

NO PRIDE IN OCCUPATION

A Roundtable Discussion

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The following roundtable conversation took place via telephone, Internet chat, and e-mail exchange. While each conversation occurred separately, I have passed information back and forth among the three participants so they could remark on each other's comments and have edited lightly for the sake of continuity. I have also translated into English Samira Saraya's contributions, which were originally in Hebrew. The three participants are actively involved in local Palestinian queer activism in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Haneen Maikey is the founder and director of Al-Qaws (Rainbow), an independent Palestinian LGBTQ organization established in 2007. The organization is located in Jerusalem, with activists operating in both Israel and the West Bank. Rima is the information and publication project coordinator at Aswat (Voices), an LBTQI organization for Palestinian women in Israel and the occupied territories established in 2003. Saraya helped found Aswat and was the group's general director between 2007 and 2008. She is a registered nurse, a rapper, and a drag performance artist.
—Gil Hochberg

Gil Hochberg: There are several LGBTQ Israeli organizations, some of which explicitly target both Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Israelis, like the Jerusalem Open House (JOH). Is there really a need for independent and exclusively Palestinian organizations?

Haneen Maikey: Absolutely. I actually began my activist work at the JOH. After the second Intifada, people at JOH noticed that Palestinians stopped coming to the center, so they were looking for someone who speaks Arabic to run a new outreach program for Palestinians in East Jerusalem. At the beginning, I too thought that it was only a matter of language. But, after working with the LGBTQ Palestin-

ian community at the JOH for several years, I came to realize that as Palestinian LGBTQ, we need an independent organization and social space where we can get together and explore our multiple identities, needs, and concerns.

Rima: I know this sounds like a cliché, but the initial experience of most Palestinian lesbians, myself included, is that they are “the only one.” It is a very scary and lonely feeling. Creating a network of women who share similar experiences is therefore incredibly empowering. But for this kind of environment to be supportive, women must feel safe and “at home.” They need to be able to speak among themselves, about themselves, and in their own language (Arabic). So yes, I think it is very important that Aswat is an exclusively Palestinian organization.

Hochberg: What would you say are some of the particular challenges Palestinian LGBTQ face?

Samira Saraya: I can’t speak for all Palestinian LGBTQ because we all come from very different backgrounds and have different experiences. Just the fact that we are divided by the Israeli state into three groups — Israeli citizens, West Bank Palestinians, and Gaza Palestinians — already makes our experiences diverse, with each group facing a different political reality. Then, of course, there are distinctions within each of these groups between men and women, between different classes, education, and religion. All of these aspects determine the kinds of challenges one faces when confronting his or her sexual identity. So whatever I say about the Palestinian LGBTQ as a collective relates to my own experience and to the experiences of the individuals I know closely. In general, I would say that Palestinian LGBTQ have the burden of dealing with both internal and external difficulties. By internal I mean problems within the Palestinian society, from the immediate family circle to the larger social structure. Most Palestinians consider homosexuality to be a disease imported from the West. This is something most of us have to fight, first in ourselves, then in others. And as if this is not enough, we also have to face “external” difficulties, by which I mean, the difficulties resulting from our dealing with the Israeli occupying culture: as a Palestinian, you are discriminated and oppressed whatever your sexuality is.

Maikey: LGBTQ Palestinians have to deal with the burden of being a double minority — as LGBTQ persons in Palestinian society and as Palestinians living in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Like most LGBTQ people, individual LGBTQ Palestinians generally face a sense of isolation and alienation within their families and close surroundings. Many Palestinians face social ostracism and discrimination, and in some rare cases, physical violence. In addition, the unique

social, historical, and political situation of Palestinians—the Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza and decades of discrimination against Palestinians in Israel—has created real obstacles for advancing respect for sexual and gender diversity in Palestinian society, which has not had the same opportunities to grow and evolve as many other societies have.

Hochberg: Still, I would imagine that the challenges are quite different for LGBTQ Palestinians living in Israel and those living directly under military occupation in Gaza or the West Bank . . .

Rima: The main difference has to do with freedom of mobility. Women from the West Bank very rarely make it to Aswat meetings. If they are lucky, they have the freedom and ability to stay connected via Internet or phone. But even among Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, there are those who are mobile and independent, and those who can't even find a way to leave their parents' house or their husband in order to make it to a meeting. Education, location, and class determine mobility. And this is even before we talk about checkpoints.

Saraya: The Palestine society as a whole still lives a tribal life. You belong to your family, not to yourself. This is surely the case if you are a woman. Women have little, if any, authority over their time, bodies, and their selves. If you live under Israeli occupation, you are then faced with checkpoints and Israeli soldiers that further restrict your movement. In other words: for a Palestinian lesbian citizen of Israel, it will likely take a lot of maneuvering for her to successfully attend one of Aswat's meetings; for a lesbian living in the West Bank this "mission" is almost impossible, and for the one in Gaza, it is not even remotely conceivable.

Hochberg: What would you say are some of the specific connections between what Samira calls "the internal difficulties" of LGBTQ Palestinians and the Israeli occupation?

Saraya: There are many connections, but let me just address a couple. Like every society, the Palestinian society is dynamic. The changes it experiences can take various directions. The reality of occupation, oppression, financial hardship, etc., have a lot to do with the movement of the Palestinian society "backward" toward conservative, religious, and paranoid ways of being. This of course is not helpful for us LGBTQ. A society that experiences war on a daily basis and that fights for its survival cannot move ahead. It is by definition a "sick society" that needs to have the freedom and autonomy from which it can begin to heal. The other "connection" between the conflict and the LGBTQ fight is what I call the abuse of the

occupation as an excuse for not supporting our fight. You often find educated, liberal individuals within the Palestinian society, who are fighting for human rights and freedom and who agree in principle that LGBTQ issues are part of this general fight, but they still tell you that there is a time and place for everything and that first we (the Palestinians, all together united) need to fight the occupation before we can move on to deal with other concerns such as women's rights or sexual freedom. In this manner, the occupation comes to be used as something people hide behind. A way to shove these concerns under the carpet.

Rima: In order to understand our reality as Palestinian lesbians, it is very important to understand that Palestinians are an indigenous minority in Israel. Palestinians have suffered and are still suffering from traumas of land expropriation, house demolition, occupation, discrimination, and threats of citizenship dismissal. For these reasons and others, the Palestinian society is very zealous about its traditions and culture. The majority of the society rejects behaviors and changes that "threaten" its heterosexuality and patriarchy, since they are perceived as a threat to the continuity of the uniqueness of our culture. I agree with Samira. I think that a major influence one has on the other is that most Palestinians think that ending the occupation is our most important struggle, which leaves no place or legitimacy for fighting against other kinds of oppressions, not to mention the oppression of LGBTQ people.

Maikey: We in Al-Qaws consider one of our most important tasks to be the promotion of a political discourse that rejects the idea of political hierarchies along the lines mentioned by Samira. We argue that our struggle as LGBTQ Palestinians is a struggle against both the occupation and homophobia, or more accurately, it is about the intersection among these and other struggles within the Palestinian society. We are trying to promote discourse that emphasizes the interdependency between the different struggles and to show how as LGBTQ Palestinians, our various identities — gender, sexuality, nationality, etc. — are connected in complicated ways that make it impossible to view one in isolation from the others.

Hochberg: It has been said that LGBTQ Palestinians are often faced with the decision of being either "authentically Palestinian" or "authentically queer." How do you deal with this schizophrenia?

Maikey: All Palestinians live in schizophrenia. Queer Palestinians too.

Saraya: What is an authentic Palestinian?! What is authentically queer?! Clearly there are Palestinians who have a problem accepting the fact that we LGBTQ Palestinians exist. There are also Israelis, including queers, who have a prob-

lem accepting the fact that we LGBTQ Palestinians are proud of our culture and nation. For those people, the homophobic Palestinians and the racist Israeli queers, there is schizophrenia. But as far as I am concerned, there is absolutely no clash between my Palestinian identity and my identity as a lesbian. On the contrary, these aspects of my identity are inseparable. They are completely intertwined.

Maikey: In reality, however, many LGBTQ Palestinians are forced into choosing between giving up different parts of themselves. I will give you an example. I have friends who grew up knowing that they were different and that they had to move to another place if they wanted to live their sexuality openly. So they left their families to live in Tel Aviv, hoping to finally be free. But once there, they found that in order to be integrated into the LGBTQ community they needed to hide their Arab identity, to change their name and to create stories about where they came from. This way or the other, they found themselves “in the closet,” so to speak.

Hochberg: This summer, after two teenagers were shot to death in the LGBTQ center in Tel Aviv, a state memorial service was held in Tel Aviv. Could you comment on the fact that no Palestinian Israeli LGBTQ activists were invited to speak at the event?

Rima: This is not surprising. What the organizers of the event wanted was to have a Palestinian participant (to be PC) but to make sure he or she didn't make anything complicated. So they invited a Palestinian to introduce one of the speakers. This way they got what they wanted: a Palestinian face without words. In general, the Israeli gay collective is really not interested in us or what we have to say. They are maybe happy to have us participate in their events as “Arabs” but not as “Palestinians.” This is, of course, not something we have any desire to engage in.

Saraya: The majority of the LGBTQ Israeli community is Zionist and militaristic. I would even say that they are “pro-occupation,” so of course they didn't want us there. Before the memorial event, several people asked me to speak to the organizers and convince them to have someone from Aswat speak. Thinking back, I am happy I didn't: why would we want to share a stage with Limor Livnat or Shimon Peres who had the audacity to talk about “the holiness of life” while ignoring their role in facilitating the deaths of thousands of Palestinians?

Maikey: The whole frame of this event was patriotic. With the singing of the anthem, the waving of the Israeli flag, and the Israelis all being sad together, it excludes us, by definition. Our presence there would have damaged the nice picture of everybody united in [national] sorrow. It would have made everything look

less romantic, less “peaceful,” and “too political.” You know, the Israeli LGBTQ community likes to make a separation between what they call “social concerns” (i.e., gay rights) and “political concerns” (i.e., the “Palestinian problem”). They didn’t want us there because “Arabs,” by definition, are “political.” For us this event made it very clear that we are not, and probably never will be, one community. While Al-Qaws surely stands in solidarity with the victims of this hateful crime, we feel that we cannot collaborate with the Israeli LGBTQ community as a whole as long as it operates within such a racist and nationalistic frame.

Hochberg: Is there currently any ongoing collaboration between Israeli and Palestinian queer activists?

Maikey: I personally don’t have a good vision of Israeli and Palestinian queer collaboration. We as Palestinian queers (or at least speaking about the folks around me) don’t see ourselves as part of the current Israeli LGBTQ community and its struggle. We feel that the gap between us is very deep, and we live to discover it every day. We feel that the Israeli gay community is a microcosm of Israeli society in general. It privileges Israeli Jews and marginalizes Palestinians. Within gay Israeli spaces and the Israeli gay community, LGBTQ Palestinians face similar forms of discrimination that they face in their daily lives. Despite the assumption that LGBTQ communities tend to be more liberal, racism and discrimination are just as commonplace. Indeed, the Israeli LGBTQ community likes to imagine itself as more liberal than Israeli society in general and somehow free from or immune to racism. That pretension makes it all the more difficult for LGBTQ Israelis to acknowledge racism in the community. Of course, the situation with some radical queer Israeli groups is better, but even with them we often feel that we are patronized, as if we don’t know how to deal with our own problems. Working with Israeli organizations has so far involved too many nonproductive power dynamics. So for the time being, we prefer to find other outlets for collaboration.

Saraya: While I think the majority of the queer Israeli community is racist and arrogant, I think that at the same time there is an amazing group of Israeli Jews — many of whom are queer but some of whom are heterosexual — who share our Palestinian fight for social justice. I have much appreciation for these people. Their activism is not something I take for granted. They spend time and energy and often pay a high price for their activism. They could easily do what most Israelis do and pretend not to see the reality around them. But they don’t take this easy way out.

Rima: I must admit that because I spend most of my time in this building — where Aswat’s office is located and where several other feminist organizations are

hosted—my friends and colleagues are all leftist progressive feminists (Israeli Jewish and Palestinian). I realize that this is a bubble and that it doesn't reflect the majority of mainstream Israeli LGBTQ, with whom I have little if any contact at all. So I can only say that here, in this building, on the margins of this society, we—Israeli Jewish and Palestinian feminist and gay activists—share many political goals and aspirations.

Hochberg: The coming-out narrative is key to modern Western gay liberation movements. Are “coming out” and “fighting the closet” something you consider essential for Palestinian LGBTQ?

Maikey: I would say that whereas “coming out of the closet” is an important value for many Western lesbians and gays, for many LGBTQ Palestinians, coming out is not necessarily the standard by which we evaluate our freedom and equality as LGBTQ people. Moreover, those LGBTQ Palestinians for whom coming out is important may experience this process in ways that do not always neatly follow the Western coming-out narrative. Rather than simply declaring one's sexual identity to the world, coming out may, for example, be experienced as a process of individual self-discovery that might (or might not) be shared with others, depending on the particular circumstances and needs of the individual. Although we respect and understand forms of activism in which a specific understanding of “visibility” is the goal, we believe that there are other, equally valid forms of activism—and ways of being LGBTQ—that should also be respected. It seems to me that this idea of visibility and being seen in public, which has been a part of Western gay liberation movements, has become a “universal goal” that all LGBTQ are asked to follow. In this sense, the coming-out narrative has become oppressive in and of itself, as it functions as a standard by which to tag people: those who are out (healthy, strong, mature) and those who are not (weak, immature, backward). We have found that oftentimes the emphasis on visibility and coming out is inadequate: first, because these ideas do not effectively capture or respond to the actual needs and experiences of LGBTQ Palestinians, and second, because they serve to empower our most vocal opponents who use them to represent us—LGBTQ Palestinians—as something foreign and inauthentic.

Rima: The closet, as we know, is a spectrum. In Aswat we respect the choice of each individual to live her life as she wishes. Very few of us are fully “out,” but for us the issue of visibility is important less on the level of the individual members and more on the level of Aswat as a political organization. Aswat is “out” and that is what matters. It sends a clear message: we are here, we are real, and we will not disappear.

Saraya: For me personally, coming out to my family and friends was liberating. Being out made me strong and independent. But I know this is not always the case, and I don't think it is right for me or anybody else to tell others how to live or how to become free. Freedom is a relative term. Real freedom is the freedom to choose whatever kind of freedom you want.

Hochberg: Some argue that the very idea of sexuality as an identity formation is a Western concept and that as such it is foreign to Arab culture . . .

Rima: Yes, we are all familiar with this argument. It is true that homosexuality in the modern West is conceived of as an identity and that in some ways you could say that in the Arab world it is a matter of sexual practice. In general, what matters to our society is how things look. So yes, of course it is easier for many Arabs to live a normative married life while having same-sex sex "on the side," and as long as we all pretend this doesn't happen, that is fine. But I am not sure I agree that this is something we should aspire to. I know [Joseph] Massad talks about this as being liberating, but for me and most lesbians I know, homosexuality is a lifestyle and not just a sexual practice. And even if this idea about lifestyle originates in the West, I still find it liberating. I don't just want my sexual activities to be "tolerated." I want my love for another person to be recognized as legitimate, and I don't want to have to yield to heterosexual standards of living.

Maikey: Many LGBTQ Palestinians understand their gender and sexual identities in ways similar to many Westerners. Specifically, many LGBTQ Palestinians view sexual behavior and sexual identity as interconnected. Many Palestinians, however, do not share this view. Participating in same-sex behavior, in other words, does not make one "lesbian" or "gay." So I am not sure it is productive to come up with a definitive answer. I think it is now time for us to explore these questions from the inside and to not accept them from the outside as a theoretical axiom. What I can say for sure is that at this point the discourse of "sexual identity" is already part of our discourse as LGBTQ Palestinian activists, whether it is a Western concept or not.

Saraya: I would agree that in Arab culture "sexuality" is not really a concept associated with a clear sense of identity. And it is true that it is at times discussed (when it is) in terms of practices and positions, rather than "lifestyle." But to that I must add: so what? Does it mean that this idea doesn't move around like other ideas? Cultures don't exist in isolation from each other; there is always mobility of ideas, concepts, and terms across cultures. So to me this kind of argument functions so as to delegitimize our struggle as Palestinian LGBTQ, not

really to save any authentic sexuality. It harms our struggle against homophobia. This is nothing but a holy war for the sake of the familiar, the privileged, and the so-called authentic. For those of us who are worried about the “negative impacts of the imperial West on Arab culture” I say, “too late. Arab queers are already here. So you can stop worrying.”

Hochberg: What about internal tensions among Palestinian LGBTQ? Is there ever a sense that some are judged as “sellouts” by living a so-called Western lifestyle or hanging out and sleeping with Israeli Jews?

Saraya: People will always find something to criticize you for. I am in a relationship with a Jewish woman, and truthfully I don’t care what anybody has to say about this. I know there are Jewish women who would not date a Palestinian, and I personally know Palestinian women who would not, in principle, date an Israeli Jew. I consider these “principles” to be racist, whether expressed from a so-called position of power or a minority position. Any classification of individuals purely on the basis of their race, nationality, ethnicity, or skin color is in my mind racism, no matter from what position it is made. So yes—there is criticism of the sort you mention, but one learns to ignore it and focus on what really matters.

Maikey: We have had these kinds of conversations at Al-Qaws, but the complaints actually came from the other side: there were individuals who felt that our organization was enforcing the Palestinian issue too much and making those who feel less identified with these political questions uncomfortable. As for the other way around, I don’t know anybody in Al-Qaws who thinks or speaks this discourse of authenticity. Most all of our activists live in Tel Aviv or Jaffa, we all have Israeli Jewish friends and, hmmm . . . we all sleep with Jews, otherwise we would not have a sex life!

Rima: Today most of the Palestinian lesbians are deeply in the closet, and there are no specific places that you can meet other Palestinian lesbians, other than Aswat of course. But Aswat is not a dating group. Love relations do develop; however, they are not our main goal. Therefore it is quite common for Palestinians to be in a romantic relationship with Israeli Jews, mainly because you can meet them at parties or gay bars. Some women prefer not to date another Palestinian woman because they don’t want to go through the same challenges they face with their society twice (first on their own and the second time through their partner). Is there judgment from others? I don’t think so; it is not something that comes up in our meetings. On the contrary, we respect each other’s choices, and we are very happy that we as women are able to choose.

Hochberg: I understand the anger directed toward Western journalists for prying into sensationalist information, but I must ask nevertheless: how dangerous is it for Palestinians to be “outed” as LGBTQ?

Maikey: I don’t have a problem with the question. I have a problem with journalists who come here looking for cheap stories about the exotic Palestinian “blood-thirsty” society. But to answer your question: homophobia exists in the Palestinian society, and we are dealing with its outcomes daily. The discrimination is both direct and indirect, and yes, there are surely places and situations where it is dangerous for gay people to be known as such. Just as it is in many parts of the United States and elsewhere.

Rima: We have no hard facts and numbers with which to answer this question. Nobody is denying that homosexuals face dangers, but I would add that it is important to distinguish between the reality women and men face. Our struggle as lesbians cannot be separated from our struggle as women. The dangers lesbians face have a lot to do with the fact that as women, we do not accept our position as subordinate to patriarchal authority. We want to be more than someone’s mother, daughter, or wife. The price women pay for crossing these lines is often very high.

Hochberg: Israel often uses stories about Palestinian homophobia and patriarchal chauvinism—against which it portrays itself as the only safe haven for LGBTQ in the region—in its appeal for international support. How do you deal with this sort of rhetorical manipulation?

Maikey: I think it is pathetic that Israel relies on gay rights to promote its liberal image. But what I find most troubling is that in order to present itself as some kind of a “gay refuge,” Israel exploits tales of terror about oppressed gay Palestinians. We at Al-Qaws refuse to be a part of this campaign. To Israelis who use us this way I say, “Stop speaking in my name and using me for a cause you never supported in the first place. If you want to do me a favor, then stop bombing my friends, end your occupation, and leave me to rebuild my community. I’m aware that my society has a long way to go in terms of human rights and social issues, but it’s my responsibility, not yours.”

Saraya: To begin with, it is important to make some things clear. It is true that LGBTQ in Israel enjoys a certain degree of freedom unavailable to them in the Palestinian society. But this freedom is not absolute, nor is it available for all. If you are an Israeli gay man who served in the army, looks masculine, acts “normal,” and has a secure job, then you are treated well. For the rest of us, things

are much less rosy. I agree that Tel Aviv is a pink bubble, but the rest of Israel is for the most part a homophobic place, much like many other places. Now when it comes to LGBTQ Palestinians, Israel is surely not a haven of any sort, and the idea that sexual identity is a basis for seeking refuge in Israel is a total myth. Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza simply cannot come here. One or two stories circulating in the news about the Palestinian gay guys Israel “saves” does not turn Israel into a LGBTQ Palestinian liberator.

Hochberg: I know that Aswat and Al-Qaws often work in collaboration and that you share many goals, but in comparing the mission statements posted on your Web sites one gets the impression that there are also some clear differences in emphasis.

Rima: Aswat is an organization for LBTQI women. Our main goal is to create a secure place for women to express themselves and be who they are with all their identities (national, gender, sexual, social class). For this reason, it was important for us to have an outlet that is for and about women who self-identify as lesbian, bisexual, transgender (including male-to-female and female-to-male), and intersex. So I would say our struggle is in essence a feminist struggle against all kinds of oppression and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Maikey: I think that for the most part we share a political vision. If there are differences, they are mostly in our understanding of political strategies. As I see it, bringing in a traditional women’s rights discourse is antirevolutionary, as it relies too much on notions of tolerance, equality, and normality. I think we should aspire to break from those notions and create a more radical political discourse that is critical of normality itself. Perhaps this is what is meant by “queer politics.” I am not sure. I don’t really have a solid grasp of the term. But I use it in the sense of breaking away from current power structures that define what is right and what is wrong, what is normal and what is abnormal. I think radical politics should never follow the incentive to be normal.

Hochberg: I want to end our conversation with a question about terminology. How do you feel about borrowing English terms such as *gay*, *lesbian*, *queer*, which seem to travel globally? How important is it for you to use or generate your own Arabic terms?

Rima: Aswat considers the issue of creating localized Arabic terminology to be very important. Most of us reach a moment when we realize that we can only talk

about our sexuality by using English or Hebrew terms, because those are more readily available. This creates a certain distance between us and our “selves,” as if we have to go out of our own linguistic reality and culture in order to articulate something so central, like our sexuality. One of our goals in *Aswat* is to reclaim Arabic for our own use.

The sources are there, in medieval poetry, in philosophy, everywhere. One of the main difficulties we encounter is that the commonly used Arabic terms (like *luti* for homosexual men or *sahaqi* for lesbian) are extremely derogatory and offensive. So we are trying to find different, neutral words to replace these terms. Being in touch with other organizations in the region, like the Lebanese organizations *Helem* or *Meem*, helps us a lot in this regard. We found out that they use *mithli* (sameness, same as me). This term is slowly beginning to circulate in the region, and this is only one example.

Although it is a slow process, we are beginning to feel its effect on our daily discourse. Today we can talk and write about our sexuality in our own language, something that we at *Aswat* find very liberating. It is also important in allowing us to carry on this discourse in the language of our society, thus enabling others in our community to feel less distanced from our cause. This kind of process can only happen as a conscious decision and effort on our part.

Maikey: I know many groups, among them *Aswat*, are busy trying to come up with appropriate Arabic terms for us to use. As far as I am concerned, this is not a priority. These changes ought to happen naturally and organically as part of an evolving community. I don't think they can be “decided upon.” It is not about sitting in your office and looking at a list of terms, or reading medieval poetry and deciding what would be the proper one to use. I think language ought to be generated playfully through real lived experiences. My friends and I at *Al-Qaws* spend a great deal of our time playing with language: breaking, stretching, and exploring Arabic, but also switching between languages. I personally like the term *queer*, which I don't consider an “English term,” but rather an English/Arabic term. I find it useful for the time being, but I am not attached to it or to any other term. I am happy to move along with language. I am not looking for a term to marry. When it comes to language, I believe in short affairs.