

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Lebanon & LGBT : The Story of HELEM

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Sommaire

- [MEN WHO DO NOT HAVE SEX \(...\)](#)
- [AN LGBT ORGANIZATION ? WHY NOT](#)
- [IT'S NOT ONLY ABOUT LIFESTYLE](#)
- [JOINING THE STRUGGLE](#)

INTRODUCTION

This article is an account of the formation of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) group, Himaya Lubnaniya lil Mithliyeen wal Mithliyat (HELEM). In Arabic, the name means “Lebanese protection for gays and lesbians,” and its acronym means “dream.” HELEM formed in Lebanon in the early 2000s, after a decade that saw the opening of the debate on sexuality and sexual orientation in the region in the context of the war on terror, rapid economic liberalization, imperialist intervention, and the growth of a multi-faceted movement for resistance.

I tell the story of HELEM as one of the many participants in its founding, attempting to clarify some of the misconceptions based on fleeting second-hand accounts and heavily edited journalism, academic bias, and political homophobia among civil society and regional intelligentsia. This article also puts the formation of HELEM back into the context of more general struggles and rapid regional transformation, especially in cities such as Beirut, where HELEM was founded. It tackles obstacles to fulfilling sexual rights in Lebanon and tries to identify limits of the growing toleration of sexual non-conformity by the state, based on an analysis of the class nature of the position and the impact of Western intervention. It also highlights an alternative discourse beginning to emerge within the new movements for sexual rights around the world, re-linking these movements with universal struggles for social justice.

MEN WHO DO NOT HAVE SEX WITH WOMEN, AND WOMEN WHO DO NOT HAVE SEX WITH MEN

The attitude of Lebanese society toward homosexuality is linked with a social order that forces people into confessional identities based on classifications imposed by the Ottomans and pressure from European imperialism in the nineteenth century. The religious and sectarian establishment acts as an interlocutor between citizens and the formal entity of the modern state. Officially, relationships in Lebanon are defined by heterosexual marriage, as they are everywhere else in the postcolonial world. Lebanon is a multi-religious country, and predilection toward heterosexuality serves as a point of concurrence for both Islam and Christianity. Supported by the constitution, laws governing the personal status of individuals are based on religion, and each Lebanese citizen must follow his or her sect's personal status codes related to marriage, inheritance, and so forth.

Homosexual practices are criminalized in the Penal Code of Lebanon, under the moniker of

“unnatural sexual intercourse” [1] (Republic of Lebanon 1943, Article 534), specifically sexual intercourse that includes anal penetration. It was derived from Vichy legislation during the so-called French mandate on Lebanon and goes against traditional Islamic interpretation of such practices (El-Rouayheb 2005). In order not to fall into contradiction with the Napoleonic Code, Lebanon criminalized homosexual acts with a punishment of imprisonment of up to one year. Expression of non-conforming gender identity is usually prosecuted under several other articles regulating public morality. [2]

Post colonial regimes inherited such laws and did nothing to reverse them. Emphasis on nationalism meant that a new national identity had to be created, based on already outdated Western notions. In Lebanon, the identity of the emerging middle class at the end of the nineteenth century was formed by two apparently contradicting currents : on one hand, the remnants of the feudal/religious order, and, on the other hand, a new emerging identity that comes with the modern state, based on capitalist notions of nuclear family, upward social mobility, and proscribed gender roles. [3] The same period also saw the gradual disappearance of homoerotic poetry that was prevalent during the rule of the Islamic empires (El-Rouayheb 2005).

The ambiguity of such laws, and their reference to an imagined state of morality or natural order, promotes abuses and acts of hatred directed against non-conforming individuals, especially sexual nonconformists such as homosexuals : from discrimination in employment and arbitrary dismissal, to limited access to housing, health, and social services, to political and financial extortion. These laws also create a taboo on discussing sexuality, which goes in tandem with the agendas of the political and religious elite who want to maintain control over a conservative society. The application of Article 534 remains largely discretionary, where the poor and marginalized face the brunt of these hateful and aggressive acts. Rulings differ between one judge and another, depending on the degree of leniency or fanaticism of the judge and on the level of connections of the accused (Al-Farchichi and Saghie 2009, Mroue 2010).

The last few decades also saw the rapid urbanization of the Middle East : slums, residential fortresses, and pockets of extreme luxury amid deprivation. In the 1950s, 30 percent of Lebanon’s population was urban ; today, it is closer to 90 percent (World Bank). The increased visibility of new lesbian and gay identities, as opposed to mere corporeal acts, “probably owes less to outside cultural influences than to social causes like mass migration to cities, more waged labor by women, higher wages, commodification of everyday life, assumption of some traditional family functions by the state, and the spread of modern medicine with its penchant for classification” (Drucker 2008).

This urbanizing factor also leads to the break-up of honor-based systems including the binary of passive/active differentiation of homosexual sexual roles in the region. The multi-religious, multi-confessional nature of Lebanese society often leads to the opening of spaces for change. While these spaces allow some segments of society to become more tolerant towards non-conformity, such non-conformity is only permitted by the ruling class when it serves the interests of the regime, as evident in its legalizing of gay commercial establishments to attract tourists, while unconstitutionally putting obstacles on the work of social support organizations, such as HELEM.

Despite the political turmoil that led to an increase in sectarian division in the country in the last few years, the experience of the gay and lesbian community in Lebanon has shown that, where a secular and progressive alternative is presented, Lebanese society will not fail to accept or even embrace an organization calling for the end of oppression based on sexual preference.

AN LGBT ORGANIZATION ? WHY NOT !

People do not choose to identify with a criminal identity. Declaring a sexual preference that does not conform to imposed norms is an act of defiance against existing structures of oppression. We criminalize ourselves and reject the crime at the same time. This brings about a dual nature of such expression. One is used by the state and the ruling class to criminalize a section of society. The other is that of resistance and rebellion against criminalization and oppression. [4]

Social identities are not fixed. It is precisely the ruling classes and the order of the market that wish to restrict them in this way. The dissolution of social identities can occur only when society is truly free from oppression and exploitation. Social identities that differentiate between people will continue to exist as long as there is oppression and resistance to oppression (Chit 2009).

While the debate about the nature of the word “homosexual,” the propriety of using the terms “gay” and “lesbian” in a non-English speaking setting, and the attempts to identify ownership of these categories might be of utter theoretical importance, “[for] everyday, practical purposes, people can and do operate quite well with fuzzily bounded categories, even if some analysts cannot” (Murray 2000, 8). [5]

In the late 1990s, few studies were available that tackled the issue of criminalization of sexual non-conformity in Lebanon. Documentation on the period before the 1975-1990 civil war is scant (Abu Khalil 1993, 1998), although the war did bring out the worst on all levels. In the late 1970s, at least one leftist political group involved in the civil war decided to purge homosexual members and force them into exile. Feminists who chose to introduce women’s issues in other supposedly progressive groups were told to form their own groups and leave politics to the men. Following the civil war, the great majority of people attracted to the same sex lived a life of secrecy and fleeting relationships. Fearing pressure from Western donor countries, the Lebanese state became more careful when persecuting openly gay or lesbian people, especially those able to afford officially sanctioned commercial establishments. Its attention was directed toward those forced to hide their orientation, due to social pressure but also due to Article 534, which provides impunity to oppressors and human rights violators (Republic of Lebanon 1943). [6]

However, even in the most repressive circumstances, people are capable of forging links with each other and creating spaces to satisfy their needs. Some groups mentioned by Abu Khalil (1998) found that the Internet could be a safe place to make acquaintances for sex and sometimes politics. Several discussion lists and online dating groups catering mostly to gay men emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The Internet played an important role in forging primary links between all sorts of activists and regular gay men and women looking for a safe space until 2002, when formal and informal groups began to organize. Several small-scale initiatives had taken place earlier, such as the “I Exist” exhibition organized by Club Free at the end of 2000 and the work of Khatt Mubashir’s radical film club, which aimed to highlight various struggles including sexual liberation within the “Man is a Woman” festival at the end of 2001. The film festival attracted around 1,500 viewers over the course of seven days and introduced issues of sexuality and gender identity. By the end of 2001, these groups began to tackle the issue of sexual liberation. Mobilization against the World Trade Organization meeting in Qatar and post-September 11th war-mongering brought together a large constituency of independent left and democracy activists.

IT'S NOT ONLY ABOUT LIFESTYLE

The discourse on sexuality became informed by several developments. The first was the Queen Boat case in Egypt and the opening of the region to questioning on LGBT rights issues by Western human rights organizations. The second was a regressive penal code reform proposal in Lebanon and increased policing of sexuality and gender expression by the regime. Both developments seemed to stem from an attempt by Arab states to contain fundamentalist movements in the context of the so-called "war on terrorism." The third was a general atmosphere of anti-imperialist mobilization in support of Palestine and in opposition to U.S. wars in the Middle East.

Debauchery on the Nile

On May 10, 2001, the Egyptian police arrested dozens of revelers in a supposedly gay nightclub on the Nile River called the Queen Boat. Their first trial lasted from July until November. In Lebanon, the impact of these arrests was greater than the severity of the crackdown itself. It served as one of the first highly publicized examples of systematic repression of gender and sexual non-conformity in the region in our generation. Values and Western influence were the focus of debates on the arrests, especially after Egyptian and Arab human rights organizations, influenced by generalized heterosexism even in the most liberal and radical leftist circles, refused to consider it a human rights issue. Instead, these groups claimed that homosexuality was a Western phenomenon for fear that they would be stigmatized as sympathetic to the LGBT cause.

According to Human Rights Watch (2004), the defendants were tried in "a security tribunal which permitted no appeal. When Egypt rammed through a renewal of the emergency law creating those courts in 2003, it cited the US Patriot Act as justification." According to Egyptian activist Hossam Bahgat, the "motive is certainly to divert public attention from economic recession and the government's liquidity crisis" (2004). Categorization into an identity based on sexual orientation became one of the tools in the hands of oppressive Arab states facing growing unrest. Moreover, in February and March 2002,

« a widespread, baseless rumor about "Satan worshippers" linked to homosexual practices was given credence by police raids and nevercompleted legal proceedings, as well as official statements. During that period, religious voices took advantage of the occasion to reiterate their traditional position against homosexuality. They urged parents to safeguard their children's morality against "satanic" bid'a (new practices which are contrary to religion) such as homosexuality. Moreover, the "Committee for the Preservation of Moral Values," representing the main recognized sects in Lebanon, used the word bid'a to demonize homosexuality and even civil marriage. » (Scalenghe 2004)

The government tried but failed to link "Satan worshippers" with some commercial and non-commercial establishments frequented by sexual non-conformists.

Similar campaigns by the police surfaced in Morocco and the Gulf countries. Morality became a weapon of the state against society to appease a growing Islamist movement. These efforts were aided by the reluctance of weak and donor-driven local human rights organizations to tackle controversial issues, the interlinking of security agencies of the states of the Arab League, and the over-enthusiasm (and sometimes outright colonialist mentality) of some Western identity-based gay rights organizations looking for a new front and funding opportunity. The question of organizing a response to both trends became a priority, prompting several attempts to form indigenous associations that would protect against future repressive measures.

Do Ask and Do Tell

Closer to home, in the autumn of 2002, the government released a draft of a new Penal Code, the first since 1943. To call the reforms regressive was an understatement (Saghieh et al 2003). Among the reforms was a suggestion to change the wording of Article 534 to read “unnatural sexual relations” (Republic of Lebanon 2002) instead of “intercourse” (Republic of Lebanon 1943), thus expanding the scope of the clause and making it more ambiguous. [7] The draft document contained a comment that the amendment was meant to include both gays and lesbians, using the terms *liwat* and *souhaq* (both terms used derogatorily to denote male-male and female-female sex respectively). Following a campaign led by a newly formed group called Hurriyat Khassa (Personal Freedoms) in the first half of 2003 and a hugely successful conference on “Human Dignity in the Penal Code” in May of that year, the draft was sent back to the Administration and Judiciary Committee of the Lebanese Parliament, where it remains today.

Hurriyat Khassa aimed to tackle the issue from the point of view of protecting the private sphere from the intrusion of the state, successfully campaigning to stop the proposed draft of the penal code. Its “membership include[d] independent lawyers, artists and journalists who previously worked on various human rights issues. Others are leftist activists belonging to the group Khatt Mubashir. A few identify themselves as gay and are members of an ad hoc group called HeLeM” (Scalenghe 2004). Its

« main focus has been to examine amendments to the penal code, proposed in November 2002, which conflict with human dignity. Three main points grabbed our attention in this pseudo-reform of the penal code : privatization of the public sphere, increasing interference in private space and the marginalization of many segments of society. » (2004)

Although HELEM was formed to focus on LGBT issues, its roots in Hurriyat Khassa and the anti-imperialist movement led to the adoption of an anti-sectarian, anti-racist, and anti-xenophobic position from its inception and to a focus on social work, especially within marginalized communities. Contrary to assumptions by outside observers, especially those who assume that gay and lesbian identity in the region is the creation of the Westernized middle class, “[men who have sex with men from] the upper social class do not care for any connection with Helem” (Republic of Lebanon 2008). HELEM was open to all individuals who live in Lebanon even if it meant losing some Lebanese members.

Similarly, during the 2005 Cedar Revolution, when non-Lebanese workers were attacked in the streets, HELEM insisted on remaining open to Palestinian refugees and was attacked for welcoming their membership in the organization. HELEM is also active in campaigning for the rights of domestic workers and for providing Palestinian refugees with civil, political, social, cultural, and economic rights in Lebanon.

Since 2009, HELEM has provided support for Iraqi and non-Iraqi refugees fleeing persecution based on their sexual orientation. This only became possible when gays and lesbians, or even people who just like same-sex sex, decided to organize and look for resources. In April 2004, HELEM started a community center in Zico House, a cultural space in Beirut. In September of that year, five people were elected to sign the notification of association to be sent to the Ministry of the Interior, announcing the formation of the organization. Contrary to law and constitutional rights, the ministry still refuses to provide HELEM with its file number, causing several bureaucratic difficulties, such as inability to register staff to receive social security benefits.

The lack of a registration or file number means that the organization struggles to obtain institutional funding. In order to offset any interference by donors or prevent the imposition of pre-set agendas, HELEM agreed on a policy of refusing conditional funding of any type and avoiding direct funding that is actively political or interventionist or that imposes the adoption of particular policy or

political position. Lebanese and Arab supporters of the organization in the diaspora also set up autonomous chapters to help raise funds. It later became completely independent institutionally due to its need to work within the diaspora community. The legal battle to obtain a file number is a reminder that the struggle for acceptance will always be blocked by confessional politics and the corruption of the ruling class, supported by Western interests.

Events following the Hariri assassination in February 2005 plunged the country into turmoil. The withdrawal of the Syrian army and the promise of democratic reform gave the false impression to many that some freedoms can be gained. But, not unlike other U.S.-sponsored revolutions, the Cedar Revolution consolidated a new sectarian leadership and led to increased dependence on the capitalist system and increased police repression. From the beginning, it was clear to gay and lesbian activists that the “pro-West” forces that had just prevailed could be worse than their predecessors. Chants against the sitting government were virulently homophobic and then, a few days into the upheaval, gay democracy activists were kicked out of the “Freedom Camp” (Azzi 2005, 2) set up by NGOs who received generous donations from the European Union and the United States to promote human rights and democracy. Stories of gay-bashing by supporters of the March 14 movement were mixed with news of attacks on Syrian workers and the poor.

Similarly, of most anti-homosexual rhetoric and online attacks against HELEM consistently comes from entities funded and supported by pro-Western regimes, [8] especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In May 2005, HELEM held its first international day against homophobia (IDAHO) without linking formally to the international campaign due to the Islamophobia of some participants. We chose a strategy of visibility in the media culminating in the second IDAHO in May 2006, which focused on economic, social, and cultural rights and access to public services. This visibility allowed HELEM to be outspoken on issues of sexuality, but drew the indignation of some conservatives who began a smear campaign started by the web site of the Saudi Al-Arabiya News Channel and involving members of the official Sunni religious establishment in Lebanon.

A member of the Beirut municipality complained about the organization to the public prosecutor who later threw out the case based on freedom of association and lack of element of crime. Many human rights activists and prominent legal and political personalities testified in support of HELEM and were instrumental in the judge’s decision. The scope of HELEM’s alliances meant that similar future attempts would probably fail.

Out and Proud against Imperialism and War

The resurgence of the far left in a 45-day sit-in in protest of the siege of Ramallah in April 2002 led to the emergence of several initiatives such as Al-Yassari Magazine, Beirut Indymedia, and the campaign to boycott pro-Israel companies. Along with Khatt Mubashir and independent (from establishment parties) leftist groups in universities, these initiatives proved to be HELEM’s only natural allies outside the shrinking sphere of progressive human rights campaigners.

HELEM became part of the steering committee of the “No War—No Dictatorships” campaign against the war on Iraq and participated openly in the February 15, 2003 International Day of Mobilization. The official slogan rejected the war on Iraq and opposed the collaboration of Arab regimes with U.S. imperialism against the people of Iraq. During the next international mobilization, a rainbow flag was openly displayed in front of about fifty demonstrators. It featured prominently in news reporting about the demonstration, both negatively (in *An-Nahar*, a rightwing pro-West daily newspaper) and positively (in the youth section of *As-Safir*, a left-wing, Arab nationalist daily newspaper).

Unfortunately, only *An-Nahar*’s bigoted and distorted coverage was translated into English and is used by many as a reference to what supposedly happened. The next day, no one was surprised

when An-Nahar

(2003) reported the visibility of the gay movement in the anti-war movement as feeble and in a caricatured manner. As-Safir's article was probably too positive, comparing the "fresh" and "joyful" aforementioned demonstration (the actual title of the article was "Rainbow Flag," printed in English) to the "grumpy" demonstration held by establishment parties marching behind huge pictures of Saddam Hussein, Bashar Al-Asad, and other dictators (Mandour 2003).

At the time of war, some Lebanese LGBTs chose to associate themselves with a movement that directly attacked the existing order of imperialism and state oppression. They chose to be part of a movement that stood shoulder to shoulder with enraged people around the Arab world and the planet, calling to an end of the war and an end to the madness of U.S. President George W. Bush and his administration. They sought to link issues of the struggle for real democracy, including full universal civil rights. This was not undertaken merely out of solidarity with Iraq, but based on a conviction that sexual liberation cannot be achieved through imperialism nor can it be detached from the wider struggle for democracy (Chit 2009).

In 2006, a campaign by the police to intimidate openly gay persons under the suspicion of being members in HELEM led to a sharp fall in active membership, but it was also due to a general atmosphere of apathy following the attempts by the sectarian leadership of March 14 to control civil society organizations and stifle any criticism of the new order. Moreover, the Israeli aggression on Lebanon and the ensuing political rift left no space for rights campaigns.

In July 2006, HELEM was one of the first organizations to react to the Israeli aggression and join the massive grassroots solidarity movements that sprung up during the attacks. The gay and lesbian community center became part of Beirut's busiest relief headquarters during four weeks of bombing. With allies from the anti-war movement, environmentalists, student groups, collectives, and Palestinian refugee associations, HELEM became part of Samidoun, the largest independent campaign in solidarity with the resistance and working for the relief of civilian refugees and war victims. The total number of refugees reached one million ; the Samidoun campaign that ended in December 2006, provided care directly for 10,000 persons in thirty-two displacement centers and indirectly for twice that number. [9] HELEM had also called for the boycott of Jerusalem World Pride earlier that summer. [10]

A good analysis of HELEM's real impact is provided by Khaled Saghiyyeh, editor of the leftist *Al-Akhbar* newspaper in Beirut, who spoke about the reaction to HELEM's call for the support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement against Israel in boycotting an event organized by the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association in Tel Aviv. [11] Concluding that "[Hezbollah], no matter how powerful it is, will not be able to continue to grow unless it takes this kind of message into account," Saghiyyeh quoted a gay supporter of the resistance who spoke about his experience in Samidoun during the Israeli aggression (in an anonymous comment on the statement) :

« I felt a great power in me that pushed me to volunteer to work on the ground and that gave me the will and energy to strive for victory no less than any Resistance fighter. And, for the first time, I saw the reality of these fighters without any fear and illusions. They had more goodness and humanity than I ever imagined. And when an official of Hezbollah thanked us for our humble effort, I felt happiness like never before, and I realized that the common language of the oppressed united us more than any other consideration.... » (Saghiyyeh 2009)

JOINING THE STRUGGLE

During the Israeli war on Lebanon in July 2006, HELEM addressed a section of the international LGBT community via video at the opening of a conference that kicked off the OutGames in Montreal. The address spelled out the difficulties faced by HELEM in “proving the legitimacy of its cause without falling prey to accusations of being ‘agents of Western imperialism’” especially while “we enter the next phase of the U.S. administration’s plan to re-draw the geo-political map of the Middle East “... [holding] up the mantle of women’s rights as one of the justifications for invading and occupying both Iraq and Afghanistan” (Moumneh 2006).

We naively expected that human rights organizations would denounce the atrocities committed by Israel as it “systematically destroys Lebanon’s infrastructure and kills its residents with U.S.-made bombs in what is being advertised as the latest installment of the United States’ plan for the ‘new Middle East’” (2006). Although the address admitted that “[some] LGBT and civil rights movements have joined forces with right-wing nationalist groups in their practice of one of the last acceptable forms of racism against Arabs and Muslims” (2006), the polarized reaction to the call for support was a further indication of the need to intervene more aggressively in international forums on LGBT rights.

This does not mean that the categories implied in the term “LGBT” and the legacy of colonialism are not problematic for the non-Western movement. Nevertheless, the real weakness of the movement is not semantics. Rather, it results from rampant commercialization and image creation, the shift to the right toward institutional identity politics, and disengagement from the real needs of the community by the great majority of sexual rights organizations in the West who control the agenda and the resources. It is also the result of the frightening retreat of leftist and progressive movements in the West from the issue of sexual liberation, embracing sectarian politics internally and reverse-Orientalism when it comes to groups outside the West.

The politics of international organizations providing funding and other forms of support to emerging LGBT movements should always be challenged. LGBT groups might look for funding in the European Union or the United States, but the path towards liberation is lit by groups such as the Blue Diamond society joining a revolution against the remnants of feudalism and religious order that legitimize the exploitation and oppression of the people of Nepal and the participation of young LGBT activists in the Egyptian uprising at the beginning of 2011. The experiences in Lebanon, occupied Palestine, and numerous groups around the world have shown that LGBT liberation is part of a wider struggle for change and against imperialism and capitalist exploitation.

Ghassan Makarem

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P.-S.

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Notes

[1] I performed all translations from Arabic to English.

[2] See Al-Farchichi and Saghie (2009). See also Mikdashi (2010a, 2010b, 2010c).

[3] See Khater (2001).

[4] Special thanks to Bassem Chit (2009), at the time one of the organizers of the No War—No Dictatorship campaign, for letting me use an unpublished reply to Joseph Massad's interview with ResetDoc, December 2009 for several of the ideas in this paper.

[5] The entry on "homosexuality" in the Historical Dictionary of Lebanon states the following : As in other Arab countries, homosexual sex is specifically prohibited by law in Lebanon. The state rarely prosecutes offenders, although a few unfortunates (always from poor families) are sometimes arrested. Homosexuality is less condemned by Islam than in Christianity. The Qur'an only briefly mentions homosexuality, but Islamic law prohibits homosexual acts. Lesbianism is less covered by the law. In recent times, homosexual groups have become more active, although society is opposed to homosexual advocacy organizations. Christianity is more intolerant of homosexuality, and this is partly reflected in the Lebanese culture. Yet, many prominent Lebanese politicians were known homosexuals, and a bill proposed in the 1960s by then deputy Munir Abu Fadil to ban homosexuals from holding public office never passed. (Abu Khalil 1998).

[6] See also Al-Farchichi and Saghie (2009) and Mroue (2010).

[7] Article 534 states that "Sexual intercourse contrary to nature is punished by a sentence of up to one year" (Republic of Lebanon 1943).

[8] This, of course, does not excuse the homophobia of many "anti-Western" or other parties and formations.

[9] See United Nations (2006).

[10] The statement is available at <http://helem.net/node/27> (accessed on January 11, 2010).

[11] HELEM's call for the boycott can be found here : <http://helem.net/node/210> (accessed on January 11, 2010).