

*English translation of the first chapter of the book*

## Prologue

“YOU’RE LOOKING FOR ‘THE QUEEN OF AMMAN’? Well, you’ve found me.” Madian Al Jazerah is finishing a Café Americano. He waves for me to come sit at his table. A man in his fifties, with a high forehead and a well-groomed, little white soul patch – he makes me think of Randy Jones, the cowboy from the Village People.

I’m at Books@Café, at the corner of Omar Bin Al-Khattab and Rainbow Street in downtown Amman, the capital of Jordan. “I know I’m called ‘The Queen of Amman’ – it is my nickname, but I can guarantee you that I don’t go around proselytizing here in this Muslim country. I’m openly gay but I don’t want to make too many waves, I don’t fly the Rainbow flag. I created this alternative space – just a gay friendly café.” Madian Al Jazerah is one of the most emblematic homosexuals in the Arab world, and his bar, the Books@Café, is a miracle in an Islamic country – an oasis, and exception, and a mystery. A mirage, perhaps?

And the name of the street! “Al-Rainbow Street used to be like the Champs-Élysées of Amman. Then there was the depression and the neighborhood lost its charm. Prices fell, then artists moved in, and galleries with them, and movie theaters... and gay people. Little by little, the neighborhood became trendy again, and even got a *bobo* [bourgeois bohemian] makeover – it got gentrified. But the name of the street has no relationship to the gay flag, it’s purely coincidental,” explains Al Jazerah. I offer to not use his real name in my book so as to keep from pointlessly putting him at risk. “No, you can use my name. I’m not afraid. My notoriety protects me. And after all,” he says, splitting into a wide smile, “The Queen of Amman does not hide.”

IN ORDER TO GET TO BOOKS@CAFÉ, you have to walk through a little courtyard shaded by blossoming orange trees on the ground floor of a posh house. While having lost its former glory, the building has retained some kind of oriental

chaos. First entering the space, you find yourself in a bookshop, which explains the name (the @ is there because it's also a cyber café). The shelves hold books in Arabic and in English, as well as CDs and DVDs. I spot *Brokeback Mountain* by Taiwanese director Ang Lee, *Farewell My Concubine* by the Chinese Chen Kaige, and Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette*, adapted from a screenplay by the English-Pakistani Hanif Kureishi. Further down is a double DVD of the HBO series *Angels in America*, a TV adaptation of the famous play by the gay Jewish American Tony Kushner. "It's not a gay bookshop," argues Madian Al Jazerah, who shows me tourist guides, bestsellers, and an aisle of comics for kids. Among the books, I find Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (but not *The Satanic Verses*), some of Edward Said's works on "orientalism," and a book on AIDS by the American Susan Sontag. And up on one shelf, I see a prominently positioned copy of the magnificent novel *The Yacoubian Building* by Egyptian author Alaa Al Aswany, which tell the story of an opulent and cosmopolitan Art Deco residence in Cairo: a social microcosm where people of all generations and social classes live together – both Pashas and Jews, and, of course, both gays and straights. I think to myself that you could write a novel that takes place at the Books@Café and it would be a sort of modern Yacoubian Building.

Behind the bookshop's cash register, there is a discreet stairwell. The café is on the second floor and, while the ground floor is narrow and rather confined, the bar turns out to be immense. It's composed of a succession of four rooms enlarged by two large terraces decorated with asymmetrical glass atriums on different levels, and which have been built on surrounding rooftops. In the summer, it's cool and shady; in the winter, it's sunlit and sheltered. Sometimes the terraces are open-aired, sometimes they're cocooned in eccentric fabrics. You can take in the white and ocher city of Amman from up here, with its hills and its mosques lit in green, its bourgeois neighborhoods – and its Palestinian camps.

Madian Al Jazerah is of Palestinian descent. His family, descended from Bedouins, comes from Akka, now known as Acre, to the north of Haifa. His parents were forced out of Israel in 1956 and moved to Kuwait, where Madian was born. "I grew up in the desert, and with respect for Bedouin culture. And even though my family was rather well-educated, I kept a nomadic side. I'm continually moved by the beauty of the desert. The desert does not lie." Forced out of their home once more, his parents emigrated to Jordan. "That's part of what it is to be Palestinian," he says. "You're always a little bit of an exile, without a country. You're never home."

In the 1970s, Madian "naturally," he says, found himself in the United States, where he studied architecture at Oklahoma State University, then lived in California before moving to the East Coast. "When you're Palestinian, you don't stay in place. And the United States... it's the promised land. It's like in *America, America* by Elia Kazan – I believed in the American dream, too."

In the 1980s in New York, the “sexual-liberationist” Al Jazerah opened Le Frisbee, an Arab bar in a gay friendly neighborhood. Ten years later, he would go on to inverse this feat in Amman by opening a gay friendly, Americanized café in a Muslim city.

BOOKS@CAFÉ IS A CONCENTRATE OF THE GAY ARAB WORLD. In the daytime, it looks like any alternative coffee shop you might find in California, though with the addition of heavily scented hookah smoke. An Iraqi exile spends his afternoons checking the internet, waiting to get his papers for Beirut. A Syrian who grew up in Dubai reviews his coursework for classes at the University of Amman. A native-born Jordanian (he uses this expression so as to not be confused for a Palestinian) looks through the “Study in the USA” brochures sitting in stacks at the bookshop’s entryway. A young man from a good family – and who, so I’m told, was raised in a harem and might be a prince – wears an Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirt and suggests we rename the café “You Mecca Me Hot,” a joke I can’t help but laugh at. A British Airways steward, a “hummus queen” (the label for whites who hit on Arabs), chats with a group of young men, one of whom is studying to become a dentist at the American University of Cairo. A gay Palestinian, who gives the impression of being extremely insecure, tells me he’s from Nablus, but I later learn that he’s Syrian and his family hasn’t lived in Nablus – now in Israel – since his great-grandparents were there. As for Mohammed, who wears a red checkered keffiyeh, he lives in the Jabal el-Hussein refuge camp in Amman and tells me that he refuses to drink Coca-Cola or eat ketchup, as he’s boycotting Israeli and American products. He also shows me a photo of Che Guevara, which never leaves his wallet, and declares that he’s a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the nationalist movement founded by Georges Habache, a Marxist and Christian leader – as well as a terrorist. Mohammed has large black eyes that shine cheerfully and extremely dark brown hair: he is the quintessence of Arab beauty. He is not gay and hasn’t had his “coming out,” but he does admit that he’s “wondering about some things.” There’s a word for this in America – not gay or bisexual, but “questioning.” As it does for the other young men here, this café is helping him “learn” how to become gay. In short: one isn’t born a homosexual, but becomes one.

BETWEEN THE HOOKAH AND THE WIFI, the café gets more and more crowded throughout the evening. At 5pm, the daytime waiters are relieved by the night shift. No fewer than forty bartenders are now bustling about, proudly sporting black t-shirts bearing the Books@Café brand despite the fact that they’re rather poorly paid (not counting tips, they earn an average of 150 Jordanian dinars per month – about 160 euros). One of them, Omar, is a new hire: he’s a Palestinian

who has been exiled from Ramallah, and Madian tells me that he has accepted to take Omar on for a trial period out of solidarity with his people. He is tasked with carrying the hookahs and making sure that the coals continue glowing red-hot. He is not to talk to customers.

“We’re in a deterritorialized café here, like as if there’s no territory. We’re in Jordan, but we could be somewhere else in the Middle East, with all its uprooted people. People come here when they have no ‘home.’ Everyone is dreaming of Beirut, or Dubai, or Istanbul. And beyond that, everyone really wants to go to the United States,” explains Madian Al Jazerah. The great majority of music at Books@Café is American, but then I also hear Shakira’s latest hit and the crowd begins to hum along with the completely globalized Lebanese-Columbian singer.

The multiethnic youth of the changing Muslim world begins to crush together and enjoy itself in staggered rows of club chairs. I’m not in Amman anymore – I’m in Santa Monica! A bouncer delicately filters people at the entry and checks everyone, both straights and gays, with a metal detector. Older couples come, too, having reserved their tables. Most of the women don’t wear veils, though I do see one veiled young woman playing with her iPhone. A lithe, supple model tells me he’s in the running for “Mister Jordan 2010” – and if it were up to me, I’d certainly give him the prize. But he’s still only one of ten finalists, and as he smokes a hookah, he tells me of his hopes to win at the finals in Beirut. Suddenly, his cell phone breaks into *I Will Survive*, by Gloria Gaynor.

“In the beginning, I didn’t want to open a gay venue,” Al Jazerah confesses. “I opened several cafés in Amman, and in 1997, I had the idea to start Books@Café. At first, the concept was that it would be a bookshop and internet café, and an alternative space. My vocation is promoting tolerance, not activism. But little by little, almost against my will, it became a gay friendly café.”

Five times a day, the muezzin’s call to prayer reaches the bar’s terraces. His voice – today it’s an audio cassette broadcast via loudspeaker – mingles with Lady Gaga’s latest hit, leaving the café’s clientele completely indifferent. Not a single person here turns toward Mecca.

THURSDAY NIGHT, THE NIGHT BEFORE THE WEEKEND in Arab countries, is the most popular. The crowd arrives and bustles. The bright orange, slightly tacky lounges, with their Vasarely-style wallpaper, fill up with people, as does the large veranda, with its “seventies-colored” flowers on the walls. The cool café becomes a trendy restaurant with menus written entirely in English. They serve up to four hundred dishes a day – club sandwiches, plain omelets, Caesar salads, chicken nuggets and even a veggie burger. The desserts: carrot cake, cheesecake or pancakes – not one Middle Eastern specialty. At 9pm, a westernized, not exclusively gay elite lines up at the entrance and wanders through the bookshop

as they wait for tables. The speakers are now pumping out the latest American hit, *I Got a Feeling*, by ex-Parisian gay bar DJ David Guetta. I see chic straight couples pretending to have fun and gay couples really having fun. “The truth is that it’s a lot easier to be gay in Amman than to be straight. A gay man finds partners pretty easily, whereas it’s nearly impossible for a young straight man,” remarks Madian Al Jazerah as he points to the nocturnal fauna that has descended upon the bar. In a grouchy, sometimes grumpy mood, Madian watches over his little community – his sultanate.

Unlike the cool and gay friendly restaurant, the bar inside is more strictly gay. The clients press in around a big wooden bar, laughing out loud in the colorful, alcoholized atmosphere – another exception in this Muslim city. “The people here aren’t clients, they’re friends,” Madian ventures, repeating his marketing lesson. But it’s a fact: everyone moves about, dancing and calling out to one another. A young man named Adam, who seems possessed of an unconquerable gaiety, holds his boyfriend’s hand as he tells me that he comes here “every night.” Life for him seems to be joyous and easy.

Like everyone else, I look at the numerous screens and watch reasonably bare Arab women singing on the Saudi music channel Rotana, the Ramadan soap operas from the Saudi group MBC, the Jordanian Premier League on Al Jazeera Sports, and the no holds barred talk shows on the Lebanese channel LBC. One night, I even see Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire*, a film that met with unanticipated success on five continents, and which I often came across during my fieldwork – in Indonesian gay bars, gay nightclubs in Rio, and gay friendly cafés in Shanghai. Books@Café is probably the most beautiful gay venue in the Arab world, and there’s nothing in Paris or New York that can compare to it. It’s Facebook with a hookah, Lady Gaga with camel drivers – it’s the Yacoubian building, every night. And in this story, Madian Al Jazerah is the Bedouin lost on Rainbow Street, the Palestinian exile become the socialite owner of a gay bar, the heir of date growers transformed into a Veggie Burger vendor, the méhariste who has made the tarp of the café terrace his new tent. Lawrence of Arabia would have loved him.

WHY DOES THE JORDANIAN HASHEMITE MONARCHY, which is not at all gay friendly, tolerate this extravagant café? It’s a mystery. Some say that Madian Al Jazerah has connections in Abdullah II’s clientelist, anti-Islamist regime, and that he is even a friend of Queen Rania al-Yassin, a Kuwaiti-born Palestinian like himself. He also seems close to Queen Noor, King Hussein of Jordan’s American-born widow and the legendary protector of Amman’s gay artists. His relations in the media also seem useful: his brother hosts *Good Morning Amman*, a very popular television show in Jordan, despite its being broadcast from Dubai.

This oasis is naturally the subject of a particular community policing. The police don't let the Arab jet set and young princes of royal blood rove about without a certain degree of surveillance. I caught sight of undercover policemen who pass in front of the bar at night: they occasionally catch a minor exiting the bar, arrest a prostitute, or, during Ramadan, crack down on alcohol consumption. "Everything is under control here," says Madrian, declining to get into specifics. And he plays his part, monitoring, for example, that nobody kisses publicly. "I avoid excessive displays of affection, and they leave me alone so long as I don't cross the boundaries. I'm not about to organize a Gay Pride parade! What protects me is the alternative, counter-cultural side of the place. Even though we're well-established, it's the 'underground' attitude that makes the café acceptable in Jordanian society."

In 1999, a whispering campaign relayed in the press almost led to the space being shut down. Madian let the storm pass without a reaction while at the same time requesting political asylum in the Canadian embassy of Jordan (because you never know). Calm seems to have returned since, and the café has even obtained its liquor license, to the delight of the rich heterosexuals from good families, and to the even greater delight of the gay clientele. And this is how Madian Al Jazerah, by way of his stance at the intersection of gay friendly and elitist, was able to find his economic model: a uniquely gay locale would not only be politically risky in Amman, but bad business, too. By uniting these two communities, the café has multiplied its commercial possibilities. Madian Al Jazerah isn't a philanthropist, or even an activist – he is a businessman. As I would discover through my research, gay liberation often begins with bars and clubs – which is to say, through commerce and the market.

Leaving Madian on Prophet Day, I realized that Books@Café is at once the past and future of gay rights, both pre-gay and post-gay. It's this atemporal atmosphere that makes the place so fascinating: pre-gay because we're here, quite obviously, before "gay liberation" in the Arab world – if we can even talk about such a thing; and post-gay because we're also beyond the issue, in that modernity I saw come into being in the East Village in New York, in West Hollywood in Los Angeles, and in the cities of Northern Europe – that of a community which is no longer just "gay," and not even "gay friendly," but simply "friendly," the word "gay" being implicit. Books@Café is a place beyond unique identities and closed communities. It's unconventional, undivided: post-gay.

But can a single bar change a city? Or a country? Can it change the Arab world? Of course not. Books@Café is too simple a place to be the sole motor of the complex design in which it participates but which is beyond its scope – that is to say, the modernization of the Arab world. I know how far this privileged, cosmopolitan oasis is from the reality of the gay Arab world. More than a taboo, homosexuality is an offence – and sometimes a crime. It can lead to prison and even to death. Madian Al Jazerah is perhaps a trailblazer, but there is still a long

way to go. In the land of Islam, homosexuals are just at the beginning of a long road.

The night is dark now that Books@Café is getting ready to close. I'm riding with a group of young gay men who have left the café in a car speeding toward a mysterious destination. They sing along to the latest album by the Lebanese singer Elissa at the top of their lungs. For the first time this evening, these boys really let loose and, in their racing car, act like "queens." We leave downtown Amman, driving North over bridges and through tunnels, already in the desert.

The car stops at a vacant lot in the middle of nowhere. A little shop. A gathering of people. A young gay shopkeeper sells Turkish coffee and hot chocolate in the darkest hours of the night. The Lebanese singer Haifa's voice now resounds in the desert. The boys sing loudly and dance. Other vehicles arrive. It becomes apparent that the biggest gay parties in Jordan meet up here night after night. Gay life in Amman, like in Havana, Damascus, Tehran, Riyadh, Cairo, Mumbai, and Beijing, is a marginal, dangerous, and marvelous underground counterculture: a fear and a promise. The phrase "One Thousand and One Nights" never seemed to me both so unsettling – and so gay-friendly.

\*

THIS BOOK TAKES PLACE IN JORDAN, IN SAUDI ARABIA, in Iran, Cuba, Brazil, China, India, Sub-Saharan Africa, and of course in the United States and Europe – forty-four countries in all, having been researched over a period of five years. Gay friendly or not so "friendly," having benefitted from advances or pushing on despite resistance, the nations I visited show that a revolution is indeed underway. A gay liberation is in action, be it accelerated or forced, in the age of globalization and digital transformation. And a major phenomenon that is still underreported is taking place before our very eyes: the globalization of LGBT<sup>1</sup> rights.

The "gay American way of life" exercises a determining influence on this process taking place simultaneously on five continents – and so it's with the United States that we must begin. In this book, we will witness the major role played by American gay culture as well as how the United States feeds the imagination of gay rights activists around the world. Paradoxically, America appears to many gays not as an imperialist nation, but, since Stonewall, as a symbol of their liberation.

This globalization of the Americanized version of the debate over gay rights doesn't necessarily translate into a homogenization: The European Union and Latin America are other viable reference points, and LGBT diversity reveals itself to be infinitely variable in its myriad contexts. The line dances at cowboy

---

<sup>1</sup> - LGBT: Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders. (For all foreign words and initialisms, see the *Glossary* at the end of the book).

gay bars in Chicago, the gay tango parties in Buenos Aires and samba parties in Rio, the gay “habitaciones” in Cuba and gay dragon boating teams in Singapore, gay karaoke bars, snack bars, and “love hotels” in Tokyo, and the gay activism in the Arab world that continues the work of Muslim poet Abu Nuwas all attest to an incredible diversity, as we’ll come to see. Gay people are increasingly globalized, and often very Americanized, but they remain deeply rooted in their individual countries and cultures. All over the world, gays seem to be adhering to similar fashions, and thus becoming homogenized, yet local singularities are incredibly important wherever you go. In the era of globalization, openness and rootedness are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the local singularities of gay life and the heterogeneity of LGBT communities are fascinating, even when sheltered under the same flag.

Rainbow flags are flown worldwide, but each person acts under his own banner. What’s certain is that gay activists are organizing: in Latin America, where activists have long rallied for “sexual diversity” in certain capitals, they’re even a step ahead. In China, India, and Cuba, they have won important battles in the past few years, and the battle rages on in Russia and Eastern Europe as the European Union keeps watch. Even in the United States, marriage for all has become a political issue of national importance. The United Nations, too, is making slow but inexorable progress. New actors are emerging everywhere, and this book aims to give them a voice. And as important as they are, LGBT activists are not the only ones leading the battle for equal rights – founders of start-ups and café managers, journalists, diplomats, and artists are all playing a part, too. The gay community is making its voice heard by becoming “cool” and connected. Their subculture is becoming dominant. The fashions born in their communities are seducing the masses, and their once-ghettoized businesses are becoming the height of hip. This book will also tell the story of this decisive reversal by which gay culture exploded from the underground to the mainstream.

Elsewhere, in hostile territory, where “cool” becomes sadly synonymous with jail (and sometimes with the death penalty), gays and lesbians continue the resistance. They continue fighting in the Middle East, Evangelist Africa, and Muslim Asia – the three most dangerous regions of the world for gays –, even when they become enemies of Islamists and fundamentalists. In Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, and Cuba, I discovered their stupefying ability to “make do” – to defy dictatorships despite arrests, persecution, blackmail, and even threats of being hanged or stoned to death. Giving a voice to these courageous, extraordinary “ordinary” activists is another of this book’s goals.

One key element is contributing to an immense acceleration in the ongoing globalization of the gay rights: the internet and social networks. Once isolated, homosexuals are now connected with one another, and as we will see in the following pages, this revolution is the most significant of all.



Ultimately, we are seeing the emergence of the geopolitical aspect of gay rights, and a broader conception of human rights is being born from this revolution in the United States, in Europe, at the United Nations, and in a number of other countries. In fewer than thirty years, the West has progressed from the criminalization of homosexuality to the penalization of homophobia. It's a truly incredible historical about-face if you think about it. Let us hope that similar progress will come to the rest of the world in the years to come.

This anxious and optimistic book grounded in fieldwork is *another* history of globalization at work. It is possible to see the zeitgeist come into view through the prism of gay rights: changing lifestyles, sexual individualism, the redefinition of marriage, the globalization of culture, the universalization of human rights, the power of education and of universities, the parallel emancipation of women and homosexuals, new cultural critics straddling subcultures and mainstream culture, the mechanisms of the market, commerce, and tourism, and the decisive effects of portable phones, satellite television, the internet, and social networks. As a common thread running through the variety of changing mindsets, the question of gay rights has thus become a good standard by which to judge the state of a country's democracy and modernity.

The conviction that drove me to conduct this long investigation is that international gay rights and the decriminalization of homosexuality around the world are becoming major issues and, it seems to me, a priority of the gay community, progressive governments, and all "gay friendly" individuals. Telling this story is already a kind of contribution to the struggle, hopefully encouraging those who fight for equal rights and galvanizing into action those who want to help. I believe that it is still possible to chronicle the world through investigative fieldwork and to effect change with books.