

Signposts from Al Qaws: A Decade of Building a Queer Palestinian Discourse

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Based on Haneen Maikey's speech at the conference organized by Aswat - May 2012, and patiently translated to English by Claudine and Deems. Read the original post in Arabic on [Qadita.net](#).

How can we summarize "LGBT and Queer Palestinian Activism in the Past Ten Years from an Internal Perspective of Activists who Have Worked on the LGBTQ Issue in Palestinian Society" (the title of the first panel of the Aswat conference) in ten minutes and from within the framework of a celebratory conference? This question also comes on the day of International Day against Homophobia—something I already wrote about the danger of adopting as the center of our discourse and about the limitations of "homophobia" as a framework for our local queer struggle. But from my experience in the last decade, we can observe that these inconsistencies are at the heart of the trajectory of Palestinian LGBTQ activism.

I will attempt in this short time to take us through key signposts that I believe embody the changes that Al Qaws has passed through in becoming a group with a large grassroots foundation, a group that is connected and relevant to our Palestinian reality and context; and a group that has played, in the last few years, an influential political role on the queer, local and even international level. This influential role is one that, unlike the first years, we are able to measure and observe through various discernible changes.

But before we move on to demonstrate these major signposts, I would like to share with you three criteria that Al Qaws, as a group, has used in the last ten years as a compass for our work, for our success, and more importantly for dealing with the infinite challenges that we face in our work.

The first criterion is that we measure success in our ability, as LGBTQ movements, to change the political and social discourse around sexuality. The aim is not only to change the discourse but also to develop it continuously to ensure that we remain connected to our reality and our general context. And we don't mean only the "external" discourse, but also our "internal" discourse. The presence of such a gap points primarily to the need to reconsider our goals and practices.

The second criterion is the practice. At Al Qaws, we do not believe there is any need or usefulness for a radical (or liberal) discourse if we do not practice what our discourse represents. The discourse, values and strategies of Al Qaws, whose success we continue to explore (and change when necessary), are inspired by a continuous reflection and analysis of our field experience. It is also inspired by our daily practices and comparing it with what we are calling for and striving for. The existence of gaps between discourse and practice has always been yet another motivation to

revisit our work. One of the lessons we found useful was the importance of creating a solid space inside the group that considers constructive and ongoing debate as an important strategy for work and that is no less important than other practical strategies.

The third standard has to do with our understanding and our integration that our capability for social change starts with our capability for internal change. In that sense, fluidity is important to contain all the inevitable changes that we will be facing, whether we like it or not, as LGBTQ movements when we're connecting with members of LGBTQ communities and with society in general. The illusion that we can get through a month or a year or a decade of activism without us having to take risks and make changes is a dangerous obstacle in our path. Being flexible in this area guarantees that we remain influential and ensures a precise assessment of the opportunities and challenges, of the points of strength and weaknesses in our group.

The main signposts that I will mention here all center primarily on the journey of change in Al Qaws' internal and external discourse, on the individual, collective, social and political level. These usually get marginalized at the expense of showcasing the practical achievements, which I will not be going through here. When we think of the progress of Al Qaws' discourse in the last decade, we can talk about it as a story with two main parts.

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The first part has to do with the ongoing transformation in the way Al Qaws defines itself.

The source of our self-definition is the field of our work; while determining our strategies stems from translating and analyzing this experience. In the last ten years we have seen how Al Qaws started out as a Jerusalemite group working as a part of an apolitical Israeli organization at the end of 2001. From that, it transformed into the first official organization for Palestinian LGBTQs that registered in 2007 and to the current redefinition of ourselves as being, at the basis, a group of activists whose main mission is to work on changing its reality and who aim to change and break the existing gender and sexual hierarchy in society. Al Qaws saw the immense importance of defining its role as a group with large ambitions and a political goal, but consciously chose that "representing LGBTQs" will not be one of them.

In addition, Al Qaws saw a need to organize and establish its work as an organization, but it always believed that its main contribution is in building and contributing to the larger Palestinian movement for sexuality, promoting a new sexual discourse instead of promoting an organization. Perhaps the biggest change that Al Qaws has led was to challenge the stereotypical images of the "gay" Palestinian—produced over decades of sexual taboo and exploited many times for political ends that serve the imperialist interests of the Israeli state. The primary change in the image was from that of a victim—the victim of society, family and institutions, to a new image as an individual and activist with agency and control over themselves, their peers and their society.

The last point, which could only take its final shape after studying and analyzing all the points above, relates to our ability to determine our "demands" from society. And this is precisely the issue: we have no "demands" from society, and we do not place ourselves outside of or opposed to society that reproduces destructive divisions and binaries. Thus, over the years, Al Qaws' leadership has taken out many terms from its discourse, such as "acceptance" (we are not working so "you" can accept us) and "equality" (and we don't want "your" privileges) and replaced them with other words that better contain our vision as people who are part of society; words that express our ambitions for real social transformation, guaranteeing justice and dignity to all individuals and groups.

The second part of the path highlights the steps that Al Qaws had pioneered to get out of

the LGBTQ shell. This step to expand our discourse and our work allowed us to see reality from a new perspective and gave us the opportunity to define our goals and our struggle with new terms. LGBTQ groups (Arabs too) fall in the trap of promoting LGBTQ oppression and struggle as “special” and “unique” and we forget that our struggle is essentially to oppose patriarchal institutions and systems that regulate our sexuality, to challenge gender and sexual standards and norms which have always been depicted as fact, such as heterosexuality. This new frame for our struggle has basically affected how we view Al Qaws’ relationship with the outside and how we determine our work strategies for social change and transformation. Al Qaws’ leadership focused on three main things:

First, reshaping our relationship with society in general. Al Qaws rejects the inorganic division between “inside” and “outside” which is also evident at this conference, where the conference’s sessions are split in two: one for “LGBTQ” speakers and the other for the “friends” of LGBTQs. If we want to strengthen our position and legitimacy in this community, it’s important that we begin to dismantle the polarization between the outside and the inside and stop putting ourselves opposite society. We believe our goal isn’t building bridges between the LGBTQ community and society but to swim in the same river to change its course together -if we can’t promote our struggle as a wider social struggle and not just an LGBTQ one, then we’ll fail at having a sustainable impact.

The second point was focusing on the uniqueness of the experience and the local context, understanding the structure of sexuality and the attitudes around it in the Palestinian society and cautioning from importing strategies which are often irrelevant to our reality. Adopting Western concepts and notions such as homophobia, coming out, visibility and pride brings up a binary which reinforces other concepts of shame, hiding and fear, and limits your goals to fighting homophobia, defines your ultimate purpose (coming out of the closet) and suggests your strategies (visibility and pride). Our analysis isn’t just about the limitations in adopting these concepts in our work, but extends to a critique which highlights the perception of these concepts and Western LGBTQ hegemony as new reflections of cultural colonialism. [\[1\]](#)

The last point is our work and our political role. Al Qaws’ leadership and members (despite constant and important internal debate about how we do that as part of other priorities) consider that struggle cannot be separated from political action against occupation and colonization. Like it or not, the Palestinian LGBTQ movement is part of the political cause, even if it did not actively participate in the fight against the symbols of colonialism and occupation -which do not distinguish between gay and straight. Its cause and name have become hostages of political games. The biggest example to that is how the Israeli government uses LGBTQs rights and tarnishes Palestinian LGBTQs’ image to pinkwash its crimes against the Palestinian people.

I have tried above to present some major milestones of Al Qaws’ journey in the past decade by shedding light on the discourse transformation, the struggle framework and work strategies. Based on this pivotal point, we, as LGBTQ movements, should also be aware of a few important and urgent challenges to which Al Qaws tried to respond after a thorough study of different initiatives in its new strategic plan.

The first challenge revolves around the individual’s position and role in this journey. After focusing on building a wide leadership, strengthening social and political activism inside Al Qaws and committing to social change’s responsibilities in the past five years, we must take several steps back and wonder how we can link these concepts and our perception of the struggle to the individual, psychological and social needs of the LGBTQ community. Al Qaws has been making huge efforts in recent months to build new and appropriate frameworks which place the individual at the center and aspires to continue the journey of building a proactive Palestinian LGBTQ community that doesn’t marginalizes the personal.

The second challenge is the “LGBTQ tolerant” discourse. There are those who refuse to recognize the existence of sexual images, identities, behaviors and genders different from the standard and the mainstream. And this is a fact. Then there are those who recognize the existence of individuals who do not fit these standards. However, when working with this part of society, one is surprised by the alarming increase in the old neoliberal discourse which attempts either to confine the issue within a sexual frame: “I have no problem with gays as long as they have sex at home” or to completely eliminate sex from the issue: “Why do you have to talk about sex whenever you discuss homosexuality?” Both extremes of this discourse confirm that it’s not LGBTQs who are obsessed with sex; but it’s those people. So let us first agree that sex isn’t scary nor disgusting. Really.

Unfortunately, there is another aspect of liberal discourse which criticizes the LGBTQ’s organization and the existence of LGBTQ groups: “Why should there be LGBTQ groups in the first place?” It considers, with a direct or indirect accusation, that our attempts to group ourselves fragments and weakens the struggle. And we ask: what struggle are we talking about? Such discourses are dangerous because they try to devalue the LGBTQ struggle and eliminate our discourse and existence within society in a new form and under the pretext of liberalism and tolerance. Al Qaws is committed in their future plans to working directly with political and social youths and providing a direct and responsible space to engage in these important debates in an attempt to cocreate a new discourse.

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The last challenge can be summed up by asking a basic question to society in general: Do we want to change society or do we want society to change us? Can we resist the temptation of imitating heteronormativity by confining ourselves to the family establishment and construct and adopting the accepted sexual norms and patterns so that we are more tolerated and accepted? Al Qaws has set the goal of destabilizing the foundations of existing powers and breaking society’s molds. But that won’t be possible unless we can propose a comprehensive discourse which sheds light on how every individual’s sexuality, gender and desires are controlled by patriarchy’s institutions and how pure heterosexuality limits our choices and imposes what is acceptable and unacceptable. The sexuality struggle must not be reduced to rights, intimacy, health, love and sexual freedom but should fundamentally revolve around resisting, dismantling and continuously criticizing these institutions while working on raising awareness to the images and behaviors through which these constructs are embodied in our daily lives.

Al Qaws believes that the Western definition of an “exclusive heterosexuality” and consequently of an opposing homosexuality as an abnormal reflection of heterosexuality over the past century is a successful bourgeois attempt to impose structural division between straight (normal) and gay (abnormal), thus controlling gays by accepting them but under the condition of “segregation” in the sense that “we are here and you are there.” This is reminiscent of the Zionist Left’s discourse which originally established the principle of segregation. We at Al Qaws challenge this discourse and seek to be an organic part of the world LGBTQ movement against all forms of social and political hegemony. And by dismantling the LGBTQ ghetto, which is more a “reaction” to heterosexual

capitalist domination rather than a genuine, effective, crystallized identity, we adopt the discourse which places the “queer” at the center and not as an emotional or proactive case, but as an individual re-formulating social and political relations from their perspective, from the perspective of the “formerly oppressed.”

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P.S.

* <http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2012/05/algaws/>

Footnotes

[1] For further reading see, available on ESSF (article 25412), [From the Belly of Arab Queer Activism: Challenges and Opportunities](#).