

Society

Nike *hijab* for Muslim athletes welcomed, criticised

Roufan Nahhas

Amman

American sportswear giant Nike's decision to launch a *hijab* for Muslim women athletes has stirred mixed feelings but was welcomed by sports-women from conservative Arab societies where female athletes feel constrained in their pursuit of sports without the veil.

"It is really good that finally there is a *hijab* made for the Muslim women in sports. The new *hijab* will make women indulge in sports more, especially that it can be used in any type of sports," said Heba Sabbagh, a sports journalist at Jordan's al-Rai newspaper.

The sports *hijab* has been a controversial issue since FIFA, the international governing body of football, banned it in 2007 and extended the safety rule to include neck warmers, which were judged a threat for choking injuries to athletes. It was not until 2014 that FIFA authorised the wearing of head covers for religious purposes.

Sabbagh contended that Nike heeded the calls of Muslim athletes by introducing Nike Pro Hijab, the first product targeting the Islamic world and Muslim athletes.

■ Criticism focused on the perception that Nike was exploiting restrictions on women.

"The controversy surrounding the *hijab* grew bigger when Arab athletes wearing the head cover tried to compete in international events such as the Olympics but now it is a different story and I am sure we will see more women playing professional sports," she said.

In 2013, the Iranian women's

football team was prevented from playing an Olympics qualifying match while wearing head scarves and in the 2012 Olympics, Saudi Judoka player Wojdan Shaherkani was almost barred from competing until a compromise was reached.

“The new *hijab* will make more women indulge in sports.”

Sports journalist
Heba Sabbagh

Nike said the sports *hijab* will go on sale next spring.

"The Nike Pro Hijab may have been more than a year in the making but its impetus can be traced much further back, to an ongoing cultural shift that has seen more women than ever embracing sport," the sportswear company said in a statement announcing the new product. It was referring to veiled Saudi runner Sarah Attar, who competed in the 800m races at the 2012 Olympics.

"The new product as we have read is lightweight and very comfortable to wear and was tested by Muslim athletes, so it should appeal to many women who are looking to start or continue their sports activities," Sabbagh said.

The Nike Pro Hijab was designed and tested by Emirati figure skater Zahra Lari and Olympic weightlifter Amna Al Haddad, who visited Nike's sport research lab in Oregon after complaining about the lack of options.

The new product has appealed to amateur sports women, too, with gym-goer Zain Hamayel saying "it is about time".

"I always had an issue when going to the gym because of my *hijab*," Hamayel said. "We have hot weather here and making a breathing *hijab* is a good idea. When I read about this new product I thought it should be perfect to do sports."

Lina el-Kurd, general manager of Run Jordan, the sole entity dedicated to organising marathon events in Jordan, is another supporter of the Nike Pro Hijab.

"We need sports companies to think of their audiences' different needs. Taking care of athletes' needs will encourage more people to join the sports revolution and lead a healthy life," Kurd said.

Kurd said she remembers when the burkini, a type of swimsuit for women that covers the whole body except the face, the hands and the feet, hit the beaches and swimming pools around the world.

"The burkini, which was designed in Australia, was a success as it allowed many women living in conservative societies to go swimming and practise their favourite sports," Kurd said.

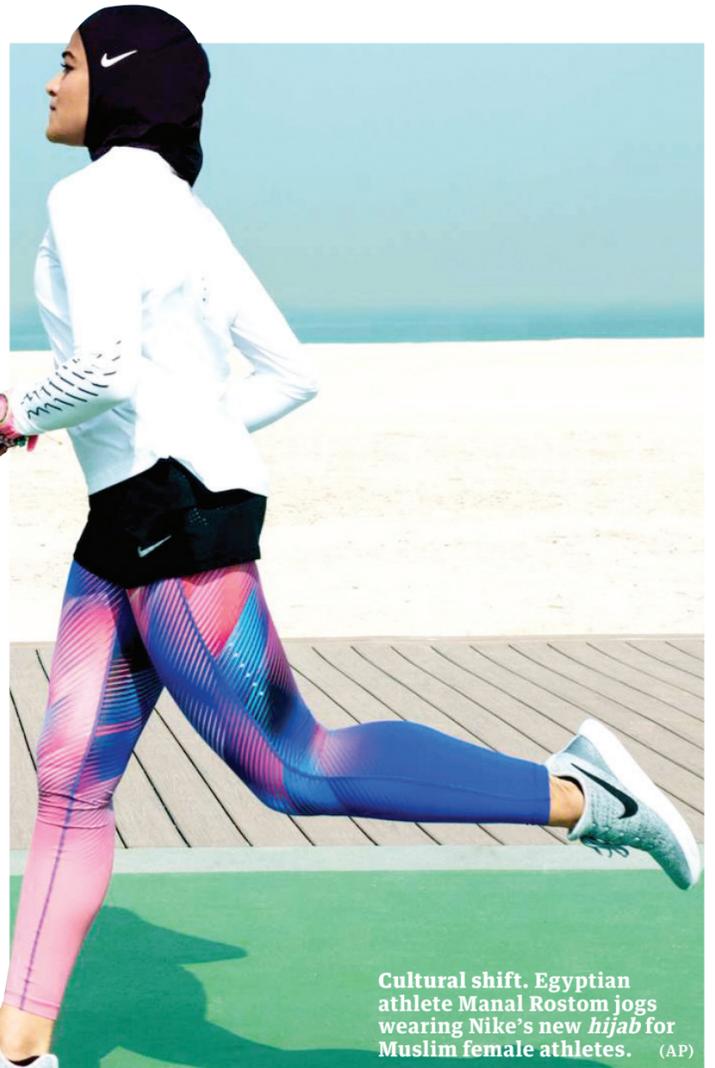
"Although it created controversy in Europe with France banning wearing the burkini in some areas, it still found a lot of reception in other places... After all, playing sports is a right for everyone."

Women athletes who wear the *hijab* during international competitions remain a minority in Arab countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, with a long history of participation in the Olympics.

Since Nike's announcement of the Pro Hijab, people stormed social networks with some criticising and others commending the move. Criticism focused on the perception that the Nike company was exploiting sacred restrictions on women.

Egypt's Amr Adel's tweet asked: "What can marketers learn from Nike 'Pro Hijab Collection' for female Muslim Athletes?" It received a reply saying: "They can learn how to profit from keeping (*hijab*-wearing) women oppressed?"

The *hijab* controversy became more visible in 2017 with an EU



Cultural shift. Egyptian athlete Manal Rostom jogs wearing Nike's new *hijab* for Muslim female athletes. (AP)

court ruling that businesses can ban workers from wearing Islamic headscarves and other religious symbols.

Critics are concerned the Nike veil will cause Muslim female athletes to be singled out further in international arenas.

For many athletes in conservative Arab societies the advantages

it offers outweigh such reservations.

"Around 70% of female runners who participate in our marathons wear the *hijab* and I believe that with this new product more females will start running," said Kurd.

Roufan Nahhas is a journalist based in Jordan.

Gates Foundation works for 'lasting change' in Middle East

Justin Salhani

Washington

In a time of turmoil in the Middle East, Hassan al-Damluji's job is to try to solve problems facing humanity. It is no easy task for the British-Iraqi but he is buoyed by improvements he has seen in recent years, including the battle against extreme poverty. Damluji is the head of Middle East relations at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

"Our foundation focuses on the major health and development challenges that prevent the poorest people from living a healthy and productive life," Damluji said. "What's striking is that although every community is unique, the same challenges do come up time and time again. Absolute poverty looks remarkably similar, no matter where you are."

The Middle East has been plagued by wars and instability in recent years. Syria is embroiled in a conflict now in its seventh year while Yemen has suffered internal violence and widespread destruction. Egypt has gone through political turmoil and Libya has descended into an all-out civil war. All these conflicts – Syria in particular – have resulted in millions of displaced people, some internally but many as refugees. With instability and violence come hardships.

"Sadly, the MENA region has been rocked by instability and conflict in recent years. It's a human tragedy that has cost many lives," Damluji said via e-mail. "It also

makes it much harder to do the kind of long-term development work that our foundation focuses on. Humanitarian aid is the priority for communities that are experiencing violent displacement but it is only when the violence stops that you can fix the system and build it back better than before."

Damluji said many farmers struggle to provide for their families while many young children die from diseases because they do not have access to vaccines. However, in the midst of tragedy, there is also hope.

"Thankfully, the good news is that the number of children dying

each year has been falling in every country in the world, including in the Middle East," Damluji said. "In the MENA region, more than 7% of children died before the age of 5 in 1990. That number has been cut in half."

■ Damluji and his team make targeted investments in humanitarian aid projects.

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Head of Middle East Relations at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Hassan al-Damluji.

(Courtesy of Hassan al-Damluji)

jects, build development projects with regional partners and invest in the Gulf region's non-profit sector.

Humanitarian projects include technological innovations as basic as improving toilets or organising groups of refugees to respond to the community's needs.

To support longer-term development objectives, the Gates Foundation connects with local governments to try to "effect lasting change across the MENA region and the Muslim world," Damluji said.

"One example is the polio eradication work we are carrying out in partnership with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, crown prince of Abu Dhabi," he said. "Polio is mostly found in Afghanistan and Pakistan and is a high-risk threat in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Thanks to the UAE's funding and its influence on the ground, the vaccination campaigns to eradicate the disease have been able to reach children in the hardest-to-reach areas."

"We stand on the verge of a globally historic moment, when that disease will be eradicated forever."

Support for the non-profit sector might be one of the most interesting initiatives of the Gates Foundation. By working with local governments, the foundation tries to encourage a "new generation of philanthropists, volunteers and community leaders". This initiative sees to it that development work continues outside of the government and instils values with an emphasis on aiding the less fortunate.

For Damluji, the work is person-

al. While he grew up in London, his Arab roots influenced and shaped him. His father was brought up in Baghdad, as were many of his relatives. Knowing of their suffering gave him a "strong sense of moral purpose", Damluji said.

"My life has really been about trying to use whatever abilities I have to serve underprivileged communities, both in the UK and the Arab world," he said. "My day job is focused on the work I've just been describing across the MENA region."

Damluji said he was deeply invested into his local community in London. He has used lessons learned in his work and applied them to helping disadvantaged people in Britain.

“Absolute poverty looks remarkably similar, no matter where you are.”

Hassan al-Damluji

"In my spare time I have co-founded a school serving a deprived community in North London," Damluji said. "I'm active in local politics and care deeply about the problems that affect British people, too. Sometimes life is more complicated when you don't fit neatly into the usual categories and boxes. But I think there is as much need as ever for people who are able to operate in different cultural contexts and that has helped me for the most part in the work that I do."

Justin Salhani is an Arab Weekly contributor in Milan, Italy.