

# ***Desiring Arabs***

***Desiring Arabs* by Joseph Massad University of Chicago Press, 2007**

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**REVIEW ARTICLE BY BRIAN WHITAKER FROM *AL-BAB.COM***

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Joseph Massad, associate professor of modern Arab politics at Columbia University, is a controversial figure. As a protégé of the late Edward Said who is also of Palestinian-Christian descent, his views on Zionism have made him a target of the Israel lobby, while others have defended him in the name of academic freedom.

In 2002 he plunged into a different controversy with a paper entitled “Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World” which sought to marshal a case against gay rights from a nationalist and secular standpoint - one that was not based explicitly on a moral judgment of homosexuality itself.

The central thesis of his 25-page polemic was that promotion of gay rights in the Middle East is a conspiracy led by western orientalist and colonialists which “produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist”. After several years’ gestation he has now produced a book, *Desiring Arabs*, which elaborates on this.

Though Massad's views might appear idiosyncratic, there is a commonly-held notion among Islamists and Arab nationalists that western political machinations in the Middle East have parallels in the social and cultural sphere - not only in relation to homosexuality but towards sexual rights more generally. In 2007, for example, when Jordan finally ratified the international Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (15 years after originally signing it), the Islamic Action Front denounced the move as an “American and Zionist” attempt to strip the nation of its “identity and values”, to steer people away from religion and to destroy “the Muslim family”.

While that might be dismissed as crude, populist rhetoric, Massad’s book - ostensibly a serious study published by the University of Chicago Press and with several academic endorsements - reflects essentially the same idea, even if it is couched in more sophisticated language:

Western social Darwinists, who include modernisation and development theorists and their kindred spirits (UN agencies, human rights organisations and activists, NGOs, the IMF, the World Bank, the US State Department, etc) would see the possible “advance” of the Arab world (as well as the rest of the “underdeveloped” world) toward a western-defined and sponsored modernity as part of a historical teleology wherein non-Europeans who are still at the stage of European childhood will eventually replicate European “progress”

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toward modern forms of organisation, sociality, economics, politics and sexual desires.

What is emerging in the Arab (and the rest of the third) world is not some universal schema of the march of history but rather the imposition of these western modes by different forceful means and their adoption by third world elites, thus foreclosing and repressing myriad ways of movement and change and ensuring that only one way for transformation is made possible. (pp 49-50)

Relating this to gay rights activism in Chapter 3 of *Desiring Arabs* (a chapter which is basically an expanded version of his earlier paper), Massad talks of a “missionary” campaign orchestrated by what he calls the “Gay International”. Its inspiration, he says, came partly from “the white western women’s movement, which had sought to universalise its issues through imposing its own colonial feminism on the women’s movements in the non-western world”, but he also links its origins to the Carter administration’s use of human rights to “campaign against the Soviet Union and Third World enemies”.

Like the major US- and European-based human rights organisations (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International) and following the line taken up by white western women's organisations and publications, the Gay International was to reserve a special place for the Muslim countries in its discourse as well as its advocacy. The orientalist impulse ... continues to guide all branches of the human rights community. (p 161)

Oddly, since this is central to his argument, Massad offers no evidence to substantiate his claim. There are plenty of reasons other than an “orientalist impulse” why gay rights activists might justifiably pay attention to Muslim countries (punishments for same-sex acts, for instance, tend to be heavier there, on paper if not always in practice, and the only countries in the world where the death penalty for sodomy still applies justify it on the basis of Islamic law) but that is not the same as reserving “a special place” for them in the discourse.

A look at the activities of the main campaigning organisations suggests they do not, in fact, focus excessively or unfairly on Muslim countries. Human Rights Watch, for instance, has more than 140 press releases on the LGBT section of its website, dating back to 1994. Among these, the country most targeted by the organisation’s “orientalists” is actually the United States - the subject of 27 press releases. The US is followed by Egypt, Iran, Jamaica and Russia (10 each), Nepal (8), Nigeria and Poland (6), the Netherlands (5), Australia, Moldova and South Africa (4), Latvia, the Philippines and Uganda (3), Guatemala, India, Japan, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe (2), while Bangladesh, Botswana, Cameroon, Canada, Chile, China, Fiji, Lebanon, Namibia, Pakistan, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Zambia have one each. The five people named in Human Rights Watch’s most recent homophobia “hall of shame” also range

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across the world: Pope Benedict XVI, President George Bush, Roman Giertych (the Polish minister of education), Bienvenido Abante (a parliamentarian in the Philippines) and the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Meanwhile, a search of Amnesty International's online library, under the subject category of "sexual orientation" reveals more than 190 items - again, covering a broad range of countries with no obvious signs of a "special place" reserved for Muslims. It is a similar picture on the websites of two other organisations targeted by Massad: the International Lesbian and Gay Association and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission.

The credibility of Massad's argument also hinges on the idea that the "Gay International" is responsible, apparently almost single-handedly, for bringing debate about homosexuality to developing countries - what he calls "incitement to discourse" - and is also responsible (pp 188-189) for any backlash that may occur. This is plainly ridiculous.

Contrary to the impression given by Massad, "the west" does not speak with a unified voice in matters of LGBT rights. While focusing on gay activists, he ignores the well-funded and often-strenuous campaigns by western "pro-family" organisations to resist progressive legislation and, if possible, turn back the clock. Five years before Jordan ratified the international Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, much to the annoyance of the Islamic Action Front, the American religious right also fulminated against US ratification. According to one Christian activist, the treaty served a "frivolous and morally corrupt agenda" and it would "legalise prostitution and open the door for the homosexual agenda".

When it comes to opposing gay rights, socially conservative Muslims and Christians seem happy to bury their theological differences. IslamOnline, one of the most popular Muslim websites, has a series of articles discussing homosexuality in "an Islamic and a scientific light", but the articles rely, almost entirely, on material from the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, a religious-based fringe psychiatric organisation in the US which promotes "reparative therapy" for gay people.

In various international forums, western evangelicals, Catholics and Mormons have forged alliances with Muslims to defend "the family" (code for opposing abortion, contraception, homosexuality, etc). One such event was the conference held in Doha in 2004 under the auspices of the UN's Year of the Family. Hosted by the Qatari government and organised by the Mormons, it brought together some of the world's most reactionary forces, including Cardinal Alfonso Trujillo, who campaigns against condoms on behalf of the Catholic church, and Mahathir Mohamad, the dictatorial former prime minister of Malaysia who sacked and jailed his deputy for alleged homosexuality.

In the United States, "pro-family" organisations are among the Bush

administration's core supporters, so whatever other "western" ideas the administration may seek to foist upon the Middle East, gay rights is not one of them. It figured nowhere in the "forward strategy of freedom" for the Middle East announced by President Bush in 2003 and only rarely does the US intervene officially on gay issues at an international level; the most recent case in the Middle East was in 2005 when the State Department spoke out against compulsory hormone injections for a group of men arrested at an allegedly gay party in Abu Dhabi.

Perhaps the biggest flaw in Massad's argument is that his preoccupation with "orientalism", "social Darwinism", gay "missionaries", their "native informants" and the "imposition" of "western modes" blinds him to some more obvious processes.

The last decade has brought growing awareness of gay rights in many parts of the world, much of it involving local activists. According to Scott Long, of Human Rights Watch, gay activism is growing in both Latin America and Africa. "It's still relative, but ten years ago, outside South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe, there were no groups anywhere in Africa," he said. "Now, most anglophone countries and an increasing number of West African countries have at least small organisations that are trying to do something.

"In Latin America there's a really vibrant movement that has connected with the left, and particularly in countries like Argentina and Chile there's a completely different atmosphere now. These issues have become respectable in a lot of places."

Among the more obvious factors is the growth of international communications - satellite television, foreign travel and the internet. (Massad does mention sex tourism, but only in the context of western men; it seems not to have occurred to him that Arab men might do the same in the opposite direction.) Arab exposure to western culture has increased enormously through satellite television, foreign travel and – more recently – the internet. Western sexual behaviour arouses much curiosity, both among those who see it as decadent and those who are simply intrigued. It is not unreasonable to suggest that widely-circulated stories about the sex lives of international celebrities (such as the arrest of the singer, George Michael), and western debate about gay marriages, have more influence on Arab ideas of sexuality than the supposed missionary efforts of the "Gay International".

Even in ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia, exposure to different ideas is beginning to influence people's views, as an article in the Atlantic Monthly described:

... as the western conception of sexual identity has filtered into the kingdom via television and the internet, it has begun to blur the Saudi view of sexual behavior as distinct from sexual identity. For example, although Yasser [a Saudi] is open to the possibility that he will in time grow attracted to women, he considers himself gay. He says that his countrymen are starting to see

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homosexual behavior as a marker of identity: "Now that people watch TV all the time, they know what gay people look like and what they do," he explains. "They know if your favorite artist is Madonna and you listen to a lot of music, that means you are gay."

The internet, in particular, is making a huge impact in many parts of the world. In countries where public discussion of homosexuality is still taboo, it is often the most accessible source of information and provides comfort for many whose sexuality has made them feel lonely and isolated. "If it wasn't for the internet I wouldn't have come to accept my sexuality," said one young Egyptian who is now a rights activist.

In places where no openly gay "community" exists, the internet also allows people to make social contacts that were unimaginable just a decade ago. "It has become a way for people to connect who would absolutely never have connected before," according to Scott Long. "It has happened in the Middle East and the same thing has been happening in Africa."

Again, these highly significant trends are simply waved aside by Massad in his preoccupation - or perhaps obsession - with the western origins of modern concepts of sexuality (concepts which were new in the west, too, not very long ago). In an age of global communications, exposure to foreign ideas and influences cannot be prevented, but nor should we assume that Arab Muslims are incapable of making critical judgments about them. The real issue is not the source of such concepts as "gay" and "sexual orientation" but whether they serve a useful purpose. For a small but growing number of Arabs who seek to understand their sexual feelings the answer seems to be yes. And far from viewing from these concepts as an imposition they are eagerly grabbing at them.

For Massad, this is not a natural development but something that is being imposed on people - to their detriment. "By inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before," he writes (p188), "the Gay International is in fact heterosexualising a world that is being forced to be fixed by a western binary [i.e. 'gay' or 'straight']." He continues:

Because most non-western civilisations, including Muslim Arab civilisation, have not subscribed historically to these categories, their imposition is producing less than liberatory outcomes: men who are considered the passive or receptive parties in male-male sexual contacts are forced to have one object choice and identify as homosexual or gay, just as men who are the "active" partners are also forced to limit their sexual aim to one object choice, women or men. Most "active" partners see themselves as part of a societal norm, so heterosexuality becomes compulsory given that the alternative, as presented by the Gay International, means becoming marked outside the norm - with all the attendant risks and disadvantages of such a marking.

It does not matter how the "active" same-sex partners regard themselves, however: they are still criminalised (along with their "passive" partners) in

most Arab countries and condemned by the overwhelming majority of religious figures. It seems rather perverse to suggest that the "Gay International" is forcing people to choose between "gay" and "straight" when the only choice offered by Arab society - the law, religion and the public attitudes in general - is to be straight or at least to pretend to be.

In his introduction (pp 49-50) to the book, Massad accuses the west of "foreclosing and repressing myriad ways of movement and change and ensuring that only one way for transformation is made possible". He does not elaborate on what these "myriad ways" might be in terms of sexuality if the "Gay International" would only stop interfering, but if the clerics had their way myriad prohibitions seem far more likely. In the current climate of stifling religiosity, Muslims are not only enjoined to refrain from same-sex activities but also from masturbation and kissing between unmarried couples of the opposite sex. Even when they are married, according to some clerics, couples should avoid oral and anal sex, and take care not to catch sight of their partner's naked form while having intercourse.

According to Massad, "it is the very discourse of the Gay International which produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist" (pp 162-3). In saying this, he revives an old and largely specious argument as to whether such people exist, and have existed, at all times and in all societies. Denying their existence is a familiar practice in the Arab countries, and in other places where their rights are also denied, and it serves a political purpose: if they do not exist, there is no need for any action to protect them.

The argument though, insofar as it has any substance, is more about terminology than anything else. International LGBT organisations (at least, those with even a modicum of expertise) recognise that same-sex emotions and activities do not necessarily come with an identity attached. Massad himself quotes Robert Bray, an officer of the International Lesbian and Gay Association as saying: "Cultural differences make the definition and the shading of homosexuality different among peoples ... But I see the real question as one of sexual freedom; and sexual freedom transcends cultures" (p 162).

While it may be interesting to consider how far modern (western) constructs of sexual identity have been adopted (or not) by various cultures, in terms of sexual rights the question is largely irrelevant: it is the behaviour that is liable to be penalised, regardless of how people describe themselves. As far as the Arab countries are concerned, few would seriously dispute that same-sex activity is widespread, that it is often undefined and that many of the participants (probably the majority) are married, expect to marry or have sexual encounters which include people of the opposite sex. At the same time, there exists a smaller number whose interest focuses mainly or exclusively on people of their own gender, some - but by no means all - of whom consider themselves gay, lesbian, homosexual, etc. It should be noted

in passing that marriage, in Arab society, may not be a reliable guide to a person's sexual inclination; marriage is more or less obligatory and many gay youngsters are pressed into it by their families.

Massad does not deny that gay and lesbian Arabs exist, but he sees them mainly as victims of western influence:

The advent of colonialism and western capital to the Arab world has transformed most aspects of daily living; however, it has failed to impose a European heterosexual regime on all Arab men, although its efforts were successful in the upper classes and among the increasingly westernised middle classes. It is among members of these richer segments of society that the Gay International has found native informants. Although members of these classes who engage in same-sex relations have more recently adopted a western identity (as part of the package of the adoption of everything western by the classes to which they belong), they remain a minuscule minority among those men who engage in same-sex relations and who do not identify as "gay" nor express a need for gay politics. (pp 172-3)

This picture is something of a caricature, though it is broadly true that Arabs who identify as gay or lesbian come from the better-off sections of society. Whether that is the result of a class-wide adoption of all things western, as Massad suggests, is disputable. According to Widney Brown of Amnesty International, the phenomenon is not restricted to Arab countries. "It does tend to be related to class and education," she said in a recent interview. "When you are not struggling to survive is when you get a chance to think about who you are and how you would like to live your life." Because of their social status, such men also enjoy a measure of protection which may allow them to be more open about their sexuality than the poor and less educated.

However, it is disingenuous to claim that most Arabs who engage in same-sex relations do not express a need for gay politics. Given the local conditions, they could scarcely do otherwise. Gay rights groups cannot operate freely, as Massad ought to know: in most Arab countries non-governmental organisations require approval from the authorities and their activities are closely monitored. The only openly-functioning LGBT organisations in the Middle East are Helem in Beirut (the least restrictive of the Arab capitals) and Aswat, the Palestinian lesbian group which is based across the Green Line in Israel. The result is that much Arab activism (of all kinds) is organised from abroad. Inevitably, in Massad's eyes, that turns the activists into "native informants", aiding and abetting the western "missionaries".

Massad appears similarly blinkered to the human cost of the prevailing attitudes towards homosexuality in Arab countries: the murders of gay men in Iraq, entrapment by the police in Egypt, the arrests of men who "behave like women" in Saudi Arabia, the beatings at the hands of families, the futile and potentially harmful psychiatric "cures", blackmail, the lack of state protection, and more. There is no real acknowledgment of a problem that Arabs should

attend to.

In a dismissive footnote (p 188), Massad refers to reported ill-treatment of gay men in the Palestinian territories:

The most recent campaign [by the “Gay International”] has targeted the Palestinian Authority (PA). The campaign started two years after the eruption of the second intifada. Articles published in the US press, written by Israelis or pro-Jewish activists, claimed that Palestinian “gays” are so oppressed that they could only find refuge in “democratic” Israel. Interviews with such “gay refugees” recounted horrid torture by PA elements. Indeed, the effort was inaugurated by US Congressman Barney Frank himself, who used the occasion to praise Israeli “democracy” ...

The footnote continues at some length in a similar vein and unfortunately it is all too typical of Massad’s approach. It is hard to see a reason for dwelling on these Israeli connections unless the purpose is to cast doubt on the veracity of the reports themselves. But Massad does not go on to challenge the facts (which is perhaps just as well, since the reports were broadly corroborated by the BBC and Reuters), so the result is a series of aspersions about the motivation of the source and no evaluation of the substance.

Here, too - as with his discussion of western ideas about sexuality - Massad seems far more eager to denounce the messengers than to consider the message.