



Arab  
Reform  
Initiative

# RAINBOW ITEMS AND THE MORALITY OF COLORS IN ARAB COUNTRIES

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## About the Author

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Cover photo: LGBTQ rainbow colors created with pegs. (c) Photohasan - Shutterstock

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## 1 Rainbow Items and the Morality of Colors in Arab Countries

In January 2023, Algeria's Minister of Trade and Export Promotion launched an "awareness-raising" campaign against "symbols, slogans, images, and colors [that] attempt to incorporate ideas contrary to moral and religious values, especially for the new generation".<sup>1</sup> The targeted objects are mainly multi-colored or rainbow-shaped objects. According to the minister, since March 2022, controls have been carried out in coordination with the security services, to prohibit the sale of these products, including online, to confiscate them, and to strengthen border surveillance to prevent their introduction into the country.

This decision is not isolated, it is in line with those of other Arab<sup>2</sup> and/or Muslim countries.<sup>3</sup> Starting from the Algerian example, the objective of this paper is to review the context of these decisions, analyze the discourses, their foundations, and their nature, and ask whether they are an instrumentalization of religion by politicians and/or an attempt to divert the attention of public opinion.

To answer this, the paper will analyze articles from French, Arabic, and English press from several Arab countries, with a focus on videos, and text messages sent by the Algerian Ministry of Commerce as well as the reactions of Internet users and/or people belonging to the LGBTQ+ communities on social networks.

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1 Sarra Chaoui, « Lancement d'une campagne nationale de sensibilisation. Protection des intérêts moraux du consommateur », *Horizons*, 4 January 2023, p.2.

2 Mario Doueiry, « Homophobie au Liban : nouvelle semaine, nouvelles polémiques », *L'Orient-le-Jour*, 31 July 2023, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1344963/homophobie-au-liban-nouvelle-semaine-nouvelles-polemiques.html>

3 This is also the case in Malaysia, where in May 2023 rainbow-coloured Swatch watches were seized. The country's prime minister has announced that wearing or selling watches from this brand in the colors of the LGBTQ+ community is an offense that can be punishable by up to three years in prison and a fine of 3,800 euros. "The tightening of the legislation comes ahead of by-elections in the country where the prime minister is accused by opposition parties of not doing enough for the Muslim community." See Anastasia Nicolas' video on Brutoficiel, 18 August 2023 and «LGBTQI. 'Expéditions anti-Swatch' : les autorités malaisiennes saisissent des montres arc-en-ciel», *Courrier international*, 26 May 2023, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/lgbtqi-expeditions-anti-swatch-les-autorites-malaisiennes-saisissent-des-montres-arc-en-ciel>

## The 2022 FIFA World Cup: A Pitch Against the Rainbow Colors

During his "awareness-raising" campaign, the Algerian Minister of Trade expressly referred to Qatar's policy during the 2022 FIFA World Cup and praised the country for banning "colors and symbols contrary to the values of society [...] in stadiums."<sup>4</sup> According to him, it is desirable that all countries whose religion is Islam carry out this kind of campaign.

In December 2021, in preparation for the World Cup, the Qatari Ministry of Trade and Industry announced on Twitter (now X) that it had carried out inspection campaigns at several points of sale in different regions that resulted in the seizure and confiscation of children's toys bearing slogans that went against Islamic values, customs, and traditions.<sup>5</sup> This statement was accompanied by a photograph of multicolored toys.

In the Arab world, this was the first official initiative to confiscate objects with rainbow or simply multicolored colors. A few months later, in June 2022, in parallel with Pride Month recalling the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, several ministries of trade in the Gulf countries followed the Qatari initiative. Kuwait's Ministry of Trade and Industry posted a message on Twitter with the hashtag *sharik fi al-raqaba*, ("participates in censorship"), calling on citizens to inform the government about rainbow-colored products. To avoid confusion, two icons were depicted: on the right, a flag with six colors and a caption that reads: "The flag that violates public morals consists of only six colors" and, on the left, a rainbow with seven colors, captioned as the natural rainbow.<sup>6</sup> In the same month, the Saudi Ministry of Commerce published a post on Twitter: "Our surveillance teams make rounds at points of sale, seize and confiscate products with symbols and indications that call for homosexuality and are contrary to morality, and punish offending facilities." The video, which

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4 Sarra Chaoui, «Lancement d'une campagne nationale de sensibilisation. Protection des intérêts moraux du consommateur », *Horizons*, 4 January 2023, p.2.

5 <https://twitter.com/MOCIQatar/status/1472888753710673923>

6 <https://twitter.com/mocikw/status/1538448843079041024?s=20&t=80VVgSSF56t9be1-FV32CQ>

## 2 Rainbow Items and the Morality of Colors in Arab Countries

accompanied this post, showed two ministry officers taking photos of items and explaining which ones were confiscated from stores, including rainbow-colored children's clothing, bags, hats, and accessories, as well as items with rainbow-colored packaging.<sup>7</sup> In June 2022, the United Arab Emirates, too, asked Amazon to remove several multicolored products from sale in their country, including books. Words have also been removed from the Amazon search bar, such as LGBTQ+ or pride.<sup>8</sup> During the same period, Syria confiscated rainbow-colored kites, claiming they promoted homosexuality, and prosecuted the owner of the goods.<sup>9</sup>

While only the Algerian Minister of Trade suggested that his decision was taken after Qatar's in the context of the football World Cup, we believe that the decisions of other countries were certainly taken on the occasion of Pride Month, but also with a view to the sporting event scheduled for the end of the same year. As a reminder, German players were banned from wearing rainbow-colored armbands<sup>10</sup> and decided to cover their mouths with their hands before a match in protest. Although these are the first official initiatives "taken" by Arab countries, they are the result of a long history of distinction in terms of cultural specificities, "customs", and the conception of the family in opposition to the West. At the same time, they echo similar campaigns in North America against "gender ideology" in schools. These groups say they want to protect children from being indoctrinated by the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>11</sup> It is also worth noting the adoption in July 2023 of a new law in Russia that bans gender transitions and is justified in the name of protecting citizens and children. The aim would be to "rally Moscow's support, both in the hated West and in the rest of the world".<sup>12</sup> As a reminder, Algeria "has never hidden its close ties to Moscow".<sup>13</sup>

7 <https://twitter.com/MCgovSA/status/1536767573802508291>

8 Anaïs Cherif, «Aux Émirats arabes unis, Amazon fait disparaître les produits LGBT», BFMTV, 30 June 2023, <https://www.bfmtv.com/tech/aux-emirats-arabes-unis-amazon-fait-disparaitre-les-produits-lgbt-AN-202206300314.html>.

9 (In Arabic) Wael Essam, "Syrian authorities confiscate children's toys in Hama for 'promoting homosexuality'", 12 June 2022, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/>

10 Will Todman, "LGBTQ+ Advocacy in the Middle East Backfires," 16 December 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/lgbtq-advocacy-middle-east-backfires>.

11 Justin Dupuis, «Jeunes LGBTQ+ : une « vieille forme de haine habillée dans un nouveau discours », ICI Radio Canada, 24 September 2023, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/2012621/lgbtq-manifestations-kristopher-wells-barbara-perry>

12 Benoît Viktkine, « La Russie interdit les transitions de genre », Le Monde, 14 July 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/07/14/la-russie-interdit-les-transitions-de-genre\\_6182011\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/07/14/la-russie-interdit-les-transitions-de-genre_6182011_3210.html)

13 Anthony Bellanger, « L'arc-en-ciel viré du ciel algérien », France Inter, 3 January 2023, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/la-chronique-d-anthony-bellanger/histoires-du-monde-du-mardi-03-janvier-2023-2354769>

## Discourse and Foundations of "Awareness" Campaigns

Apart from the United Arab Emirates, all other "awareness-raising" campaigns against rainbow-coloured products have been initiated by the Ministry of Commerce and not the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Admittedly, all of them highlighted the protection of moral and religious values, such as the three text messages sent by the Algerian Ministry of Trade to all residents in January 2023 inviting them to "pay attention to products that bear colors and symbols that are contrary to morality," to "report products that are contrary to Muslim values and morals," and to "protect [their] families from products that bear contrary colors to Islam". However, these initiatives did not come from the religious authorities of these countries.

As in other Arab countries, the Algerian ministry announced "the establishment of a toll-free number and two email addresses to allow residents to report sellers of rainbow toys to a police unit responsible for seizing toys."<sup>14</sup>

While the LGBTQ+ community is targeted by these "awareness-raising" campaigns, criminal articles condemning homosexuality in these countries are not mobilized. According to an article in the Algerian daily, Horizons, "the action is taking place according to the principle of the protection of the moral rights of the consumer" as per Article 19 of Law 09-03 of 25 February 2009 on consumer protection and the repression of fraud. However, this article provides that "any service offered to the consumer must not be detrimental to his or her material interest and must not cause him or her non-pecuniary damage". There is, therefore, no reference to religious values or morality as values or rules of conduct. Moral damage is defined as opposed to bodily or material damage; it is an emotional injury, "e.g. moral damage, damage to a person's feelings of affection (loss of a loved one) or honor (offense), is distinguished from damage caused to the human body (injury) or property (damage)"<sup>15</sup> whereas morality is "any set of rules concerning the actions permitted and forbidden in a society, whether or not they are confirmed by law."<sup>16</sup> Thus, it would seem that there is a confusion between "moral" and "morality".

14 Hamza Bensouda, «Algérie. Kamel Rezig, le ministre qui chasse les arcs-en-ciel», Orient XXI, 20 February 2023, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/algerie-kamel-rezig-le-ministre-qui-chasse-les-arcs-en-ciel,6209>.

15 Gérard Cornu, Vocabulaire juridique, PUF, 2007, p.598.

16 According to the French definition available here: <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/morale//1#:~:text=1.,conditions%20dans%20lesquelles%20il%20vit.>

### 3 Rainbow Items and the Morality of Colors in Arab Countries

Among the measures put in place to “sensitize” consumers against rainbow products, the director general of economic control and fraud repression of the Algerian Ministry of Commerce outlined the organization of an “awareness” campaign in public places, commercial, cultural, vocational training centers, universities, and mosques.<sup>17</sup> “Awareness-raising” was to be done in coordination with several ministries and through television and radio broadcasts. A television program<sup>18</sup> was broadcast on the YouTube page of the organization APOCE (Association for the Protection and Guidance of the Consumer and its Environment), which defines itself as a social association, one of the objectives of which is to defend the moral and material interests of consumers. According to the video, the campaign was mainly aimed at children, as the “Algerian people refuse this subject” and the marketing of these objects to young children would represent a danger and allowing a child to play from childhood and in an ordinary way with these products “in the colors of homosexuals” or in favor of same-sex marriage would lead to the child eventually accepting these practices. The speaker also said “They are fighting us through our future generations,” without explaining whether he was referring to the LGBTQ+ community, the West, or specific individuals or entities. Another video, shared on social media, also showed officials from the Ministry of Commerce showing children pencils and asking them to name the colors, then explaining that they should not all be used together and telling them to throw away any rainbow objects they may have at home.<sup>19</sup> This is also in line with the Gulf countries’ campaigns that mainly targeted products aimed at children and the usual raids on LGBTQ+ friendly places and entrapment on LGBTQ+ dating apps targeting adults. It would seem that by targeting children through prevention, these campaigns are in opposition to the gender theories taught in Western schools, and therefore to Western values perceived as transgressive but also potentially interfering in the internal affairs of Arab countries and participating in some sort of neo-colonialism.

Moreover, in this video and another posted by the same association,<sup>20</sup> a presumably state agent<sup>21</sup> addresses passers-

by in the courtyard of a shopping mall advising them not to burn the Korans in multicolors, but to give them to the mosques that will know how to dispose of them. He adds that some colors have a special meaning, such as white and blue, which are natural colors, but together represent the flag of the Zionists, and that using the colors of the rainbow would “give them publicity,” but he did not explain who he was referring to by the phrase “hadouk enass” (those people).

## Arab “Awareness-Raising” and the Global Anti-LGBTQ+ Campaigns: The Same Goal

While some Algerians ironically tweeted after the Algerian minister’s statements by sharing images of rainbows or objects or buildings bearing these colors, for many it was just an attempt to distract from other issues, such as cost of living and rising inflation.<sup>22</sup> Some Syrians, meanwhile, have reportedly criticized the confiscation of rainbow-colored kites, claiming that they were already wearing these colors before they became the symbol of the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>23</sup>

These campaigns should not be seen as being built on a religious argument, but rather as an instrumentalization of religion for political purposes: to divert attention from real social and economic problems these countries are facing and to try to establish legitimacy by advocating an anti-Western discourse to win the support of conservatives. Western countries are portrayed as seeking to implement an agenda of enslavement of the Arab world through a policy of defending LGBTQ+ rights, despite the campaigns waged in these countries against this community – especially by the far right – the rollback of certain rights (for example, anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Italy, Hungary, and Romania), and the rise in homophobic attacks throughout Europe.<sup>24</sup> According to Ramon Martínez, an activist with COGAM (LGBT collective in Madrid), this phenomenon can be explained by the success of the LGBTQ+ movement, “the rights obtained and the rapid

17 Chaoui Sarra, «Lancement d’une campagne nationale de sensibilisation. Protection des intérêts moraux du consommateur», Horizons, 4 January 2023, p.2.

18 Association for the Protection and Guidance of the Consumer and its Environment, (video in Arabic) “Report any product that contains suggestions or images that are contrary to morals and our religious beliefs.” 5 January 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XguIF4xvXM&ab\\_channel=L%27OrganisationAPOCE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XguIF4xvXM&ab_channel=L%27OrganisationAPOCE)

19 Hamza Bensouda, «Algérie. Kamel Rezig, le ministre qui chasse les arcs-en-ciel», Orient XXI, February 20, 2023, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/algerie-kamel-rezig-le-ministre-qui-chasse-les-arcs-en-ciel,6209>.

20 (in Arabic) Association for the Protection and Guidance of the Consumer and its Environment, “#Bureau of the Capital: The National Awareness Campaign on Colors and Slogans Contrary to Morals and Beliefs”, January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I99Qa9kwMmA>.

21 The officer is wearing a white vest with the Algerian flag, but there is no clear indication that he is a state agent. He does, however, use a microphone and speaks from a stand.

22 Hamza Bensouda, «Algérie. Kamel Rezig, le ministre qui chasse les arcs-en-ciel», Orient XXI, February 20, 2023, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/algerie-kamel-rezig-le-ministre-qui-chasse-les-arcs-en-ciel,6209>.

23 “Saudi Arabia seizes toys in ‘colors of homosexuality,’” Middle East Eye English edition, June 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/actu-et-enquetes/arabie-saoudite-interdit-jouets-couleurs-homosexualite-lgbt>

24 “LGBT rights: Hate ‘comes out of the closet’ in Europe,” Euronews, 30 June 2023, <https://fr.euronews.com/2023/06/30/ils-sont-sortis-de-leur-armoire-a-haine-la-montee-de-lextreme-droite-sape-les-droits-des-p>

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progress provoked a reaction that was coupled with a rise of the far right”.<sup>25</sup> Thus, behind a discourse of protection of the “Arab nation” and the values specific to Muslims, Arab countries are taking, ironically, a Western ideology and discourses of the far right against a left that is demonized and perceived as too liberal.

Even if this issue is not new, it is interesting to note that within LGBTQ+ communities themselves, the discourse is polarized between Western activists who fight for LGBTQ+ people to have more visibility within Arab countries and activists inside these countries. Indeed, in the run-up to the last football World Cup, a British activist organized what he described as the first LGBTQ+ protest in the Gulf.<sup>26</sup> This was badly received by local activists, who argue that demonstrations of solidarity, no matter how well-intentioned, are not constructive, because states use them to further exploit homophobia and win the support of a conservative majority of the population. LGBTQ+ nationals from some countries – such as Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, or Qatar – are trying to distance themselves from Western activists to gain the trust of their community and

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25 “LGBT rights: Hate ‘comes out of the closet’ in Europe”, Euronews, 30 June 2023, <https://fr.euronews.com/2023/06/30/ils-sont-sortis-de-leur-armoire-a-haine-la-montee-de-lextreme-droite-sape-les-droits-des-p>

26 Will Todman, “LGBTQ+ Advocacy in the Middle East Backfires,” December 16, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/lgbtq-advocacy-middle-east-backfires>

even be more loyal to their countries.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, while, at the time of writing, the “awareness” campaigns seem to have ended, the censorship of certain animated films presented as pro-LGBTQ+ or pro-feminist is the order of the day. To cite just one example, the film *Barbie* was banned from distribution in Algeria, and Kuwait but allowed in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Lebanon.

While religion is indeed in the background of these “awareness” campaigns against LGBTQ+ colors and “child protection” policies, it is once again instrumentalized by powers lacking legitimacy and seeking to gain the support of their populations, most of whom are conservative. If they draw on a Muslim religious normative discourse, they only reproduce far-right Western discourses and ideologies while adopting oppositional postures. This façade of opposition to the West can be seen as an attempt to win over the public opinion of their populations. The borrowing of elements of language from an increasingly dominant Western far right can be read as a continuity of mimicry of the Arab states with regard to the West and a difficult “decolonialism”.

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27 Will Todman, “LGBTQ+ Advocacy in the Middle East Backfires,” December 16, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/lgbtq-advocacy-middle-east-backfires>.

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### **About the Arab Reform Initiative**

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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