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# Shifting Sands and Changing Attitudes: LGBT Life in Saudi Arabia



**Drew Dalton**

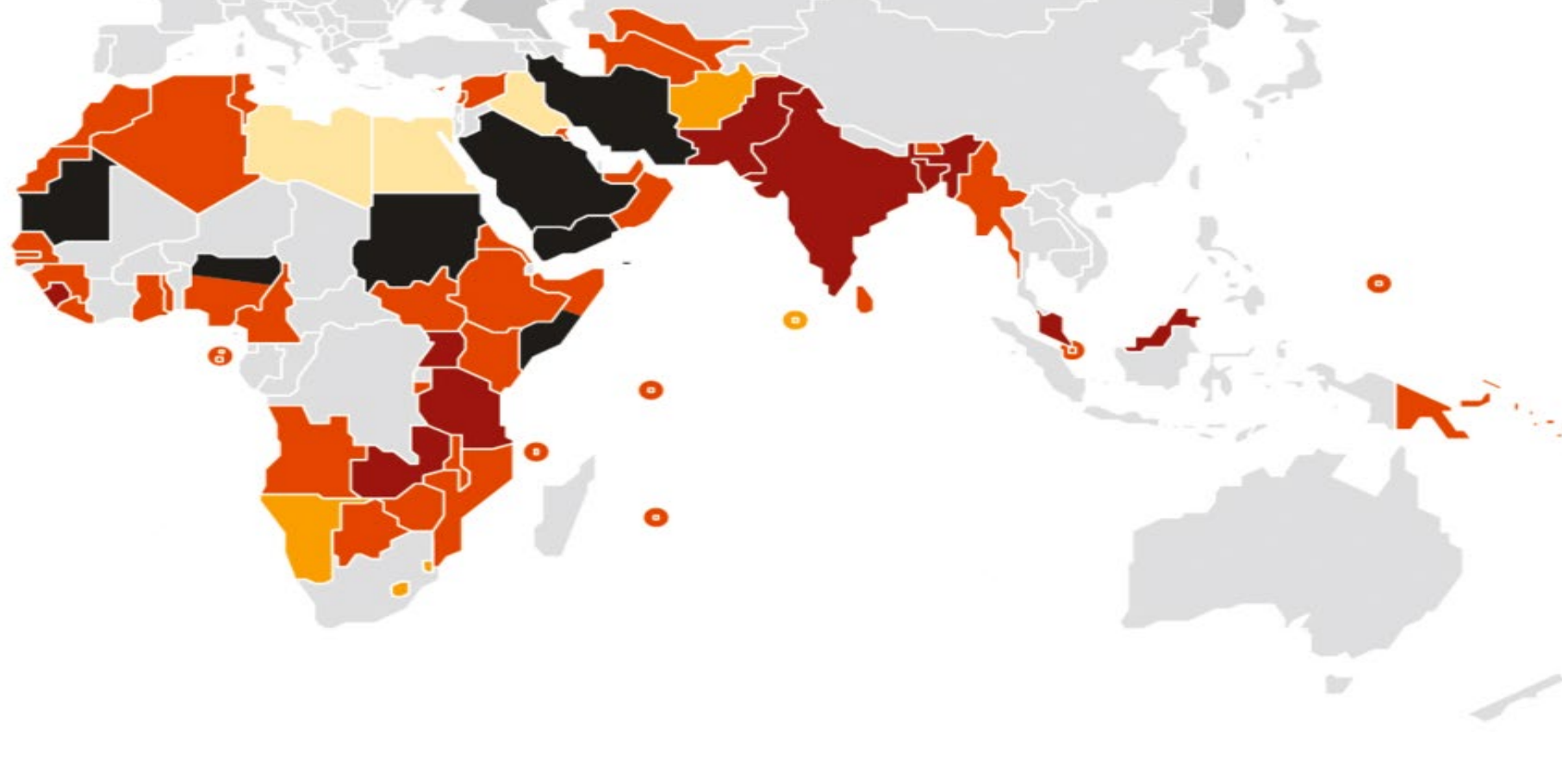
**University of Sunderland**

**@DrewDalton1980**

# Where homosexuality is illegal

2013

RUSSIA †



Death penalty

14 years to life

Up to 14 years

No indication of length

Unclear\*

Imprisonment

\* Legislation not specifically homophobic but can be used as such/persecution by religious courts  
† "Propaganda law" restricting freedom of expression and association

Source: ILGA

# Sex in the Arab world...

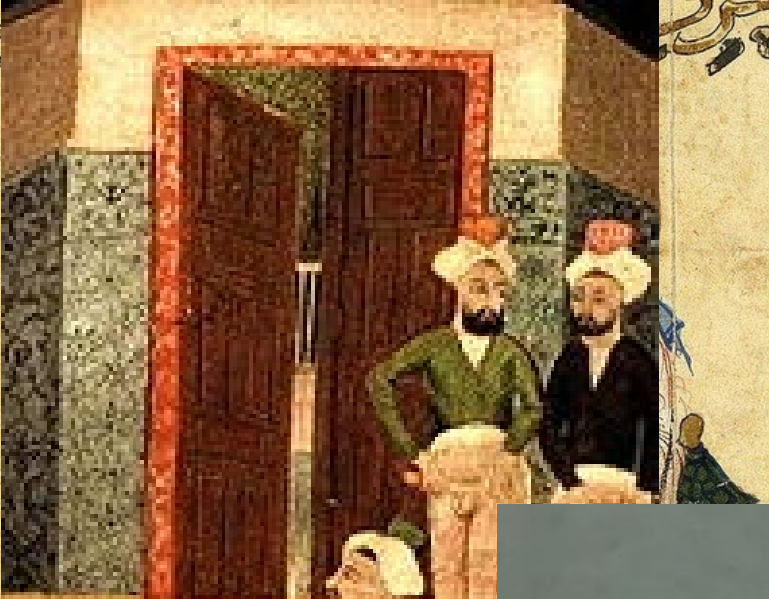
- Only widely accepted, socially acknowledged context for sex is state-registered, family-approved and religiously sanctioned matrimony.
- Anything else is 'ayb' (shameful), 'illit adab' (impolite) or 'haram' (forbidden).
- Vast amounts of people do not fit this mould- young people who cannot afford to marry, career women, sex workers and LGBT people (El Feki, 2014).
- In various surveys from 1995-2001 the greatest difference of opinion between the Islamic world and the West, was not over democratic values, but rather gender roles and sexuality (divorce, abortion and homosexuality) (Inglehart, 2012).
- Been little change in these positions in subsequent 'world values' surveys (El Feki, 2014).



# **A rich sexual history....**

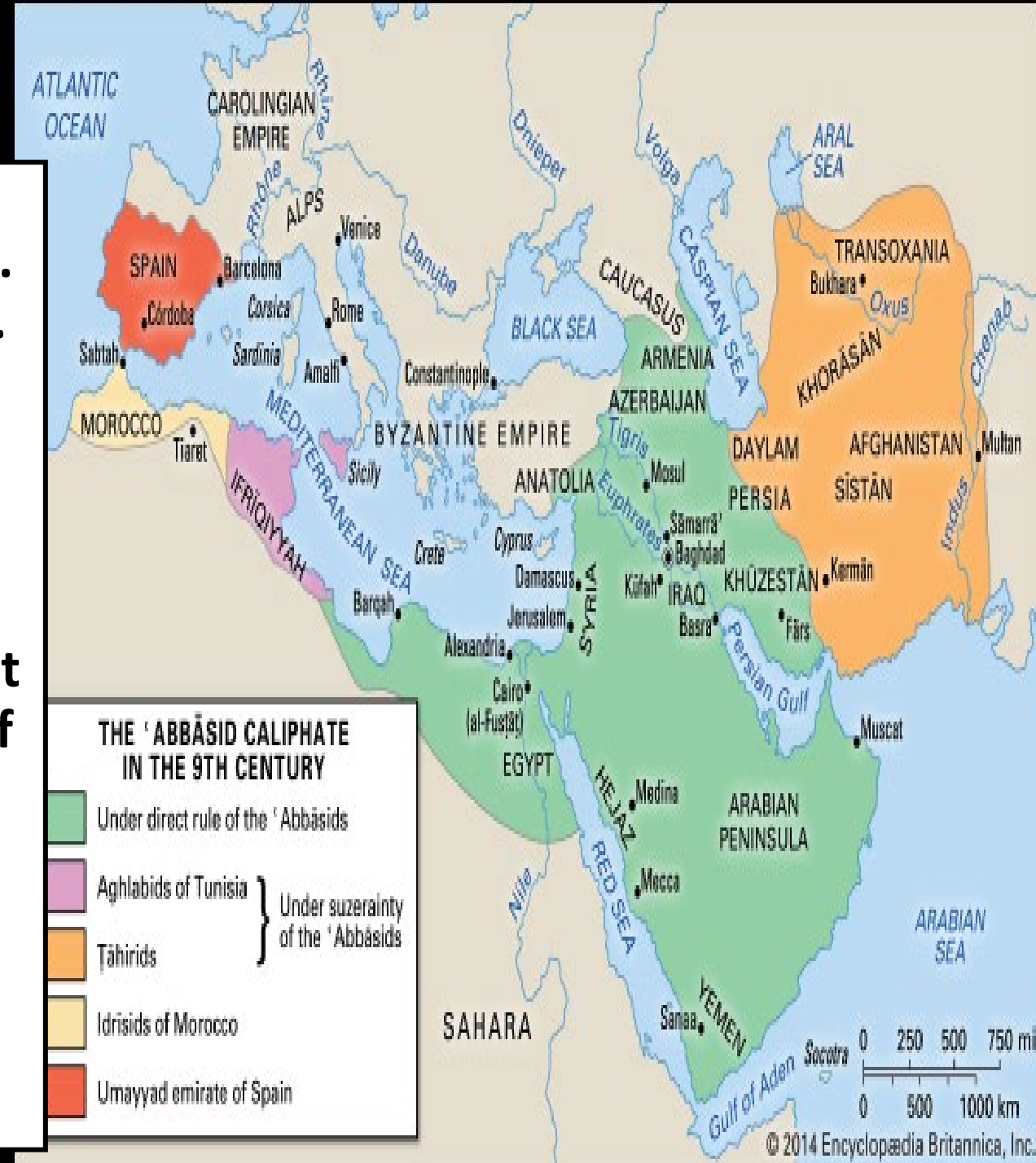
- **Al-Tifashi (Tunisian scholar, 1200s).**
- **Wrote about men of great wealth and refinement who would engage in sex with younger men and who loved them for their beauty, youth and intellectual companionship.**
- **There is a vast body of literature around this which spread throughout the Arab world, including modern day Saudi Arabia, such as Abu Nuwas (poet of eighth and ninth-century Baghdad).**
- **Warda, a woman quoted by al-Tifashi, was a ‘grinder.’ She felt sorry for men as she described in rousing detail the journey to orgasm one woman could make with another. These works spread far and wide and were part of Arab sexual history.**
- **“In the re-writing of Arab sexual history over the past century or so, homosexuality has been buried – to the point that today’s intolerance is now seen as the authentic voice of tradition...and is certainly less forgiving in practice, than at other times in its history” (El Feki, 2014: 224).**

صورة الحزب وآدم من طينافين



# The wider background...

- At the zenith in early Abbasid Caliphate, the Caliphate was confident and creative. Open thinking on sexuality reflected this.
- Boom of scientific thinking alongside Islam.
- This is in contrast to the, “deep vein of denial...plenty of people who want to pick and choose their history, taking what is now considered the respectable face of the Arab golden age – science and technology...leaving the rest behind” (El Feki, 2014).
- Defeat of Egypt through Napoleon’s forces and Arab forces in 1967 ‘Six Day War’ with Israel weakened confidence.



# The wider background...

- The Arab world lost ground to the West, impacted further by Western colonial expansion (French invasion of Algeria in 1830 and 1882 British occupation of Egypt).
- In asking themselves why Europe was ascending, Arab thinkers began to wonder if their activities (e.g. homosexuality) were connected to their descent.
- As many Arab intellectuals saw themselves through foreign eyes, they started to re-write their own sexual history.
- Rise of a stricter version of Islamic thought began to emerge. More concerned with sexual behaviour than ever before. Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia.
- “The history of homosexuality in the Arab world is largely forgotten” (El Kei, 2014: 224).





# Why not LGBT?

- The term 'gay' carries hefty baggage outside of the west.
- Fixing Arabs into strict LGBT categories is not always helpful in a culture whereby same sex happens often without the need for a label.
- There may be intense amounts of 'homosociality,' which does not necessarily mean sex follows close physical contact.
- Whilst many may use 'gay' as sexual identity labels, these are borrowed from the West.
- Historically, there are many words to describe men and women engaging in same sex acts but it is about activity not identity e.g. 'Luti' (man who penetrates a younger male).



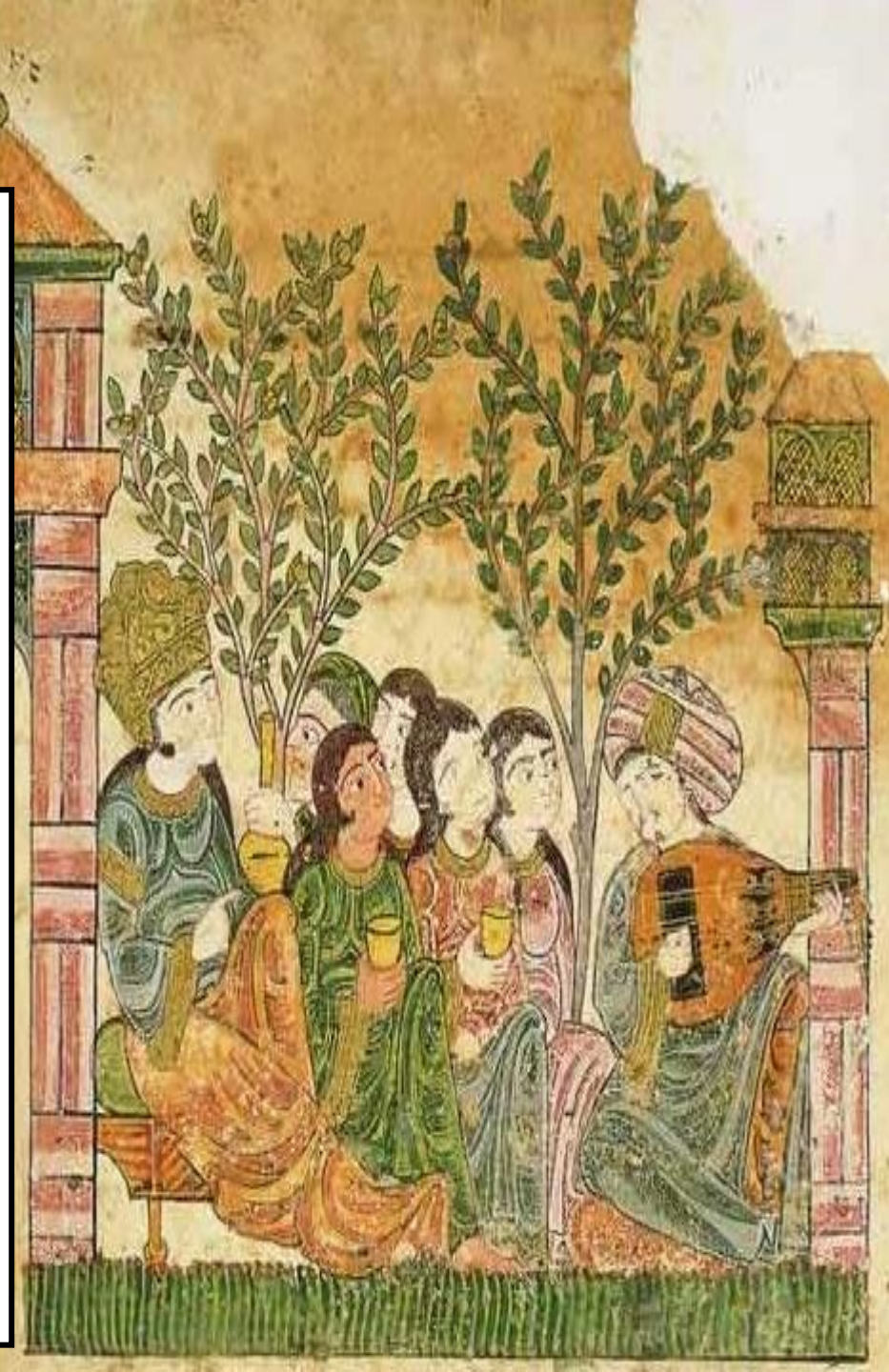
# Trans?

- **Very little written about what can be identified as 'transgender' in Saudi Arabia. It is complex.**
- **Transgender is regarded as an extreme version of homosexuality.**
- **In seventh-century Medina, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) regularly interacted with people who crossed the gender divide.**
- **Mukhannathun: people anatomically male, raised as boys but dressed like women.**
- **Not traditionally assumed to be sexually attracted to men, however not attracted to women either.**
- **They were allowed access to the Prophet's wives and played a social role as matchmakers and entertainers.**



# Trans?

- Hit is a character who makes a brief appearance in an early Islamic religious text. As the hadith goes, the Prophet Muhammad encountered him when he was calling upon his wives.
- Hit, a mukhannath who was acting as an attendant, made a saucy remark describing the attractive rolls of belly fat one of the wives had on her.
- The Prophet was outraged that someone whose job required him to have no interest in women could tell what caused men to lust over them, and Hit was subsequently banished from the household.
- Considerable debate exists as to whether Hit and other mukhannathun should be viewed as homosexuals, transvestites, or eunuchs. The word itself translates to 'men who resemble women', but the definition is too expansive for easy classification. Repercussions?




# Resistance in Saudi Arabia?

- The archconservative kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the only Arab country where sharia law is the sole legal code, under which homosexuals are flogged and executed.
- However, “homosexuals are freer here than they are in Iran,” says Afdhere Jama, who travelled through the Islamic world for seven years doing research for his book ‘Illegal Citizens’ (2008).
- Gay men and women have a surprising amount of space in parts of Saudi society.
- Newspapers print stories about lesbian sex in school lavatories, while it is an open secret that certain shopping centres, restaurants and bars in Jeddah and Riyadh are gay meeting points (Peterson, 2009).



# Resistance in Saudi Arabia?

- **Social media.**
- **“There is a shortage of bottoms in Jeddah...”**
- **“Western hotels are the place to be...”**
- **Grindr, Scruff and the use of mobile apps.**
- **“I avoid Arabs and prefer non-Arabs...”**
- **Segregation of the sexes in education.**
- **“While homosexual men in the Arab region are often in the line of fire, their female counterparts are all but off the radar screen” (El Feki, 2014: 249).**
- **“Strange enough, there is no certain condemnation for that [homosexual] act in Islam. On the other hand, to have illegal sex between a man and a woman, there are very clear rules and sub-rules.”**

Hey there, I was wondering if anyone would be open to considering something like a marriage of convenience. I'm a lesbian from Saudi Arabia and I've seen how hard it can be for us to comfortably survive here. I know of some people who have done an arrangement like this go get out of a tight situation and to avoid family pressure. Anyone interested in discussing this please contact me at: 

# Resistance in Saudi Arabia?



Resistance in Saudi Arabia?

*Carole Samaha*  
سهرايين



# Resistance in Saudi Arabia?

Worldwide Trends · Change

#ديريبي\_جده

62.2K Tweets

#RecomendeUmLivro

26.2K Tweets

#EsViernesYDanGanasDe

9,670 Tweets

#GiuseppeWhatsGood

7,578 Tweets

Bowling Green Massacre

401K Tweets

#احب\_المثليين\_ولست\_منهم

28.5K Tweets

"I love gay  
people, and I'm  
not one of them"



# Resistance in Saudi Arabia?



JG  
@\_iiiiJG

Follow

#احب\_المثليين\_ولست\_منهم we are born this way 🌈

2:35 AM - 5 Feb 2017

1 4

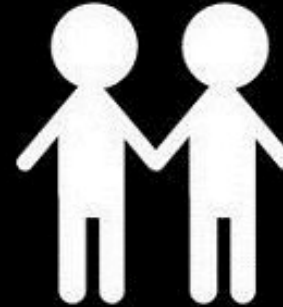
This is love



This is love



This is love



This is stupid



Action Potential

@MsActionHerself

Follow

My support litmus test:human?✓. harming/endangering anyone?✗➡ I support you #احب\_المثليين\_ولست\_منهم

4:53 PM - 4 Feb 2017

8 7

# Resistance in Bahrain?



**Resistance elsewhere?**

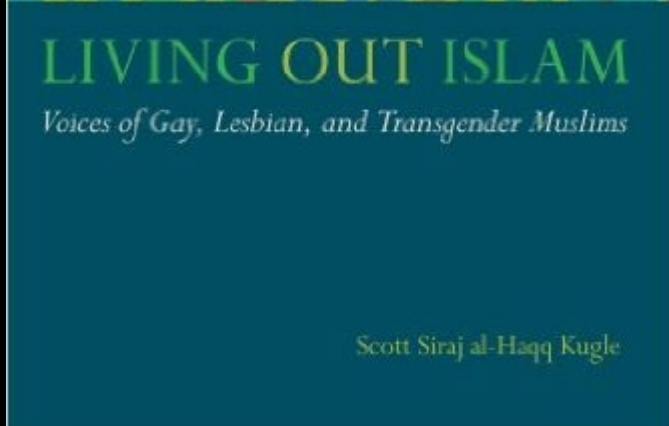
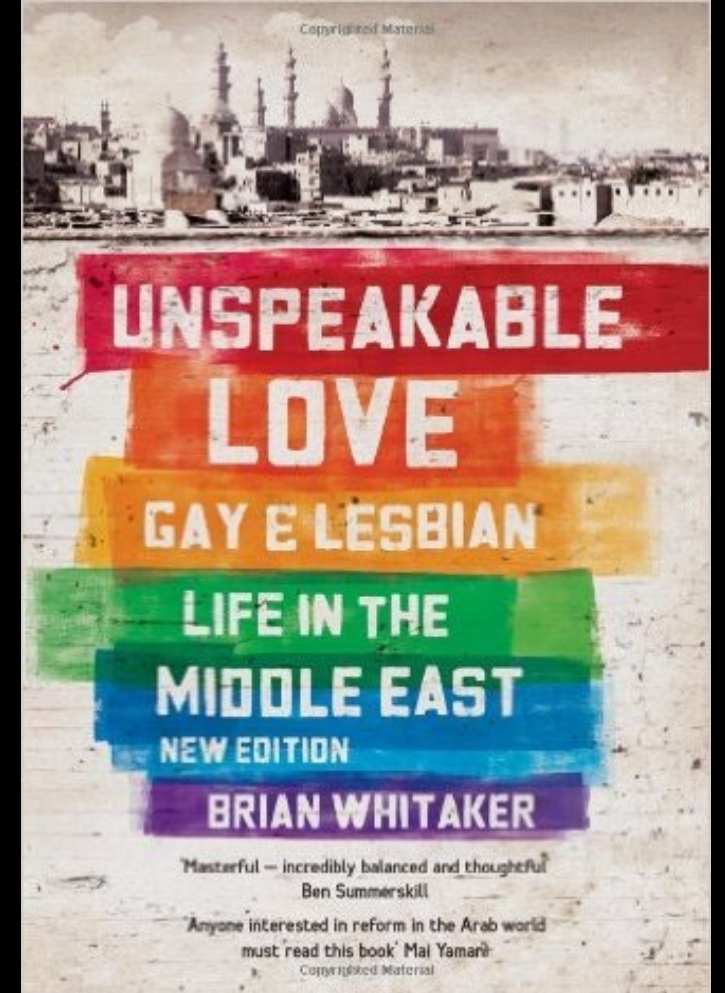
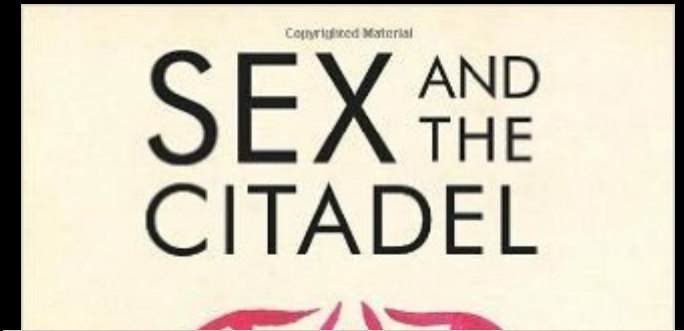
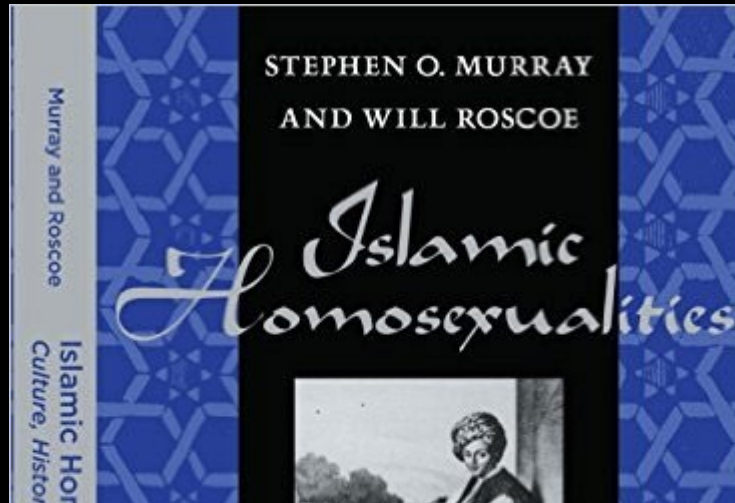
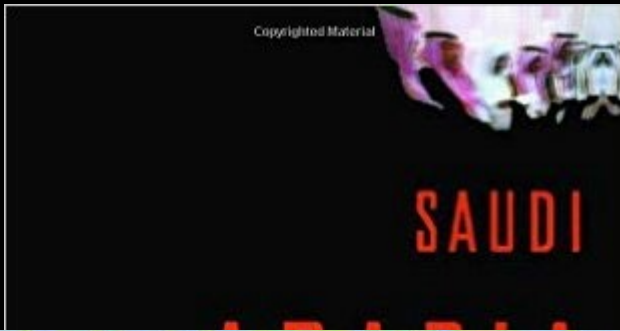
**REPRESENTING  
QUEERS WHO  
CAN'T MARCH IN  
SAUDI ARABIA**



# Thoughts to take away...

- Often we only talk about queer issues by painting the rest of the Arab world as backwards or stuck in time, or of needing ‘saved’ by Western LGBT organisations.
- There are complex and different LGBT lives within Arab nations. The ‘Arab Spring’ gave rise to public discussions about representation and safe spaces.
- It produced [www.ahwaa.org](http://www.ahwaa.org) in 2011.
- The simplistic story of ‘saving LGBT Arabs’ denies the LGBT community in the Middle East a fundamental personhood.
- “By taking away their voice and their agency, by pretending that gays and lesbians in the region are just chasing behind the same rainbow flag freedoms that Western queers have, these simplistic narratives inflict a violence of their own” (Shafei, 2016).

The screenshot shows the AHWAA website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a 'Sign-Up' button, a 'Login' button, and a search bar labeled 'النسخة العربية' (Arabic version). Below the navigation bar is a menu with categories: Sexuality, General, Personal, Identity, Society, Religion, Family, Relationships, Culture, and More. The main header features the AHWAA logo and the tagline 'An open space to debate LGBTQ-related issues in the Middle East.' Below the header, there are three main sections: 'Private' (Choose what to disclose), 'Engaging' (Share stories and experiences), and 'Supportive' (Offer and receive support). A video player is embedded in the 'Engaging' section. Below the main sections, there are three statistics: '6 1 6 1 Caring Members', '1 9 2 6 Intimate Topics', and '6 0 1 0 Pieces of Advice'. The bottom section is divided into 'MOST POPULAR TOPICS' and 'NEWEST TOPICS'. Under 'MOST POPULAR TOPICS', there are three topic cards: 'Where are you from?' (By Sunshine, 171, General), 'lesbians in egypt, where are you ?' (By tokaliz, 126, General), and 'ask for advice' (By nayoumi\_chiita, 2, Personal). Each card shows a list of user avatars who have participated in the topic.



لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله



**The experience of a gay man living in Saudi Arabia**