

## “The Queer Movement in Palestine”

by Anisha Yoshi

### *Introduction*

In 2006, InterPride, the organization that plans and hosts the annual international World Pride parade, announced that Israel would be hosting the parade for that year.<sup>1</sup> The event was to be called “Love Without Borders.”<sup>2</sup> The bitter irony of the announcement was not lost on queer Palestinians and activists— what did “Love Without Borders” mean, really, if it also meant increased surveillance and harassment, and possible deportation, for Palestinians and Arabs from neighboring countries?<sup>3</sup> If Israel already had a history of deporting queer activists who supported and participated in the liberation struggle?<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the heteronormativity and fear of gender divergence common to the majority of societies, the ordinary lives of queer people and the queer movement in Palestine are also deeply enmeshed in the political realities of settler colonialism. In this essay, I analyze how the queer movement in Palestine has been articulated within this reality through the lens of political opportunities. In spite of the many barriers to a publicly visible realization of the queer movement in Palestine, I argue, the movement has offered important ways of imagining and practicing decolonization; their contributions can in turn inform queer theory and movements in questioning some of their own exclusivist, normalizing tendencies.

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<sup>1</sup> Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism. “Call to Boycott World Pride in Jerusalem 2006,” February 12, 2017. <https://electronicintifada.net/content/call-boycott-world-pride-jerusalem-2006/519>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jasbir K. Paur, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

I begin with a brief introduction of Palestinian queer experiences, and an overview of how queer Palestinian activists have pushed the queer liberation movement forward. In this section, I also discuss some of the difficulties of organizing a queer movement in a political and social context like that of Palestine. I then analyze how a discourse of progress and sexual acceptance has been deployed by Israel to further its settler colonial project. This narrative of progress and civilization is part of a broader set of problematic strategies that legitimate some queer identities at the expense of ‘othering’ queer people who do not fit this identity. I then demonstrate how Palestinian activists tackle these shortcomings in the queer movement in Palestine, and conclude by discussing what Palestine contributes to queer theory.

### *The Multiplicity of Queer Palestinian Experiences*

Given the sociopolitical contexts and diversities within Palestine life and identity, the experiences and lives of queer Palestinians are multiple and diverse, so that it is difficult to overlay directly onto this context the subjectivities through which we understand queerness in the rest of the world.<sup>5</sup> About half of the world’s Palestinians live in the diaspora, 1.9 million live as second-class citizens in Israel, and 2.8 million and 1.9 million Palestinians live as stateless noncitizens in the West Bank and Gaza respectively.<sup>6</sup> These varied political and geographical contexts, on top of other factors such as social class, are deeply influential in shaping the experiences of queer Palestinians.<sup>7</sup>

Within Palestine, various social and political factors such as heteropatriarchy and homophobia make it difficult for many to be publicly visible about their queerness regardless of

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<sup>5</sup> Atshan, Sa'ed, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

whether they have close confidants, are in relationships, or choose to keep that part of their identity to themselves.<sup>8</sup> Publicly confronting homophobia also holds the possibility of social backlash in one's own community—and it can reinforce binaries that are used to justify colonialism, as I explore below. But, however one is to confront this issue, the reality persists that there is a looming threat of social and physical harm when it comes to publicly expressing one's sexuality and gender nonconformity. In his ethnography of queer Palestinians, Sa'ed Atshan tells us the stories of queer Palestinians who suffered great psychological and physical torment when their families found out about their sexuality, or queer women and men who were cornered into marriages of convenience in order to escape further social and physical backlash.<sup>9</sup>

Sexuality is also regarded by some as a Western import that has the potential to further colonize Palestinians.<sup>10</sup> This social fear is reinforced by the politicization of socially marginalized Palestinians: Israeli authorities target those who engage in drug-use, prostitution, premarital sex or homosexuality, and blackmail them into becoming informants.<sup>11</sup> This in turn adds a political dimension to the social stigma queer Palestinians already face, for such associations are thought to disqualify them from the nationalist struggle.<sup>12</sup> Thus, during the period between the two intifadas, Palestinian authorities launched “cleansing” strategies to uproot from society individuals who threatened the moral order.<sup>13</sup> So, while some have a social and political fear of being publicly outed, this fear also conflicts with the need for social recognition.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the journey of realizing one's sexuality is fraught in a tough matrix of

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<sup>8</sup> Atshan, Sa'ed. 2020. *Queer Palestine and the empire of critique*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Walaa Alqaisiya, “Decolonial Queering: The Politics of Being Queer in Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47, no. 3 (2018): 29–44.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Atshan, 32.

several factors, such as marginalization within one's own communities, anti-Arab racism, the material and social difficulties of life under settler colonialism, and surveillance.<sup>15</sup>

Given such social realities and varied experiences, different symbols of queerness and organization resonate in different ways with Palestinians—some may aspire to publicly visible organization like a pride parade, whether in Palestine or one abroad, while others may see it as completely out of the question for the near future.<sup>16</sup> In his ethnography, Atshan thus notes the distinction made by Philip Ayoub in his study of queer movements and their visibility across the world. Ayoub distinguishes between “interpersonal visibility,” or the interaction within members of the queer community, and “public visibility,” a more public way of engaging the movement and community with the broader society and state.<sup>17</sup> This perspective is important in considering queer movements conducted in places with severe political and social constraints, especially in determining what level of public visibility a movement should consider, given the possibility of a level of social or political backlash that might be counterintuitive to furthering the movement.<sup>18</sup>

The issue of homophobia in Palestine notwithstanding, this lens is also invaluable in analyzing some of the difficulties in organizing a public-facing queer movement in Palestine in the context of settler colonialism and nationalist resistance. Indeed, these difficulties are directly rooted in the political conditions birthed by settler colonialism: queer Palestinian activists are frequently hampered by the belief that the struggle for national liberation takes precedence over the struggle for queer liberation and the battle against heteropatriarchy—if queer liberation is even on the agenda.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the context of colonialism in some cases gives rise to, and in

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<sup>15</sup> Atshan, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Atshan, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Atshan, 30.

<sup>18</sup> Atshan, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Nadine Naber et al., “On Palestinian Studies and Queer Theory,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47, no. 3 (May 2018): 62–71.

others exacerbates the social, psychological and physical violence experienced by queer Palestinians, for the nationalist resistance has also created a demand for heteronormativity and patriarchy.<sup>20</sup> This is demonstrated in how Israeli authorities target non-normative individuals, sowing the seeds for a more political reaction against non-normativity in Palestine. Some articulations of the nationalist resistance also mark out the bodies of women as the site of violence, or mothers who “birth the nation” and “urge their nationalist sons to launch the revolution.”<sup>21</sup> The resistance is described as a “pregnancy,” and attempts to suppress it an “abortion.”<sup>22</sup> Such a patriarchal articulation of liberation and the normativity that guides the struggle is part and parcel of settler colonialism, and in turn leads to marking out queer individuals as threats to national liberation, severely constraining the possibility of a publicly visible movement.

Other more material constraints to the queer movement in Palestine are also borne of the conditions of settler colonialism. The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and constrain queer Palestinians’ access to the “outside” world, use innumerable checkpoints to hinder travel between cities and towns, and make it difficult to obtain the resources that would sustain queer organizations.<sup>23</sup> Safe physical space has been another casualty of occupation: though queer Palestinians in the Occupied Territories have been able to secure safe spaces and houses, activists acutely feel the risks and challenges associated with efforts to keep such spaces secret.<sup>24</sup> These issues of deliberately constructed separation make it difficult to have a contiguous movement for Palestinians who face countless barriers in meeting together—queer Palestinians

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<sup>20</sup> Alqaisiya, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Alqaisiya, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Alqaisiya, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Atshan, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Atshan, 47.

in the West Bank report feeling alienated from the work done by alQaws, one of the major Palestinian LGBT organizations, which has an office in Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup> Part of this alienation is physical: most queer Palestinians cannot get to alQaws,<sup>26</sup> and even those in the West Bank and Gaza who can follow organizations' work online feel the pain of the inability to experience such solidarity in person acutely. For Palestinians who do not have access to the Internet or are in rural areas, such difficulties become even greater.<sup>27</sup> The enforced separation of settler colonialism also means Palestinians in the Occupied Territories may feel their needs and experiences cannot be adequately represented by queer Palestinians and organizations in Israel, even though being a Palestinian and being queer in Israel comes with its own challenges.<sup>28</sup> Such material difficulties, even if they are associated with the social climate in Palestine, are greatly reproduced by the conditions of occupation. On the other hand, the politics of settler colonialism are directly to blame for impeding queer communities from generating contiguity.

Such are the circumstances in which alQaws and Aswat, two major Palestinian LGBT organizations, have articulated a queer Palestinian agenda. alQaws ("rainbow" in Arabic) was initially established in 2001 under Jerusalem Open House, an Israeli LGBT organization, as a space where queer Palestinians could gather to discuss issues of queerness.<sup>29</sup> JOH espoused an "apolitical" approach to queer issues—Palestinian members could not discuss how deeply the issues of being a queer Palestinian were bound to the occupation. As the second intifada progressed, queer Palestinians under JOH found this increasingly untenable, for the "apolitical" approach precluded possibilities of discussing their very existence as Palestinians. In 2005,

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<sup>25</sup> Atshan, 61.

<sup>26</sup> Atshan, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Atshan, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Atshan, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Alqaisiya, 30-31.

alQaws split from JOH, and since then, alQaws has been continuously engaging with queerness in a way that does not gloss over the colonial reality of Palestine.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Aswat, an organization for Palestinian queer women, was established in 2002, with registration in Israel.<sup>31</sup> Aswat focuses on the needs of queer Palestinian women, providing safe spaces, workshops, and publications with a focus on feminism and women's experiences. Both alQaws and Aswat have women as their most prominent leaders.<sup>32</sup>

As illustrated earlier in the section, the experiences of queer Palestinians can be extremely diverse and heterogenous. Layered with the aforementioned political, social and material difficulties, this heterogeneity has also led to disagreements among activists and organizations as to what strategies can best build a queer movement adapted to the Palestinian context.<sup>33</sup> Some focus largely on the struggle for anti-imperialism and ending the occupation, whereas others view this goal in tandem with fighting heteronormativity. Groups like alQaws take a multivocal approach, resisting both the settler state and heteronormative and patriarchal articulations of Palestinian liberation.<sup>34</sup> One view unites these various organizations and activists: queer liberation in Palestine is not possible without securing freedom from occupation and colonialism.<sup>35</sup>

In the following sections, I discuss how distorted engagements with the discourse of progress and tolerance hinder the queer movement in Palestine, and how queer activists and groups in Palestine have combatted such tendencies.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Atshan, 46.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Atshan, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Mikki Stelder, "From the Closet into the Knesset': Zionist Sexual Politics and the Formation of Settler Subjectivity," *Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 4 (2018): 442–463.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

*Pinkwashing and Homonationalism*

The 2006 announcement I introduced in the beginning of this essay came much to the frustration of queer Palestinian activists and queer supporters of the liberation movement globally. Yet it was but one installment in a series of concerted efforts kickstarted in 2002 by Israel to burnish its international image by presenting itself as an LGBT-friendly, progressive tourist destination.<sup>36</sup> As a campaign to boost Israel's image in the world—as “the only democracy in the Middle East” and an oasis of modernity and development, “Brand Israel” was officially launched in 2005. Branding efforts also included projecting an image of acceptance and tolerance of sexuality and gender diversity, and a haven for gay tourists.<sup>37</sup> Such practices have been identified by activists as “pinkwashing,” the engagement of LGBT-friendly tropes to rebrand Israel's image.<sup>38</sup>

Jasbir Puar identifies the dangers of such supposedly progressive rhetoric as “sexual exceptionalism” and “homonationalism.”<sup>39</sup> Puar defines “exceptionalism” as suggestive of a “departure from, yet mastery in linear teleologies of progress.”<sup>40</sup> In such a teleology, the USA presents the ideological and civilizational, if not geographical endpoint, and such a narrative has continually been used in the discourse of terrorism and counterterrorism.<sup>41</sup> Such a secular, liberal queer discourse increasingly seeks identification with the state and institutions.<sup>42</sup> Through this

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<sup>36</sup> Alqaisiya, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Atshan, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Leila Farsakh, Rhoda Kanaaneh, and Sherene Seikaly, “Special Issue: Queering Palestine: Introduction,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47 no. 3 (May 2018): 7–12.

<sup>39</sup> Puar, Jasbir K. 2017. *Terrorist assemblages - homonationalism in queer times*.

<sup>40</sup> Puar, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Naber et al., 62–71.

<sup>42</sup> C. Heike Schotten, “To Exist Is to Resist: Palestine and the Question of Queer Theory,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47 no. 3 (May 2018): 13–28.



lens, which encompasses queerness not only at the heart of the empire but more globally, it becomes clear that moves such as gay marriage and the acceptance of queer people into the military are less about gay rights and more about proving progress and marking out the distance between civilization and barbarism.<sup>43</sup> While Puar does not discount the struggles queer bodies may experience in the heart of the empire itself, she points out that in such a case a secular, liberal understanding of sexual normativity—white homosexuals—builds “homonormativity.”<sup>44</sup> Orientalism is also implied in such a paradigm, for the sexuality and bodies of nonnormative queer individuals and people of color are chalked up to “culture” and “religion.”<sup>45</sup> Such sexual exceptionalism sustains itself by obfuscating the policing and normalizing boundaries it has itself created—boundaries that are contingent on normative race, religion, class, and gender.<sup>46</sup> In this paradigm of normalization and tolerance, “nonnormative” queer bodies—those of Muslims and Arabs in this case—are othered, are “queered” once again.<sup>47</sup>

Such rhetoric hinders the efforts of the Palestinian queer movement and national liberation movement in multiple ways. Homosexuality is assimilated into the state and used to further the cause of the empire.<sup>48</sup> Israel becomes “exceptional” in its modernity and acceptance, while Palestine and Islam are marked out for their “monstrosity” and otherness.<sup>49</sup> Apart from attempting to (superficially) expunge the homophobia within Israel, such a discourse serves to present queer Palestinians as victims that must look to Israel as a source of acceptance and a safe haven, although in reality queer Palestinians suffer from violence at the hands of Israel as much

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<sup>43</sup> Puar, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Puar, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Puar, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Puar, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Puar, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Naber et al., 62–71.

<sup>49</sup> Puar, 17.

as straight Palestinians do.<sup>50</sup> Atshan points out the falsity of this binary: there is no ‘pink gate’ in the wall that is supposed to let queer Palestinians pass through to Israel with ease, and no special passes are issued to LGBTQ Palestinians at military checkpoints by Israeli forces.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, when the branding is successful in attracting gay tourists to Israel, the economic benefits of heightened tourism reproduce colonialism by depleting indigenous resources and funding Israel’s war making.<sup>52</sup> Most significantly, such exceptionalist rhetoric also dissociates the impediments settler colonialism imposes on the queer movement in Palestine, essentially depoliticizing the movement and the necessity for liberation.

Significantly, the voices of queer Palestinians are silenced in such “progressive” narratives. Following the Oslo Accords, Palestine was inundated with foreign aid dedicated to “development” and “peacebuilding.”<sup>53</sup> At the same time, Israel’s expansionist actions were ignored while conditions and activities devoted to this “development” (conditions Palestinians had not quite consented to) were imposed on Palestine.<sup>54</sup> As a part of this process, Palestine had to conform to donors’ standards, which were often shaped by the “development” and modernity projected by Israel. It was postulated that the Palestinian city of Ramallah be modeled after Tel Aviv, once again erasing in the process the violence that had gone into the building of Tel Aviv.<sup>55</sup> Pinkwashing, homonationalism, and development discourse are often thus achieved by deliberately muddying historical and political realities. Beyond the perversity of looking to one’s own oppressors for salvation, such representation can also only be achieved by erasing the strides Palestinian activists have made in their own ways.

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<sup>50</sup> Alqaisiya, 35.

<sup>51</sup> Atshan, 38.

<sup>52</sup> Stelder, 455.

<sup>53</sup> Alqaisiya, 32-33.

<sup>54</sup> Alqaisiya, 32-33.

<sup>55</sup> Alqaisiya, 32-33.

Once more, we can examine how the queer movement in Palestine has strategically and continually battled the harmful impacts of homonationalism and pinkwashing, even in the absence of sufficient social and political opportunities. alQaws actively counters pinkwashing campaigns by engaging in “pinkwatching,” calling out the hypocrisy inherent to presenting Israel as LGBT-friendly while it oppresses countless queer and straight Palestinians. alQaws activist Omar Khoury has pointed out how pinkwashing efforts often depend on implicit binaries between Israel and Palestine, and as a part of ‘decolonial queering,’ alQaws challenges how homophobia is falsely depicted specifically as characteristic of Islam and Palestine.<sup>56</sup> To counter the pinkwashing of Tel Aviv Pride in 2016, alQaws activists launched a Boycott Tel Aviv Pride 2016 campaign, publishing a video with the question “Why Are You Proud of Tel Aviv?” imploring the audience to consider the colonial violence that had been historically unleashed upon the Palestinian population of the city, the violence that had preceded its now purported standing as a “gay haven.”<sup>57</sup> While homonormative queer discourse engages with a liberal, secular understanding of the queer movement, alQaws members also challenge the perception that “coming out” is a universal indicator of progress for the queer movement, instead pondering how the Palestinian battle against homophobia can be articulated within local social contexts.<sup>58</sup> Within the frame of homonationalism, “othering” is combatted, and queerness normalized by securing privileges such as marriage and military service. alQaws question how such standards can apply to Palestinians and other disenfranchised queers when statehood itself is denied to them, thus linking queer discourse to decolonialism.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Alqaisiya, 32-33.

<sup>57</sup> Alqaisiya, 34.

<sup>58</sup> Leila Farsakh et al., “Special Issue: Queering Palestine: Introduction,” 7–12.

<sup>59</sup> Schotten, 20.

*Perseverance in the Face of Adversity*

Despite the many difficulties of pushing forward a queer movement in Palestine, organizations like alQaws and Aswat continuously explore the points at which settler colonialism and heteronormativity intersect, and fight those forces. Although the social and political opportunities to realize a public facing movement are few and far in between, it is important to acknowledge the various tangible actions these groups have taken to generate support for queer Palestinians. alQaws works to bring together queer Palestinians from both sides of the Green Line (the contested boundaries between Israel and Palestine) to reclaim the contiguity that has been denied them.<sup>60</sup> Such efforts deliberately undermine Israel's attempts to separate Palestinian people, further queer activism, and present newer avenues for liberation efforts. These organizations and teams in Haifa, Tel Aviv and Ramallah organize groups with trained facilitators to empower and educate Palestinian youth.<sup>61</sup> alQaws and Aswat have also partnered to run a hotline to support Palestinians who have questions about their sexuality,<sup>62</sup> and collaborate with Palestinian partner institutions to run empowerment workshops in the West Bank. These events and efforts provide a semblance of spaces where, at least in the private sphere, queer Palestinians may engage with and entertain questions about their sexuality and find community support.<sup>63</sup> In small but significant ways, queer groups and activists are also posing challenges to patriarchy and heteronormativity in a more public-facing manner. They do so by questioning the stereotype that LGBTQ individuals collaborate with Israel and are detrimental to Arab and Muslim values, instead showing that the way queer individuals articulate modes of

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<sup>60</sup> Alqaisiya, 34.

<sup>61</sup> Atshan, 50.

<sup>62</sup> Atshan, 50.

<sup>63</sup> Atshan, 47.

being is essential to the liberation movement.<sup>64</sup> Thus, even within contexts of limited political opportunity and circumstances in which they are actively surveilled and thwarted, Palestinian activists and groups have carved out important means of supporting queer Palestinians—in ways that are borne of as well as constrained by life under colonialism.

### *Conclusion*

While the work of alQaws, Aswat and queer Palestinian activists demonstrate how a movement can be carried forth even with limited social and political opportunities, it also highlights how serious engagement with deeper historical issues is necessary in realizing queer liberation. The struggle against heteronormativity, the patriarchy, and homophobia cannot be isolated from settler colonialism. Pinkwashing and homonationalism in the post-Oslo Accords Palestinian context illustrate how important it is to rethink internationalizing queer discourse and the implications it carries: queer subjectivities, communities and movements as they are conceived of in the US, and the global north generally cannot be universalized to all circumstances. Queer movements, in many contexts, must tread along social and political lines that are contingent on deep historical legacies, and transposing subjectivity as understood in one part of the world to another only contributes to the construction of newer forms of otherness that are then consumed for the causes of empire.

In such socially and politically extenuating circumstances as in Palestine, with limited political opportunities, the very act of “existing,” both as a Palestinian and as a queer individual, is also “resisting.”<sup>65</sup> Heike Schotten, in her analysis of engaging queer theory in the context of Palestine, points out that colonization and heteronormativity are contingent on obscuring and

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<sup>64</sup> Atshan, 51.

<sup>65</sup> Schotten, 2018.

disappearing deviance, a condition which itself is created by normalization and institutionalization.<sup>66</sup> In this sense, being itself rejects the logic of being made a “minority” and othering. Being itself can be an act of resistance to regimes of normalization and violence.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

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