

POV

Community
Engagement & Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Light in Her Eyes

A Film by Julia Meltzer and Laura Nix



LOS ANGELES, 2012

**Filmmaker Julia Meltzer**

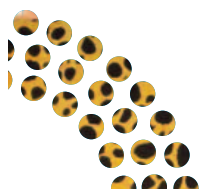
Photo courtesy of Tracey Landworth

**Filmmaker Laura Nix**

Photo courtesy of Anne Etheridge

In a courtyard off a busy street in Damascus, Syria, boisterous girls run and play before class starts in the women's side of Al-Zahra mosque. Inside the mosque, preacher Houda al-Habash teaches the Quran, educating women and girls about their religion, and their rights, within their faith. Julia Meltzer lived in Damascus in 2005, and from the moment she first entered Al-Zahra mosque, she recognized what a unique place it was. Houda's school was well-organized and energized—filled with women and girls supporting each other in their studies.

Most people don't associate Islam with women's rights, and that's exactly what we found interesting about the Al-Zahra Mosque Quran School. Inside this community, we uncovered a lively debate about women's roles as mothers, teachers, wives, workers, sisters and daughters. Houda insists that secular education is an integral part of worship, because it gives her students the tools to make decisions about their futures. However, the school also emphasizes the importance of modesty and piety. These women and girls are following "the straight path" of Islam, because they want to live according to its structure, rules and ethics.



Houda's version of women's rights doesn't look like ours. We were raised in the West by feminist mothers, grew up attending marches for reproductive freedom and identify as third-wave feminists. But the deeper we dove into Houda's community, the more we realized how much our guidelines for judging women's liberation and autonomy were informed by the parameters of our culture and experiences. As filmmakers, we believe it's our job to understand our subjects, and to tell truthful stories about their worlds. So, while we witnessed Houda encouraging girls to take their secular education seriously, we also recognized that her primary mission is to teach her interpretation of conservative Islam, which includes cultural traditions like wearing hijab and serving the husband—actions we would question in our own culture.



Julia Meltzer, Houda al-Habash and Laura Nix

Photo courtesy of Anne Etheridge

We were raised in a primarily secular culture, so it was challenging at first to see how a religious education could be a constructive influence for women. We come from faiths different from that of Houda and her students; one of us is Jewish and the other has a Catholic parent and a Protestant parent. Respectively, we went to Hebrew school in Los Angeles and Sunday school in upstate New York. We each studied the holy books of our traditions and were expected to learn the tenets of our religions to become adult members of our congregations. Despite our major cultural differences, the longer we spent in Houda's mosque, the more parallels we saw between our own religious studies and the program Houda was directing.

This was the most difficult project either one of us has ever undertaken. Both Syria and the community of conservative Muslim women are intensely private and suspicious of outsiders.

It took several years of return trips to Damascus to convince Houda to allow us to film in her mosque. Finally, in the summer of 2008, she agreed. We worked with a very small all-women crew, and the shoot required many trips to Syria, which we usually entered through Lebanon because it had more lax border control at the time. We made the film without the permission of the Syrian government; every day we faced the possibility of being shut down and having our footage confiscated.

However, the risk for Houda, her family and her students was much greater—the school itself could have been shut down by state security for engaging with American filmmakers. Today, Syria is on the brink of a full-blown civil war, sparked by a popular uprising against the regime. Houda and her family are no longer in Damascus and therefore she cannot teach at Al-Zahra Mosque. The school is open some days and closed others. **The Light in Her Eyes** completed photography in November 2010, four months before the uprising began. It captures a moment of stability in the country that will not exist again for many years to come.

We hope audiences will gain a greater understanding of conservative Islam by watching the film. The act of women teaching each other about Islam is a key element of the religious revival taking place in the Middle East, and understanding that is crucial to understanding how the region is changing, especially through the Arab Spring. We also hope audiences will welcome a view of contemporary Syria that is not solely defined by headlines and YouTube videos of the recent chaos and violence. While the uprising dominates Syria's present moment, it is only one story of Syria's people and its rich history.

Julia Meltzer and Laura Nix, Directors/Producers



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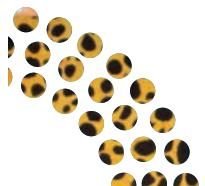
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Thirty years ago, at the age of 17, Houda al-Habash, a conservative Muslim preacher, founded a Quran school for girls in Damascus, Syria. Every summer since then, her female students have supplemented their secular schooling with a rigorous study of Islam.

Houda's efforts illustrate a complex—and for some audiences, unexpected—aspect of the current Islamic revival. Under the banner of restoring Islamic traditions in modern life, women are claiming space within the mosque, a place historically dominated by men. Using Quranic teachings, Houda encourages her students to pursue higher education, jobs and public lives, while remaining committed to an interpretation of Islam that includes cultural traditions that encourage some traditional gender roles, such as marrying young and serving one's husband.

Shot just before the eruption of Syria's current uprising, **The Light in Her Eyes** ventures into a world rarely seen by Westerners, yet echoes other faith-based movements throughout the Arab world. It offers an extraordinary portrait of a leader who challenges the women of her community to live according to Islam, without giving up their autonomy. In the process, it confronts viewers with questions about the meaning of women's empowerment within the parameters of different cultures and experiences.



Houda al-Habash and her students at Al Zahra Mosque

Photo courtesy of Itab Azzam



The Light in Her Eyes is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- **Your local PBS station**
- **Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to Muslims, feminism, spirituality or the Middle East, including *Islam: Empire of Faith*, *New Muslim Cool* and *The Oath***
- **Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the Key Issues section**
- **High school students**
- **Faith-based organizations and institutions**
- **Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums**
- **Civic, fraternal and community groups**
- **Academic departments and student groups at seminaries, colleges, universities and high schools**
- **Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries**

The Light in Her Eyes is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

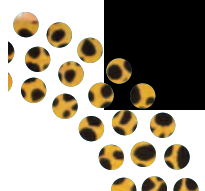
Anti-bias/anti-defamation education
Arab Spring
Feminism
Feminism and religion
Feminist theology
Gender roles
Girls
Hijab debates
Interfaith dialogue
Islam
Islamic revival
Leadership
Middle East
Mosque movement
Piety movement
Public/private spheres
Quran schools
Religious education
Religious studies
Stereotyping of Arabs, women and Muslims
Syria
Women's rights

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use **The Light in Her Eyes** to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit www.pbs.org/pov/outreach





Houda al-Habash leading morning recitation

Photo courtesy of Itab Azzam

Syria: A Modern History

In the aftermath of World War I and the weakening of the Ottoman Empire, Syria functioned as a French protectorate heading toward independence. That independence would become official in 1946, following World War II. The decades of the 1950s and 1960s were marked by political instability and a series of military coups. In one of those coups, Hafez al-Assad and the secular Ba'ath Party ousted the civilian party leadership and Assad assumed the role of prime minister. He ruled Syria autocratically from 1970 to 2000 and was succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad after his death in 2000.

Allied with the Soviet Union, the Syrian dictator established a secular state with a pan-Arab outlook, forging strong relations with Iraq. Though the head of state was required to be a Muslim, the nation was nominally

tolerant of its Christian minority. Compulsory and free public education was established for both boys and girls; women served in government posts, and wearing of the *niqab* (a veil covering the face) was banned in public places like universities. As happened elsewhere, from the United States (where legislators added "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance) to Afghanistan (where religiously-inspired mujahadeen attempted to oust Soviet troops), the forced secularization was met with resistance from people of faith. The trend in Middle Eastern countries was that the initial resistance came primarily from faith-based political opposition, and Syria was no exception. From 1976 until 1982, the Muslim Brotherhood



in Syria organized revolts and an armed insurgency against Assad's regime. The government mobilized to crush the Muslim Brotherhood culminating in a massacre in Hama in 1982, and until March 2011 public displays of anti-regime activity were very limited.

Today, Syria has a population of approximately 22.5 million people, about a quarter of whom live in the capital city of Damascus (the location of Houada al-Habash's school). Ethnically, the nation is approximately 90 percent Arab, with significant minority populations of Druze, Kurds and Turks. Religiously, about three quarters of Syrians identify as Hanafi (the oldest and largest denomination of Sunni Muslims). Another 12 percent, including the ruling Assad family, are Alawi (a heterodox Shiite Muslim sect). Approximately 10 percent of the country's population identifies as Christian. Until recently, there was also a significant Jewish community in Syria.

The nation shares large borders with Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, and also a short border with Israel. In the region, its strongest alliance is with Iran (which, like the Assad family, is identified with the Shiite practice of Islam).

Currently, Bashar al-Assad's regime faces an ongoing uprising, which many believe was sparked by the Arab Spring—a wave of protests in the Arab world that began in Tunisia in 2010. While the uprising is dominated by Sunni Muslims, there are protesters from Druze, Christian and even Alawite backgrounds, many calling for more political rights, social reform and regime change. The government responded with a violent crackdown and, according to a July 2012 report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, more than 16,500 people have been killed in the uprising thus far.

In November 2011, the Arab League suspended Syria's membership in the alliance and called for political and security reforms, urging the Syrian army to withdraw its security forces from civilian areas and to release its political prisoners. The Arab League formed a "monitoring mission" to assess the regime's response to its mandate. In late January 2012, the Arab League suspended the mission due to a dramatic increase in violence. The diplomatic focus switched to the United Nations Security Council with the hope that it would vote on a draft resolution for a quick transition to an interim government.

As of the printing of this guide, violence against civilians in Syria continues, and the United Nations has failed to reach an agreement on appropriate action.

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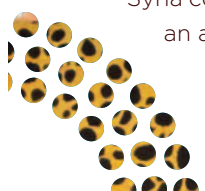
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Morning prayer at Al-Zahra mosque

Photo courtesy of Itab Azzam

Basic Islamic Beliefs and Practices

Islam is the second most common religion in the world after Christianity; it is one of the three major Abrahamic traditions (along with Judaism and Christianity). There are different denominations within Islam, but they all share some fundamental beliefs: that there is only one God (“Allah” means “God” in Arabic); the Quran is the word of God; and Muhammad was the last in a series of prophets—including Moses and Jesus—who were sent to instruct humanity about how to live in accordance with God’s law. Other tenets shared across the sects are the five pillars of the faith: the declaration of belief or *shahada*; reciting five daily prayers; giving to charity (Zakat); and fasting in the month of Ramadan; and making a pilgrimage to Mecca (also known as Makkah) Islam’s holiest city.

Quran recitations are a year-round practice, although they hold an especially important signifi-

cance in the month of Ramadan. Muslims believe that to be the month in which the Quran was revealed.

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3 generations of al-Habash women: Yazda, Enas and Houda

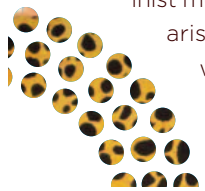
Photo courtesy of Laura Nix

The following section is re-printed with permission from ITVS and Independent Lens. Visit <http://womenandgirlslead.org/> to learn about ITVS' *Women and Girls Lead*, an innovative public media campaign designed to celebrate, educate and activate women, girls and their allies across the globe to address the challenges of the 21st century.

Muslim Women's Movements

Feminism is often assumed to be a Western construct, yet Muslim women outside the West have been active in modern forms of feminism since the 19th century. Different feminist movements reflect the cultural contexts in which they arise, and Muslim feminists have adapted their own ways of working within an Islamic framework, al-

lowing women to counter gender oppression and expectations as a part of their faith. Umm Yasmin of the Centre for Muslim Minorities and Islam Policy Studies at Australia's Monash University defines a Muslim feminist as "one who adopts a worldview in which Islam can be contextualized and reinterpreted in order to promote concepts of equity and equality between men and women; and for whom freedom of choice plays an important part in expression of faith." Many Muslim feminists insist that violence against women is anathema to Islam, and that their faith does not condone it.





Students at Al-Zahra mosque, Hiba, Ala'a and Riham

Photo courtesy of Itab Azzam

Muslim women's movements have also been traditionally aligned with nationalist, democratic and humanitarian movements, as well as postcolonial struggles and religious reform. In Egypt, which has been in the forefront of feminism in the Muslim world, the fight for women's rights dovetailed with the rise of secular nationalism and social justice.

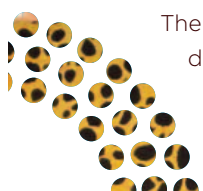
Islamic Feminism

Because some secular Muslim feminists are less interested in reforming Islam and more concerned with promoting gender equality within a secular society, the term "Islamic feminism" arose to distinguish those women who work specifically within Islam.

The term Islamic feminism became popular in the 1990s, defining an emerging feminist paradigm by scholars including Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Mai Yamani, Nilufer

Gole and Shamima Shaikh. As a global phenomenon, the movement strives to transcend binary notions of East versus West, secular versus religious and traditional versus modern, encompassing the Muslim diaspora around the world.

Islamic feminism also aims for the full equality of all Muslims, male and female, in both public and private life. Margot Badran of Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding asserts that Islamic feminism is more radical than more secular Muslim feminisms. She writes, "Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism is both highly contested and firmly embraced."



A Global Movement

As the global Muslim diaspora grows, many Muslim women face struggles between the ways of life in their current countries and the traditional practices of their parents' culture. These women have developed their own feminist practices and ways of articulating their own concerns.

For instance, “veiling,” the Muslim custom of wearing *hijab*, is often viewed by non-Muslim feminists as an oppressive act that silences Muslim women and exemplifies the myth of Islam as inherently sexist and patriarchal. Yet, growing religious revivalism in the Muslim world has led to an increase in Islamic dress, including head coverings. For many Muslim women, wearing the headscarf has become a feminist act, serving as a symbol of their identity and a way to counter cultural imperialism. This is just one example of how Muslim women are defining and developing feminism—on their own terms.

The Women’s Mosque Movement and the Islamic Revival

Houda’s school is part of a resurgence of Islam across the globe known as an “Islamic revival.” As secular Arab states have largely failed to meet the needs of their citizens for domestic political reform and economic growth, an Islamic resurgence has swept through the region. According to writer and anthropologist Saba Mahmood (author of *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*), “Islamic revival” can refer to the activities of state-oriented political groups, but the phrase also typically refers to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies over the last three decades.

Practitioners like Houda see their efforts to encourage a return to Islamic observance as social and not political. They do not insist on imposing Islam on others or in creating theocratic states governed by Islamic law, though they would like their governments to reflect core Islamic values (in much the same way that many American Christians have supported political leadership that reflects their faith).

The Islamic revival is not related to the trend of religious violent extremism sometimes labeled “Islamist” (in contrast to “Islamic”). In fact, Muslims like Houda adamantly disavow political violence in the name of Islam.

While Islam is also often associated with the subjugation of women, the mosque movement is seen by many Muslim women, including Houda, as liberating. It of-



A group of girls read at Al Zahra Mosque

Photo courtesy of Itab Azzam

fers an opportunity to gain intellectual ownership of Islamic teaching—women are active and they’re asking questions – and is seen as a return to a “golden” age of Islam, when Muslim women were known as great teachers, philanthropists and religious leaders. Mahmood points out that the women of the movement are focused on cultivating a practice of personal piety rather than focused on embracing politics. However, Maan Abdul Salam, a Syrian women’s rights campaigner, explains that female Islamic prayer groups (like the

conservative Islamic women's society Qubaisiate) recruit women differently, based on their social status. For example, wealthy, upper-class women are often taught how to influence politics.

According to a recent *New York Times* article on the Islamic revival in Syria, religious teachers in the country say the growth in the number of girls' madrasas (Islamic religious schools) has outpaced the growth in those for boys. Weekly religious lessons held at home slowly moved to mosques, and women began memorizing and studying the Quran and other Islamic teachings. While there are no official statistics about how many of Syria's 700 madrasas are for girls, a survey of Islamic education in Syria published by the pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat* suggests that there are about 80 such madrasas in Damascus alone, serving more than 75,000 women and girls. About half of those schools are affiliated with the Qubaisiate (an insular and conservative Islamic women's society in Syria, which has recently started to export its brand overseas), though Houda's school is not.

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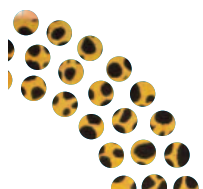
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Two women reciting Quran at Al Zahra Mosque

Photo courtesy of Itab Azzam



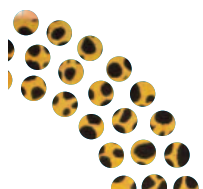
Selected People Featured in **The Light in Her Eyes**



Houda al-Habash was born into a large, educated Sunni Muslim family in Damascus, Syria. One of 10 brothers and sisters, she knew from an early age that she wanted to become a *da'ia*, or caller, in the Islamic faith. Houda was educated at a well-known Islamic school in Damascus, the Abu Nour Institute. She started her Quran school at Al-Zahra Mosque in 1982 when she was only 17 years old. She also ran the summer Quran school and led biweekly lectures at the mosque for the women in her neighborhood for 30 years. She is married to Samir al-Khaldi, a businessman, and they have three children. In early 2012, Houda and her family left Damascus due to the growing political unrest. They are now living in the Arabian Peninsula.



Enas al-Khaldi, Houda's daughter, is a recent graduate of the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, where she studied international relations and political science. She will be traveling to the United States in summer 2012 to participate in a seminar on the Quran in the modern world at Princeton University.



Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You can, if you wish, pose a general question and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion.

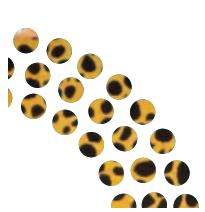
General questions might include:

- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, who would you ask and what would you ask him or her?
- What did you learn from this film? What insights did it provide?
- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?



Girls reading the Quran at Al Zahra Mosque

Photo courtesy of Itab Azzam



CONTEXT QUESTIONS

It is difficult to understand Houda al-Habash's work without understanding some basic information about the context in which it takes place. Discuss these questions below before delving deeper into the discussion prompts. You might want to also add some supplementary information using the Background Section of this guide.

- **What is the difference between the Islamic revival and Islamic political extremism? What distinguishes conservative religious Muslims (like Houda) from Islamist fundamentalists?**
- **What is the relationship between religion and government in Syria? How does this compare to the United States? What about other countries you're familiar with?**
- **Legally, what is the position of women in Syria, and how does this compare with accepted social conventions and day-to-day practice in communities across the country?**

Viewing Through a Gender Lens

Summarize Houda's teaching about women's roles. Who might oppose her philosophy and why might they perceive her messages to and about women as a threat? Who sees her teaching as liberating and what does it enable them to do that they can't do now?

One way Houda justifies teaching women and girls and encouraging them to seek education in the mosque and beyond is by saying, "If a mother never learns, how can she teach the next generation? A woman is a school. If you teach her, you teach an entire generation." What are the potential dangers and benefits of justifying learning for girls by saying they need it in order to be good mothers?

How do you define "feminism"? Does Houda's work fit within your definition? Explain your reasoning.

In the film, we see television footage of traditional clerics describing their understanding of what Islam requires of women:

- Abu Ishaq Alheweny: If a woman does as the Prophet said, worships God, then she should stay home as much as possible.
- Saad Al-Khathlan: Regarding women's prayer—praying at home is better than in the mosque. The Prophet said, "Their homes are better for them."
- Wagdy Ghoneim: Our Lord created four duties for women that no one can argue with: 1. Reproduce. 2. Raise the children. 3. Take care of her husband. 4. The house.

How would Houda hope that her students would respond to such declarations? What would she want them to say or do? How might the clerics respond to Houda's declaration that, "Muslims themselves have deprived women of everything, even the right to learn, teach, and enter the mosque. This is ignorance which has nothing to do with religion."?

Houda's daughter, Enas al-Khaldi, says, "The tradition of memorizing Quran is not an obligation, but I believe that it's a way of protecting yourself... For girls, it's very important to learn what is in Quran because, if you don't really know what is the true thing, you are going to be misled." How does knowledge of Quran offer protection? In what ways does studying Quran in Houda's school give women a voice or empower them? In what ways might it constrain women's voices or limit their power?

In many Muslim communities, women neither attend the mosque (instead they pray at home) nor memorize the Quran. Houda and her students do both. How does it change the culture or society when women start doing something that was previously viewed as a male domain? Does it matter what the specific activity is, or does any incursion into a traditionally male sphere produce the same type of social change?

Houda explains, "God made the *hijab* an obligation to protect women from inappropriate looks and acts. And to protect a woman's beauty and purity for her husband later on." The lyrics of the song during the ceremony say, "Now we are veiled. There is light in our eyes. We bless her, we bless her. Whoever sees her thanks God and says, 'May you be safe from envy.'"



Julia places a mic on Yazda before the shoot

Photo courtesy of Laura Nix

What are the messages regarding modesty, women's sexuality and proper gender roles in those lyrics? How could these messages be interpreted as feminist? In what ways do they reinforce traditional gender roles? What are possible explanations for the significant increase in the number of Syrian women – and women across the Middle East and North Africa – adopting the hijab?

In what ways is the *hijab* an expression of identity (like a Christian wearing a crucifix or a Jew wearing a star of David)? What are the implications of such visible expressions when they are adopted by or required for only one sex or the other? What other religious or cultural traditions ask women or men to cover their heads? How do the reasons for head covering in those traditions compare with the reasons that Houda gives?

Houda says to her students, "What I really wish from you girls is to speak up if there's something you don't like. You are free in your choices, free in your way of thinking, free in your faith, free in everything. Women can be teachers and students. Women can rule and arbitrate. Does religious law allow a woman to be president? Yes! Don't shut

off your brain. Don't give up your right to choose." In your opinion, how does this message about choice square with Houda's belief that Islam dictates that a woman's first obligation is to be a wife and mother?

How do the expectations for marriage that you hear expressed in the film compare with your own expectations or experiences? How does your own community view working mothers or female politicians? In what ways have gender roles changed in your religious or national community?

Enas and her friends see outdated customs and traditions as causing the Muslim world to fall behind. ("The rest of the world is driving fast while we are riding on the backs of ants.") She is especially critical of extremely conservative religious leaders, saying, "This situation, I'm sorry, has put us in a very backward position. The world is in turmoil. There's terrorism and a sheikh is talking about how thick a woman's socks should be!" In your view, what are the links between religious or social traditions that restrict women and societal development?

In your view, do people like Houda, who counter the arguments of extremists by using women's roles as wives and mothers to justify education and participation in society, have a better chance to secure rights for women in a country like Syria than people who support a feminist interpretation of Islam, building on the ways that Islam values women to argue for equal rights and expanded choices? Or do you think people who reject religious practice in favor of a secular government and lifestyle have the best chance? Explain your position.

How do Houda's teachings about women affirm or challenge what you learned about the role or rights of women in Islam?

Compare Houda's educational opportunities (both religious and secular) with those of her mother and her daughter. How do the opportunities change for members of each generation? Think about your grandmothers' and mother's experiences attaining education. How has your own experience differed?

What do you learn about gender from the way that Houda interacts with people in her home? What else do you learn about Houda's culture or values from the scenes in her home? How does her home compare to your home?



Ala'a and Teacher Anan pray at Al Zahra Mosque

Photo courtesy of Itab Azzam

Viewing Through a Religion Lens

Houda's efforts are part of a broader movement known as the "Islamic revival." What do you think the participants in this movement are reviving and why? Why might both Muslim religious clerics and Syria's secular government see Houda's Quran school as a challenge?

In relation to the greater religious revival, where else in the decades since the 1980s have you seen a resurgence of religious practice? How would you describe the outcome(s) of that resurgence?

How is Houda's school like and unlike a Christian Bible school, catechism class, Hebrew school or other religious education you have experienced?

Compare and contrast what you see in the film with

the teachings of your own faith tradition/belief system/philosophy. In particular you might consider:

- Who can be a preacher or religious leader and how does one attain that position?
- What is the relative authority of the main sacred text, commentaries on the text and custom?
- What is the importance of the main sacred text and how people (including children) study that text?

What is the significance of the film's title? What is the "light"?

Though Houda has very definite ideas about how the Quran instructs women to live, she teaches her students to ask questions during their studies. What does your religious or philosophical tradition teach about questioning religious leaders or sacred texts? Who is allowed to ask questions and under what circumstances?



Teacher Anan's class has lunch in the courtyard at Al-Zahra mosque

Photo courtesy of Itab Azzam

Houda says, "If she's memorized 10 chapters with mistakes, it's not accepted by God, and it's not right in front of people." Another Quran teacher in Houda's mosque says, "We recite properly so that our understanding of the Quran and God is clearer. We should obey God in all the details of our lives. This is piety." The teacher conveys this to her students, saying, "You won't accept mispronouncing your name but it's okay to mispronounce the Quran?" In your view, what is the value of requiring precision in the girls' recitation? What do they learn from this requirement (beyond simply memorizing the text)?

Houda explains sending her daughter to university abroad saying, "She has a great opportunity to change the world's view of Islam. Why is Islam viewed as a terrorist religion?

We need someone to answer these questions." How can a young, educated Muslim Arab woman change the world's perceptions of her faith? In what ways

would Enas be following in her mother's footsteps if she does follow this path?

One woman in the film describes "customs and traditions" (as opposed to what is actually in the Quran) as being like "a cage that imprisons us all." Are there types of customs and traditions in your own community that "imprison" people? What provides an escape from that prison? For Houda and her community, how does religion provide an escape from the cage?

If leaders of the Islamic revival (like Houda) succeed, what will Muslim communities or Muslim practice look like 20 years from now? What do you think Houda wants it to look like? What do you want it to look like? What do you think Houda wants it to look like?



Viewing Through a Political Lens

Prior to viewing the film, what were your major sources of information about Islam in general and Muslim women in particular? In what ways did the film confirm and/or contradict your pre-existing ideas?

Houda thinks of her work as social or cultural, not political, and she is not part of any political party that is explicitly promoting greater adherence to Islam. What are the differences between a social movement and a political movement? How might Houda respond to the feminist adage that “the personal is political”?

Houda often urges female education by repeating the adage that a mother is the first teacher for her children. How salient is this argument in a developing economy?

Are political labels such as “radical,” “liberal,” “moderate,” and “Islamist” or “conservative” useful for understanding Houda’s work? If so, which label do you think best describes her philosophy? If not, what terms would you use to situate her work in the context of her culture?

What could be interpreted as radical, and what could be understood as conservative about what Houda is doing?

In what ways do the women and girls in the film benefit from the fact that Syria has had a secular rather than a theocratic government? What are the women who study with Houda getting from their return to Islam that they weren’t getting from Syria’s secularism?

How do you think Syria’s government would respond to a school like Houda’s that was only for boys? Why might it view schools for boys and girls differently?

Houda responds to a question about secular people feeling threatened or alienated by a culture that is increasingly religious by saying, “They should not be afraid. If I’m a religious person, it doesn’t mean I have more rights.” Do you think that Houda’s answer would satisfy those who are concerned? Why or why not?

With the benefit of hindsight, we know that the film shows a country that was about to erupt into its most serious political violence in decades. Looking back, do you see in the film any signs or seeds of political tensions or impending violence?

Viewing Through an Education Lens

Describe the relationship between teachers and students at Houda’s school. How is it similar to or different from teacher-student relationships at schools – religious and public – you know?

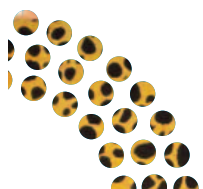
Houda says, “I won’t dismiss anyone, even if she’s not memorizing. She may benefit from other things.” What does this say about Houda’s approach to teaching? What do you think she means by “other things”?

What does Houda want for her students? What does she count as success? How is this similar to and different from what you want for children in your community?

Houda encourages her students, saying, “I want you to make more efforts with reading because, God willing, when this Quran course ends, you won’t be able to sit without a book. God willing, whatever you find, a newspaper, a book, a story, religious or not, whenever a human being reads, he benefits and his mind grows.” She even reminds the girls that the first verse of the Quran is “Read in the name of your Lord the most noble.” Why do you think reading is so central to Houda’s expectations for her students, even beyond reading the Quran? What are the “benefits” she references, and why might those benefits make a particular difference for the girls?

In keeping with Islamic teaching, Houda describes education as a form of worship. In your view, how does it change education to approach it as sacred? How does this characterization of education provide women with entry into the traditionally male sphere of the mosque?

Houda justifies sending her daughter to a foreign university by explaining, “To be a world-class preacher, she must know the language and cultures of others.” Enas agrees with her mother’s vision, saying, “I can see that I can serve Islam better if I study politics or if I study economics or media.” How do these motives compare with the arguments in support of higher education that you typically hear? In what ways do you think they might influence Enas’ college experience?





Julia and Yasmin shoot Enas and friends

Photo courtesy of Laura Nix

Viewing Through a Media Lens

What do the film's transitional street and sidewalk scenes communicate to you? How do they expand, reinforce or add new ideas to the information that is communicated through the dialogue?

What meaning do you draw from the juxtaposition of the following pairs of scenes:

- Houda supervises Quranic education with authority, demanding perfection and discipline from both teachers and students at another local school, and then goes home to pray behind her husband, and serve her family.
- The *Qiyam al-Layl*, or night prayer scene and the image of pool toys floating around in the water.
- The discussion surrounding hijab and the Sunday ceremony and a series of street scenes showing women in public.

What do you think the filmmakers were trying to communicate through these editing choices?

In a few scenes, we see Houda talking to her daughter, Enas — or Enas and Enas's grandmother — as op-

posed to talking to the camera. Do these scenes feel different from the scenes in which Houda is talking directly to the camera? Do they feel the same? In your opinion, what is gained or lost in filmmaking when conversations happen between subjects rather than between the subjects and the filmmakers?

Are you aware of the camera's presence in the film? How did the camera's seeming absence or its presence make you feel as you watched the subjects' stories unfold?

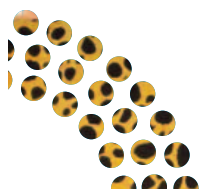
What is the significance of the shot in which pigeons fly past the rooftop?

What is the significance of the shots which show Bashar Al-Assad posters around Damascus?

Additional media literacy questions are available at:
www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php

Taking Action

- Document, track and publicize instances of negative stereotyping of Muslim women. Work with local allies to combat those stereotypes and provide your community (and media professionals) with a more accurate picture.
- Convene an interfaith study group to look at teachings about and implementation of the roles and rights of women.
- Host a teach-in to look at how the Islamic revival has played out differently in various nations with significant Muslim populations. Draw distinctions between nations like Syria, with secular governments, and nations where Islam is an integral part of the government.
- Invite speakers who are first-person witnesses to the Arab Spring to talk, either virtually or in person, about the role that women have played in the political upheaval.
- Convene a panel to discuss feminist approaches to Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Ask panelists to feature both commonalities and differences and to comment on where Houda's work might fit into the spectrum of approaches that they describe.
- In addition to promoting the practice of Islam, Houda runs her school in order to empower girls. Design a school that would work in the context of your community to empower girls. What would that school look like? What would be included in the curriculum? What would the relationship be between teachers and students? When you've designed the ideal school, consider whether or not there are elements that could be applied to the existing schools in your community.
- If you are not Muslim, arrange for a clergy exchange, in which an imam or a female Muslim leader is invited to speak to your congregation and your religious leader is invited to speak at a mosque. Or arrange for small groups of congregants to visit houses of worship or community centers run by people from a faith-tradition different from your own. As a follow-up, arrange for those small groups to meet for ongoing informal conversations to answer questions and discuss experiences.





FILMMAKER WEBSITE

www.thelightinhereyesmovie.com

In addition to general news and information about the film, the film's site provides links to resources, including interviews with scholars.

Interact with The Light in Her Eyes at PBS.org

POV's Webby Award-winning website offers a broad range of exclusive online content to enhance the broadcast of **The Light in Her Eyes**. Watch the full film online for free for a limited time following the broadcast (from July 20, 2012 to August 19, 2012), download this discussion guide, lesson plans and other viewing resources, view photos from the film and interact with the filmmaker through video interviews and an online Q-and-A soon after the documentary airs on POV.

What's Your POV?

Share your thoughts about **The Light in Her Eyes** by posting a comment at <http://www.pbs.org/pov/thelightinhereyes>

FILM-RELATED WEB SITES

ON THE SCREEN

<http://onthescreen.podbean.com/2011/06/17/the-light-in-her-eyes-women-in-the-media/>

This radio interview with the filmmakers covers the film itself, stereotypes of Muslim women, feminism and the changing roles of women in Islam.

HUFFINGTON POST:

“INSIDE A SYRIAN QURAN SCHOOL FOR WOMEN: THE SPIRITUAL ROOTS OF A REVOLUTION”

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kamran-pasha/syrian-quran-school-for-women_b_1119535.html

This review of the film provides background on women in Islam and women's spiritual awakening as part of the Arab Spring.

Islam, Women and Combating Stereotypes

MUSLIM WOMEN'S LEAGUE

<http://www.mwlnusa.org/>

This U.S. organization offers explanatory position statements on a wide variety of issues related to women living as Muslims in the modern world, as well as links to other relevant resources and organizations.

INSTITUTE ON RELIGION AND CIVIC VALUES

www.ircv.org

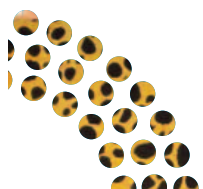
This academic organization provides a wide range of educational resources, including guidelines for teaching about religion in public schools and lesson plans on topics like the meaning of wearing the hijab and the role of religion in current social and political movements.

CARNEGIE COUNCIL:

RESOURCES ON ISLAMIC EDUCATION

<http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/education/004/bibliographies/0001.html>

This library provides annotated links to papers and organizations that examine Muslim schools.



**MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE: INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM:
AN ONLINE TEXT**

<http://www.mideasti.org/content/introduction-islam-preface>

This introductory text about Islam was written by law professor M. Cherif Bassiouni specifically for non-Muslims.

RETHINKING SCHOOLS: “SAVE THE MUSLIM GIRL!”

http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/24_02/24_02_muslim.shtml

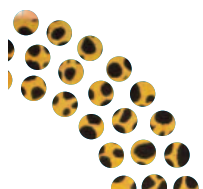
This article by Özlem Sensoy and Elizabeth Marshall critically examines the depiction of Muslim girls as victims in Western young adult literature and offers alternative strategies to help students think through the issues.

For information on Syria, see the resources cited in Background Information section of this guide.



A young girl reads at Al Zahra Mosque

Photo courtesy of Itab Azzam



To pre-order the DVD please visit: <http://thelightinhereyesmovie.com/store>

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POV Digital www.pbs.org/pov

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**POV Community Engagement and Education
www.pbs.org/pov/outreach**

POV films can be seen at more than 450 events nationwide every year. Together with schools, organizations and local PBS stations, POV facilitates free community screenings and produces free resources to accompany our films, including discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

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**Front cover: A teacher instructs her student
on correct pronunciation of Quranic verse.**
Photo courtesy of Itab Azzam



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