

Palestinian Visibility and Activism: The Plight of Queer Palestinians under Occupation and Homophobia

Mohammed S. Abualsaid

Department of Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Email: mabualsaid@hotmail.com

How to cite this paper: Abualsaid, M. S. (2023). Palestinian Visibility and Activism: The Plight of Queer Palestinians under Occupation and Homophobia. *Advances in Anthropology*, 13, 204-213.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/aa.2023.132012>

Received: April 14, 2023

Accepted: May 23, 2023

Published: May 26, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Queer Palestinian representation has become an essential discussion in spaces concerning Palestinian liberation. While queer Palestinians participate and advocate for Palestinian sovereignty, it was not until the past two decades anthropologists paid attention to the influence and dynamics of queer centered organisations. Scholars have contributed significantly to Palestinian queer organisations' activism through the context of global politics, yet the independent queer Palestinian experience requires more exploration to fully contextualise Queer Palestine. The objective of this paper is to highlight the concealed element of the queer Palestinian experience and explicate why Queer Palestinian rights are essential to Palestinian sovereignty. The research methods focus on two elements: the textual analysis of recent publications centralised around Queer Palestinian activism and social behavior within the context of visibility and state propaganda. Specifically, the political influence and challenges of Queer Palestinian organisations, and their development in political approach and the challenges of ethnoheteronormativity and the difference in visibility between queer Israelis and Palestinians. Second, interviews with queer volunteers, that shall remain anonymous, who graciously provided an insider perspective on the individual experience of queer Palestinians through first-hand observation.

Keywords

Queer, Activism, Palestine, Israel, Pinkwashing, Colonialism

1. Introduction

The queer Palestinian movement was, in fact, inspired by Palestinian feminist movements that advocated for both the liberation of women and the nation

(Atshan, 2020). Specifically, lesbian women brought the subject of a queer Palestine into the political sphere (Atshan, 2020). Initially, Palestinian organisations reached out to Israeli institutions; however, the volatile political environment for Palestinian-Israelis and stateless Palestinians undermined the influence within the Palestinian LGBT movements. The colonial despotism of Palestine by the Israeli government and homophobia in Palestinian communities has rendered Queer Palestinians invisible from the Palestinian liberation discussion. The former is reinforced by Israeli's ethnoheteronormativity—a concept which encompasses colonial oppression and heteronormative customs. The latter is reinforced through the critique of homophobia within the Palestinian community which is seen as a product of Israel's and the West's colonial agenda, resulting in an increased push-back against any form of discourse involving Palestinian queer rights. "Queer Palestine" refers to the fundamental element of queer liberation that fulfills the vision of a free Palestine. The term, "Queer", is the description that encompasses non-hetero normative sexual and gender diversity, not including those that originate from recent gender ideology such as "non-binary" or "gender queer". As such, interviews and textual analysis conducted serve as a testimony to Palestinian queer agency and how their involvement is crucial to a free Palestine, despite their circumstances.

2. Zionism's Weaponization of Anti-Semitism

There have been debates about the early versions of Zionism, where it allowed Palestinian Christians and Muslims to co-exist with Zionists in the newly developed state of Israel (Atshan, 2020). However, such discussion is considered to be of the past. The Labour party of Israel adopted right-leaning definitions of Zionism leading to increased militarism and right-wing policies (Atshan, 2020). Activists, such as Judith Butler, emphasize that the rejection of Zionism is the ethical and essential step to achieving equality between Israelis and Palestinians. Of course, criticism of Israeli policies is often equated to anti-Semitism by Zionist officials, repressing any form of dialogue that references Israeli war crimes or illegal donor practices made by Israeli organisations. One of the most controversial examples is Minnesota's congresswoman, Ilhan Omar. Glenn Greenwald, a world-renowned journalist, made a twitter announcement criticizing House Minority Leader, Kevin McCarthy, who threatened to take action against Omar after her criticism of Israel. She responded to Greenwald's tweet: "It's all about the Benjamins baby" a reference to a 90's P. Diddy song. Her comments received backlash from both sides of the political spectrum, accusing her of using an anti-Semitic trope of Jewish Americans having global monetary influence. In reality, her comment was directed at the clandestine activities of Israeli-organisation AIPAC and its illegal funding of Zionist U.S politicians to pass pro-Israeli legislation. The incident of Ilhan Omar suggests that making clear distinctions between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism is imperative for both Palestinian liberation and to recognise when anti-Semitism has manifested. The current success of

the pro-Israeli lobby stems from its financial contributions to its political allies, and its character assassinations of political adversaries. An example to illustrate this fact occurred in 1992 during the congressional elections. One of the largest recipients of AIPAC financial contributions was Mel Reynolds, who defeated Gus Savage in Illinois. Savage proposed a legislation which eliminated funds for the resettlement of Soviet Jews in Israel, generating opposition from AIPAC. The results of the election led to the victory of Reynolds; a victory that came to fruition due to AIPAC's financial contributions and efforts as suggested by Savage. Another example of AIPAC influence on a congressional election involved Senator Charles Percy of Illinois. Percy expressed support for Palestinian rights. In retaliation, AIPAC donated \$300,000 to his opponent, Paul Simon. Director of AIPAC, Tom Dine, stated that "all Jews in America gathered to oust Percy, and the American politicians got the message". In the end, Simon emerged victorious. Queer Palestinians believe that the struggle against Zionism and its ethno-religious privileges to be a crucial organising principle. While Queer Palestinians are continuously marginalised in the fight against the occupation, the association of anti-Semitism to Zionism on state-sanctioned media and illicit donor practices restricts any form of progress queer Palestinians attempt to achieve.

3. Textual Analysis: Political Strategies of Queer Palestinian Organisations

Queer Palestinians are often not discussed in other advocate circles as they are not expected to be utilised as a functional demographic dedicated to the liberation of Palestine. However, the current state of Palestine calls for the analysis of Palestinian queer strategies as a necessary step to decolonising Palestine. In recent decades, Palestinian Queer organisations have become more politically active, playing a significant role in constructing strategies to advocate for a liberated Palestine. One of the most prominent organisations, AlQaws, focuses on the disruption of sexual and gender-based oppression and challenging laws that limit bodily agency. AlQaws literally translates to "rainbow", which is a universally recognised symbol of the global LGBT community. The name was used as a symbol of acceptance of sexual and gender diversity, while acknowledging the colonial reality of Palestine (AlQaisiya, 2018). When the Oslo Accords were finalised, Palestinian/Israeli human rights groups collaborated with one another. AlQaws established itself as an organisation in 2001, operating under the wing of Jewish Open House—an enterprise focused on creating space for discussion about sexual orientation (AlQaisiya, 2018). However, after the second Intifada, the collaboration eroded. Notwithstanding the Oslo accords, also referred to as the Declaration of Principles, the occupation of Palestinian lands continues to be exacerbated through the presence of checkpoints and Zionist-only settlements, and dispossession of Palestinians. As retaliation to the draconian measures, waves of Palestinian rebellion emerged. With these conditions,

AlQaws members were restricted from movement and experienced harassment from Israeli soldiers. Additionally, the Jewish Open House did not acknowledge the political circumstances that were imposed on Palestinians and reinforced the occupied/coloniser dynamic. This sentiment was reaffirmed by Randa Morcos, current chair of Aswat, who explained that it is difficult to stand in solidarity with Israeli groups such as HaAguda and Gay International missionary projects due to their negligence and disregard of colonial issues. The affiliation of Palestinian queers with apolitical Israeli-organisations brought forward an important question of “Palestinian-ness” and identity under colonial rule (AlQaisiya, 2018).

What initially began as an organization dedicated to the reconstruction of queerness has shifted politically and changed the public discourse. In 2012, Maikey claimed that the discourse was “shifting away from narrow LGBT gay rights and identity politics, focusing more on the sexual rights approach as it helps minorities challenge the misconceptions of sexuality.” (Queer Politics & Maikey, 2012). Maikey further elaborates on her incremental renunciation by suggesting It’s not about just about homosexuals, “but also women who have sex before marriage, or people having a more open lifestyle and sexuality.” (Queer Politics & Maikey, 2012). One interlocutor, a former member of AlQaws, explains the repercussions behind AlQaws’ transition:

“Our queerness is often perceived as sexual deviance in the Palestinian community. This particular narrative has been sown deep into the minds of Palestinians. We are not advocating to fulfill our homosexual fantasies, but to discuss our stories of love, family, and grief without social repercussions or banishment” (Ex-AlQaws Member, 2022).

The use of Maikey’s language suggests AlQaws’ motive focuses not on queer liberation but sexual freedom. During a public lecture at Cornell University in 2012, she claimed that AlQaws “is not a gay organization operating to achieve gay rights for the Palestinian gay movement” as this sort of activism “is not relevant to the Palestinian conflict” (Maikey, 2012). The lack of unanimity among queer Palestinians is evident through Maikey’s assertion that “Zionist colonialism must be tackled before the group can have full conversations about sexuality.” Currently, AlQaws’ objective is to tackle the issues of colonialism before engaging in political discourse regarding homosexuality, also referred to as “discursive enfranchisement” (Atshan, 2020). Despite the inclusive name of the organization and its emphasis on sexual and gender diversity, AlQaws seems to prioritize the issues of colonialism, marking homophobia and sexuality as a less significant and secondary matter. Palestinians are expected to contribute to the established gender binaries, where one’s role is provided based on their reproductive organs until the issue of Israeli colonialism is resolved.

In addition to AlQaws’ political transition, another significant issue within the sphere of activism is *muzaayada* (Atshan, 2020). Both factors have led to the lack of consensus among queer Palestinians. One of Atshan’s interlocutors, Hamdy, a member of AlQaws explains the complications that occur within activist circles

(Atshan, 2020). Specifically, the moral purity competition or *muzayada* activists engage in.

“The term *muzayada* suggests cynical skepticism, an anticipation that what is to come is further oppression that must be condemned. Those who engage in it are judgmental and suspicious of others’ level of commitment to their cause, and they are more committed, and they are more dedicated than everyone else. If one expresses joy or a sense of accomplishment over a battle won, those practicing *muzayada* are suspicious that one could ever feel victory and still be morally and politically committed subject who has not naively capitulated to the ploys of the oppressor”. (Atshan, 2020: p. 23)

With the daunting fight against ethnoheteronormativity, more division is sown between activists—criticizing one another’s activism as a measurement of morally purity. The type of demoralization of queer activism leads to the plateauing of LGBTQ Palestinians groups. Furthermore, the resistance to the occupation leads one to become self-righteous, thus thinking they must know the absolute truth regarding activism. Individuals who fall into this category are less likely to open up to different ideas restricting any form of dialogue among activists. Those who bring forward new ideas by engaging the mainstream are often neglected and marginalized from the core group. AlQaws is guilty of such practice, often subsidizing its capital to launch campaign critiques targeted at other queer Palestinians and allies (Atshan, 2020). The interlocutor further elaborates on queer strategies and AlQaws defamation of former members:

“Former members of AlQaws, ever since its change in political discourse, currently operate in smaller groups dedicated to reconstructing queer identity. Of course, we have received harsh criticism from current AlQaws members, even being accused of undermining AlQaws’ efforts, Regardless, we do believe the objective is to spread awareness on how both issues homosexuality and colonialism are inevitably intertwined. Our resources are limited, however, but we manage to establish solid strategies during our meetings in queer friendly spaces” (Ex AlQaws Member, 2020).

Despite AlQaws political trajectory, queer Palestinians feel it necessary to continue tackling the aforementioned issues. However, queer Palestinians prefer a “localized outreach to other queer Palestinians as well as potential allies within Palestinian civil society” (Atshan, 2020). Canadian resident, Nathan, formerly worked in the West Bank explained the nature of queer spaces.

“Queer-friendly spaces” in the West Bank are not advertised as such due to the hostile and homophobic environment in Palestinian society. However, queer Palestinians are often welcomed into such spaces to organize and strategize their activism efforts. Information about queer-friendly spaces is almost entirely provided through word of mouth in the community and omitted from any business directory (Nathan, 2021). Conversely, some queer activists willingly put themselves within the crosshairs of the Palestinian Authority, often found on university campuses passing out flyers to other students in hopes of gaining allyship (Nathan, 2021).”

Issues of homophobia and colonialism are deliberately constructed to ensure difficulties for queer organisations and individuals. For many Palestinians, colonialism reinforces the demand for a heteronormative society resulting into social and physical violence for queer Palestinians. The demand for heteronormativity manifests in the Palestinian communities' commitment to birthing more children for the Palestinian revolution as the Palestinian birth rate is significantly higher in the West Bank than in Israel (Khawaja, 2014). Yasser Arafat, the late founder of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, reaffirms this approach claiming that "the womb of an Arab woman is my greatest weapon". Such sentiments will continue to make queer spaces less available. Moreover, the statement reaffirms that queer Palestinians have no place in a free Palestine through the eyes of Palestinian civil society.

4. Textual Analysis: Palestinian Queer Visibility

An important element to understanding queer Palestinians is through visibility. Visibility refers to the victim's agency or ability to be the authors of their own narrative. Moreover, queer Palestinian visibility is a crucial component to challenging the Israeli citizenship regime itself and the imposed depiction of queer Palestinians. In this case, Palestinian voices are overshadowed by their Israeli counterparts. Queer Israelis serve the role as storytellers and gatekeepers of a metaphorical checkpoint to which Palestinians are interrogated, abused, and rarely admitted into the Western notion of gayness and as victims of Palestinian social norms. Israeli soldiers, in most cases, employ literal checkpoints, such as bars, where queer Palestinians are often denied entry when their identification shows their "Palestinianess" (Ritchie, 2015). This highlights an important element about validation of queer Palestinians—that their queerness is accepted on the condition of revoking one's own Palestinianess.

In 1988, The Israeli Knesset repealed the British mandate law banning homosexual relationships. With Israel's plan to integrate the new homosexual demographic into its government sectors, the Knesset passed the IDF anti-discrimination law in 1993, prompting increased military morale in Israel. This trajectory is referred to as Homonationalism—a phenomenon where white homosexuals have a full range of rights and representation (Schulman, 2012: p. 104). They are accepted into the patriotic and nationalist ideologies of their state, while also serving as a symbol of the state's progressive and modern persona. Such depictions are often reinforced on social media where, in 2012, the IDF's Facebook page posted an image of two homosexual IDF soldiers freely holding hands in celebration of Pride month. The global image projected is one of "educated, professional gay men and women, who served in the IDF (Israeli Defense Force) and maintain long-term relationships"—molding into the norms of a heteronormative society. Pinkwashing is famously known as an Israeli practice; however, it is certainly not exclusive to Israel. The tactic is used to brand Israel as a progressive society, while portraying Palestinians as regressive and hostile to-

wards LGBTQ folk. Pinkwashing first began in 2002 when Israel recruited Jewish LGBTQ folk to help promote the pro-LGBTQ trope (AlQaisiya, 2018). The effort was a success, developing into an official political multi-million dollar campaign dedicated to rebranding Israel as a gay-friendly state. As Maikey suggests, the tactic divides the world into binaries of democracy and terrorism, civilised and barbarians, and progressive and homophobic. In fact, the idea of progressive versus homophobic is frequently used as a defence for imperialism on news outlets. For instance, during Israel's onslaught against Gaza in 2014 (also known as Operation Protective Edge), human rights attorney Noura Arakat, and ambassador of Israel, Joshua Hantman, were invited to a news outlet to speak of the invasion. Arakat clearly explains how Israeli attacks on Gaza stem from Israel's enshrined roots of colonialism and reinforcement of the complete subjugation of Palestinians through lethal force. As a counterargument, Hantman accuses Arakat of being a Hamas sympathiser, an organisation that would not "allow his friends to express their sexuality without consequences". The apparent diversion by Hantman is intended to tap into one's moral compass, especially in a sensitive political environment. Regardless of what Hantman's intention was, his arbitrary argument sows doubt among the audience as an effort to normalise connections to pinkwashing spaces. The call to boycott the Tel Aviv pride and the rejection of narrative that connect LGBTQ Palestinians to Tel Aviv were methods to oppose Israeli colonialism. Anti-pinkwashing activism is essential to countering the problematic discourses regarding queer rights and their celebration in spaces such as Tel Aviv and provides context about the historical violence initiated by the Israeli government.

There is a clear difference in representation between Israeli and Palestinian queers. As Ritchie suggests, there have been "advances in gay rights, significant changes in social attitudes, and the rise of gay culture in Israel" (Ritchie, 2010). However, that transition has only occurred in Tel Aviv, not Israel as a nation. Tel Aviv exists as a separate geographical space which is used to rebrand the state as "gay friendly", while other regions are spaces meant to preserve the Zionist ideology and rejection of homosexual practices. Nevertheless, the neoliberal reforms and emergence of pro LGBTQ legislation lead to the adoption of the Western notion of homosexuality. I use "Western" to describe the conditionally sanctioned nature of homosexuality, that asks the state to recognize the right of queer citizens to "come out of the closet" and into the space of the nation. The term "Western" also represents the effort to globalize how homosexuality should be perceived. Despite the initiative to make the "Western" model of homosexuality a standard model applicable to all nations, queer Palestinians' reality proves otherwise. As such, Israel's standards have become the bar to which the Palestinians are measured and are expected to abide by despite there being no mention of Palestine's progressive laws such as removing sodomy as a punishable offense from the Jordanian Penal Code in 1957 (AlQaisiya, 2018). Queer Israelis often provide stories of victimized Palestinians seeking refuge in

Israel to justify or rationalize the state sanctioned violence. As a result, the acceptance of one sexual identity in Israel marks them as a national subject used to reinforce right wing radical policies that continuously affect Palestinians on a daily basis.

In his article, *Re-Orienting Desire*, Massad provides an extensive analysis on Western authors and organisations being the voices of queer Arabs. He argues that organisations such as The Gay International have created a political struggle where “the world is divided between the supporters and opponents of gay rights” (Massad, 2002). The claim implies that homosexuality is a Western social construct that forces itself into Arab communities (Massad, 2002). He also argues that this type of activism has led to the passing of anti-gay legislation within Arab communities (Massad, 2002). One of my interlocutors, “Khalid”, a former resident of Gaza describes the current state for queer Gazans:

“Although the LGBTQ organisations like AlQaws do not have political influence in Gaza, the Hamas government is well aware of their actions in the West Bank. They have taken extreme measures to ensure their political messaging doesn’t gain any traction in Gaza. I, as a gay man, don’t personally identify with Western LGBTQ ideals such as Pride Parades. I’m currently staying in Dubai and was lucky enough to experience what it means to be true. While there is no sort of legislation that protects LGBTQ here, the authorities turn a blind eye, letting us exist on the contingency that our identity does not come politicised.”

Khalid’s testimony somewhat aligns with Massad’s sentiments about Western encroachment yet Massad overlooks how labels such as “gay” and “lesbian” are borrowed and evolved to fit into other contexts. Massad’s form of constructing the queer subject within the West vs Oriental framework creates a falsified perception of a monolith queer culture, which ironically is an action perpetuated by the Israeli government. Additionally, he does not acknowledge the societal difficulties of queers Arabs from their own communities. It leads one to believe that queer Arab activists are responsible for their oppression, not the homophobic culprits who sought to inflict violence. I do acknowledge that many queer Palestinians do not resonate with Israel’s Westernized queerness would also reject Massad’s critique. Queer Palestinians continuously refuse their own objectification by Israel. These projects, while acknowledging the circumstances of queer Palestinians, do not provide queer Palestinians with an opportunity to engage in dialogue about the circumstances of ethnoheteronormativity. Furthermore, the constant “savior-victim” framework represses any dialogue in terms of visibility and understanding of identity. The Western concept of “come out of the closet” is not rejected by Palestinians but there is a rejection of the language of the closet altogether. Palestinians rely not on the projection of visible and intelligible subjects but “on the subversion of the state to see in the first place” (Ritchie, 2015).

Discussions among queer and non-queer Palestinians groups regarding liberation strategies and visibility continue to be debated. Truthfully, it is difficult to provide an answer as I, like Atshan, do not believe in a hierarchy of oppres-

sion. I would argue that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become less about militarism and more about a battle of ideas. The unprecedented funding of Israeli organisations responsible for rebranding Israel, and the rise of anti-colonial Palestinian queer movements highlights the fundamental importance of providing knowledge during times when the world is politically sensitive. Homophobia has become a weaponised concept by the Israeli government, projecting the Palestinian population as barbaric and regressive society which discriminates its own LGBTQ population. It is imperative that more discourse unfolds in terms of sexuality and queerness in Palestinian society. I am by no means suggesting that resolving homophobia will end the occupation. Even if homophobia were not an issue in Palestinian society, the Israeli government has historically improvised a different narrative which vilifies Palestinians. For instance, Palestinians are still demonised for voting for Hamas during the 2005 elections, yet the Israeli government fails to mention that Hamas is a by-product of Israel colonialism that came to be in the 1980's—40 years after the establishment of the Israeli state. Another example is Hamas' recognition of Israel as a sovereign state on two separate occasions yet received no coverage in the media. However, there are particular issues which could be handled locally which help integrate the queer minority—whose representation is essential to the struggle against the occupation. This isn't a simple matter of difference in opinion; I say this with urgency as a Palestinian: Palestinian LGBT lives are at genuine risk. If an egalitarian society ever comes to fruition, Palestinians, regardless of their orientation, would stand unified and stronger in the face of adversity.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I proposed the necessity of understanding queer politics and acknowledged that the introduction of queer narrative to the Israeli occupation of Palestine could have repercussions. However, if the queer narrative is consistently overshadowed and halted, structuralised homophobia would exacerbate the social and political influence of heteronormativity. The issues of Palestinian queer oppression and visibility are all reinforced by multiple forces, each wielding its own power. These forces include family members, the Israeli occupation, ethnoheteronormative Zionism, Palestinian groups, and some Western scholars. The dismantling of the disenfranchisement of queer Palestinians can be fulfilled if both imperialism and the internal system of oppression are consistently challenged. Queer Palestinian rights should not be deferred but incorporated into the issue of colonialism. Within queer Palestinian organisations, discourse must be democratized where participants are given a platform to discuss their vision of a queer Palestine to ensure that all discernments and perspectives are taken into consideration. Collaborations with other organisations and Palestinians in diaspora communities can contribute to the fight against statist Israeli propaganda. Due to the extreme surveillance Palestinians experience as a result of Israeli occupation, the collaborations with other agents serve as a significant

element to global activism and, ultimately, the liberation of queer Palestinians. I acknowledge the suggestions proposed are not objectively the best course of action but, it is of utmost importance to highlight how different forms of oppression against queer Palestinians manifest for the sake of a free Palestine, i.e., a queer Palestine.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Alqaisiya, W. (2018). Decolonial Queering: The Politics of Being Queer in Palestine. *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, 47, 29-44. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2018.47.3.29>
- Atshan, S. (2020). *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503612402>
- Ex AlQaws Member (2022). *Personal Interview*.
- Khawaja, N. (2018). The Politics of Demography in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. *Journal of International Affairs*, 74, 27.
- Maikey, H. (2012) *Lecture*. Cornell University.
- Massad, J. (2002). *Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World*. Duke University Press, Vol. 14, 384-386. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-2-361>
- Nathan (2021). *Personal Interview*.
- Queer Politics & Maikey, H. (2012). <http://alqaws.org/>
- Ritchie, J. (2010). How Do You Say “Come Out of the Closet” in Arabic? Queer Activism and the Politics of Visibility in Israel-Palestine. *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 16, 560-575. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2010-004>
- Ritchie, J. (2015). Pinkwashing, Homonationalism, and Israel-Palestine: The Conceits of Queer Theory and the Politics of the Ordinary. *Antipode*, 47, 616-634. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12100>
- Schulman, S. (2012). *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*. Duke University Press, 100-208. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822396536>