover myself as a Syrian, an artist and an activist through my photographs in ‘Live, Love, Refugee.’ I already knew a lot about what is going on in Syria, however from talking to Syrians from different cities I learned that I actually knew very little. With each story, I found that I wanted more knowledge. The thing we don’t realize is that there are six million stories out in the world waiting to be told.”



More photographs from Omar’s *Live, Love, Refugee* series can be found here:
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tap/7977573.0006.206/--omar-imam-humanitarian-surrealism?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

ÖZGE SEBZECI

Özge Sebzeci is a freelance Turkish photographer based in Istanbul. She has covered breaking news and feature stories that unpack social and political issues in Turkey and the region. Shining a light on topics of gender and human relations, Sebzeci photographed stories on refugees, child marriage and violence against women. She is a 2018 fellow of the Magnum Foundation's Photography and Social Justice Program.



Her work documenting child brides in refugee communities in Turkey was featured in National Geographic:
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2018/01/child-marriage-divorce-syrian-refugees-turkey/>

TANYA HABJOUQA

Tanya Habjouqa is an award-winning Jordanian documentary photographer based in East Jerusalem. She has spent decades producing in-depth visual narratives tackling issues of gender, dispossession and human rights in the Middle East. Habjouqa is a founding member of [Rawiya](#), the first all-women photography collective in the region. The following photos are from her book [Occupied Pleasures](#), which was deemed one of the best photos books of 2015.



“We have the people in the frontlines documenting the non-violent resistance. That’s invaluable work and there are some wonderful photographers doing that. But me, as Tanya, I think what can I do different? What can I bring different to the conversation?”

I think my best images today have come from when I broke away from what everyone else expects.”