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'Rainbow Street'

The Diversity, Compartmentalization and Assertion of Youth in Amman (Jordan)

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Abstract:

Jordan, a young country, is centred on its capital, Amman. The leisure offer is important, but one neighbourhood remains special. Close to the historic center, very popular, the district of Rainbow Street has become a bohemian place where youth shows itself. Here the social interactions are done, while Jordan remains a traditional country where the mix and the choice of his partner during the marriage remain rare.

Keywords: Jordan, youth, urbanity, leisure.

Jordan is a young country, independent only since 1946. Jordan's cities also give the impression of newness, their nascent historical centres contrasting with the vast residential areas that surround them. Home to nearly half of the country's six million inhabitants, the capital city of Amman looks at first glance like a sprawl of square buildings as far as the eye can see, with no real shared focus for its inhabitants. Apart from its ancient settlement, making it one of the oldest continuously inhabited sites in the Middle East, the city's development dates to the time of the British Mandate (1920-1948) when it was chosen as the capital of the territory, to the detriment of Salt, closer to Palestine. Although it languished for a long time, Jordan's capital was an early recipient of refugee flows, compounded by rural exodus and the city's natural growth. The refugees were Palestinian on several occasions, Iraqi since 2003 and, since 2012, Syrian. For a long time, Amman remained in the shadow of other cities in the region, such as Beirut, known for their commercial activities, flourishing bourgeoisies and entertainment venues that attracted the elites of the Arab world and

the nouveau riche from the Gulf.

Although Amman is the young capital of a new country, is it a city for young people? Despite its reputation as a dull town, the city has gradually turned into an increasingly attractive hub. Today, it is characterized by a configuration that is dual, with working-class neighbourhoods to the east and affluent neighbourhoods to the west, and ‘multipolar zed’, with each neighbourhood having its own commercial, business, and recreational spaces. Over half of its population is under twenty years old. Leisure activities have gradually expanded, offering among other things more venues for outings and entertainment spread out in a rather random way in the upscale western part of the conurbation. Built on former undeveloped areas, the new neighbourhoods of Shmeysani (1980s), Sweifieh (late 1980s-early 1990s) and Abdun (late 1990s) have become attractive hubs for the cosmopolitan and privileged youth of the Jordanian capital. Consumerism exploded as shopping malls modelled on those in the Gulf states were developed in the western part of the city. Amusement arcades, coffee shops and fast-food restaurants attracted young Jordanians and non-Jordanians to the capital. Over a dozen of these shopping malls have opened since the 1990s. This sprinkling of leisure facilities in various parts of Amman reinforces the city’s multi-hub nature.

A notable exception to the development of these consumer-leisure venues in increasingly outlying neighbourhoods is a central residential area from the 1940s and 1950s, which has been renovated into a friendly and attractive space: the eastern part of Jabal Amman Hill, known as “Rainbow Street”. The area is often presented as Amman’s “bohemian” spot due to its exhibition venues for local artists, a cinema, restaurants and “trendy” cafes. It remains a meeting place where young men and women, street musicians, connoisseurs of fine cars, families out for a walk, young soccer fans and hookah smokers meet... In short, a special place to observe the different young people who live in Amman but do not necessarily meet.

A Soccer Evening on Rainbow Street

Rainbow Street overlooks Amman’s old town and its little marketplace. When shops in the lower city close, establishments on Jabal Amman hill, and especially those on Rainbow Street, the backbone of the neighbourhood, start to come alive. It is

a narrow street with one-way traffic, and not very long either. Young people like it because it is lined with oriental restaurants and snack bars offering falafels, oriental pizzas, *mana'ish* on a *saj* – a curved metal plate placed on a gas fire – and all kinds of Syrian and European culinary specialties. Rainbow Street attracts people of all socio-economic backgrounds, each one consuming according to their means, because it allows them to stroll among friends, and to sit on a bench while contemplating the lower city and listening to young musicians play guitar in the small squares.

During the day, the street doesn't stand out from Amman's other "fashionable" shopping areas. But on soccer match nights, the street comes alive with a special fervour. The street vendors selling pennants and flags in the colours of Jordanian youth's two favourite clubs – Real Madrid and F.C. Barcelona – can all be found here.¹ Hookah bars fill up more than two hours before the game kicks off, as the most ardent fans want to make sure they get a good seat – just in front of the screen! The staunchest fans meet in two characteristic establishments on the street, two adjoining cafés that share the same sidewalk. Tables at the two establishments are just next to each other and their giant screens hang back-to-back on the same wall. One hosts the pro-Barcelona crowd while the other welcomes the pro-Madrid fans. The atmosphere between the two groups is overexcited, at times electric, a bit provocative but never aggressive. Once the game has begun, the two groups switch to a duel where each one taunts the other in reaction to their favourite team's moves and dexterity. The confrontation between the two groups of young people is indirect; it is the sound level that informs us which team has the advantage, temporarily or conclusively. The young men stand in a cluster on the sidewalk, so as not to disturb the flow of traffic on the road, very close by.

Because the cars are also part of it. Some are decorated or covered with the favourite team's flag. They crawl along, stopping in turn wherever the crowd is thronging. Acting as if they all knew each other already, the discussion starts about the score of the match or about predictions. Further back, other drivers honk their horns. Traffic resumes in fits and starts at a snail's pace, then pauses anew before starting up again in an endless merry-go-round. The fate of the match ultimately determines who

¹ Regarding "long-distance fans" in Palestine, see chapter by Abaher El Sakka, p. xxx.

will occupy the street for the rest of the evening. The “defeated” will have no choice but to leave while waiting to take their revenge.

Showing Off, Standing Out, Getting Noticed

When it is not soccer factions symbolically dividing the space, evenings on Rainbow Street, especially on Thursday nights – because they precede the weekend – are the scene of another, more touching kind of confrontation. In small clusters, teenagers position themselves along the road to observe the traffic. Sitting, leaning on their elbows, or resting against parked vehicles, they watch the endless procession of other young people, who are older and especially richer, showing off at the wheel of their German or American cars. For the drivers, the most important thing, apart from the make and model of the vehicle, is to drive with the music blasting and the windows down. For the more brazen, parading with a young girl in the passenger seat – or even several! – gives them a great deal of prestige. Some of the teenage pedestrians film or take pictures, cell phone in one hand, cigarette in the other.

Rainbow Street is above all a place to be seen to show that one is both different and privileged. To show others that you are not from the same world. Most of the young people who watch the processions of beautiful cars are young Jordanians from the distant suburbs. Some of them are probably from Zarqa, famous for being a Salafist stronghold and the hometown of one of the leaders of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, killed by an American bomber at the age of thirty-nine in 2006. The young Jordanians are sometimes joined by young people of Palestinian origin, most of whom live in the Wahdad or Jabal Hussein refugee camps.

But the segmentation is also gendered. The small groups of young men also observe the groups of young women who dare to parade down Rainbow Street. For these girls, there is no question of stopping in the street and doing as the boys do; they’re just passing by, under the male gaze. Sometimes they rush into a restaurant or a bar. But most of the time, they are content to cross the street from one side to the other. Strictly speaking, the street is not a place where the two sexes meet, contrary to the university which has undoubtedly remained the main place for mixing between genders. Rainbow Street is above all a place to parade in order to be noticed; but also, to stand

out! In general, on the feminine side, outfits are rather light, casual, without ever being provocative. Amman is not Beirut! Closer to what one can observe in Damascus or Tehran, this part of Amman offers a chance to escape from the country's rather conservative social norms but without completely transgressing them. Young girls, usually dressed in jeans, T-shirts, shirts and often wearing a light scarf over their hair, are particularly fond of taking this route or coming here to have tea and smoke a hookah. They demonstrate their self-confidence as rather modern, trendy girls. They may nonetheless be perceived as less respectable by some of the young men who frequent the street.

At nightfall, Rainbow Street turns into a place for asserting privilege and differences, a place where it is appropriate to show others a facet or image of oneself. But without ever revealing oneself.

Leisure Time, a Break for Middle-Class Girls

Thursday, late afternoon. A group of young women are walking down Rainbow Street and catch the eye of some boys sitting on a bench. The boys immediately start to talk louder, tossing out a few remarks and jokes in the girls' direction, hoping to catch their attention. The girls walk past without really looking and whisper a few words to each other, laughing. They might go to the ice cream shop or stop for some juice. But they probably won't do anything other than walk, holding each other's hands. While it's early enough for these students to still be out with their girlfriends, they won't go home late because they have a reputation to maintain. In any case, their brothers and cousins go out in the same neighbourhoods, so conventions are respected. Tomorrow is Friday, the weekly day off devoted to family. For now, they talk about love and their dreams. They compare the look of the boys on the bench, preferring the guitarist's hairstyle to that of his classmate who was playing with his cell phone while eyeing them out of the corner of his eye. One of them texts her cousin to tell her about their adventure.

Observing this scene, one can't help imagining the fate of these young women who clearly come from modest socio-economic backgrounds. According to the statistics about Jordanian society, these young girls will probably be married before the age of 25 and will have their first child within a year. Their future seems mapped out from

childhood. After going to a girls' school, they attend university for a few years. Sometimes they break off their studies to get married. This youthful period is also the moment when they have the most free time in their lives. As young adults, they can choose activities according to their tastes and are now mature enough to venture out of the family circle.

The range of leisure activities is relatively limited, however. In terms of sports, the most attractive discipline is probably taekwondo, in which Jordan is well-placed internationally, and young women attend the numerous halls in the city assiduously. There are also aerobics and dance classes, and recently, due to a global trend, Zumba, a highly rhythmic athletic dance. Others prefer artistic disciplines (drawing, painting, music) or language courses. But most of their free time is spent with friends. The girls go out a lot with their friends – from the neighbourhood, from college or school. They invite each other to their homes. They go shopping or for walks in the few pedestrian areas of Amman. They also watch a great deal of television and spend a considerable amount of time on Facebook. Sometimes the young women join (women's) clubs that organize outings to the Dead Sea or the countryside.

A period of relative freedom, the years at university are also when the most interaction occurs between genders. Boys and girls mix and talk to each other in the cafeteria during breaks. Behind the banter, however, there is always the idea of a possible marriage. There is no question of going out for coffee together unless the relationship is on a serious track. The only real times for mingling are when the extended family gets together, and cousins can see each other. But here again, the relationships forged then are not free of hidden matrimonial agendas. Later, once they are married and have families, these girls will certainly still visit one another and continue to “cross paths” on Facebook. But a little less often since they must look after the house. Possibilities for leisure activities outside the family framework will become almost non-existent. In retrospect, the time when they were studying will seem like an interlude in their well-ordered life.

Amman's Affluent Youth: International Leisure Activities

Still on Rainbow Street, two very well-dressed young women wearing high-heel

boots and carrying brand-name leather handbags walk out of the British Council. They are taking classes to improve their English. They will probably go to the United States or England in a year or two, and before they do, they need to take language tests to confirm their enrolment at university. They haven't come to Rainbow Street to walk around or hang out with their friends. The neighbourhood is a bit too working-class, and too crowded. While some trendy cafes and restaurants have opened here in the past few years, their favourite neighbourhood is Abdun, where they will go in the evening to eat at an upscale restaurant and hang out at a popular bar. During the week, they also go to Taj Mall, a huge shopping mall opened in 2012 with the chicest boutiques in the capital. Afterwards, they'll have tea at Paul's and nibble on French pastries, dropping the bags of clothes and shoes they have just bought by their chairs. They'll talk about their girlfriend who has just returned from a weekend in London.

These young women come from the aristocratic or bourgeois Jordanian elite, or from the Palestinian upper middle class. At this social level, national distinction is not so important. They have received a highly Westernized education and a lifestyle to go with it. Going out is no longer necessarily gender-related, since their social milieu allows young men and women to date. Marriage is not an end in itself either. Although it is rare for a woman not to marry, she will do so later, sometimes after a period spent abroad to pursue her studies or acquire a professional specialization. Until then, they have abundant leisure activities. They are enrolled in the most luxurious (mixed) gyms in Amman. They study music with a private teacher, go to the movies, and go out a lot in the few trendy areas of the city. But Amman is too small for them. These young women dream of elsewhere.

The search for external role models to identify with remains strong in Jordanian society. This can be seen in a thousand details, by observing the young people from all social classes who cross paths on Rainbow Street. In the context of globalization, Jordan offers few models to enhance these young people's self-esteem. As a result, they are tempted to turn to representations and idols imported from abroad. This is especially true since the government seems terrified of the models emerging elsewhere in the Arab world, whether revolutionary, free-market or Islamist... The apparent depoliticization of young people has been reinforced by a Jordanian state looking more

toward a future involving a consumerist Western model or the hedonistic and conservative Gulf model, rather than that of its immediate neighbours, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, too politicized to be stable. Nonetheless, the innocuous aspect of these leisure activities cannot conceal that it is a society in great turmoil, but in which the political ferment is partly stifled by a particularly tense regional context.

Further Reading

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