

It's all happening in Amman:

The impact of modernity on a Muslim community

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Background

We have lived for nearly 15 years in a lower middle-class area of east Amman called *Hai al-Arman* (the Armenian Quarter). Just before the turn of the 20th century, the population of Amman was around 200. These were mostly Circassian farmers who had fled the Czarist massacres in the Caucasus and Crimea. The Armenian community dates back to the Turkish massacres of 1915. Refugees drifted south over the following years as the Ottoman Empire shrank away northwards.

Today, at the turn of the 21st century, the population of Amman is well over 2 million – an average growth rate of 15% per year! The Armenians of *Hai al-Arman* are long gone. Most have emigrated or now live in the richer western suburbs. Taking their place are the Jordanian Arab families moving in from the villages; the Iraqis waiting for their wars to end or their immigration papers to be processed; and the Palestinians overflowing from the enormous U.N. refugee camp hidden from view on the back-side of the hill. Has there ever been a time where the globalising forces of some form of colonialism *haven't* affected Amman? King David, Nebuchadnezzar, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Umayyads, the Ottomans, and the British, have all at some stage added this city to their empires.

A small state with few resources such as Singapore or Dubai can acquire incredible wealth by merely becoming a 'node' in Globalism's network. With Globalism desperate to find a friend in the Middle East, Churchill's custom-designed buffer state may have a chance of becoming a node. Each night on the news we get to watch the signing of yet another new trade agreement and hear some spokesman for the WTO telling us just how wonderful it is.

Well, by "we" I mean just my wife and me actually. We feel incredibly privileged that Jordan TV is going to such effort to put on the news – a whole channel in fact – just for us, while everyone I know is watching al-Jazeera on satellite TV. Our landlord tells us that life was better before TV. "We used to visit each other much more, but now we just sit in our homes", he says.

It's not quite that bad. On the east side, we still chat with the neighbours, and invite passing strangers in from the street to drink tea. We've never been burgled by outlaws. The neighbours see everything, *absolutely* everything. There are no secrets in our street.

However, the streets on the west side are vertical: multi-storey buildings with a lift to bring you to your door. You can't hang around in the stairwell. Besides the odd visit from the next-door neighbours during the 'eid, the only people that pop by are in-laws, burglars, and Burger King reps selling VIP cards. Though it's hard to tell, morality seems to be slipping. No one cares what their neighbours think.

At sunset, the crescent-like silhouettes of thousands of satellite dishes stand out on Amman's skyline as the 'idthan rings out calling the faithful to prayer. From the comfort of your home you can watch your favourite cleric preach, as the stock market indices scroll by at the bottom of the screen. Aware of western criticisms, the *sheikh* quite rightly points out that although the *Qur'an* permits you to beat your rebellious wife, you should only use a toothbrush...¹

Amman is rapidly becoming a modern, cosmopolitan city as money floods into the country and real-estate prices soar. Bedouins become millionaires over-night. With 20000 empty apartments in the city you would think rental charges and the building boom would slacken – but they haven't. Entrepreneurs and multinationals are flocking to Amman to set up their regional offices in time to get a slice of the 'Re-build Iraq' pie. Eye-catching, and perhaps ominously symbolic, the enormous 'La Royale' hotel, where the UN sponsored Iraq conferences are held, is shaped like the tower of Babel. The tourists are coming too. I recently talked to the governor of a Jordanian town that receives many tourists; a 1/3 of his pupils are skipping school to beg or hawk in the streets.

The latest addition to Amman is 'Mecca Mall'. Here you can drop your kids off at 'Jungle Bungle' while you either have a cappuccino worth half an east-ender's daily wage; join the rich Gulf Arabs buying French lingerie; buy an anti-globalisation book at the Mega store; or see the latest Hollywood movie. If you feel nostalgic, you can get in touch with your roots by decorating your hands and feet with henna at the Bedouin tent set up on the third floor. There is no need to worry about the kids - your Sri Lankan maid will be watching them.

The Mecca Mall food court and cafés are crowded and noisy until late at night. Above the tables, a huge poster showing a scantily clad woman winking at her Motorola cell-phone, encourages the youth to "Moto-flirt", and they do. Camera-phones, SMS, and Internet chatting provide anonymity and cyber-mobility. These are the new digital veils through which Arab youth find freedom from their watchful families.

The car-park outside Mecca Mall is full of young *shebab* driving the latest BMWs and Mercedes. Hundreds of them. Where is all this money coming from?

¹ Al-Jazeera weekly program 'The Shar'ia and Life' 5 October 1997, Al-Qaradhawi said: "Beating is permitted [to the man] in the most limited of cases, and only in a case when the wife rebels against her husband... The beating, of course, will not be with a whip, a stick, or a board. The beating will be according to what the Prophet said to a servant girl who annoyed him on a particular matter, 'If it were not for fear of punishment in the Hereafter, I would have beaten you with this *miswak*.'" A *miswak* is a small wooden stick used in Muhammad's day, and today by Muslims, as a toothbrush. (al-Qaradhawi quoted by Steven Stalinsky and Y. Yehoshua, *Muslim Clerics on the Religious Rulings Regarding Wife-Beating*, The Middle East Media Research Institute, 22 March 2004, Special Report No.27) <http://memri.org/>

The next morning, back on the east side, I greet Abu Muhammad as he sits in his usual spot on a stool outside his carpenter shop. He has no work – everyone buys Malaysian furniture these days - but at least he can get out of the house for a while. “The middle class has all but gone”, he tells me.

Still, the WTO seem pleased. They've even let Jordan join their club. I guess it really is wonderful... for some.

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