CONTESTED COLONIALITIES?
DISPUTES AND TRANSNATIONAL LINKAGES IN LEBANESE LGBT MOVEMENT-BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

Organized LGBT activism has a nearly two-decade long history in Lebanon, with the first LGBT organization in the West Asia North Africa region being registered in 2004 in Beirut. Visible LGBT organizing in a region that is often identified with hostile social attitudes and state repression towards sexual and gender non-conformity drew much interest both in Western popular imagination and academia. A strong interpretation of such activism is offered by the Palestinian-American scholar Joseph Massad, who conceptualizes gay activism in the Arab region—and Lebanon in particular—as a form of Western imperial imposition. What many of these academic accounts fail to grasp is that rather than being a homogenous movement, the history of LGBT activism in Lebanon is fraught with tensions and internal debates. Building on a close reading of these debates and interviews conducted with key LGBT activists in Lebanon and the Western Lebanese diaspora, my thesis will demonstrate that while the trope of the 'West' is a common point of reference both as a source of inspiration and a point of criticism in the discourse of activists, the Western vs. local binary does not fully structure these debates, they in fact cross-cut that binary. The thesis argues that such a recurrent, but flexible employment of the Western vs. local binary derives from three main sources: the plurality of 'Western' models of activism to draw on, an engagement of Lebanese LGBT activists with such different models of activism via transnational migration and diasporic relations, and a hegemonic interpretation both in the local political discourse as well as Western academia of LGBT activism being a Western imposition. The thesis further argues that these disputes play a productive role in the development of the LGBT movement in Lebanon, as they facilitate the creation of a diverse, resilient movement able to adapt its strategies to respond to new challenges.

Keywords: LGBT social movements, social movement infighting, Lebanon, transnational networks

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 29,943

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Signed: Ahmad Al-Kurdi

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

For the translation and transliteration of Arabic words throughout the thesis, I follow the general translation and transliteration guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES), with the exception of a few adjustments and additions. For names of organizations and key terminology I include both the Arabic script as well as its transliterated form. If an organization or person uses their Arabic name with a transliteration different from IJMES, I use their preferred transliteration. Whenever an Arabic word is used, I also include the most appropriate English translation. When such a translation is particularly difficult due to different taxonomies or connotations in the two languages, I use ~ to mark the fact that it is only an approximate translation.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

"A movement is built through real questions and discussions and not displaying the illusions of a 'unified happy family' at the expense of our values and political commitments."

—a Palestinian queer activist

In the summer of 2019, a concert to be played by Mashrou' Leila, a popular Lebanese indie rock band with an openly gay lead singer and lyrics that cover topics such as war, politics, materialism, immigration and homosexuality at the Byblos International Festival was cancelled. The festival is the largest Lebanese music festival, drawing tens of thousands of locals and tourists from around the world. The cancellation was a response to calls by local political and religious leaders, including the Maronite Catholic Eparchy of Byblos to ban the show claiming the band's songs "offend religious and human values and insult Christian beliefs".[1]

The cancellation provoked a massive wave of protests. Some musicians canceled their participation at the Festival, while dozens of pubs and restaurants across Beirut played Mashrou' Leila songs at the planned time of the concert. A solidarity concert entitled صوت الموسيقى أعلى (*sawṭ almūsīqā ʾlā*, The Sound of Music Is Louder) was organized by the group People Against Oppression. At the concert, several performers and dozens of audience members flew the rainbow flag and the pink-blue-white flag of the trans movement, making the protest one of the largest events with LGBT visibility in the history of the country. Freedom of expression and LGBT rights were not the sole focus of the event, and in their press release and speech at the conference the organizers used a universalistic formulation of

[1] Amnesty International, "Lebanon: Authorities Must Ensure Mashrou' Leila Concert Goes Ahead," July 23, 2019, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/07/lebanon-authorities-must-ensure-mashrou-leila-concert-goes-ahead/.

demands such as “we want rights for everyone” or “a day against all oppression and interdictions”. This framing of the issues allowed the concert to become a platform for multiple causes: the arena was not only dominated by rainbow flags, but also a huge sign calling for “all civil, economic, and social rights for Palestinian refugees.”[2]

The broad framing of the protest, the large number of social issues featured, and in particular the inclusion of claims concerning the rights of Palestinian refugees drew criticism on social media. According to this contestation, the protests should have stuck to the issue at hand (i.e. censorship and LGBT rights) and not attempted to “politicize” the matter. As noted in a user post on the social media page of the concert: “more than just a thin line separates these topics so please don’t confuse them.”[3] What followed was a heated online debate about what qualified as LGBT activism, in addition to what strategies and tactics the Lebanese LGBT movement should follow, and who should get to decide.

As a gay, Arab man who has lived in Lebanon and volunteered at HELEM, the country’s oldest and largest LGBT organization, I was instantly drawn into the debate. The lively discussion reminded me of the plethora of similar debates I had observed online over the years in the Lebanese LGBT movement, which played a major role in developing my interest in LGBT activism in Lebanon. HELEM, founded informally in 2001 and officially in 2004, is the first registered LGBT organization in Lebanon, and additionally the first of its kind in the West Asia[4] and North Africa (WANA) region. By now, Lebanon has a thriving

[2] صوت الموسيقى أعلى (sawṭ almūsīqā ʾlā, The Sound of Music Is Louder) (@MusicIsLouder), “كامل الحقوق المدنية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية للاجئين/ات الفلسطينيين/ات” (kāmil alhuqūq almadaniyya w alʾqtisādiyya w alʾjtimā’yya lilājiʾīn alfilistīniyyīn, All Civil, Economic, and Social Rights for Palestinian Refugees). *Facebook*, August 16, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/MusicIsLouder/posts/118455966168171.

[3] صوت الموسيقى أعلى (sawṭ almūsīqā ʾlā, The Sound of Music Is Louder) (@MusicIsLouder), “وهيك كانت سهرتنا 🎉” (w hek kānat sahretnā, And That Is How Our Evening Was). *Facebook*, August 15, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/MusicIsLouder/posts/118089969538104.

[4] Throughout the thesis I will refer to the region Lebanon is located in as ‘West Asia’. While this region is most commonly referred to as the ‘Middle East’ both in academia and popular thinking, that term is strongly embedded in colonial history as the name refers to the position of the region (both geographic and cultural)

LGBT activist scene with a number of registered organizations, grassroots collectives, and initiatives, which is particularly remarkable in a country that criminalizes homosexuality (more on this *Chapter 2*). The trajectory of the Lebanese LGBT movement thus serves both as a source of inspiration and a cautionary example for other countries in the region.

Heated disputes or infighting are not uncommon anywhere in the world among activists, yet the history of the Lebanese LGBT movement is particularly ripe with such controversies. This includes debates surrounding the goals and priorities of the movement, the applicability of Western identity categories and human rights frameworks, and the advantages and disadvantages of visibility and coming out. They also extend to the role of businesses and academics in the movement, and whether to prioritize advocacy or service provision or to choosing a liberal or radical approach to organizing. Additionally, there are ongoing debates related to questions of class and gender relations within the movement, and to what extent the movement engages with, and relates to, feminism as well as to refugee and worker rights. Constant infighting is such a decisive experience of activists in Lebanon, that editors of *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*—some of whom personally participated in those debates—dedicated a special issue of their journal to *Tensions in Movement Building* in the summer of 2020.

It is tempting to be drawn into interpreting those debates in the context of the frictions[5] created by the encounter between Global/Western models of LGBT organizing and local socio-political realities. Academic literature on LGBT organizing in non-Western contexts, especially in the West Asia region has been dominated over the past two decades by a postcolonial discourse built in dialogue with the works of Joseph Massad, a scholar of

vis-à-vis Europe. I will use 'West Asia' to avoid the pitfalls of such connotations. I will only use the term 'Middle East' when directly citing or summarizing sources or interviews.

[5] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Palestinian origin and Professor of Modern Arab Politics and Intellectual History at Columbia University in the Unites States. Massad's argument[6] can be summarized as follows: 'homosexuals' as a particular category of people marked by their same-sex sexual desire is a modern Western phenomenon linked to 19th century juridico-medical discourses aimed at controlling and channeling human sexuality. Since Arab societies did not undergo the same historical development as those in the West, homosexuals as a category of people and as an identity is largely unrecognized in the region. Gay-rights activism is an emancipatory movement that developed first in largely Anglo-American and Western European context as a reaction to this repressive notion of homosexuality, which makes it incompatible with regions that did not adopt this notion of human sexuality. When international human rights organizations and Westernized local elites (whom Massad refers to as the 'Gay International') apply these notions to the region, they not only fail to resonate with local populations, but risk harming the groups they claim to protect, since the likely response will be intensified state repression.

Building on a close reading of these debates as well as interviews I conducted with key LGBT activists in Lebanon and the Lebanese diaspora, my thesis will demonstrate that while the trope of the 'West' is a common point of reference both as a source of inspiration and as a point of criticism in the discourse of activists, the Western/local binary does not fully structure these debates, and the debates in fact cross-cut the Western/local binary: an opposition to Western forms of activism can be, and is mobilized in nearly all of these debates to support diametrically opposing views. The rejection of Western models of activism can equally be used when arguing for and against the greater politicization of LGBT struggles, for

[6] Massad developed these ideas in the following publications: Joseph Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (May 1, 2002): 361–86; Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (University of Chicago Press, 2008); Joseph Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

and against more intersectional forms of organizing, for and against abandoning identity categories, for and against community building or advocacy as a primary strategy.

My thesis will argue that such a flexible employment of the Western/local binary derives from three main sources.

(1) 'Western gay activism' is far less monolithic than Massad claims since there are both temporal and regional differences, as well as mainstream and more alternative forms of LGBT organizing found within various Western contexts. Lebanese LGBT activists draw inspiration from all these varying forms of 'Western LGBT activism'.

(2) Massad focuses on Western donors, embassies and international human rights organizations as the primary motors behind LGBT activism in the region. I argue that such a focus is one sided because it downplays the role of local activists. At least in the case of Lebanon, the drivers of the LGBT movement were not so much international actors, but rather activists moving back and forth between Lebanese and Western sociopolitical contexts. These activists also had firsthand experience with diverse forms of organizing in Western contexts, and through their personal participation they also shaped 'Western LGBT activism'.

(3) Both the local political discourse and the Massadian framework provides such a hegemonic interpretation on LGBT activism as a Western imposition that local LGBT activists cannot avoid but frame their activism in opposition to Western models. Since, however, Western LGBT activism is diverse, it allows these activists to bend and shift the West vs. local opposition in a way that supports the argument they want to put forward in those debates.

Looking at the major debates that shaped the LGBT movement in Lebanon, one might identify several issues that have been debated similarly in Western LGBT activism in recent decades. Massad and his followers would likely interpret this as another sign of Western colonial imposition: not only are dominant forms of activism imported, but with it also the

contradictions and contestations of Western countries. However, my aim in this study is to demonstrate that the debates arise from the particular challenges LGBT organizations and activists faced, and continue to face, in the contemporary Lebanese sociopolitical context.

1.1. Literature review

The following section of the *Introduction* examines key academic debates and fields of research that inform my theoretical analysis and foundational knowledge for the thesis. Starting with a clarification of key terminology concerning the use of queer, LGBT and gender and sexual nonconformity, I then move into the core part of the review which is divided into four sections: the first one focuses on the relationship between sexuality and coloniality, highlighting how past colonial relations and contemporary post-colonial political constellations shape both Western and non-Western approaches to sexual and gender nonconformity. The second section reviews some key theoretical debates on LGBT social movements questioning the presumption of the existence of a coherent Western model of LGBT organizing. The third section reviews literature about social movement infighting to understand how disputes and internal conflict might lead to movement building. The fourth and final section focuses on the relationship between migration, sexual identity formation and social movement activism.

1.1.1. A note on terminology

A decision on which name or label to use can never be neutral: by choosing one term over the other the researcher cannot avoid but take a stand in classificatory struggles,[7] and such a decision might amount to a form of epistemic violence via omission or silencing.[8] This

[7] Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (1989): 14–25.

[8] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313.

problem is particularly acute with sexual and gender-nonconforming people and their social movements: not only do these movements struggle widespread use of derogatory labels attached to them, but are also internally divided on how to refer to the community.[9] Choices about terminology are even more complicated when doing research in a transnational setting, where linguistic differences and the reinterpretation of 'foreign' concepts further complicate the decisions of the researcher.

Over the past three decades the term 'queer' has gained immense popularity as an umbrella term to refer to sexual and gender nonconformity. The usage of 'queer' saves researchers having to deal with an ever more expanding vocabulary of sexual and gender identities, and offers a way out of using Western identity categories such as gay and lesbian in social contexts where such identities do not necessarily exist. 'Queer', however, carries a more specific meaning in both academia and activism referring to non-identitarian conceptualizations of sexual and gender nonconformity, and an emphasis on the fluidity of sexual and gender identifications. In the Lebanese context that my thesis focuses on 'queer' as an umbrella category is hardly ever used, most activists and organizations would use gay or LGBT (and its permutations) or local neologisms such as مثلي (*muthlī* ~ gay), مثلية (*muthliyya* ~ lesbian), عابر (*ʿābir* = transmasculine), عابرة (*ʿābira* = transfeminine), مثليون وعابرون / ميم-عين (*Muthliyyūn w ʿābirūn / mīm-ʿyn* ~ LGBT).

Since most of the literature now uses queer, I will also use queer when discussing such academic works or movements with a specifically queer orientation, but will use LGBT (or gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) whenever referring to Lebanese groups or activists, unless they consciously used a markedly different formulation.

[9] Elizabeth A Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Greg Jacobs, "The Struggle over Naming: A Case Study of 'Queer' in Toronto, 1990–1994," *World Englishes* 17, no. 2 (1998): 193–201.

1.1.2. Sexuality and coloniality

Colonialism and the social control of sexuality are strongly interlinked. As Meiu argues, throughout the colonization of the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Pacific territories by Western European states, sexuality played a central role in the colonizers' imagination and was a frequent target of colonial intervention.[10] It was an arena through which arguments about race and culture, difference and sameness, superiority and inferiority, morality and indecency were constructed and contested. Stoller for examples identifies a number of economic and political interests lying behind the suppression, tolerance or fostering of certain types of sexual relations such as (interracial) concubinage, prostitution and rape. She explains changes over time in the control of sexuality by the need of colonial powers to maintain colonizers and colonized as two distinct groups, to increase the cohesion between various subgroups of colonizers, and to maintain the superiority (and respectability) of the colonizers.[11] I will demonstrate in this review of literature how such dynamics continue to shape attitudes towards sexuality in the postcolonial world order.

As any other aspect of sexuality, same-sex desire was also caught up in the power dynamics of colonial domination. Aldrich, for example, shows that a number of famous men associated with European imperialism established intimate relations with local men in the colonies: life in the colonies offered them an escape from the repressive sexual morals of European society. Such sexual relations, however, created long lasting cultural associations of homosexuality with Western domination.[12] Same-sex sexual desire and behavior, however, was far from unknown among colonized populations. As the now growing historical research

[10] George Paul Meiu, "Colonialism and Sexuality," in *The International Encyclopedia of Human Sexuality*, ed. Patricia Whelehan and Anne Bolin (Chichester, West Sussex, UK : Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 1.

[11] Ann L. Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 634–60.

[12] Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002).

into (pre-)colonial Africa, Asia and Latin-America show, many of these societies had culturally accepted forms of same-sex intimacy, albeit with very different sexual taxonomies than the European colonizers.[13] As El-Rouayheb observes, many European travelers "noted, usually with astonishment or disgust, that local men openly flaunted their amorous feelings for boys."[14] Condemning and controlling such non-normative sexuality became another way for the colonizers to express their moral superiority over the colonized. Many colonial administrations adopted laws that implicitly or explicitly criminalize homosexuality, many of such legislation are still in force as long-lasting postcolonial legacy of European domination.[15] Local elites often responded to the moralizing discourses on same-sex sexuality by internalizing such attitudes: cleansing their societies from gender ambiguity and same-sex sexual practices became entangled in their quest for modernization.[16]

Public attitudes towards same-sex desire and gender-nonconformity, however, have drastically changed in Western societies over the past 150 years. First, same-sex sexual activity was transformed from a sinful act to a pathological inclination deeply rooted in one's personality, relocating same-sex desire from the field of law and morality to the field of medicine and psychology. The 'homosexual' as a type of person was born.[17] Urbanization and wage labor eased the necessary reliance on (heterosexual) family structures, allowing the

[13] Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Stephen O Murray and Will Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1997); Peter Sigal, *Infamous Desire: Male Homosexuality In Colonial Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[14] El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, 1.

[15] Alok Gupta and Scott Long, "This Alien Legacy: The Origins of 'Sodomy' Laws in British Colonialism" (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008).

[16] Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

[17] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

development of gay and lesbian urban communities and related identities.[18] Such communities served as the bases for social movements, which—coupled with shifts in models of capitalism [19]—ultimately lead to the decriminalization of homosexuality, legal protection against discrimination, and in a growing number of countries full legal equality. Such legal developments went hand in hand with homosexuality being reconceptualized from sin or sickness to a private matter or a morally arbitrary characteristic of a person, an aspect of human diversity. Academic literature is divided on what exactly explains such major shifts in both law and social attitudes,[20] the outcome is likely the result of a combination of factors (with different emphasis in different national contexts) such as changing political opportunity structures, the successful mobilization of financial resources and personal networks, framing demands in the language of established civil rights, making alliances with powerful social actors such as politicians, the media and the corporate sphere, and the cooptation of the LGBT cause for economic and political gain by those actors.

As the relationship between state and sexual and gender nonconformity gradually shifted in Western societies, it also impacted how the issue is implicated in the postcolonial world order. Puar coined the term "homonationalism" to describe this new relationship, the fusing of homosexuality to Western (US) pro-war, pro-imperialist agendas.[21] Rather than

[18] John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (London: Virago, 1984), 140–52; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, & Modern Sexualities* (London; Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 2003).

[19] Stephen Valocchi, "Capitalisms and Gay Identities: Towards a Capitalist Theory of Social Movements," *Social Problems* 64, no. 2 (May 1, 2017): 315–31.

[20] For an overview, see: Barry D Adam, Jan Willem Duyvendak, and André Krouwel, *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics: National Imprints of a Worldwide Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Manon Tremblay, David Paternotte, and Carol Johnson, *The Lesbian and Gay Movement and the State: Comparative Insights into a Transformed Relationship* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011).

[21] Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Jasbir Puar, "Rethinking Homonationalism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (May 2013): 336–39.

defining the 'nation' solely in heteronormative terms,[22] Western countries construct their moral and civilizatory superiority by demonstrating how well they treat their sexual and gender-nonconforming citizens. As Puar argues: "'acceptance' and 'tolerance' for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated."[23]

In many ways, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have taken the place women had in the colonial world order. In her influential book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod cites numerous examples of how colonial domination was justified by an alleged care for the well-being of women: banning the practice of *sati* by the Brits in South Asia, focusing on the veil as a sign of women's oppression in turn-of-the-century Egypt, or more recently honor crimes against Afghani women as a pretext for military intervention in Afghanistan.[24] Spivak uses the term "white men saving brown women from brown men" to describe how the colonial discourse on the *sati* renders Indian woman as objects of protection, rather than subjects of liberation, while reaffirming the moral and civilizatory superiority of the imperial state.[25] Paraphrasing Spivak, Rahul Rao talks about the similar "contemporary eagerness of white queers to save brown queers from brown homophobes."[26]

It is in this context that Joseph Massad, whom I already mentioned in the first part of the introduction, launched his powerful criticism against international human rights

[22] V. Spike Peterson, "Political Identities/Nationalism as Heterosexism," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1, no. 1 (0 1, 1999): 34–65.

[23] Jasbir Puar, "Rethinking Homonationalism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (May 2013): 336.

[24] Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[25] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313.

[26] Rahul Rao, "Echoes of Imperialism in LGBT Activism," in *Echoes of Imperialism in LGBT Activism*, ed. Kalypso Nicolaïdis, Berny Sèbe, and Gabrielle Maas (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 362

organizations and local activist groups working on gay rights. In his 2002 article,[27] which was later published in a slightly extended form as a chapter of *Desiring Arabs*[28] Massad builds on a social constructivist, Foucauldian understanding of homosexuality:[29] while he does not question that same-sex desire and sexual activity are present in all human societies, 'homosexuals' as a particular category of people with same-sex sexual desire is a modern phenomenon linked to 19th century juridico-medical discourses aimed at controlling and channeling human sexuality (opposing deviant homosexuality to natural and normal heterosexuality). While Foucault focuses on the historicity of the notion of homosexuality as a modern phenomenon, Massad highlights that this modernity is a Western one: since Arab societies did not undergo the same historical development as Western ones, homosexuality as a category of people, as an identity is foreign to the region.

Massad understands gay rights activism as an emancipatory movement that developed in North-America and Western Europe as a reaction to this repressive notion of homosexuality, which makes it incompatible with regions that did not adopt this notion of human sexuality. When international human rights organizations and Westernized local elites (whom Massad refers to as the 'Gay International') apply these notions to the region, they not only fail to resonate with local populations, but risk harming the groups they claim to protect, since the likely response will be intensified state repression. Using Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, a persistent, simplistic and distorted image of 'the Orient' in the academic discipline of Orientalism and in Western culture more broadly,[30] Massad also criticizes the orientalizing representation of same-sex sexual activity in Arab societies that oscillates

[27] Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World".

[28] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*.

[29] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

[30] Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978).

between charging these societies by being either two permissive or too oppressive towards same-sex sexual activity.

Massad further expanded and clarified his approach in the chapter "Pre-Positional Conjunctions: Sexuality and/in "Islam" in his 2015 book *Islam in Liberalism*.[31] In this work he extends his earlier analysis to the notion of 'queer' as well: while queer as an alternative to the identitarian conceptualization of homosexuality might seem to be a notion applicable to regions where 'homosexuality' is not rooted, he claims that 'queer' only makes sense as a critique of gay identitarianism, and since that is not the mainstream approach in Arab countries, it is of limited applicability.

Massad's approach drew widespread criticism both among activists and academics.[32] These criticism primarily highlight that while Massad claims to follow a Saidian approach to expose orientalist thinking in historical and contemporary academic and activist accounts of same-sex sexual activity in Arab societies, his own account is deeply orientalizing and occidentalizing: it is built on a simplistic, ahistorical opposition between Western and Muslim/Arab (used interchangeably in his work) sexuality, the first being organized around the gender of the partner, the latter around the position taken in sexual activity. Massad

[31] Massad, *Islam in Liberalism*.

[32] See for example: Hosam Aboul-Ela, "Is There an Arab (Yet) in This Field?: Postcolonialism, Comparative Literature, and the Middle Eastern Horizon of Said's Discourse Analysis," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 4 (2010): 729–50; Lama Abu-Odeh, "That Thing That You Do: Comment on Joseph Massad's 'Empire of Sexuality,'" *Al-Akhbar English*, March 25, 2013; Sahar Amer, "Joseph Massad and the Alleged Violence of Human Rights," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 4 (2010): 649–53; Sa'ed Atshan, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*, 1st edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Gil Z. Hochberg, "INTRODUCTION: Israelis, Palestinians, Queers: Points of Departure," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 4 (October 1, 2010): 493–516; Dina Georgis, "Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame in Bareed Mista3jil," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (May 2013): 233–51; Ghassan Makarem, "We Are Not Agents of the West," *Reset DOC*, December 14, 2009; Ali Reda and Philip Proudfoot, "Against Abandonment Activist-Humanitarian Responses to LGBT Refugees in Athens and Beirut," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, no. fez114 (0 27, 2020); Valerie Traub, "The Past Is a Foreign Country? The Times and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies," in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge: Harvard University Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2008); Brian Whitaker, "Distorting Desire," *Gay City News*, September 13, 2007.

completely disregards the fact that men who have sex with men, yet do not identify as gay or homosexual, are common in Western societies as well,[33] and that identitarian notions of homosexuality have long existed in Arab/Muslim society, undeniably linked to the presence of European colonial powers and their hegemonic cultural influence over the region, but clearly long before the 'Gay International' became active.[34] Massad offers no empirical evidence, and simply takes it for granted that 'Western', identitarian notions of homosexuality are limited to certain segments of the population in contemporary Arab/Muslim societies.[35] His evidence is based solely on the reading of historical texts—a practice long criticized by postcolonial scholars inspired by Said.[36] Furthermore, his analysis is completely silent on female same-sex sexuality in the region.

LGBT activists in non-Western countries find themselves in the same difficult position that Lila Abu-Lughod so lucidly explains in her article *Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies*: Middle East feminists have to very carefully navigate the tension between critiquing local patriarchy and becoming a tool of Western imperialism.[37] A universalizing discourse on human rights offers LGBT activists a powerful tool to tackle discriminatory laws and social practices, but using such a language implicates them in the postcolonial world order, and they risk being alienated from local elites and local populations who define themselves in opposition to Western domination.

[33] Tom Boellstorff, "BUT DO NOT IDENTIFY AS GAY: A Proleptic Genealogy of the MSM Category," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (2011): 287–312; Josephine D. Korchmaros, Claudia Powell, and Stevens Sally, "Chasing Sexual Orientation: A Comparison of Commonly Used Single-Indicator Measures of Sexual Orientation," *Journal of Homosexuality* 60, no. 4 (April 1, 2013): 596–614.

[34] Sa'ed Atshan, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*, 189; Ghassan Makarem, "We Are Not Agents of the West," *Reset DOC*, December 14, 2009.

[35] Georgis, "Thinking Past Pride."

[36] Anouar Majid, *Unveiling Traditions Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Uma Narayan, "Restoring History and Politics to 'Third World Traditions,'" in *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 41–48.

[37] Lila Abu-Lughod, "'Orientalism' and Middle East Feminist Studies," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 101–13.

The scarce, but growing academic literature on Lebanese LGBT organizing aims to challenge Massad's account that local LGBT activists blindly and uncritically adopt Western models of LGBT organizing. Makarem claims that LGBT activism in West Asia is a fully localized struggle markedly distinct from Western models of LGBT activism.[38] In particular, he highlights how HELEM, rather than focusing solely on acquiring social recognition for an oppressed minority, is committed to a broad ideal of social justice that includes anti-colonial, anti-war and anti-racist causes, thus employing an intersectional approach to LGBT activism.

Moussawi argues that LGBT organizations in Lebanon are not homogenous; instead there are crucial differences among them in terms of their strategies: HELEM focuses on human rights via visible organizing, whereas MEEM's strategy is to fight patriarchal systems of oppression via underground organizing.[39] Furthermore, these groups both contest and engage with Euro-American models of LGBT organizing: they mobilize collective identities differently locally and globally. Their role can be best described—following Thayer[40]—as translation, negotiation and appropriation.[41] Qubaiova employs a similar framework, although instead of focusing on collective identity deployment she describes the process of negotiating global and local structures as they manifest themselves in the "incomplete and messy NGOization" of HELEM.[42] Rather than being "a catalyst of imperial and Western intervention" HELEM should be better understood as a space where "contentious and contradictory hedging of dominant power structures" take place.[43]

[38] Makarem, "We Are Not Agents of the West"

[39] Ghassan Moussawi, "(Un)Critically Queer Organizing: Towards a More Complex Analysis of LGBTQ Organizing in Lebanon," *Sexualities* 18, no. 5–6 (September 1, 2015): 593–617.

[40] Millie Thayer, *Making Transnational Feminism: Rural Women, NGO Activists, and Northern Donors in Brazil* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010).

[41] Moussawi, "(Un)Critically Queer Organizing", 606.

[42] Adriana Qubaiova, "Cross-Bracing Sexualities : Hedging 'Queer'/ Sexual Non-Normativity in Beirut" (Budapest, Central European University, 2019).

[43] Ibid, 100.

All three works take for granted the existence of a dominant Western model of LGBT organizing that local LGBT organizations have to deviate from or translate, negotiate and appropriate. The following section reviews literature on Western LGBT movements to highlight the need to move beyond that presumption.

1.1.3. LGBT social movements

The previous section already touched upon the drastic changes in states' response and public attitudes towards same-sex desire and gender-nonconformity in Western societies, and the role gay, lesbian and transgender social movements have played. While the iconic Stonewall riot in 1969 is often hailed as the birth of the modern gay and lesbian movement, the first treaties aiming at reforming sodomy laws criminalizing same-sex sexual activity are even-aged with the Enlightenment.[44] France decriminalized homosexuality during the French Revolution in 1791. Canonized histories[45] of the Western (predominantly American) gay and lesbian movement trace its roots to homophile organizations in Europe and North America after World War II. As the narrative continues, these groups with an assimilationist agenda and relying on respectability politics gave way to the more confrontational gay liberation movements and lesbian separatist movements in the 1970s inspired by the countercultural movements of the 1960s. With the rise of neo-conservatism in the 1980s and the impact of the AIDS epidemic, the gay and lesbian movement started to rely more on an ethnic model, speaking about themselves as a minority group stripped of their civil rights. The focus on legal rights especially the focus on marriage equality, however, prompted some activists to move away from the ethnic model, thus we arrive to contemporary queer organizing that

[44] See e.g. Jeremy Bentham, "Offences Against One's Self:," *Journal of Homosexuality* 3, no. 4 (1978(1785)): 389–406; Thomas Cannon, *Ancient and Modern Pederasty Investigated and Exemplify'd* (1749).

[45] Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

emphasizes the fluidity of sexual and gender categories and decenters the gender of sexual partners as a key structuring principle of sexuality.

Such a linear reconstruction of history fails to recognize that various models or epochs of gay and lesbian organizing do not neatly follow each other, and what seems retrospectively as linear progression is, in fact, the result of a series of internal debates, tensions and contestations much like the ones I analyze in Lebanese LGBT organizing. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains such movement-tensions by refuting the basic assumption in Foucault's and Massad's view, which is that the modern Western model of homosexuality is stable, coherent and dominant.[46] Sedgwick argues the opposite: that Western discourses on homosexuality are deeply incoherent; there are two equally widespread, yet diametrically opposed views. The first one she labels as the minoritizing view that sees homosexuals as a distinct group of the population characterized by stable, unchangeable same-sex sexual attraction. The second one she labels as the universalist view in which every person is potentially homosexual, since sexual desire has no set object, everyone is born bisexual, so their same-sex attraction can be activated at any time. Sedgwick emphasizes that neither views are inherently oppressive or emancipatory: the homophile movement, gay separatism and the gay civil rights movement relied on the first model, while gay liberation and lesbian feminism (and one might add the later queer movement) on the second.

Erin Calhoun Davis identifies a similarly deep incoherence in the conceptualization of transgender identities in contemporary Western societies.[47] Transgender persons are at the same time perceived to embody gender fluidity and gender conformity. On the one hand, their gender performances are conceptualized as being temporal and situational, inconsistent across

[46] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

[47] Erin Calhoun Davis, "Situating 'Fluidity': (Trans) Gender Identification and the Regulation of Gender Diversity," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 1 (2009): 97–130.

time and space, and unconstrained by societal rules and norms. On the other hand, insistence on proper gender attribution and the reliance on stereotypical markers of femininity and masculinity make them an embodiment of gender fixity or gender conformity. Patricia Elliot explains that historical shifts, as well as major rifts or contestations in transgender organizing and theory are structured by such incoherence.[48]

Adam, Duvenyduk and Krouwel identify further divergences in Western models of LGBT organizing if one leaves behind the United States, and takes a more comparative approach.[49] They demonstrate that while at first glance gay and lesbian movements around a globe show striking similarities in the activities, styles, symbols, institutions and language, "closer scrutiny shows, however, that these similarities are sometimes misleading, and superficial analogies may hide fundamental disparities."[50] They emphasize, for example, a key difference between politicized personal identities and communities in the UK and the US, and a split between an apolitical culture and formalized movement in Northern Europe. Movement paradigms follow national characteristics of political institutions and political culture.

Jonathan Alexander introduces a further distinction between two models of LGBT organizing: a 'community of identity' and a 'community of values' approach.[51] While in the former, it is a sense of shared identity that integrates the movement, in the latter the movement is built on a set of shared values relevant for the community. Alexander claims that the 'community of values' approach was strongly present in early LGBT organizing, and it was brought to the forefront once again in recent years in response to the queer theory critique

[48] Patricia Elliot, *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory: Contested Sites* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2016).

[49] Adam, Duyvendak, and Krouwel, *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics*.

[50] Ibid, 344.

[51] Jonathan Alexander, "Beyond Identity: Queer Values and Community," *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, & Bisexual Identity* 4, no. 4 (1999): 293–314.

of the notion of identity and the practical problems that movements face when tackling internal diversity.

When analyzing the relationship and exchanges between Western and non-Western (with particular reference here to the Lebanese context) social movements aiming at improving the situation of sexual and gender nonconforming people, we cannot thus depart from a unitary, coherent Western model of gender and sexuality, and consequently a unitary, coherent Western model of LGBT organizing. It is not only the East that is much more diverse than the orientalist gaze allows it to appear, but so is the West. When contemporary activists in non-Western contexts look for inspiration to 'Western' activism they find a wide variety of models coalesced in space and time.

1.1.4. Social movement infighting

Social movement studies have traditionally been dominated by a debate between the resource mobilization and political process approaches. Resource mobilization theory argues that social movement success can be explained by the ability of actors to acquire and deploy key resources such as material (money and physical capital), human (volunteers, staff, leaders) and cultural (knowledge, prior experience) resources.[52] Political process approaches on the other hand argue that movement success can be explained by political opportunity structure, that is the openness of the political system to respond to or repress movement demands.[53] Since the 1980s new theories that focus on collective identity formation[54] and

[52] Bob Edwards and John D. McCarthy, "Resources and Social Movement Mobilization," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A Snow, Sarah Anne Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Malden; Oxford; Carlton: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 116–52.

[53] Doug McAdam, "The Biographical Impact of Activism," in *How Social Movements Matter*, ed. Doug McAdam, Marco Giugni, and Charles Tilly, NED-New edition, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 117–46; David S. Meyer, "Protest and Political Opportunities," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 125–45.

[54] Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27, no. 1 (2001): 283–305.

framing,[55] or more broadly approaches that highlight cultural processes in movement building have also been developed.

It is within this latter school of thought that understanding the role and impact of intra-movement infighting has become a key research question. While successful social movements tend to portray themselves as cohesive, united and driven by a common goal, disputes and internal conflicts are an integral part of the lives of social movements. Writing about gay and lesbian organizing in the United States, Ghaziani convincingly shows that "beneath these happy proclamations of "unity through diversity" lies significant divergence, personally and in terms of political ideology, which results in infighting, including strategic disagreements about the boundaries of membership (who is part of our group?) and decision-making control (who should be included in the organizing process and with what authority?)."[56]

The social movement literature is sharply divided on the function and impact of intra-movement debates or infighting. Some argue that such debates lead to factionalism, splintering of resources, discouragement of participation and ultimately the destruction or stagnation of movements.[57] Others argue that infighting is a form of socialization, which establishes and maintains group identities, encourages the participation of diverse groups of people, brings in more resources, and leads to the production or expansion of movements.[58]

[55] Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611–39; David A. Snow, "Framing and Social Movements," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (Wiley-Blackwel, 2013).

[56] Amin Ghaziani and Gary Alan Fine, "Infighting and Ideology: How Conflict Informs the Local Culture of the Chicago Dyke March," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 20, no. 1 (September 1, 2008): 53.

[57] Sa'ed Atshan, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*; William A. Gamson, *The Strategy of Social Protest* (Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1975); Doug McAdam, "The Biographical Impact of Activism," in *How Social Movements Matter*, ed. Doug McAdam, Marco Giugni, and Charles Tilly, NED-New edition, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 117–46.

[58] Robert D. Benford, "Frame Disputes within the Nuclear Disarmament Movement," *Social Forces* 71, no. 3 (1993): 677–701; Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict: An Examination of the Concept of Social Conflict and Its Use in Empirical Sociological Research* (New York: Free Press, 1964); Ghaziani, *The*

Ghaziani conceptualizes social movement infighting as a form of cultural work, as cultural carriers of ideas about strategy and identity.[59] Rather than being personal disagreements, infighting is "collective disputation that is linked to conceptions of group identity and culture."[60] Reviewing a large number of scholarly works about infighting, Ghaziani and Kretschmer find that infighting is most often linked to racial, gender and class divisions within movements, changing generational profile of activists, challenges with participatory decision-making, and disagreements over the political logics that drive the selection of strategies and tactics.[61]

1.1.5. Queer migration

Migration studies have for a long time been dominated by approaches that explain both intranational and transnational migration from an economic perspective. Neoclassical theories inspired by Ravenstein[62] assume that labor markets move towards equilibrium through migration: individuals will make rational decisions to migrate from areas with low wages and labor abundance to areas where labor is scarce and wages are high. New economics theories focus on household decision-making and the role of remittances.[63]

Dividends of Dissent; Ghaziani and Fine, "Infighting and Ideology"; Molly Sarah Jacobs, "Infighting at the Fringe: How Fields Shape Conflict and Organizational Outcomes in Social Movements" (UCLA, 2017).

[59] Amin Ghaziani, *The Dividends of Dissent: How Conflict and Culture Work in Lesbian and Gay Marches on Washington* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[60] Ghaziani and Fine, "Infighting and Ideology."

[61] Amin Ghaziani and Kelsy Kretschmer, "Infighting and Insurrection," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 220–35.

[62] E. G. Ravenstein, "The Laws of Migration," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 52, no. 2 (1889): 241–305.

[63] Oded Stark and David E. Bloom, "The New Economics of Labor Migration," *The American Economic Review* 75, no. 2 (1985): 173–78.

Structural and historically-based studies[64] and world system theory approaches[65] emphasize the structural demand for migrant labor in advanced capitalist societies. More recent theories highlight the role of migration policies and migration systems and networks,[66] and organizations facilitating migration[67] in explaining migratory flows. It was only in the past two decades that the complex relationships between migration and gender, religion, ethnicity and sexuality have become a central focus of scholarly studies.[68] The issue of sexuality and transnational migration was primarily addressed within refugee studies.[69]

Binnie argues that migration occupies a central place in the subject formation of sexual and gender-nonconforming people, or as he calls them "sexual dissidents".[70] Historical works on the formation of gay and lesbian communities in Europe and North America focus on intranational migration, from rural areas to urban centers.[71] Research into contemporary

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[64] Stephen Castles and Godula Kosack, "The Function of Labour Immigration in Western European Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. I/73 (June 1, 1972): 3–21; Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[65] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).

[66] Douglas T. Gurak, Fee Caces, and Mary M. Kritz, "Migration Networks and the Shaping of Migration Systems," in *International Migration Systems: A Global Approach,* (Mary M: Clarendon, 1992), 150–76.

[67] Johan Lindquist, Biao Xiang, and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, "Opening the Black Box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility and the Changing Political Economy in Asia," *Pacific Affairs* 85, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 7–19.

[68] Peggy Levitt, "'You Know, Abraham Was Really the First Immigrant': Religion and Transnational Migration," *International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (September 1, 2003): 847–73; Katie Willis and Brenda S. A Yeoh, *Gender and Migration* (Cheltenham: E. Elgar, 2000).

[69] Rachel A Lewis and Nancy A Naples, "Introduction: Queer Migration, Asylum, and Displacement," *Sexualities* 17, no. 8 (0 1, 2014): 911–18; Martin F. Manalansan, "Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies," *International Migration Review* 40, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 224–49.

[70] Jon Binnie, *The Globalization of Sexuality* (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004).

[71] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994); John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (London: Virago, 1984), 140–52; John D'Emilio, "Gay politics and community in San Francisco since World War II," in *Hidden from history reclaiming the gay and lesbian past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman (New York: New American Library, 1989), 456–73; Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carole S Vance and Gayle Rubin (Boston: Routledge & Paul, 1984).

patterns of migration shows that the rural-urban migration continues to be a formative experience for sexual and gender-nonconforming people.[72] In 'Get thee to a big city', Weston analyzes how coming out narratives often have a markedly spatial character, the rural/urban "symbolic contrast was central to the organization of many coming out stories."[73]

As opposed to intranational migration, much less academic focus has been put on transnational migration of sexual and gender-nonconforming people. As Eithne Luibhéid notes scholarship and policymaking often "remain organized around the premise that migrants are heterosexuals (or on their way to becoming so) and queers are citizens (even though second-class ones)."[74] Building on the work of Carillo,[75] Manalansan claims that "sexuality, broadly conceived, can be the indirect or direct motivation for international relocation and movement."[76] Grewal and Kaplan analyzes how both intranational and transnational migration are often "figured as the movement from repression to freedom" in both academic works and popular thinking.[77]

Gorman-Murray, however, warns against taking the rural-urban migration and its unidirectionality as a paradigm for understanding all types of queer migration: "the concentration on the rural-to-urban trajectory suggests a teleological finality with respect to displacement and ontological closure with regard to identity."[78] He proposes instead to

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[72] Bob Cant, *Invented Identities?: Lesbians and Gays Talk about Migration* (London: Cassell, 1997); Richard Parker, *Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality, and Emerging Gay Communities in Brazil* (New York; London: Routledge, 1999); Kath Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (June 1, 1995): 253–77.

[73] Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City", 32.

[74] Eithne Luibhéid, "Queer/Migration: An Unruly Body of Scholarship," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 169.

[75] Héctor Carrillo, "Sexual Migration, Cross-Cultural Sexual Encounters, and Sexual Health," *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 1, no. 3 (2004): 58–70.

[76] Manalansan, "Queer Intersections."

[77] Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Studies of Sexuality," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7, no. 4 (2001): 670.

[78] Andrew Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migration through the Body," *Social & Cultural Geography* 8, no. 1 (2007): 109.

highlight the 'peripatetic' nature of queer migration an "ongoing, generating movement between places."[79] He does not question that the quest for sexuality-affirming places remains a driving factor for migration, but argues that "this can only be realized through accepting that multiple sites may need to be experienced and 'tested', and so continuing movement is often inevitable."[80]

Queer transnational migration, especially its peripatetic type, opens up a space for encounters between Western and non-Western activists and can foster transnational queer activism. Peumanand and Ayoub and Bauman show how the relational and emotive mechanisms of migration foster activism: on the one hand, migration to a place more accepting of sexual and gender nonconformity allows queer migrants to feel safe enough to be open about their sexuality and take up activism, meanwhile an ongoing attachment to their 'home' and friends left behind prompt them to extend that activism to their home country. [81]

1.2. Chapter breakdown

My thesis is divided into six main chapters. After this introductory chapter that also reviewed various fields of studies and key literature relevant for my thesis, the second chapter describes the methodology of the research, exploring not only how data was collected and analyzed, but also how my 'halfie' positionality informed the research questions and the methodology. The third chapter provides an overview on the sociopolitical context in Lebanon in which LGBT activists operate in, and introduces the main social movement actors referred to later on throughout the thesis. The fourth chapter analyzes the dense, multilayered

[79] Ibid, 113.

[80] Ibid, 113.

[81] Phillip M. Ayoub and Lauren Bauman, "Migration and Queer Mobilisations: How Migration Facilitates Cross-Border LGBTQ Activism," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 15 (2019): 2758–78; Wim Peumans, *Queer Muslims in Europe: Sexuality, Religion and Migration in Belgium* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020).

network of connections that link actors in the Lebanese LGBT movement to Western LGBT activism. The fifth chapter provides an analysis of the major debates in the Lebanese LGBT movement as they evolved throughout the past two decades relying both on public contribution to these debates as well as the retrospective reconstruction of these debates by key activists I've interviewed. The sixth chapter offers a more focused analysis of these debates linking them to local and global political structures and the challenges LGBT activists face on the ground in Lebanon. The conclusion reflects on the research findings and suggests future directions of research.

CHAPTER 2:

METHODOLOGY

This chapter will explore in greater depth the methodological dilemmas and theoretical considerations that have guided my research, as well as practical questions of data collection and analysis. By focusing on questions of positionality, I build on the insights of postcolonial feminist ethnography which require that the researcher engages in a practice of critical self-reflection. This self-reflection explores and exposes the situated, socially constructed nature of the researcher's self and uncovers potential power dynamics involved in the research, doing so with the aim of creating "a collaborative research process by building reciprocal relationships."[82] I analyze how my role as researcher within the context of the activist diaspora at once facilitated access to and build rapport with interviewees, but at the same time made me very cautious regarding the reception of my research findings among the activist community I consider myself part of. Thus I discuss positionality, not only in terms of personal characteristics, but also my (contested) role as a researcher, and the difficulties of 'studying up'.

2.1. Notes on positionality

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, my position as an activist-researcher cuts across standard differentiations between insider and outsider. Being an immigrant with mixed Arab family roots and having lived in several countries in the 'West', I was influenced by a multitude of identities, affiliations, patriotisms and socializations. Growing up, I was exposed to Levant Arabic language and culture largely through Lebanese media. My family history

[82] Jennifer Manning, "Constructing a Postcolonial Feminist Ethnography," *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 5, no. 2 (January 1, 2016): 95-96.

and ties are strong in this region, and it is a place of which I have heard countless stories. Having this influence motivated me to visit Beirut during my college years, and to get to know the place better. I stayed in Beirut twice for work and study for over a year combined, during which periods I also volunteered at one of the organizations I analyze in my current research. All of this allowed me to familiarize myself with the cultural codes and nuances of Lebanese life. My position was similar to what Abu-Lughod names the 'partial insider':[83] my Arabness and connection to the region was never questioned, yet I deferred from my interviewees in significant ways.

This was primarily due to the fact that my relationship to Lebanon is largely structured by my adult experience as an 'Americanized' foreigner. My social contacts in Lebanon were mainly limited to the hyper cosmopolitan gay and activist communities, with whom my transnational identity and upbringing resonated very well. Many of these people grew up abroad due to the Civil War, or were educated in international private schools and went on to study abroad: in short, they moved back and forth between the diaspora and the homeland. There seemed to be a certain affinity between my life and the 'irregular' lives of many of these activists.

Choosing Lebanon as a topic of my research means that I engaged with a locality I already knew quite well. Having cultural affinities, but being socialized elsewhere puts me in a similar position to the 'halfie researcher' that Subedi describes.[84] In my earlier life I established a home in Beirut based on memories and family connection, and reconstructed my Arabness while living abroad via my connection to Lebanon. This might qualify me as an

[83] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Fieldwork of a Dutiful Daughter," in *Arab Women in the Field: Studying Your Own Society*, ed. Soraya Altorki and Camillia Fawzi El-Solh (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), 143.

[84] Binaya Subedi, "Theorizing a 'Halfie'Researcher's Identity in Transnational Fieldwork," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 19, no. 5 (2006): 573–93.

insider in certain aspects. Yet, having a Palestinian, rather than Lebanese family background and engaging with Beirutis after a prolonged period of time in the 'West' might mean I have certain blind spots as a result of the late and partial socialization to the culture.

Subedi describes very well the complexities of negotiating insider and outsider identities in transnational fieldwork, emphasizing that the transnational dimension separates the researcher and his informants. My situation is slightly different, as the transnational dimension is present in the lives of many of the people whose life and activism I studied. I share much more with my informants than the 'halfie researcher', whose transnational experience stands in sharp contrast with the cultural rootedness of the people in their home country whom they come to study. Focused discussions about the topic of the research were often interrupted by my interviewees' wish to exchange opinions on issues that they perceived affected as equally, such competitiveness of the American academia, racism in Europe or COVID related travel bans, blurring the border between me being a researcher and a friendly interlocutor.

My sexuality and Arab ethnicity also clearly facilitated my access to the interviewees. I was often perceived within the framework of being 'one of us', some interviewees also emphasized how important it was that academics from the region also study, write, and speak up about these issues. My name definitely opened gates that would not have been opened, especially with the distance and impersonality of contacting people over the internet. My linguistic skills in English, Arabic and French also proved to be vital for successfully completing the study: even in cases where interviews started off in English they often ventured organically into French and Arabic. This polyglotism so typical of contemporary Lebanese communication, especially in Beirut and the activist circles in which I have conducted research, provided interviewees with a certain sense of comfortable colloquiality

that eased the establishment of rapport and discussing topics that might be difficult for activists both from a personal and a political point of view.

Being a somewhat gender-nonconforming gay man I found it relatively easy to connect with interviewees of any genders. Gender roles and expectations play out rather differently in LGBT activist circles than in the majority society, allowing for much more open discussions around issues of gender and sexuality and significantly less emphasis on everyday gender segregation. I had some preliminary concerns regarding how to navigate the boundaries between good rapport and a certain level of flirtatiousness so common among gay men, but the online interview situation and the professional standpoint most of my interviewees took made the management of the erotic component of fieldwork[85] less daunting.

As Abu-Lughod points out, the relationship between the anthropologist and informant tends to be hierarchical: researchers are often "distinguished from those they study by greater wealth, education, and standard of living."[86] My study, however, deviated from this model: many activists belonged to the same class as I do, or were positioned 'above' me due to their seniority or education. I have, for example, interviewed several interviewees with multiple master's degrees in relevant fields, one having a PhD and recently published a book on the LGBT movement in Palestine. Some of the interviewees have been my 'bosses' when I volunteered at HELEM.

[85] Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 2 (2008): 177–89; Isabelle Clair, "Sexuality in Researcher–Informant Fieldwork Study Relations: Deciphering a Methodological Taboo," *Revue Française de Sociologie (English Edition)* 57, no. 1 (2016): 25–47; Don Kulick, "The Sexual Life of Anthropologists: Erotic Subjectivity and Ethnographic Work," in *Taboo: Sex, Identity, and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, ed. Margaret Willson and Don Kulick (London: Routledge, 1995), 1–28; Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

[86] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Fieldwork of a Dutiful Daughter," in *Arab Women in the Field: Studying Your Own Society*, ed. Soraya Altorki and Camillia Fawzi El-Solh (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), 143–144.

Throughout the interviews, I often felt I was treated as an 'apprentice activist', a freshman in the field, who needs to be told 'how things really are'. While this attitude felt uncomfortable in the beginning, it did provide me with a position in the activist field understood by the interviewees that enables me to gather a lot of information. As Abu-Lughod's 'dutiful daughter' persona allowed her to integrate within Bedouin society by inhabiting an already existing social category, taking on the role of the 'apprentice activist' helped me structure my interactions with the activists.

One difficulty with 'studying up',[87] especially if the informants are highly educated, is that rather than providing 'raw' ethnographic information, they offer highly interpreted summaries of events and processes, expressed in a semi-academic language, often detaching themselves from the debates as neutral outsiders that have never been involved (or have moved beyond) the half-truths of passionate activist debating. It was very important to triangulate such accounts with the textual records of those debates, i.e. to compare the positions taken by the activists during the interviews today and those expressed in those debates years ago.

A clear point of discomfort for me as a researcher was the role and impact of academic knowledge production, which was brought up several times during the interviews. Most of my interviewees expressed clear disregard or even disdain towards academics. This disdain was not only based on the content of academic works and media appearances of academics, but personal cooperation with several well-known academics as part of their activist work. Several of my interviewees made references to useless, overtheorized academic works that in the best case are completely irrelevant from an activist point of view, and more often than not even harm the movement by playing into the hands of opponents or demotivating activist

[87] Laura Nader, "Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up.," in *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed. Dell Hymes and Laura Nader (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 284–311.

engagement. Such references made me rather cautious about how my research findings would be received. This concern was particularly pressing since I will potentially be in touch with these activists in my future life and career. I will return to the question of the role of academics in the movement in the final chapter of my thesis.

2.2. Research methods

2.2.1. Debates

A core part of the empirical material my thesis is built on is the texts produced by activists as contributions to major debates that shaped the movement. While in the first years of LGBT organizing in Lebanon in the early 2000s these debates usually took the form of in person discussions at various meetings, with the increasing spread and popularity of the internet, much of these debates have moved online completely, or in person debates were complemented with online discussions accessible publicly. The discussions took place in some friendly media outlets and their comment sections, on personal blogs and their comment sections, on websites and social media pages of groups and organizations (reflecting on each other's work), and on the personal social media pages of key activists.

Debates were selected via a method of triangulation:[88] reading academic coverage on the history of LGBT organizing in Lebanon,[89] tracing the above-mentioned media for debates sparking a significant number of interactions, and asking activists during the interviews to identify such debates. Once I had a list of core debates to analyze, I went back to the media sources mentioned above to find contributions to the debates themselves or coverage of the

[88] Uwe Flick, "Triangulation in qualitative research," in *A companion to qualitative research.*, ed. Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardoff, and Ines Steinke (London; Boston: Sage Publications, 2004), 178–83.

[89] Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi, "L'altermondialisme Au Liban : Un Militantisme de Passage : Logiques d'engagement et Reconfiguration de l'espace Militant (de Gauche) Au Liban" (Doctoral Thesis, Paris 1, 2013); Moussawi, "(Un)Critically Queer Organizing"; Adriana Qubaiova, "Cross-Bracing Sexualities".

issues raised in the debates. This in some cases meant finding archived versions of blogs and websites at https://archive.org as some of those internet sources are no longer publicly available.

2.2.2. Interviews

As part of the research, I conducted in-depth, qualitative, semi-structured interviews[90] with thirteen key activists linked to the Lebanese LGBT movement. The method was chosen because it allows to contextualize the disputes, explore meanings and motivations, and access biographic data not publicly available. As Valerie Yow argues "in-depth interview is indispensable for probing behind the public-oriented statement."[91] The interview technique allowed me in particular to explore how queer migration structures activist experiences; what personal, social or political factors underlie positions taken in the disputes; and what meanings or impacts activists attach to movement infighting.

The interviewees were selected via a combination of three methods: the interviewee's organizational position, their involvement in public or social media debates, and snowballing.[92] By focusing on organizational position, I was able to involve actors that had leadership positions in the movement at different points in time, thus having a greater impact on the direction of the movement as well as a broader overview of major shifts and schisms. Second, via the analysis of debates in print and online media, blogs, and social media, especially Twitter and Facebook, I was able to involve those actors that had the sharpest position in those debates. These people in some cases overlapped with those in leadership

[90] Kathlyn M. Blee and Verta Taylor, "Semi-Structured Interviewing in Social Movement Research," in *Methods of Social Movement Research*, ed. Bert Klandermans (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 92–118.

[91] Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2005), 9–10.

[92] Ibid, 81.

positions. Finally, I asked all my interviewees to suggest more interviewees that they think have meaningful contribution to the questions my research is addressing. While I started by identifying thirty-one potential informants, this translated into thirteen actual interviews.

The interviews were carried out via videoconferencing (and in a few cases over the phone) over a period of one year, between March 2020 and March 2021. The use of online interviewing was partly a necessity due to limited access to the field, but in line with the relevant literature, [93] I also found that participants found such form of interviewing less stressful, and thus they were more likely to open up and devote a substantial amount of their time to the interviews. The interviews lasted from one to three hours long, some of them in more than one sitting. Interviewees show a relative diversity in terms of age, gender and current place of living. The oldest interviewees were in their mid-forties, the youngest in their mid-twenties. Eight of the interviewees were men, three women, one of the latter a trans woman, and two were non-binary. Ten of the interviewees had Lebanese background, one Palestinian, one Moroccan Egyptian, one Syrian and one mixed French-Lebanese. Of the thirteen interviewees, six currently live in Beirut, Lebanon; four in France, two in the United States, and one in Canada. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, or a mix of English, Arabic and French, one interview with a trans activist with a Syrian background was conducted solely in Arabic. Interviewees include both leaders of the movement as well as a few 'regular' members contributing via volunteering. The interviewees include people who played a role in the early 2000s and also those who became active mainly in the past five years.

The interviews were semi-structured following a set of core questions (included as *Appendix 2*), but allowing for the interviewees to expand on issues they found most relevant

[93] Janet Salmons, *Qualitative Online Interviews: Strategies, Design, and Skills* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2015), 62.

and to bring in new issues they found relevant for the broader topic. The interviews started with a very open, narrative approach[94] asking the interviewees to introduce themselves and tell the story of how they became LGBT activists, and then zoomed in on topics directly pertaining to the research questions. Such topics included migratory history and current relationship to Lebanon, if living abroad; motivations to join LGBT organizations and their roles in the movement; and finally questions about major disputes or contestations in the Lebanese LGBT movement. This latter topic was brought up first via an open question about what disputes or contestations the interviewee knows about, and then specific questions about disputes identified via media and social media analysis and previous interviews. Starting with the open question was important to avoid influencing the interviewees, and let them freely identify the disputes they considered important. There was a relative consistency about which disputes the interviewees could recall; differences were primarily explained by when the interviewee was active in the movement: some of the earlier debates were less prominent in the accounts of activists that joined the movement more recently. There was more diversity in terms of which debates the interviewees considered most decisive, which was usually linked to their personal involvement in those debates.

All the interviews were transcribed. While transcription of recorded interviews necessarily reduces the richness of the source material and forces the researcher to make certain decisions interpreting the text, I tried to follow the advice of Samuel as much as possible, who argues that researchers should strive at "preserving the texture of the speech (…) to convey in words the quality of the original speech."[95] In particular, I kept the original language of the interviews, switching back and forth between the various languages used.

[94] Ibid, 14–17.

[95] Raphael Samuel, "Perils of the Transcript," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2006), 391.

English translation was added in brackets for non-English terms, sentences or larger sections. Non-verbal communication such as laughs, longer pauses, disruptions were added to the transcribed text as side notes. Quotes published in the thesis were corrected for grammatical errors.

Interviewees were provided in advance with a written description of the research project and a description of how data they provide will be used throughout the research project, as well as an informed consent form to sign in advance (both attached as *Appendix 1*), although due to the online nature of the interviewing, consent was often provided orally during the interview after the interviewee read the consent form. While most interviewees agreed for participation in the research with their names some of them did not, so to avoid such distinctions between interviewees, all the names have been anonymized.

2.2.3. Coding and analysis

Both debates and interview transcriptions were coded via Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. The software allowed for linking the video/audio interview with the transcription, allowing to go back to the source material for further clarifications or a more detailed analysis of non-verbal communication.[96] As part of the coding process keywords best describing passages of texts were attached to each text segment. This allowed for identifying patterns and establishing connections between topics and opinions across a large corpus of texts consisting of the interviews and contributions to the debates. It also allowed the easy retrieval of relevant quotes for each code or group of codes. The close reading needed for coding also helped me have a more in depth understanding of the textual data. The coding followed a combination of data-driven and concept driven coding[97] starting from a list of key

[96] Elinor A. Mazé, "The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History," in *The Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas L Charlton (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2006), 230–33.

[97] Graham Gibbs, *Analysing Qualitative Data* (London: Sage, 2008), 44–46.

concepts (such as: infight, (de)politicization, coloniality, intersectionality) that were fine-tuned in an iterative process in which earlier codes were reworked (merged, split, renamed) as the coding of texts progressed.

2.3. Limitations of methodology

When I originally conceptualized the research for my thesis, I was planning on complementing the discourse analysis of debates with ethnographic fieldwork in Beirut, Lebanon. This, however, was made impossible via a series of factors that made the personal visit to the fieldsite impossible. The first such factor was the rampant economic crisis of the country: prices nearly doubled in Lebanon in 2020, with food prices increasing by 400%,[98] the banking system collapsed, and there have been frequent cuts to electricity and internet.[99] Such economic problems lead to violent political turmoil that erupted in October 2019 lasting for months.[100] The demonstrations were interrupted only by the COVID pandemic that made any travel impossible during the summer of 2020. While I was still planning a shorter period of fieldwork in winter 2021, a major explosion that hit Beirut in August 2020,[101] and the second wave of the coronavirus made such plans impossible.

The clear advantage of being present on site in Beirut would have been the ability to assess how much the debates of the past resonate currently with activists in the LGBT movement. Focusing on key activists during the interviews was beneficial to have a detailed historical overview, but the methods finally used in the research do not allow for assessing

[98] Dana Khraiche and Ainhoa Goyeneche, "Lebanese Inflation Hits Record High as Food Prices Soar 400%," *Bloomberg.Com*, February 11, 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-11/lebanese-inflation-hits-record-high-as-food-prices-soar-400.

[99] Ellen Francis and Imad Creidi, "Blackouts Darken Misery of Lebanon's Economic Collapse," *Reuters*, July 10, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-blackouts-idUSKBN24B0UK.

[100] Lina Khatib, "Lebanon Is Experiencing a Social Revolution," *Al Jazeera*, October 20, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/10/20/lebanon-is-experiencing-a-social-revolution.

[101] BBC, "Beirut Explosion: Lebanon's Government 'to Resign' as Death Toll Rises - BBC News," *BBC*, August 10, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53720383.

whether the debates were limited to a limited number of veteran activists or they had a broader impact on grassroots activist mentality in Beirut.

CHAPTER 3:

THE LEBANESE LGBT CONTEXT

In October 2019, major anti-government protests erupted in Lebanon drawing hundreds of thousands of people to the streets. Western mainstream media was both surprised and mesmerized by the visible presence of LGBT people in those demonstrations: "How LGBT Rights Found a Place in Lebanon's Protest",[102] "Lebanon protests seen as an 'opportunity' for LGBT+ community",[103] "In Lebanon LGBTQ advocates are helping lead protests and build peace"[104] were some of the headlines. For those familiar with the LGBT activism in the Arab world, the developments were far from surprising. Lebanon has had organized LGBT activism since the early 2000s, and LGBT activists participated with their rainbow flags in similar demonstrations as early as 2003.[105] By now, Lebanon has a thriving LGBT activist scene with a number of registered organizations, grassroots collectives, and initiatives.

The current chapter discusses the complex social and political context as well as patterns of transnational mobility in which Lebanese LGBT organizing operates, and provides an overview of its development to help the reader navigate the subsequent chapters. I will argue throughout the chapter that a number of factors including the official state ideology of social and religious diversity and pluralism, a relatively liberal approach to civil society

[102] Ali Harb, "How Lebanon's Protests Have Created a Surprising Space for LGBT Rights," *Time*, 0 13, 2019, https://time.com/5726465/lgbt-issues-lebanon-protests/.

[103] Hugo Greenhalgh, "Lebanon Protests Seen as an 'opportunity' for LGBT+ Community," *Reuters*, November 14, 2019, , https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-conference-lgbt-trfn-idUSKBN1XO08N.

[104] Jamie J. Hagen, "In Countries as Different as Colombia and Lebanon, LGBTQ Advocates Are Helping Lead Protests and Build Peace," *The Washington Post*, July 15, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/07/15/countries-different-colombia-lebanon-lgbtq-advocates-are-helping-lead-protests-build-peace.

[105] "Pride and War Protests Mix in Mexico and Lebanon," *Gay.Com U.K.*, March 25, 2003, https://web.archive.org/web/20031014180016/http://uk.gay.com/headlines/4022.

organizing, and strong cultural connections and bidirectional migratory flows to Western countries facilitated the development of LGBT organizing. I will also argue, however, that two of those factors, namely religious and political divisions and attachment to the 'West' pose particular challenges to movement building, the impact of which will be analyzed in subsequent chapters of my thesis.

3.1. The Lebanese socio-political context[106]

Lebanon is a country of 6.9 million inhabitants located on the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean in the Levant region of West Asia. It is both historically and currently the most religiously diverse society in West Asia. It is the home of the Maronite branch of Christianity founded during the Roman times, and large segments of Maronites retained their religion even after Muslim Arabs conquered the area in the 7th century. The short-lived Roman Catholic Christian states created during the Crusades in the 11th century established lasting links between the Franks and the Maronites. After control by the Mamluk Sultanate and the Ottoman Empire, the area became a part of the state of Greater Lebanon under the French Mandate of Syria and Lebanon. The French mandate was terminated at the end of World War II.

The country's political system is based on confessionalism or sectarianism, that is, the sharing of power between the different religious groups or confessions. While the distribution of power was supposed to follow the demographic composition of the population as measured by the 1932 census, debates about the accuracy of the census abide,[107] and such a rigid framework is not able to accommodate the changes in the composition of the population via

[106] This historical reconstruction is based on William Wilson Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600 - 2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto, 2007).

[107] Thibaut Jaulin, "Citizenship, Migration, and Confessional Democracy in Lebanon," *Middle East Law and Governance* 6, no. 3 (2014): 250–71.

in- and outmigration and the different rates of reproduction among the various religious groups, which has been a constant source of political contestation throughout the modern history of Lebanon. Religious tensions exacerbated by the influx of Palestinian refugees and diverging opinions about the geopolitical orientation of the country resulted in US military intervention in 1958 and a Civil War between 1975 and 1990 that also involved the neighboring Syria and Israel, who occupied a significant part of the country. The Civil War ended with the Taif Agreement that reformed the distribution of power between different religious groups, and while it envisaged the end of political sectarianism, no timeframes were set, and the sectarian political system is still in place. The Israeli forces only left the country in 2000, and the Syrian forces in 2005.

The end of the Civil War brought rapid economic reconstruction, the Lebanese GDP grew 353% in the 1990s, however, this growth was funded by internal and external governmental borrowing, and the resulting budget deficit was managed by divesting from social infrastructure, which created growing social inequalities in the country.[108] The period of economic growth and relative political stability was followed by increasing political instability since the mid-2000s including a series of political assassinations in 2005 blamed on either Syria or Israel depending on political leanings; the 34-day 2006 Lebanon War between the Hezbollah paramilitary forces and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF); and the influx of 1-1.5 Syrian refugees reshaping the demographic composition of the country. The Syrian civil war had a detrimental impact on the Lebanese economy as well; the country is in a deep financial crisis since 2018. Further cuts to social spending, and introducing a set of new taxes including

[108] Richard David Barnett, "Lebanon - Economy," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed May 21, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/place/Lebanon.

one on voice calls over online messaging apps[109] prompted months-long protests starting in October 2019, which only cooled down with the COVID-19 lockdown.

Sectarian tensions, diverging geopolitical orientations and ideological divisions, which partly overlap with those tensions, the memory of the Civil War and more recent military conflicts make Lebanon a deeply divided society. Such cleavages crosscut other social groupings that do not follow sectarian lines such as sexual and gender non-conformity. Organizing along such axes of social difference carries the potential of bridging social and political cleavages, but also runs the risk of disintegration if such divisions are not carefully managed.

The conflictuous history of the country resulted in massive outmigration. An estimated number of 4-12 million Lebanese currently live outside of the country resulting from several waves of exodus in the last 150 years.[110] Periods of intense outmigration from Lebanon were often followed by periods of repatriation. For example, of those leaving during the second wave of outmigration (c. 1870-1918), one third later returned.[111] During the Civil War a large number of people continued to go back and forth depending on the intensity of the war.[112] Having an exact number of Lebanese inside and outside of Lebanon is extremely difficult partly due to the lack of census since 1932 because of the politically sensitive question of demographic composition, partly "due to the frequency of travel and the 'in between-ness' of

[109] BBC, "Lebanon Scraps WhatsApp Tax as Protests Rage," *BBC News*, October 18, 2019, sec. Middle East, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50095448.

[110] Jennifer Skulte-Ouaiss and Paul Tabar, "Strong in Their Weakness or Weak in Their Strength? The Case of Lebanese Diaspora Engagement with Lebanon," *Immigrants & Minorities* 33, no. 2 (May 4, 2015): 141–64.

[111] Akram Fouad Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[112] Boutros Labaki, "Lebanese Emigration during the War (1975-1989)," in *The Lebanese and the World: A Century of Emigration*, ed. Albert H. Hourani and Nadim Shehadi (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993).

many Lebanese lifestyles."[113] It is in this context that queer migration and diaspora involvement in LGBT organizing in Lebanon is embedded in.

Migration is significantly facilitated by the Lebanese educational system; its overseas cultural connections and focus on language education makes living abroad both more desirable and easier to achieve. Secondary schools and universities set up by French Jesuit and American Protestant missionaries in the 19th century not only continue to play a major role in the educational system, but also largely contribute to the identity formation of the Lebanese elite.[114] In 2020, over half of students are reported to be enrolled in private schools, many of them of foreign ones.[115] The educational system is tri-lingual, English or French (besides Arabic) are taught from early years in schools, and after the primary level the mandatory language of instruction for mathematics and science for all schools is English or French.[116] Unsurprisingly, socio-economic factors play a major role in choice of schools: upper-class families—regardless of religion—send their children to French or English-speaking schools, a Francophone or Anglophone education is a clear indicator of class.[117] Such differences of class and cultural orientations crosscut the LGBT community.

Beirut has a diverse and vibrant civil society that played an important role throughout its history.[118] The Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of assembly and association,

[113] Skulte-Ouaiss and Tabar, "Strong in Their Weakness or Weak in Their Strength?," 2.

[114] Deanna Ferree Womack, "Lubnani, Libanais, Lebanese: Missionary Education, Language Policy and Identity Formation in Modern Lebanon," *Studies in World Christianity* 18, no. 1 (March 30, 2012): 4–20, https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2012.0003.

[115] Center for Educational Research and Development,"النشرة الإحصائيّة للعام الدراسي ٢٠١٩-٢٠٢٠" (alnashra alʾiḥṣāʾiyya lilʾām aldirāsi 2019-2020, Statistical Bulletin for the Academic Year 2019-2020), (Beirut, 2020), 48.

[116] The World Bank Group, "Is Lebanon Falling behind in Education?," *Lebanon Quarterly Update*, no. 1 (2006): 4–7.

[117] Sarya Sofia Baladi, "Polyglotism and Identity in Modern-Day Lebanon," *Lingua Frankly* 4 (November 8, 2018); Rula Diab, "Political and Socio-Cultural Factors in Foreign Language Education: The Case of Lebanon," *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education* 5, no. 1 (2000): 177–87.

[118] Karam Karam, *Le mouvement civil au Liban : Revendications, protestations et mobilisations associatives dans l'après-guerre* (Paris: Karthala, 2006) cited in: Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi, Léa Yammine, and Amreesha

but the government is afforded a great deal of discretion to ban, penalize or even imprison organizations and activists it deems illegal.[119] The relatively liberal approach to civil society activity can be explained by the consistently weak Lebanese state that needs civil society organizations to deliver vital services.[120] This relatively liberal approach to civil society organizations explain why the first LGBT organization in the WANA region was registered in Lebanon, and why newer organizations were registered with relative ease.[121]

3.2. Sexual and gender diversity in Lebanon

Article 534 of the Lebanese Criminal Code adopted in 1943 during the period of the French mandate penalizes "any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature" with up to one-year imprisonment. This provision has been used against both men that have sexual relations against men, as well as transgender women. While activists often emphasize the colonially imposed nature of the provision,[122] it was not so much the French colonial administration, but the local Maronite elite influenced by Jesuit thinking that insisted on its introduction.[123]

The enforcement of the legislation has been rather inconsistent for the past two decades. As early as in 2007 a court found that same-sex sexual relations *per se* do not qualify

Jagarnathsingh, "Civil Society in Lebanon: The Implementation Trap" (Civil Society Knowledge Centre, January 8, 2019).

[119] AbiYaghi, Yammine, and Jagarnathsingh, "Civil Society in Lebanon".

[120] MS Mohamed, "Sexuality, Development and Non-Conforming Desire in the Arab World: The Case of Lebanon and Egypt," IDS Evidence Report 158 (Brighton: University of Success Institute of Development Studies, 2015).

[121] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on December 13, 2020.

[122] Aseel Houmsse, "Sociolinguistics of LGBTQ+ Discourse across Lebanese Law, NGO Policy, and Mass Media" (Thesis, Ohio State University, 2018); Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Same-Sex Relations Not Illegal," *Human Rights Watch*, July 19, 2018; Ghassan Makarem, "The Story of HELEM," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7, no. 3 (2011): 98–112.

[123] Ivan Strenski, "On the Jesuit-Maronite Provenance of Lebanon's Criminalization of Homosexuality," *Journal of Law and Religion* 35, no. 3 (December 2020): 380–406.

as unnatural,[124] yet raids against gay establishments has been common practice in the early 2010s. The police also used anal probes to assess who has participated in receptive anal test, a practice that was later declared unlawful. In 2018 an appeals court found that Article 534 does not apply to same-sex sexual activity as long as it does not violate morality and ethics, "when it is seen or heard by others, or performed in a public place, or involving a minor who must be protected."[125] In the 2010s several courts have recognized transgender person's gender identity; however, transgender persons might still be persecuted under Article 534.[126] Article 534 is not the only provision used against sexual and gender non-conforming people, they have also been charged with violating public morality (Articles 531 and 532), prostitution (Article 523) and incitement to debauchery.[127] Besides outright prosecution, the police also use harassment, arbitrary detention, torture and blackmail against such persons.[128] The laws are, however, enforced selectively, the police are more likely to target gay men and transgender persons with a lower class or refugee background.[129]

The social acceptance of same-sex relations is moderate: according to the global polling agency Pew Research Center, in 2019 13% of Lebanese opined that society should accept homosexuality, the proportion was 21% in 2002 and 17% in 2011. By comparison, in

[124] Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Same-Sex Relations Not Illegal," *Human Rights Watch*, July 19, 2018.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: End Systemic Violence Against Transgender Women," *Human Rights Watch*, September 3, 2019.

[127] Wahid Al Farchichi and Nizar Saghiyeh, "Homosexual Relations in the Penal Codes: General Study Regarding the Laws in the Arab Countries with a Report on Lebanon and Tunisia" (Lebanon: HELEM, 2012); Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: End Systemic Violence Against Transgender Women"; Amnesty International, "Lebanon: A Human Rights Agenda" (Amnesty International, February 11, 2019)

[128] HELEM, "Human Rights Violations against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Individuals in Lebanon" (HELEM, 2017).

[129] Anthony Rizk and Ghassan Makarem, "'Masculinity-under-Threat': Sexual Rights Organizations and the Masculinist State in Lebanon" (Lebanon: Civil Society Knowledge Center, 2015); Sarah Wansa, "Detained Transgender in Lebanon: This Is What Happened to Me," *Legal Agenda*, 0 23, 2016.

2019 it was 9% in Tunisia, 25% in Turkey and 94% in Sweden.[130] A 2015 representative study found that 66.3% perceived homosexuals to be a threat to society, 85.1% saw homosexuality as endangering the institution of the family, 81.2% though homosexuality was abnormal and unnatural, and nearly half of them thought homosexuality was a Western intrusion. 23.4% agreed that a person could identify not strictly as either a man or a woman, and 58.5% considered gender reassignment procedures as morally wrong.[131]

As opposed to this moderate rate of acceptance, Lebanon, and especially Beirut has been hailed in the international press as "the Provincetown of the Middle East"[132] or "the gay paradise of the Arab world".[133] The sharp contrast between the two is explained partly by the different experience of tourists and locals,[134] as well as the ability of (middle and upper class) Lebanese men and women to create 'spaces of belonging'[135] or 'bubbles':[136] sheltered social spaces (physical, interpersonal and ideological) that allow oneself to separate (even if only temporarily) from the rest of the society. Activist groups and gay nightlife are two obvious examples of such 'bubbles'.

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[130] Jacob Poushter and Nicholas Kent, "The Global Divide on Homosexuality Persists," *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project*, June 25, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/.

[131] Nour Nasr and Tarek Zeidan, "'As Long as They Stay Away': Exploring Lebanese Attitudes Towards Sexualities and Gender Identities" (Lebanon: Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality, 2015).

[132] Patrick Healy, "Beirut, the Provincetown of the Middle East," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2009, sec. Travel, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/02/travel/02gaybeirut.html.

[133] Tris Reid-Smith, "Beirut and Lebanon: The Gay Paradise of the Arab World," *Gay Star News*, June 8, 2012, https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/beirut-and-lebanon-gay-paradise-arab-world080612/.

[134] HELEM, "Helem Speech at IGLTA Symposium" (Beirut, October 14, 2010), https://web.archive.org/web/20130418224033/http://helem.net/node/121; Ghassan Moussawi, "Queering Beirut, the 'Paris of the Middle East': Fractal Orientalism and Essentialized Masculinities in Contemporary Gay Travelogues," *Gender, Place & Culture* 20, no. 7 (0 1, 2013): 858–75.

[135] Steven Seidman, "The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut: From the Stranger to the Other," *Theory, Culture & Society* 29, no. 2 (March 1, 2012): 3–36.

[136] Ghassan Moussawi, *Disruptive Situations: Fractal Orientalism and Queer Strategies in Beirut* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020).

Sectarianism has had an ambivalent impact on social and political attitudes towards sexual and gender nonconformity in Lebanon, both facilitating and hindering acceptance.[137] On the one hand the official state ideology of social and religious diversity, pluralism and minority rights, in principle, could be welcoming towards the recognition of other forms of social diversity, such as sexual and gender non-conformity. It is partly the consociational setup of communities and urban space that allows for the creation of 'bubbles' in the first place. Sectarianism, however, cements the position of religion and religious leaders in the political system, and the constant political anxiety about the demographic composition of society strengthens patriarchal values and nativist policies that are perceived to clash with tolerance towards sexual and gender non-conformity. In fact, it is mostly religious leaders—both Muslim and Christian—that are the most vocal opponents of homosexuality.

Even though same-sex attraction and gender non-conforming behavior is increasingly common topic of public discussion in the country, empirical studies on the organization of sexuality in contemporary Lebanon are still rather scarce, which is particularly striking taking into consideration the highly contested claims about non-Western organization of sexuality in West Asia in Massad's work (see *Chapter 1* about these debates). Massad's claim that Arab sexuality is organized around the position one takes in the sexual act, and not around the gender of the partners is made with regards to Lebanon as well in some (older) scholarly work about homosexuality. Halwani for example claims that an active, penetrating man is not stigmatized in Lebanon at all even if his sexual partner is male, and that such a person is not perceive to be homosexual, either by himself or by society—although the claim is not supported by empirical evidence, but is based solely on the authors own (supposed) intimacy

[137] John Nagle, "Crafting Radical Opposition or Reproducing Homonormativity? Consociationalism and LGBT Rights Activism in Lebanon," *Journal of Human Rights* 17, no. 1 (0 1, 2018): 75–88.

with Lebanese culture.[138] Makarem, however, claims that due to urbanization, globalization and the internet, such earlier views about same-sex desire are no longer true—neither among those practices same-sex behavior, nor more broadly in society—again the claim is not supported by empirical evidence, but is simply proclaimed.[139] Even if one takes Massad's broader claim about Arab sexuality seriously, it is still a question whether in the specific Lebanese context where Islam is not predominant, and Christianity has strong historic roots, his thesis holds true. Recent scholarship finds that Western sexual taxonomies are in fact in circulation in Lebanon, but they are often adapted and reinterpreted.[140]

3.3. LGBT organizing in Lebanon

The self-organization of sexual and gender non-conforming people in Lebanon dates back to the late 1990s when the first online platforms, mailing lists, dating sites and chatrooms allowed likeminded people to connect more easily with each other.[141] Of these platforms the #Gaylebanon IRC chatroom and gaylebanon.com website had particular relevance.[142] Some of these online communities also organized meetings in person; Club Free emerged from this milieu around 1998. Club Free was a social group of about 300 persons, its

[138] Raja Halwani, "Essentialism, Social Constructionism, and the History of Homosexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 35, no. 1 (0 12, 1998): 25–51.

[139] Makarem, "The Story of HELEM."

[140] Mathew Gagné, "Queer Beirut Online: The Participation of Men in Gayromeo.Com," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8, no. 3 (2012): 113–37; Sarah Hamdan, "Re-Orienting Desire from With/In Queer Arab Shame: Conceptualizing Queer Arab Subjectivities through Sexual Difference Theory in a Reading of Bareed Mista3jil," *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 1, no. 1 (2015); Jared McCormick, "Hairy Chest, Will Travel: Tourism, Identity, and Sexuality in the Levant," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7, no. 3 (2011): 71–97; Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).

[141] Makarem, "The Story of HELEM."

[142] Nadine Moawad and Tamara Qiblawi, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Internet?," *Al-Raida Journal*, no. 138-139–140 (July 5, 2016): 19–45.

membership was restricted to trusted LGBTIQ people,[143] most of whom knew each other from private universities.[144]

Following the Queen Boat incident in Egypt, in which 52 men were arrested and charged with debauchery, there was increased fear that a similar crackdown might take place in Lebanon as well, so a group of lawyers and activists founded حريّات خاصة (*Hurriyat Khassa* ~ Personal Freedoms) modeled upon the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.[145] While Hurriyat Khassa did not focus exclusively on LGBT issues, one of its first activities was to criticize the draft of a new Penal Code released by the government in Autumn 2002 that would have expanded the scope of Article 534 from "unnatural intercourse" to "unnatural sexual relations" covering not only non-penetrative sexual relations between men, but also sexual activity between women.[146] The draft was never adopted, but it did have lasting impact: advocating against its adoption greatly catalyzed nascent LGBT organizing in the country.

In the following months there were intense discussions about the strategy and organizational form the movement should take. Some argued for establishing a markedly LGBT group, others to keep a broader sexual rights, sexual freedoms approach; there were those who favored setting up an LGBT group within Hurriyat Khassa, and those who wanted to create a separate LGBT organization.[147] There was also a discussion about how much public visibility should be afforded to the organization (for further details, see *Chapter 5*). Out of these discussions emerged HELEM, meaning a 'dream' in Arabic, but also an abbreviation for حماية لبنانية للمثليين والمثليّات (*ḥimāya lubnāniyya lilmuthliyyīn w almuthliyyāt* ~ Lebanese

[143] Georges Azzi, "History of the LGBT Movement in Lebanon," *G-AZZI* (blog), December 21, 2011, https://gazzi.wordpress.com/2011/12/21/history-of-the-lgbt-movement-in-lebanon-3/.

[144] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on December 13, 2020.

[145] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on December 13, 2020.

[146] Makarem, "The Story of HELEM."

[147] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on December 13, 2020.

Protection for Gays and Lesbians), a separate LGBT organization with a clear commitment to visibility and public advocacy. The organization was officially established by five individuals in September 2004, but about thirty persons actively participated in its creation.[148] The organization submitted its registration documents to the Ministry of Interior, but it never received an official registration number and thus could not open a bank account. Finances of the organization were managed through individuals' bank accounts and through local chapters set up in Paris, Montreal and San Francisco. In a few years' time HELEM had over forty active LGBT members and over 1000 supporters, it set up a community center and a helpline, conducted HIV awareness campaigns and conducted community-based HIV testing, published a magazine and educational materials, and organized public events to commemorate the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia. During the 2006 War, HELEM's office became the administrative center for refugee relief work. HELEM was later on providing humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees and most recently to those most affected by the economic crises of the country.

In 2007, tensions developed within HELEM regarding its women's group, HELEM Girls. The conflict was partly related to the autonomy of the group within a male-dominated organizational leadership, partly related to differing opinions about the usefulness of visibility and coming out (for further details, see *Chapter 5*). The conflict was resolved by many—but not all—women leaving the organization, and setting up a new group, MEEM. MEEM defined itself as "the non-conforming sexual community of Lebanon: the lesbians, the bisexuals, the queer, the questioning women, the transgendered and transsexual men and women, the Muslims, the Christians, the Druze, the atheists and agnostics."[149] MEEM

[148] Lara Dabaghi, Alena Mack, and Doris Jaalouk, *HELEM: A Case Study of the First Legal, Above-Ground LGBT Organisation in the MENA Region* (National AIDS Control Programme, 2008).

[149] *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories.* (Beirut: Meem, 2009), 29.

operated a community center and support groups, offered psychological and legal counselling, published an online magazine *Bekhsoos* and an influential book entitled *Bareed Mista3jil* featuring 41 personal stories from LBQ women. Unlike HELEM, it operated underground and offered full anonymity for its members. At its peak, the group had nearly 200 members,[150] whereas in 2014 it stopped functioning as an organized support group due to internal conflicts.[151] In spite of its relatively short lived life, MEEM had a lasting impact on LGBT organizing in Lebanon by putting the issues of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women at the forefront, and showing that there might be space for more than one organization working on non-normative gender and sexuality in the country.

In 2009, the Arab Foundation for Freedoms & Equality (AFE) was set up by one of HELEM's founders and executive director to replicate the success of HELEM in other countries of the WANA region. While the organization has a regional, rather than national focus, its location in Beirut still makes it a major player in the Lebanese scene. AFE carries out research and training activities, operates a media and resource center, and between 2017 and 2020 it operated a community center in downtown Beirut. A flagship project of AFE is its Social Change Program offering theoretical and practical training to sexuality and gender activists in the region. AFE also organizes the annual NEDWA conference, a gathering of 200 activists from the region.

Following recurrent debates in HELEM whether the organization should engage in service provision or focus on community organizing and advocacy (for further details, see *Chapter 4*), in 2011 the sexual health unit of HELEM split off, and Marsa Sexual Health Center was registered as a separate non-profit organization. It offers HIV and other STI

[150] MEEM, "What Is MEEM?," April 11, 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20090314075147/http://www.meemgroup.org/about.php.

[151] Hamdan, "Re-Orienting Desire from With/In Queer Arab Shame."

testing, medical consultations and psychosocial counselling. Founded in 2012, the Lebanese Medical Association for Sexual Health (LebMASH) is a professional organization focusing on the health of marginalized groups such as LGBT people. The organization maintains a database of LGBT-friendly service providers, organizes seminars and conferences, and offers training for mental health professionals. They have also published several public statements on issues such as anal testing, conversion therapy and legal gender recognition.

Proud Lebanon, set up in August 2013 and registered officially in April 2014 was established in response to the humanitarian crises brought about by the Syrian civil war, and originally aimed to provide support to LGBT refugees coming in from Syria. Since then the organization has expanded its activities to all LGBT persons in Lebanon.[152] It offers legal support, healthcare services and psychosocial support, and conducts awareness raising activities. The Gender and Sexuality Club at the American University of Beirut was set up in the 2015-2016 academic year.

The most recent addition to the Lebanese LGBT activist scene is Beirut Pride, a group of activists formed in August 2016 to organize a yearly week-long event series. The first such event series took place in May 2017, the 2018 edition was halted abruptly after its main organizer was detained by the police. A new edition was planned for September 2019, but the event series was suspended after the venue for the opening concert cancelled the event.[153]

Besides civil society proper, businesses catering for the LGBT persons were also major players in the LGBT life of the country. LebTour was a tour operator for LGBT (mostly gay) tourists and travelers visiting Lebanon, Syria & Jordan. Being a member of IGLTA, the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association, it was internationally very well connected, and

[152] Portia Ladrido, "How a Group Protects and Supports LGBT+ in Lebanon," *INKLINE*, June 10, 2019, https://the-inkline.com/2019/06/10/how-a-group-protects-and-supports-lgbt-in-lebanon/.

[153] BBC, "Beirut Pride: Organisers Say Clerics Forced Cancellation of Opening Concert - BBC News," *BBC*, September 26, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49838193.

thus was very influential in painting a positive image about LGBT life in Lebanon. This image was largely built on the existence of several nightclubs and bars attracting a gay clientele, such as Acid (1998-2010), Bardo, Milk/Posh, B 018, Ghost and Wolf. The relationship between these establishments and civil society organizations have been rather varied ranging from mutual support and cooperation to outright hostility (see *Chapter 5* about these debates).

CHAPTER 4:

TRANSNATIONAL LINKAGES

"I don't think that the region has ever been as closed as Massad really thinks. It was never as pure as he wanted it to be."[154]

When in 2009 Massad gave an interview about his book to the online magazine *Reset Dialogues on Civilizations*,[155] one of the founders of HELEM, Ghassan Makarem took on the task of publicly refuting the arguments put forward by Massad.[156] Makarem emphasized that Massad's understanding of Arab sexuality is outdated, and that HELEM's work is a fully localized struggle markedly distinct from Western models of LGBT activism. Massad responded with a vitriolic rejoinder[157] in which he—for the first time—tried to support his claims with not only theoretical arguments, but also empirical evidence. He focused in particular on the funding of HELEM, its use of English language and Western symbols such as the rainbow flag, and the social background of its members.

I will argue in this chapter that while Massad's empirical observations are correct, the Lebanese LGBT movement is undeniably interconnected in myriads of ways with international and thus Western LGBT activism, but a more thorough analysis of those transnational linkages reveals that they are not mechanisms for unidirectional imposition. Building on Chabot and Duyvendak's application[158] of Appadurai's global cultural flows

[154] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on December 13, 2020.

[155] Joseph Massad, "The West and the Orientalism of Sexuality," *Reset DOC*, December 14, 2009, https://www.resetdoc.org/story/the-west-and-the-orientalism-of-sexuality/; Massad, *Islam in Liberalism*.

[156] Makarem, "We Are Not Agents of the West."

[157] Joseph Massad, "«I Criticize Gay Internationalists, Not Gays»," *Reset DOC*, 2009, https://www.resetdoc.org/story/i-criticize-gay-internationalists-not-gays/.

[158] Sean Chabot and Jan Willem Duyvendak, "Globalization and Transnational Diffusion between Social Movements: Reconceptualizing the Dissemination of the Gandhian Repertoire and the 'Coming Out' Routine," *Theory and Society* 31, no. 6 (2002): 697–740.

framework[159] to social movement diffusion, I will highlight how these transnational linkages carry the potential of "multiplicity and dynamics of cross-border dissemination between social movements."[160] In this chapter I will focus especially on three of Appadurai's five 'scapes', technoscape, financescape and ethnoscape. I do not provide an analysis of mediascape (the spread and reception of Western media representations of non-normative gender and sexuality), because it has been analyzed abundantly in the Lebanese context,[161] and ideoscape is addressed more thoroughly in the coming two chapters. The main argument of the chapter is that these forms of transnational interaction, and especially ethnoscape, the peripatetic migration of activists among different social contexts, creates bidirectional flows of ideas.

4.1. Technoscapes: the origins and sustenance of the movement

The internet plays a key role in activists' narratives of both their personal sexual self-discovery and involvement in activism. Many activists discussed how same-sex sexual desire was not discussed publicly while they were young, and the internet provided them with an inexhaustible repository of information and ways to connect.

> *I was 13 years old when we had internet at home. (...) I wasn't comfortable in my body. I wanted to see what the body of a beautiful guy would look like (...) Later on I realized that this imagery was very exciting and desirable for me, and that the word to describe this attraction (...) is called homosexuality. (...) I did online research, I didn't find much in Arabic or at least nothing I could relate to, and my English wasn't so good back then, so I was reverting to French literature and fora.*[162]

[159] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, no. 2–3 (June 1, 1990): 295–310.

[160] Chabot and Duyvendak, "Globalization and Transnational Diffusion between Social Movements," 727.

[161] Heather Radwan Jaber, "Is There a Gay International? : An Analysis of Homosexuality on Lebanese Musalsalat" (MA Thesis, American University of Beirut, 2016); Lizette M. Baghdadi, "Lesbanon: The Lesbian Experience In Lebanon," *Georgetown University-Graduate School of Arts & Sciences* (MA thesis, Georgetown University, 2013); Aya Touma Sawaya and Antoine Beayno, "The Representation of LGBTQ+ Individuals on Television in Lebanon," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 25, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): 128–31.

[162] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on March 19, 2021.

MEEM's collection of personal stories, *Bareed Mista3jil* includes a similar experience under the title "My Quest to Find Lesbians":

> *The first word I ever searched for on Yahoo! was "homosexual". It was the first day my dad got me a dial-up Internet connection for my birthday. It was October 1998 and Internet back then cost a fortune. I remember it was something like $6 an hour, so I had to be very quick and I got right down to the point. I had to find some lesbians!*[163]

Even those that lacked access to the internet reflected on how their experience was different from others who have built their sense of self and community through interacting with similar people online:

> *I grew up in a very different area with different realities. Yes, I had my sexual orientations. But I didn't even have an internet connection back then in the neighborhood! I wasn't exposed to those platforms where people started chatting. I didn't Google if there is anything for homosexuals in Lebanon.*[164]

In fact, as briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, HELEM and its immediate predecessor, Club Free grew out of the discussions on the #gaylebanon IRC chatroom and gaylebanon.com website. Moawad and Qiblawi provides rich analysis of how Internet chat sites in the late 1990s contributed to the rapid formation of gay self-identities in Lebanon.[165] While online discussions first took place on English language dating and matchmaking websites hosted in the United States or Western Europe, many Lebanese LGBTs found themselves frustrated that online spaces were predominantly Western, which lead to the creation of the local chat channel #gaylebanon.

Internet technologies continued to play a major role in the life of HELEM and other organizations: they used it to maintain their relationships with HELEM chapters in the diaspora, to organize internal discussions, and to reach out to other LGBTs as physical community spaces were rather scarce in the first years of activism. Online tools offered the

[163] *Bareed Mista3jil*, 107.

[164] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on February 24, 2021.

[165] Moawad and Qiblawi, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Internet?"

much-needed level of anonymity for members of the LBTQ women's group MEEM, who chose a less visible form of organizing (for related debates, see *Chapter 5*). Blogging, commenting and online discussions also provided an important entry point for newer generations of activists, and contributed to a significant increase in locally produced LGBT content in both English and Arabic. More recently, social media plays an important role in constructing a sense of closeness and thus solidarity between LGBT activists not only within Lebanon, but more broadly in the WANA region.

The internet undoubtedly created unprecedented opportunities for sexual and gender-non-conforming people and activists to connect with likeminded people across the globe, but it also contributed to bringing them together locally, creating not only online, but also offline spaces of activism. While most platforms used originate in Western countries and reflect the cultural characteristics of the countries from which they originated from, the structural elements of the platforms do not necessarily override local cultural understandings. Writing about Lebanese queer men's use of a European dating platform, Gagné for example convincingly shows how "local identities are not effaced but are eased into the Internet through structural and functional components" of these platforms.[166] Rather than sites of hegemonic erasure, such technologically mediated transnational encounters can create hybrid cultural forms or even strengthen local cultural understandings by fostering local level interactions between activists. As this section showed, the origins of organized Lebanese LGBT activism is a clear example of the latter.

4.2. Financescapes: funding as influence

The fact that foreign donors funded HELEM was a clear sign for Massad that the organization is not rooted in the local context, but was rather a Western imposition. The

[166] Gagné, "Queer Beirut Online," 128.

foreign funding of NGOs is increasingly challenged in various political contexts as a sign of foreign intrusion.[167] In the first period of its existence, HELEM was funded primarily through private donations collected to a large extent by its chapters in North America and Europe, but soon it started receiving significant, although rather volatile funding from several international donors including embassies, multilateral agencies and private foundations. According to a survey of government and philanthropic support for LGBTI communities around the world, in 2017/28 Lebanon received $969,497 of such funding, second only to Turkey in the WANA region.[168]

While academic literature on NGOization emphasizes how donors' priorities and the logic of project funding compels civil society organizations to transform themselves by adopting certain forms of professional practices, functions and priorities, [169] experience of organizations on the ground with donors vary greatly. In a 2008 publication, HELEM emphasizes that the organization "does not accept funds through which a donor imposes their own projects".[170] Donor priorities, however, might still be enforced by funding some project ideas and not others. An activist currently in leadership position in HELEM cautions against lumping all donors together in one category:

> *Some are problematic because they impose a certain political line, not necessarily a particular policy or particular political agenda to measure it with the countries of origin, but they do think certain ways. Some are very neo-liberal in how they think, some impose their own ideas of what liberation looks like. (...) Other organizations really have a very hands-off approach and say we want to help with funds, we want to*

[167] Annika Elena Poppe and Jonas Wolff, "The Contested Spaces of Civil Society in a Plural World: Norm Contestation in the Debate about Restrictions on International Civil Society Support," *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 469–88; Nicola Pratt, "Human Rights NGOs and the 'Foreign Funding Debate' in Egypt," in *Human Rights in the Arab World*, ed. Anthony Chase and , Philadelphia and Amr Hamzawy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 114–26.

[168] "Global Resources Report 2017/2018: Government and Philanthropic Support for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Communities" (Global Philanthropy Project - Funders for LGBTQ Issues, May 2020).

[169] Choudry and Kapoor, "Introduction: NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects"; Creighton and Harwood, *The Organization-First Approach*.

[170] Dabaghi, Mack, and Jaalouk, *HELEM*, 19.

> *help with capacity building, but we need you as activists in order to set the priority, and set up the tone and all of that.*[171]

Even if donors are not dictating the priorities and strategies of the movement, donor-recipient relationships and the flow of money do create important cultural encounters in which local concerns and cultural understandings have to be mapped to those of (Western) donors. Fieldwork research would be needed to assess whether that approximation of cultural frameworks is limited to the communication with the donors and administrative aspects of managing the grants received, or also influence how activities are implemented on the ground. Existing research on LGBT refugee support and activism in Beirut,[172] for example, shows that while donor priorities limit the provision of certain types of (much needed) services such as housing and cash assistance, local activists do try to respond to local needs within the frameworks allowed by donor funding, and the projects strengthen LGBT refugee communities even if they ultimately fail to deliver the goals promised to donors.

4.3. Ethnoscapes: activists on the move

Besides the transnational encounters created via technological platforms and donor-recipient relationships, the flow of people in the form of transnational migration of activists is also particularly relevant. As discussed in the previous chapter, transnational migration and diasporic experience are an integral part of the life of many Lebanese, the fact that many LGBT activists have—for shorter or longer periods of time—lived abroad or participated in movement activities from the diaspora is not surprising. This section will not only document those migratory patterns, but also show that in line with existing literature on queer migration,

[171] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on July 24, 2020.

[172] Ali Reda and Philip Proudfoot, "Against Abandonment Activist-Humanitarian Responses to LGBT Refugees in Athens and Beirut," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, no. fez114 (2020); Mahdi Zaidan, "We Live In Shadows: Identity, Precarity, and Activism Among LGBT Refugees in Beirut and Athens," *Georgetown University-Graduate School of Arts & Sciences* (thesis, Georgetown University, 2018).

migratory experiences do play a central role in the subject formation of Lebanese LGBT activists: many of them interpret their experience in the West as a form of sexual liberation and get involved in LGBT activism in Western contexts first. Such involvement, however, does not mean that these activists passively acquire the strategies and frames of Western activism and then import them to their home country. When they get involved in LGBT activism in the West, they also bring their own perspectives and concerns to the table which shapes Western activism as well. This is particularly true for newer generations of activists who started their activism in Lebanon.

4.3.1. "The doors of heaven opened"

While migration is far from being a uniformly positive experience for queer migrants due to socio-economic precarity and racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia,[173] both existing literature and the interviews I conducted show that LGBT migrants often interpret their experience in the West as a form of sexual liberation. In a public interview, one of the founders of HELEM starts the description of his activist journey with reference to his experience of moving to Paris to study engineering at university in the early 2000s: "It was crazy. The doors of heaven opened. I was 19 and discovering my different sexuality. I didn't think back then I would become an activist. I wanted to study and stay there forever."[174] He spent four years in France completing his degree in engineering, multimedia, and communications. After graduation he was asked by his friends in Lebanon to return, and participate in the official founding of the organization. His background of international

[173] Joseph Aoun, "Experiences of Non-Dutch Lebanese Gay Men in The Hague and Amsterdam: A Journey of Negotiating Dominant Norms" (Master of Arts in Development Studies, The Hague, International Institute of Social Studies, 2019); Lauren Munro et al., "A Bed of Roses?: Exploring the Experiences of LGBT Newcomer Youth Who Migrate to Toronto," ed. Dr Carol Mutch and Dr Jay Marlowe, *Ethnicity and Inequalities in Health and Social Care* 6, no. 4 (January 1, 2013): 137–50; Zaidan, "We Live In Shadows."

[174] Tim Teeman, "Inside Georges Azzi's Brave Fight for LGBT Rights in the Middle East," *The Daily Beast*, May 15, 2018, https://www.thedailybeast.com/inside-georges-azzis-brave-fight-for-lgbt-rights-in-the-middle-east.

migration and linked gay self-fulfillment is not unique, in fact it's a common pattern in the life history of many activists I've interviewed. Another founding member of HELEM, and for most of its existence, the president of one of its diaspora chapters recounts a similar experience of migrating in search of greater sexual freedom:

> *Growing up during that period I started to question things about my sexuality. I was looking forward to going abroad, to being able to be free to live things, so when I got the opportunity to come to France… I haven't had a lot of experience in Lebanon, so my first experience was… I would say I was waiting to go to work abroad to explore my sexuality.*[175]

For other activists, moving to the West was not mapped to gay self-fulfillment, but was clearly linked to becoming active in LGBT organizing. Another founder of HELEM, who later played a leadership role in the organization shares such a story:

> *In terms of orientation, yeah, I've always known, ever since I was young. In terms of identity, I was always critical of the idea of a permanent stable identity, in all sorts of matters. (...) But of course regardless of what you think, you are always pushed or pulled into a certain group. (...) My introduction to [activism] actually was in the States, in the United States when I was in college. (...) First through the student club, and student government work.*[176]

Even if not playing a role *per se* in decisions to migrate, identifying a greater freedom and safety in terms of sexual and gender nonconformity formed part of the decision to remain in Western countries. A queer activist originally from a neighboring country, former volunteer at HELEM and later board member at the Beirut-located Arab Foundation of Freedom and Equality emphasizes how his gayness played a role in his decision to stay in the United States:

> *But also, as a queer person, as a gay person. I want to be able to self-actualize. I want to be able to have the choice to make decisions about my life and my family and my family infrastructure, and to have the kind of legal recognition whether it's a husband or whether it's… If I decide to adopt a child or whatever… I wanted to be in an environment where I could make the decision that resonated mostly with myself, and that I wasn't constrained by a set of external circumstances imposed on me.*[177]

[175] Interview conducted online in Paris, France and Budapest, Hungary on October 30, 2020.

[176] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on December 13, 2020.

[177] Interview conducted online in Berkeley, CA, United States of America and Budapest, Hungary on October 13, 2020.

A Moroccan queer activist living in Paris, who volunteered at HELEM for a year also mentioned safety concerns related to being an openly queer activist as the main reason why she did not move back to their home country:

> *At the end I'm just thinking that it's still not an easy step to do, it's not easy to go back because I'm working on sensitive issues and sensitive subject, and it's still a crime to be a homosexual or trans in Morocco, and it's still something that is persecuted by the society and the authorities, and the government. And it's not easy. I'm still not feeling really totally secure to go back there and live there.*[178]

While transnational migration was a common pattern among my interviewees, not all of them had such experiences. Namely, neither of the two women who had leadership roles in HELEM's almost two decades of history lived abroad. Whether the observed gender difference is a pattern or purely accidental cannot be assessed due to the limited sample size.

Weston describes the far reaching consequences of spatial metaphors of sexual liberation which result in "a sexual geography in which the city represents a beacon of tolerance and gay community, the country a locus of persecution and gay absence,"[179] a geography that perpetuates further migration and a real and symbolic rural landscape emptied of gay people.[180] When applied to transnational migration, such spatial metaphors can contribute to strengthening homonationalist discourses that adopt a "bio- and geopolitical global mapping of sexual cultural norms,"[181] that is, associating the tolerance of non-normative gender and sexuality with Western contexts, while labeling non-Western societies as oppressive for gender and sexual minorities. People that return to their home country to pursue LGBT activism after a migratory episode actively work to disrupt such a sexual

[178] Interview conducted online in Paris, France and Budapest, Hungary on October 16, 2020.

[179] Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City", 40.

[180] Ibid, 44.

[181] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 9.

geography, their migratory pasts, however, contribute to creating an image of their activism as being imported from abroad.

4.3.2. "I'm going to come back. If I have to make the country change, I'm more than willing to do so"

Besides those activists who temporarily migrated abroad for work or education, and then later returned to Lebanon and became activists, there are also a number of people who actively participate in the movement remotely from the diaspora. One of my interviewees was a young gay man living in Toronto where his family moved from Lebanon. He was actively involved in social causes while still in Lebanon: he volunteered at several radical groups and children's rights organizations, but was not focusing on LGBT activism. When he moved to Canada, he got involved in several local organizations, especially those helping LGBT migrants and refugees, and promoting sexual health in ethnic minority communities. He has also become more vocal on his LGBT views online for which he has received several death threats. This, however, does not discourage him. Responding to the question why he considers it important to work also on Lebanon, he states:

> *It's been three years since I haven't been back to Lebanon and to be honest, I do kind of feel a little bit scared because I did receive lots of text messages and death threats. Eventually, I want to go back. (...) I'm going to come back. If I have to make the country change, I'm more than willing to do so. Now I have some more skills and experience, even more power to do so.*[182]

Another interviewee, who waited to go abroad to explore his sexuality, has been living in France for over two decades now. He explains his heightened participation in activism with a certain sense of nostalgia with his home country:

> *You never stop being an expatriate. (...) The first month you're just enjoying it, and then the first year, you're not totally settled, you don't know the code, and it's just awkward for a year. Then you start adapting and then it's fun because you're discovering... you're starting to root somewhere. And then after 5 years you start*

[182] Interview conducted online in Toronto, Canada and Budapest, Hungary on June 13, 2020.

> *questioning that am I going to stay here for the rest of my life? And you start to get nostalgic for the country.*[183]

For him and other activists in the Lebanese diaspora, being involved in activism helped them maintain a meaningful relationship with their home country. He did not only become the president of one HELEM's diaspora chapters, but he was also one of the initiators of Laïque Pride or Seculars' March Towards Citizenship, a series of demonstrations in 2010-2012 drawing thousands that called for ending the sectarian structure of the state. He was always planning to return, he only gave up that idea recently when his child was born in France.

Another activist I've interviewed was a third-generation Lebanese person born and raised in France. Their maternal family has Lebanese roots, but they now all live in France. They never learnt Arabic, they laughingly commented during the interview on their first name being "very, very French", and describes the past generations of immigrants in France, including their own family, by the "need to be more French than the French themselves." They got involved in LGBT activism at university, and when they decided to reconnect with their roots the two worlds got connected:

> *At a point in my life I felt the need to reconnect with something I never knew, to be honest. Growing up I really had no connection to the language, culture and not even the food or anything. I was feeling like I need to go back to find something. (...) I registered at the Francophone university, University of Saint Joseph. (...) My thesis was about youth going back into politics, because the generation of their parents just stopped believing in the possibility of change and politics. So, I met a lot of people working on my thesis (...) and it just became very known that I'm an open LGBTQI activist in France. Then more and more people wanted to talk with me about it. So, this is how I connected with a lot of people from Beirut on the ground.*[184]

They helps HELEM and AFE with reports and raising awareness about the Lebanese LGBT cause in France especially among the Foreign Service.

[183] Interview conducted online in Paris, France and Budapest, Hungary on October 30, 2020.

[184] Interview conducted online in Paris, France and Budapest, Hungary on October 21, 2020.

A common theme in the accounts of activists, especially those living in the diaspora, in a country less oppressive of sexual and gender nonconformity is to reflect on their privileged position and the responsibility it creates to become more involved in activism. As the young activist currently living in Canada notes:

> *If it's safe for you to come out of the closet and to advocate for other people to gain their rights, don't be selfish and say, oh I get my rights, I'm living happy and safe, I don't care about others… No! If you are safe enough and independent financially to be advocating for LGBT rights all over the world, especially from where we come from, then please do so!*[185]

A similar point is shared by the former manager of HELEM's community center currently living in France: "After starting to come out, I realized it was a responsibility to come out, and be able to talk for the people who cannot talk. Because people who are not out, cannot express their own opinion or dissent or whatever. So, if you have the privilege of being out, you need to take that responsibility. So, I did."[186]

Taking on that responsibility somewhat alleviates a sense of guilt one might feel for making personal choices that result in more comfortable lives. As the former HELEM volunteer currently living in the Unites States notes:

> *I have to deal with that guilt. I have survivor's guilt. Why am I free? Why did I survive, when so many other people are left behind and are languishing? (...) If I have the choice, I prefer to be able to lead a life with as much of my dignity intact, and then to use that privilege to try to effect change back home. So that things can change ultimately.*[187]

Building on their research among Polish queer migrants in Berlin, Ayoub and Bauman describe the "strong relational and emotive mechanisms of migration that keep migrants attentive to the queer politics of their home countries."[188] As they explain, when people leave

[185] Interview conducted online in Toronto, Canada and Budapest, Hungary on June 13, 2020.

[186] Interview conducted online in Orleans, France and Budapest, Hungary on March 22, 2020.

[187] Interview conducted online in Berkeley, CA, United States of America and Budapest, Hungary on October 13, 2020.

[188] Ayoub and Bauman, "Migration and Queer Mobilisations," 2759.

their home country, they leave behind people and places to whom they maintain an emotional connection, which can serve as the basis for transnational mobilization.[189] My interviews with people who participate in LGBT activism from the diaspora confirm such a strong relational and emotive attachment: being involved in LGBT activism in Lebanon allows these activists to establish and maintain meaningful relations to their home country that is hostile or dangerous towards them. The contradictory feelings of attachment and disdain creates strong incentives for activism.

4.3.3. "All these people started their activist journeys in Lebanon"

Becoming involved in LGBT activism while abroad, however, is not the only pattern linking activism and migration. For other activists, especially those who became active in later stages of the movement's development, it was not migration that opened the pathway to LGBT self-fulfillment and activism, but rather it was their LGBT activism that helped their careers abroad. One of my interviewees is a young man from a small town of Northern Lebanon, who moved to Beirut to study psychology at university. He got involved in HELEM via a boyfriend, and after some years he became a key person at HELEM's sexual health clinic. It was through his work at MARSA that he became involved in international research projects and received a scholarship to study in the US. While he currently lives in the US, he still works on projects on Lebanon.[190]

Another interviewee, who was a manager of HELEM's community center for three years, left Lebanon in 2018 to study Human Rights, Gender and Conflict Studies in the Netherlands. The decision to pursue a Master's degree was closely linked to his activism and

[189] Ibid, 2767.

[190] Interview conducted online in San Francisco, CA, United States of America and Budapest, Hungary on June 17, 2020.

the international recognition he received for.[191] After completing his MA, he moved to France and is planning to start work on opening a shelter for LGBT persons in Beirut. He mentions several activists with a similar pattern: starting activism in Lebanon, migrating abroad, but maintaining activist relationships to their home country.

> *The idea of LebMASH came from abroad but out of knowledge about internal reality. (...) There were some people working with HELEM that moved to the US and Canada. (...) They went abroad and they started the idea of LebMASH, and now LebMASH works very effectively! (...) There is someone that got asylum to Holland, he was a volunteer at HELEM. He now works for an organization in Amsterdam [helping LGBT refugees] (...) On the other hand you have a feminist collective in Amsterdam (…) So all these people started their activist journeys in Lebanon, and now they're starting feminist collectives, trans and refugee inclusive intersectional collectives… so, you see the impact of HELEM's work in all these discourses.*[192]

LGBT activists of Lebanese origin play a significant role in the local LGBT movements not only in Amsterdam, but also in Paris, Toronto, New York and San Francisco, bringing an intersectional, people of color approach to LGBT organizing. These examples show that rather than seeing the migration of activists solely as internalizing Western sexual and gender taxonomies and being socialized in Western models of LGBT activism, thus as a form of 'Westernization', the presence of queer migrants with their own concerns and activist agendas also influences what Western LGBT activism currently is.

Activism, however, does not only open career options previously unimaginable, but also might lead to situations where one must flee the country. The activist in Amsterdam mentioned in the previous quote had to leave Lebanon due to his political activism. Similarly, a Syrian trans refugee working in HELEM was being forced to leave the country when a conference she attended was raided by the General Security forces.[193]

[191] Interview conducted online in Orleans, France and Budapest, Hungary on March 22, 2020.

[192] Interview conducted online in Orleans, France and Budapest, Hungary on March 22, 2020.

[193] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on January 29, 2021.

As clear from the interviews above, living abroad for a longer period of time in 'Western' socio-political contexts that are less constraining of sexual and gender non-conformity plays an important part in the lives of many people involved with LGBT activism in Lebanon. Three patterns of the relation between activism and migration or diasporic existence appeared in the interviews: for some of the LGBT activists, sexual self-fulfillment, the ability to express one's gender and sexuality publicly, and involvement in LGBT activism was linked to leaving their native environments and thus escaping societal and familial pressures. For those already abroad, it was being involved with LGBT activism in Lebanon that allowed them to maintain and rebuild their relationship to their country of origin or more broadly the WANA region. Finally, LGBT activism itself can be a motor of migration: for some it opens new career paths, for others it creates security risks that force them to leave the country.

4.4. Conclusion

The current chapter offered a brief analysis of the diverse ways in which Lebanese LGBT activism is linked to international and Western LGBT organizing, focusing in particular on the role of technology, money and people have in maintaining those linkages. While such connections have been interpreted by Massad as proof that LGBT activism in Lebanon is a Western imposition, I argued that the mere existence of these transnational flows does not necessarily entail imposition or domination, especially because activists were not only exposed to LGBT activism through the prism of hegemonic actors such as donors, embassies and international human rights organizations, but could gain firsthand experience with diverse forms of organizing in Western contexts.

CHAPTER 5:

DISPUTES IN CHAINS

"Lebanese queers are always fighting online on every single issue under the Sun."[194]

In his 2015 book *Islam in Liberalism*, Massad further developed his argument of Arab LGBT activism being a Western imposition. Slightly revising his earlier thesis, he no longer claims that Western LGBT activism is monolithic, he recognizes historical shifts in LGBT organizing, especially the impact of queer theory resulting in the move away from identitarian notions of sexuality as the basis of activism. Nevertheless, he maintains that "the discourse (...) that organizations like Helem adopt [is] completely oblivious to the critiques leveled by queer theory since the 1990s about the sexual theories and politics pushed by the earlier phase of gay activism."[195] While Massad recognizes the dynamic, contentious, theoretically inspired nature of Western LGBT activism, Lebanese (or more broadly Arab) LGBT activism still appears as static, monolithic and somewhat naïve. In painting such an image, Massad completely disregards the contentious nature of Lebanese LGBT activism, the lively debates that accompanies the development of the movement in the country.

By providing an overview of the major disputes that took place within the Lebanese LGBT movement in the past two decades, I will argue that much like Western LGBT activism, Lebanese LGBT activism is also dynamic, contentious, and engaged with theoretical discussions. By a thorough analysis of these debates I will show that the disputes are structured primarily by three core controversies or dimensions: (1) a politicization vs. depoliticization dimension centering around questions of how the LGBT movement should

[194] Interview conducted online in Berkeley, CA, United States of America and Budapest, Hungary on October 13, 2020.

[195] Massad, *Islam in Liberalism*, 227.

relate to existing political cleavages and what counts as political action; (2) an inclusion vs. exclusion dimension centered around questions of who should be recognized as part of the LGBT community and whose concerns the movement should prioritize; (1) and finally a West vs. local dimension centered around questions of whether Western models of LGBT organizing are applicable in Lebanon. The chapter follows a chronological order discussing the debates in the order they arose during the history of the movement, but tracing within each debate how the issue or controversy re-emerged in later discussions.

5.1. Visibility or safe spaces

The dispute that dominated the first few years (c. 1999-2004) of LGBT organizing in Lebanon was the question of how much focus should be put on visibility, that is whether the organization and individuals linked to it should appear in the public sphere as being 'LGBT'. Should the movement prioritize providing a safe space for members of the community to socialize and share experiences, or prioritize publicly advocating for the rights and social acceptance of LGBT people. The latter opinion gained more ground which led to the establishment of HELEM, an organization strongly committed to the idea that social change can only come from engaging with the state and the rest of society. Nevertheless, HELEM also created a community space in Zico house, a popular cultural and civil society space in downtown Beirut.

The question of visibility resurfaced a few years later specifically with regards to women within the organization. While HELEM from the very beginning aimed at being an organization both for women and men, very few women were active in the early years. In 2005, a women-only mailing list was set up, and the relationship between visibility and women's exclusion soon came up. In an email later made public, a female member of HELEM summarized her opinion as follows:

> *I'm sure what I have to say is going to generate waves of controversy, but it's something I'm going to raise nonetheless. I'd like to call into question HELEM's strategy of combating homophobia through visibility, a tactic I think we might have adopted without really thinking through (...) It is precisely the invisibility of women's sexuality and the invisibility of lesbian sexuality in particular that allows them the freedom to live as they choose, and they are simply not willing to sacrifice this in the name of a cause that ultimately, they see as unbeneficial to them. (...) Is visibility a means or an end? If it is only a means, then it is not set in stone and its merits and demerits can be up for discussion. We're networking with a zillion groups in Europe. Before we pat ourselves on the backs, what has it actually done for us?*[196]

Two years later, in 2007, an initiative to reform the women's committee resulted in the setting up HELEM Girls. Its meetings were moved out of Zico house, as the organizers felt that the public nature of HELEM's space in the Zico house would discourage women from attending group meetings. Difference of opinion about the usefulness of visibility, and growing distrust of the leadership of the organization in HELEM Girls soon resulted in the mass exodus of women from HELEM, and the creation of a separate organization: MEEM.

The rejection of the 'visibility paradigm' became the core element of MEEM's organizational ethos. In a contribution by a MEEM member to a panel discussion at the ILGA World in Sao Paulo in 2021, Lynn Darwich describes why "ambiguous visibility" and "operating in the grey zone" are the core principles of the organization:

> *"Coming out" is often perceived as a standard validation of one's identity, a milestone. It is another step to fulfill, one that legitimizes our sexual/gender identity, our sense of pride, our very own life as a queer or transgender person in this bedroom, this toilet, this office, this classroom, this building, this institution, this street, this neighborhood, this city, this country, this region, this world. Coming out – in its original sense – is linked to our visibility as a queer or transgender person. When I come out, whether I am aware of it or not, wherever I happen to be in the world, I am actually locating myself and ascribing to an internationally recognized LGBT spectrum of progress. (...) In MEEM, we're ambiguously visible. This ambiguity becomes anti-productive to our movements when we situate our politics within an International (Read "Western") framework of coming out / visibility. When we, LGBTs, locate ourselves within the spectrum of progress that the (predominantly) Western coming out discourse promotes. (...) MEEM rejects the binary between the closet and coming out – just like we reject gender and sexual binaries. We operate in*

[196] ohmyhappiness, "Debates on the Participation of Women and Being 'out' (A Lebanese LGBT History Post)," *Ohmyhappiness* (blog), April 5, 2012, https://ohmyhappiness.com/2012/04/05/debates-on-the-participation-of-women-and-being-out-a-lebanese-lgbt-history-post/.

> *the grey areas. (...) LGBT visibility, if you ask me, in its mainstream sense, cannot be adapted as is, but has to be played with, refined, and attuned through strategies that respond to our very own contexts, strategies that locate us at the heart of our many struggles.*[197]

In her formulation, the problem with visibility is not only that it might lead to further victimization, but she also questions the identification of visibility with liberation which she sees as the core tenet of Western LGBT organizing.

MEEM's approach was criticized by other members of the movement as too conservative, apolitical and wanting to take the movement "back into the closet." As a person with a former leadership position in HELEM—who was otherwise very sympathetic to MEEM's off-the-mainstream-path approach—emphasized this in the interview I conducted with him:

> *I think it's a very important question of visibility and activism. (...) The moment you decide to be publicly active, there is a certain visibility that you have to have. You can't say I need to remain invisible and be publicly active. I think that's very problematic, it's very dangerous also. (...) It creates this duality in the movement. (...) Anyone who fights for their rights will have to announce themselves somehow. And I know it's been a tactic used by the feminist groups, but it's not really working. I don't see it working.*[198]

The debate about visibility resurfaced a decade later in 2017 regarding the newly launched Beirut Pride, an initiative brought about by a cooperation between some NGOs, gay friendly venues and cultural organization. Beirut Pride defines itself primary through the method and vocabulary of visibility, including a clear theory of change:

> *What is Pride? (...) Pride is a performance of visibility, because it is through visibility that prejudice, myths and lies are deconstructed. It draws attention to the problems faced by people because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, and programs*

[197] Lynn Darwich, "Framing Visibility: Coming Out and the International LGBT Spectrum of Progress - Bekhsoos," *Bekhsoos*, January 31, 2011, https://web.archive.org/web/20110131033251/http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2010/12/framing-visibility-coming-out-and-the-international-lgbt-spectrum-of-progress-2/.

[198] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on December 13, 2020.

> *a series of events and activities that bring visibility, raise awareness, deconstruct hate and prejudice, and promote social equality.*[199]

The reception of Beirut Pride was very mixed: while the events organized in the framework of Beirut Pride drew thousands, harsh criticisms were also launched by some activists targeting primarily the central role of visibility and too much focus on positivity instead of clear political messages:

> *The week that catered to a cis, gay, Lebanese, and middle upper-class audience had no political message other than "positivity" and "pride." Not only did Beirut "Pride" adopt a stale, neoliberal approach to the concepts of pride, identity politics, and visibility, but it also obliterated years of feminist activism and resistance.(...) While Beirut "Pride" promoted itself as an "apolitical" endeavor, there was nothing apolitical about their perception of visibility and their ignoring of the queer concept of ambiguous visibilities.*[200]

The criticism of visibility as a central tool of activism have come up recently in a review of Atshan's book *Queer Palestine*[201] by a professor of gender studies at the American University of Beirut. Michael criticizes the "reactionary nature of visibility politics", an imperial imposition, and a form of Foucault's Panopticon:[202]

> *The holy trinity of visibility, recognition, power benefited the few, and hurt the masses—because the elite never nurtured irrepressible benevolence towards the wretched of the earth. And so increased visibility historically translated into greater ease of domination, as well as majoritarian resentments for the claims of the vulnerable. (...) The multitude—bereft of money, status, networks, or access to powerful lawyers—experiences visibility not as a resource in the survival of the fittest, but as a tsunami of social hatred, isolation, and loss of livelihood. (...) Atshan nonetheless goes on a crusade to render this queer population ever more visible to the state—a move reminiscent of imperial management of "vulnerable minorities" from "Oriental Christians" to "Eastern women".*[203]

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[199] Beirut Pride, "What Is Beirut Pride?," Beirut Pride, accessed June 27, 2021, https://www.beirutpride.org/pride.

[200] Resurj, "Lebanon: Homonationalism at Beirut 'Pride' - RESURJ," accessed June 27, 2021, https://resurj.org/reflection/lebanon-homonationalism-at-beirut-pride/.

[201] Atshan, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*.

[202] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).

[203] Marc Aziz Michael, "Under Queer Eyes: Visibility Politics and the New Reaction (Review of Sa'ed Atshan's Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique)," *Boundary 2* (blog), January 27, 2021, http://www.boundary2.org/2021/01/marc-michael-under-queer-eyes-visibility-politics-and-the-new-reaction-review-of-saed-atshans-queer-palestine-and-the-empire-of-critique/.

Rather than seeing the rejection of the quest for visibility as a sign of apolitical escapism, he suggests a leftist political program based on invisibility and opacity, one example of which is socialist universal rights "a technique of political invisibility that benefits the most vulnerable without bringing the spotlight onto any particular plight."[204]

Michael's critique was met with strong opposition on social media among local activists arguing especially that those who choose to be visible are blamed for their own oppression. Commenting on how Michael uses the example of Sara Hegazi, an Egyptian queer activist who was imprisoned for flying a rainbow flag at a Mashrou' Leila concert, who later received asylum in Canada, where she committed suicide, he notes: "Today, everyone on my timeline is commenting on a review Marc Aziz Michael recently wrote of Sa'ed Atshan's "Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique". (...) Now if this isn't victim blaming of the most abhorrent kind, then I don't know what is."[205]

In the discussion about visibility, we can see the interplay of all three structuring dimensions of the disputes: on the one hand, the debate on 'visibility' is structured by the 'West' vs. local dimension arguing that the focus of Western LGBT organizing on visibility does not work in the Lebanese context due to higher levels of hostility. However, it is not only criticized on practical grounds, there is a deeper questioning of 'visibility' or 'coming out' as a marker of liberation or equality, which is deemed 'ideological' and linked to Western neoliberal or imperial agendas. The dispute is also structured by the politicization vs. depoliticization dimension: both sides of the debate blame the other for being too apolitical: deprioritizing visibility is seen as a sign of retreat from demanding social and legal change, while prioritizing visibility is seen as blindness towards the political embeddedness (Western, neoliberal, imperial) of the concept. Finally, the debate is also structured by the inclusion vs.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Edwn AN, "I've Always Had Trouble Expressing Why It Was That...," *Facebook*, February 2, 2021.

exclusion dimension, arguing that visibility is less useful or more harmful for women and less affluent persons, thus a focus on visibility reproduces gender and class exclusion within the movement.

5.2. The role of the diaspora

When HELEM officially applied for registration in 2004, a network of chapters or 'antennas' were set up in cities with significant Lebanese diaspora such as Montreal, Paris, San Francisco and Sydney. Such groups were supposed to help HELEM primarily with resources: they served as a fund-raising channel counting on better-off LGBT persons in the diaspora via parties and other income-generating events. They were also meant to facilitate access to other LGBT groups and decision-makers in diaspora countries. Chapters also helped receiving donor funding for HELEM when a lack of organizational bank account was a barrier to a donor.

Relationships between activists in Lebanon and the diaspora, however, were not without tensions. As the president of one of the diaspora chapters of HELEM recalls:

> *One of the biggest debates were people inside, people outside, and how 'you people outside' can't decide what to do inside. (...) You don't know anything, the model that you are building your analysis on is outdated. And people who are abroad say you are too much in your bubble. Open your eyes, there are other things that can come out. (...) There was this silly argument of "Oh, but you are abroad, you are in the comfort of your sofa, you don't know what's happening here." It's not like I was raised and grew up in France. I go to Lebanon 3-4-5 times a year. So, I know what's happening in Lebanon.*[206]

The actors involved, however, reconstruct quite differently what was at stake in those debates: while those in the diaspora saw the debate mostly in terms of management and accounting issues ("We in Lebanon and the Arab world, we don't have the culture of collaborative management or proper management"[207]), those in Lebanon felt the realities of

[206] Interview conducted online in Paris, France and Budapest, Hungary on October 30, 2020.

[207] Ibid.

those in the diaspora are so different, that there was hardly any common platform for priorities. As a current HELEM employee recounts:

> *There isn't really any meaningful connection between them because the environment, social and political atmosphere in France and Canada is completely different than in Beirut. Their struggle is much different than ours, they are much more advanced and the context is much less hostile to this type of activism.*[208]

As a result of such divergent ideas, most of the chapters have become dormant after a few years or transformed into independent organizations that focus on improving the situation of Lebanese and Arab LGBT persons living in the host countries, rather than in Lebanon.

Diaspora involvement was, however, not limited to the chapter structure. As the former manager of HELEM community space recalls they received calls and emails very often from people living in the diaspora offering their help, but very often their ideas were not in line with the activists on the ground. In his view, the opinion of local activists should always prevail:

> *Ideally, [local and diaspora activists] should coexist. (...) There are some of them with ideas that are completely separate from reality, but it's still coming from a good will, it tells you that this person is still thinking of their homeland, or thinking of the LGBT community in his homeland. (...) Our role as activists when someone wants to help is that we need to tell them that this is our priority, and if they still want to help out, they're more than welcome. And if they think that "you need to go to the president and insist on them legalizing gay marriage", like no you're being unrealistic!" (...) I tried to answer every single person and be transparent with them, like no this isn't our priority for this reason or for that reason.*[209]

In the discussion about the role of diaspora, we can see the interplay of two structuring dimensions of the debates: on the one hand, the debate is structured by the 'West' vs. local dimension arguing that those in the diaspora (and in the accounts of activists, 'diaspora' always refers to the Western diaspora) have no understanding of local dynamics, are too committed to Western priorities or models of organizing. The debate is also structured by the

[208] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on January 29, 2021.

[209] Interview conducted online in Orleans, France and Budapest, Hungary on March 22, 2020.

inclusion vs. exclusion dimension, centering on the question whether Lebanese LGBTs in the diaspora have a say in deciding the movement's priorities, strategies and tactics.

5.3. Sexism and the connection to feminism

The question of women's participation in the work of HELEM was a recurrent discussion from the very early days. While there were women present already in Club Free and the discussions that ultimately lead to the founding of HELEM, the desire to have more women, and especially more active women came up regularly. The establishment of the women's committee and later HELEM Girls to offer representation and a safe space for women was meant to tackle this issue, but it resulted in the deepening of the gender divide within the organization, and ended with a large number of women leaving the organization, and creating MEEM. The debate was partly linked to strategy, and especially the reliance on visibility as a tool of empowerment (see in *Section 5.1*), but the debate was interwoven with debates about the women's group's autonomy, or more broadly the male dominated leadership of the organization. As a (male) member of HELEM at the time in leadership position in the organization recalled the debate a few years later:

> *The fights got very personal and very ugly. Accusations of the worst kind were lobbed everywhere. Until today, words like angry lesbian, separatist, angry feminist, man hater, attention seeker are normal and acceptable everyday words to use. The women were accused of dividing, destroying, and poisoning the movement.*[210]

In 2010 and 2011, the then female president of the board received similar sexist criticisms regarding initiatives that drew much controversy in the movement (for details about the content of these debates see *Sections 5.4 and 5.5).* She recalls her experience as follows:

> *I discovered later that I was recruited to fulfill an image of the organization. I was used to whitewash HELEM from its misogynistic patterns, structure and behaviors. (...) But then I had an opinion and when the opinion had a political background, they started to gather members at cafes and started a bullying and slandering campaign*

[210] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on December 13, 2020.

> *against me and against those who held this same opinion of mine. (...) We became "narrow-minded ugly lesbians" for them.*[211]

She left the organization soon after. A similar debate took place next year as well, this time publicly. After a female member expressed criticism internally over the promotional campaign of HELEM' print magazine *Barra*, she was attacked using similar language. The messages were 'leaked' to social media, and a major debate exploded among activists about the acceptability of such behavior. As one female HELEM member shared on a social media page devoted specifically to sexist harassment in the organization:

> *Among the other things that reproduce patriarchal structures among many members of HELEM is the image they have of femininity, the same image in the mainstream social imagination: superficial, gossipy, catty, enemies with other women and obsessed with the world of fashion and beauty with the goal of attracting men. (...) Women who fall outside social norms of beauty and femininity are considered by the men of HELEM to be "abnormal", "angry lesbians", "ugly", "dirty" and "smelly".*[212]

She also recalled several incidents of physical sexual harassment (grabbing of bosoms, rubbing of penises), which she reported, but the organization's leadership never responded to her complaints properly.

The debates about political strategy and gender relations largely overlapped: those who wished for a more decisively leftist, radical orientation of the organization called for more gender inclusion and stricter sanctions against sexual harassment, those who took a more pragmatic approach accused the other side of using the issue of sexual harassment as a tool against their political opponents.

The gender question was of course not limited to handling cases of sexual harassment, but also touched upon the broader question of the LGBT movement's relationship to feminism. While feminist ideas formed part of HELEM's formative years, the relationship of

[211] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on February 24, 2021.

[212] Nfasharte, "Helem and Sexual Harassment," *Nfasharte* (blog), September 14, 2012, https://nfasharte.wordpress.com/2012/09/14/helem-and-sexual-harassment/.

the organization to mainstream feminist organizations were stiff to say the least. One interviewee for example recalled how some feminist groups secretly relocated a meeting related to the CEDAW reporting to stop HELEM's representatives from participating. Transgender people also often reported unwelcoming attitudes by services operated by women's organizations. Finally, markedly different approaches to prostitution/sex work also made collation-work rather difficult.

While already working on my thesis, a similar scandal also erupted in 2020 in the Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality, staffed largely from former members of HELEM. Charges of sexual harassment and threatening behavior were brought forward, that ultimately lead first to the resignation of the board wishing to bring more gender balance to the organization's leadership, and finally—on pressure from donors—the resignation of the executive director.

It is interesting to see how various actors emphasized different root causes of the problem. Some clearly linked it to the patriarchal structures of the Lebanese society: "It's just that it's so fascinating because with this scandal it became clear to me that his dynamics and his problematic elements, which are a lot, ended up being a microcosm of Lebanon's larger problematic dynamic."[213] Others emphasized that such gender debates are not at all specific to Lebanon, but are widespread in LGBT organizations all over the world: "Yeah, there were some debates and some problems, but I think it's something that is linked to all the communities. Wherever you go you will find the same problems, the same old problems. (...) I think it's the same everywhere, pretty much."[214]

[213] Interview conducted online in Berkeley, CA, United States of America and Budapest, Hungary on October 13, 2020.

[214] Interview conducted online in Paris, France and Budapest, Hungary on October 16, 2020.

In the discussion about sexism and feminism, we can see primarily the interplay of two structuring dimensions of the debates: on the one hand, the inclusion vs. exclusion dimension, in particular whether women have a role in the movement on an equal footing with men, and whether women-only spaces are forms of exclusion or prerequisites of a truly inclusive movement. On the other hand, the debate is also structured by the politicization vs. depoliticization dimension: those who call for depoliticization argue that a particular radical form of feminism brings unnecessary divisions to the movement, while the other side argues that without taking a radical, political approach, gendered power relations within the organization cannot be challenged.

5.4. Intersectionality and its critics

One of the initiatives that prompted the sexist smear campaign against the female president of the board was the 2010 campaign for the International Day against Homophobia entitled ؟أنا شاذ *(ʾna shāz?* ~ Am I queer?). The campaign aimed at reclaiming the derogatory word *shāz* (deviant), similarly to how 'queer' was reclaimed in English speaking countries.[215] Furthermore, rather than focusing specifically on the rights of LGBT people, it emphasized the interrelatedness of various struggles against oppression. As the manifesto of the campaign puts it:

> *The discrimination directed against gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual persons reflect society's rejection of all what is different from the apparent 'majority'. (...) All enforced roles alienate equally, thus discrimination against LGBTIQ persons is similar to that against women, foreign workers, persons with low wages, people with special needs, sex workers, and even heterosexuals who choose to have a sex-life outside the framework of marriage or religious confession. We are struggling together for freedom, for rights, and for a society that does not judge persons based on these criteria. (...) Throughout our opposition to homophobia and transphobia, we realize how interlinked all of our rights are; leading us to work in solidarity and in a joint struggle to achieve the implementation of all marginalized rights, and through a common ground that unifies and strengthens our efforts. (...) Let*

[215] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 95

> *us rid ourselves of all labels that we did not make for ourselves but were instead imposed on us. Let us unite against discrimination, its tools, and its root.*[216]

The initiator of the campaign recalls how badly the campaign was received at the time: "When we said that our struggle coincides and transects with migrants, sex workers, and so on, we were accused with "deviating our cause from its path", and people would not accept us. (...) The irony of it is that everybody now boasts about "intersectionality", and it's all they talk about in proposals."[217]

'Intersectionality' does appear to be a buzzword widely used in the discourse of several LGBT organizations in Lebanon. Former director of HELEM's community center described the organization's approach to social issues as 'intersectional' in an interview in 2018.[218] In fact, HELEM gave the name *Intersectional March* to a public demonstration they held in June 2020 to celebrate Pride Month.[219] The slogan of AUB's Gender and Sexuality Club is "Education. Inclusion. Intersectionality." Similar examples abide. It is not surprising then, that most media reports and academic text highlight 'intersectionality' as a core aspect of Lebanese LGBT activism.

Such an intersectional approach, however, is not universally accepted, as we've already seen in case of the *ʾna shāz?* campaign and the concert organized against the cancellation of the Mashrou' Leila concert described briefly in the introduction. At the center of this latter debate was whether the rights of Palestinian refugees should be on the agenda of

[216] HELEM, "Am I Queer? Ana Shaz?," 2010, https://queeramnesty.ch/docs/Helem_Infos_DEU_ENG_Soli_20110115.pdf.

[217] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on February 24, 2021.

[218] Ralph Hurley O'Dwyer, "Helem: A Home Away from Home for LGBT Lebanon," *The University Times*, January 22, 2017, http://www.universitytimes.ie/2017/01/helem-a-home-away-from-home-for-lgbt-lebanon/.

[219] Aapurv Jain, "Intersectional Communities: LGBTIQ+ Activism in Lebanon with Araz Basmajian," *We Are Restless* (blog), July 15, 2020, https://wearerestless.org/2020/07/15/intersectional-communities-lgbtiq-activism-in-lebanon-with-araz-basmajian/.

the LGBT movement in Lebanon. That was not the first time such a debate received much attention.

A few months after the *ʾna shāz?* campaign, the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (ILGTA, at the time: International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association) was having a conference in Beirut, on invitation by LebTour, a tour operator for LGBT tourists and travelers visiting Lebanon, Syria & Jordan. Heated debates ensued in both HELEM and MEEM whether to participate in the event or boycott it. There were two primary reasons for the potential boycott. First, activists were rather skeptical about what benefit such a conference would bring to the local community:

> *I could not see how something like bringing euro-bears for a Middle Eastern fetish is so authentic and liberating for the gays. If you want to bring tourists here, sex work, hibernate, or whatever bears do these days, it's completely fine, but please don't make it sound like a very important step in the history of the world. At the end of the day you're just making money as a private business.*[220]

Second, one year earlier, IGLTA organized its annual conference in Tel Aviv in spite of calls from LGBT groups in the region to move the event somewhere else, and not to participate in Israel's pinkwashing activities. Activists call pinkwashing the attempts of Israel to draw international attention away from the human rights violations it commits against Palestinians by heralding itself as a champion of LGBT human rights.[221] Despite the public call, IGLTA did not cancel, drawing anger from local activists.

MEEM decided to boycott the conference:

> *A year ago, they were in occupied Palestine celebrating the beacon of homosexuality and human rights in the Middle East: Israel. (...) But Israel has a knife under our neck and is ready to slaughter us like a lamb, regardless of our sexual orientation and gender identity. (...) Unfortunately, most of our old gay history has been gradually lost under the pressure of societal changes, including the impact of colonialism. Most of*

[220] hakjs jasj, "Comment on the Post: 'History of the LGBT Movement in Lebanon,'" *G-AZZI* (blog), December 21, 2011, https://gazzi.wordpress.com/2011/12/21/history-of-the-lgbt-movement-in-lebanon-3/.

[221] Jason Ritchie, "Pinkwashing, Homonationalism, and Israel–Palestine: The Conceits of Queer Theory and the Politics of the Ordinary," *Antipode* 47, no. 3 (2015): 616–34; Atshan, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*, 72

> *our ideas about gay dignity and human rights are taken from the Western gay revolution. (…) It is not wrong that we communicate, learn and draw inspiration from each other, especially that Western homosexuality has an important history of struggle. (...) The solution is fusion and integration with our society, interacting with local human rights issues without the condition of reciprocity.*[222]

MEEM thus links the criticism of the practices of the colonial Israeli state with eradication of pre-colonial forms of same-sex desire and behavior, and likens the dominance of Western models of sexuality and activism to colonialism. In such a framing, standing up against Israel cannot be separated from LGBT activism, as both are struggles against colonialism. HELEM participated, but delivered a very critical speech, emphasizing similar points:

> *A human rights organization cannot and should not operate in a country without taking into consideration the local politics and context it thrives in. Can we, as an organization that fights oppressive systems, support, instead of condemn, the oppression of the Palestinian people? (...) We are also aware that the discourse of sexual liberation is a tool and decoy used by Western and Western-oriented governments such as the US government and the Zionist regime in Occupied Palestine to wash their hands clean of the major human rights violations committed.*[223]

Responses in the activist community were mixed. Some saw the speech as a missed opportunity to raise more awareness of the local conditions of LGBT people in Lebanon (as opposed to the overly positive accounts appearing in the Western media), or to talk about Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as well, not just the geopolitics of the issue. Others claimed that by introducing such controversial topics the speaker alienated the audience, and "gave them the impression that we are a divided and immature."[224] As another contributor to the debate said: "The problem is that some activists are bringing some political dogmas into an

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[222] Ghoulama, "عن خطورة 'تسييح' القضية (ʾan khuṭūrat tasyīḥ alqaḍiyya, On the Dangers of 'Tourizing' the Cause)," *Bekhsoos*, January 31, 2011, https://web.archive.org/web/20110131042008/http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2010/10/gay-tourism-and-gay-activism/.

[223] HELEM, "Helem Speech at IGLTA Symposium" (Beirut, October 14, 2010), https://web.archive.org/web/20130418224033/http://helem.net/node/121.

[224] proudlebanon, "A Response to Ms. Abanni – Helem's Chair & Board Member: A Way Forward for LGBT Activism – Diversity, Respect and Inclusivity," *Proudlebanon* (blog), March 15, 2011, https://proudlebanon.wordpress.com/2011/03/15/a-response-to-ms-abanni-helem%e2%80%99s-chair-board-member-a-way-forward-for-lgbt-activism-diversity-respect-and-inclusivity/.

NGO that has been created to answer ALL and each member of the LGBT community, with no discrimination, with no limitation!"[225]

In response to the event, the first coordinator / executive director of HELEM published a heated article on his blog entitled *Radical activism* a few weeks later. In the blog post he blamed left-wing radicals in the movement for operating with an oversimplifying, binary logic, and being too much driven by anger:

> *[With radicals] we both agree that you cannot look at a certain aspect of human rights and ignore the other one. However, we disagree when it comes to the methodology and the strategy that we need to use to counter human rights violations. (...) My question always was: do we want to change the system or use it for our own benefit, get in the system and change it from inside. Constant aggressiveness was not proven to be effective in the Lebanese context. Angry activism is just another model of activism that was imported from the West. (...) I have the impression that whenever something is popular or big, radical intellectuals manage to find something bad about it, it seems like success and popularity are signs of treason.*[226]

Debates about what the interrelatedness of human rights and oppressions actually mean and how to tackle them effectively, whether intersectionality can work as a practical strategy still haunts the movement. Many emphasize the practical difficulty of implementing an intersectional approach on the ground:

> *Saying we are intersectional in our approach is a huge undertaking and is a huge issue, it means that you are working actively towards integrating multiple movements, multiple oppressions, multiple forms of discrimination into what you are fighting against. Now, it's something to say, we as an organization believe in intersectionality, meaning that we also, for example, do not tolerate any racist language or we support whatever the anti-racism movement or we support the disability rights movement, or we support the feminist movement. It's quite different to integrate it into your modus operandi, and into your program.*[227]

> *I think that intersectionality is extremely important, and these issues cannot be disaggregated. I think they're intimately linked. So, I think that on a conceptual level and a theoretical level all of these struggles are intimately connected and inextricably linked. (...) But how we translate this into practice is a lot more complicated. (...) We*

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[225] lebtour, "Comment on the Post: 'History of the LGBT Movement in Lebanon,'" *G-AZZI* (blog), December 21, 2011, https://gazzi.wordpress.com/2011/12/21/history-of-the-lgbt-movement-in-lebanon-3/.

[226] Georges Azzi, "Radical Activism," *G-AZZI* (blog), 0 3, 2010, https://gazzi.wordpress.com/2010/11/03/radical-activism/.

[227] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on July 24, 2020.

> *are limited. We have limited people. We have limited human resources. We have limited other resources.*[228]

A Beirut Pride organizer, however, was very critical about the coalition building strategy that derives from this understanding of intersectionality. He thinks that minority groups should find powerful allies that can help their work, rather than hoping that a 'coalition of the weak' can yield results:

> *So, people unfortunately have been saying, have been writing about intersectionality in a way that insinuates that the only way for you to be intersectional is to put all your eggs in the same basket. And this is very detrimental. And actually, if you look at Lebanon, for example people who call for the alliance of the minorities (...) What are you doing? (...) You don't bring people and groups who are all at their lowest, and you put them together and you expect them to come up with something. You don't become stronger because you're having an alliance of weakness.*[229]

In the discussion about intersectionality, we can see yet again, the interplay of all three structuring dimensions of the debates: on the one hand, both 'single issue' LGBT activism and radical intersectional activism is denounced on the ground that they are 'too Western', and they disregard local political contexts. The politicization vs. depoliticization dimension is also at play: those critical of intersectional coalition building argue that it is only left-wing radical ideology that connects these various issues in one coherent framework, but not all LGBT people or potential allies lean to the left, so the introduction of these 'political' issues divides the community. Those calling for a more intersectional approach argue that a disregard for local and global political contexts make real change impossible. And finally, the inclusion vs. exclusion dimension is also at play, in particular the question of how the concerns of intersectional groups oppressed by multiple interlocking systems of inequality can be efficiently worked on.

[228] Interview conducted online in Berkeley, CA, United States of America and Budapest, Hungary on October 13, 2020.

[229] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on March 19, 2021.

5.5. Class divisions and the role of businesses

A few months after the *ʾna shāz?* and IGLTA debates, another major dispute erupted in the spring of 2011 following the publication of an article by HELEM's female president of the board in *Al Akhbar*, one of the country's largest left leaning newspapers, published under the title *Lebanon's gay rights: bring down the sectarian system*. The article criticized the role of consumption in constructing lesbian and gay identities in Lebanon, and accused the owners and managers of Beirut gay venues of exploiting members of the LGBT community by making extra-profit from the fact that LGBT people can experience freedom from societal and state oppression in these exclusive, commercialized spaces:

> *"There are those who have an interest in preserving this consumer culture and reducing the issue of liberation to these indicators. (...) The prices adopted by these places exceed other places of nightlife, as if they want to receive the price of the existing oppression created through law and discrimination."*[230]

The author also drew attention to the "big difference between the interests of working-class gays and the poor, and those who found a good place in this system". While middle- and upper-class gay men are able to buy themselves freedom, lower class gays are still subjected to harassment and prosecution for Article 534 criminalizing "unnatural sexual intercourse". Linking up with the earlier debates concerning LebTour and IGLTA, the article also offers a sharp criticism of the image of Lebanon as a gay-friendly tourist destination in Western media, which is based on the privileged position of Western tourists who can operate outside of local structures of oppression.

The author received immense criticism as well praise for the article both within HELEM and more broadly in LGBT activist circles. Many accused her of stirring unnecessary tensions within the community, as well as exposing bar owners and their clientele to security

[230] Heba Abbani, "حقوق مثليّي/ات لبنان: أسقطوا النظام الطائفي (ḥuqūq muthliyyī lubnān: ʾsqiṭū alniẓām alṭāʾifī, Gay rights in Lebanon: Overthrow the sectarian system)," الأخبار *(al Akhbar)*, March 8, 2011, https://al-akhbar.com/Opinion/84441.

risks. Others praised her for bringing up concerns of people who don't feel represented by HELEM's work. As a response to the criticism (and the sexist smear campaign described above) soon after the article was published, she left HELEM.

Criticisms of the article tended to coalesce around three main issues. The first line of criticism launched against the article focused on the role of class in the movement, the criticism of middle- and upper-class gay men and the proposed prioritization of the concerns of poorer members of the community were read by many as signs of discrimination:

> *The LGBT community in Lebanon is very diverse. It has the poor and rich, the leftist and right winged, professionals and artists, activists, slacktivists and pacifists, the LGBT rights fanatics and the all-inclusive human rights advocates, etc… Do we advocate for the rights of one LGBT group and not the other? (…) Are less financially blessed LGBT worthier of our activism than more financially achieved?*[231]

The second line of criticism launched against the article focused on the role of businesses as (potential) allies of activists. As the founder of LebTour noted in a passionate blog post:

> *"I would like to highlight that LGBT businesses are part of our community. Moreover, they have historically around the world played a key part in the process of visibility (…) I do not believe that anyone should be excluded from the struggle for rights: LGBT rights are inclusive and are for everyone who is part of the community.*[232]

And finally, some charged her with having classist bias of her own in the form of 'intellectual elitism': "The activist circle is infested by intellectual elitism, which is even more exclusive than the bars. Activists should be less angry, less theoretical, and more in touch with the community. It is a fact that people are less and less interested in activism, maybe we should try to understand why."[233] The accusation of intellectual elitism and more broadly the

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[231] Hasan Abdessamad, "Can We Discriminate in Fighting Discrimination!?," *Dr. Hasan Abdessamad: Health, Human Rights & I* (blog), March 12, 2011, https://habdessamad.com/2011/03/12/discrimination/.

[232] proudlebanon, "A Response to Ms. Abanni – Helem's Chair & Board Member: A Way Forward for LGBT Activism – Diversity, Respect and Inclusivity," *Proudlebanon* (blog), March 15, 2011, https://proudlebanon.wordpress.com/2011/03/15/a-response-to-ms-abanni-helem%e2%80%99s-chair-board-member-a-way-forward-for-lgbt-activism-diversity-respect-and-inclusivity/.

[233] Georges Azzi, "Gay Bars and Activists," *G-AZZI* (blog), March 14, 2011, https://gazzi.wordpress.com/2011/03/14/gay-bars-and-activists/.

controversial role of academics in the movement was a common point of criticism in the interviews as well. The "patronizing", "top-down", "lecturing" style of those in academia, their "preoccupation with labels and categorizations", their "inaccessible" and "not understandable" form of communication, their use of foreign terminology, and their insistence on "remaining neutral" in internal debates were raised.

The debate about the involvement of businesses in LGBT activism received a new impetus with the launch of Beirut Pride in 2017, a week-long event series organized in cooperation between some NGOs, "creative industries" and a dozen Beirut bars and cultural venues. Beirut Pride marketed itself as "a happy, friendly, constructive platform that invites people to express themselves, in an attempt to contribute to our liberation from the destructive hate that poisons our country."[234] Such a framing was criticized for its overly positive portrayal of LGBT life in Beirut, and consisting of events that solely "catered to a cis, gay, Lebanese, and middle upper-class audience"[235] or "largely speak to a middle upper-class gay audience and do not address intersecting struggles."[236] A blogpost went as far as calling the event series "a local version of homonationalism, where the rich Lebanese gay citizen is hailed as a hero for his state-approved privileges."[237]

The involvement of businesses (this time not only LGBT businesses, but also some larger companies and mainstream cultural establishments) was also put under scrutiny: "Why are we celebrating corporations that are building their social capital and making profits off our shoulders? Who next, banks? The police? Who has our backs when we're not two cute girls

[234] Beirut Pride, "Beirut Pride Introduction," Beirut Pride, accessed June 27, 2021, https://www.beirutpride.org/introduction-2017-en.

[235] Resurj, "Lebanon: Homonationalism at Beirut 'Pride' - RESURJ," accessed June 27, 2021, https://resurj.org/reflection/lebanon-homonationalism-at-beirut-pride/.

[236] #beirut, "So, This Is Your First Beirut Pride. Wonderful!," *#beirut* (blog), May 18, 2017, https://hashtagbeirut.tumblr.com/post/160798887649/beirutpride.

[237] Resurj, "Lebanon: Homonationalism at Beirut 'Pride' - RESURJ," accessed June 27, 2021, https://resurj.org/reflection/lebanon-homonationalism-at-beirut-pride/.

looking out into the ocean?"[238] The critics also emphasized that Beirut Pride accepted donations from the US and other Western embassies, stressing the foreignness of the Pride concept. The Pride organizers directly rejected this claim arguing that: "Beirut Pride is not a westernized, imported platform, as its program and initiatives are local and reflect on the specificities and intricacies of the Lebanese complex social fabrics."[239]

In the discussion about class and the role of businesses, we can see yet again, the interplay of all three structuring dimensions of the debates: commercial establishments as a cornerstone of the gay community, the concept and symbolic of Pride, and collaboration with businesses are all criticized as belonging to a 'Western' model unsuitable for the Lebanese contexts. Interestingly, the Pride organizers did not respond by arguing for the applicability of the Pride model, but claimed that the model is properly localized. There were also voices that claimed the Western model of cooperation between businesses and LGBT organizations should serve as a model. The politicization-depoliticization dimension is also strongly present: gay bars and bar goers are portrayed as depoliticized actors, and Beirut Pride's insistence on independence from political parties is translated as a sign of depoliticization. Finally, the inclusion-exclusion dimension also structures the debate: both gay bars and Beirut Pride are accused of excluding less well-off members of the community, while the critics are accused of trying to exclude better-off members and being unaware of how their intellectual elitism excludes other members of the community.

5.6. Community building and services or activism

In parallel to the debates about class and sexism in the movement, there was another major dispute taking place at HELEM about launching support services to the community,

[238] #beirut, "So, This Is Your First Beirut Pride. Wonderful!," *#beirut* (blog), May 18, 2017, https://hashtagbeirut.tumblr.com/post/160798887649/beirutpride.

[239] Beirut Pride, "Beirut Pride Introduction."

primarily in the field of sexual and mental health. While some members of the organization argued that a clear priority should be given to political work, others said services that bring direct and immediate impact to the life of people should also be launched. Two interviewees quoted by Abayaghi demonstrate the two opposing positions well:

> *We can only achieve LGBTQ protection effectively through a comprehensive political struggle. Otherwise, it will be useless to do initiatives on the right and on the left, which will not lead to much.*
>
> *The rights of the community are important for sure, but in the meantime, you have to be active, make services accessible! You may not realize how despised people feel when they go to get tested for AIDS in private labs or state clinics! Or how much women feel judged when they go to see a gynecologist![240]*

The debate was decided in favor of those supporting more service provision, and in February 2011, Marsa Sexual Health Center opened. Abayaghi explains the decision to move away from the activist-political model of the early years towards service provision by a change in membership: efforts to involve less privileged members of the community proved successful, and a large number of Shia youth from the southern suburbs of Beirut started to frequent the community center.[241] While radical, leftist activists welcomed this 'democratization' of the organization, to their greatest disappointment the new members wanted services and not political struggle.

The debates about class and sexism and the prioritization of service provision lead most of the radical left members of the organization to leave, which was followed by a very turbulent period: the organization lost its community center due to lack of funding, and efforts to transform the organization's governance structure resulted in even more members leaving. A new executive director appointed in 2014 took on the task of reopening the community center, and she hired the former manager of one of the (heavily criticized) gay bars as

[240] AbiYaghi, "L'altermondialisme Au Liban."

[241] Ibid.

manager for it. Marsa, the health center, became an independent organization, but debates about the community center remained. The idea to turn the community center to an activist trainings center was put on the agenda several times:

> *It turned out that they did not want it to be a community center open to the public, they wanted it to be a hub for activists to learn how to be one. My answer to this was: "If you really want to do this, get lost, go do this at your own home. Don't come here playing elitists with our funds." The moment we decide this center has to be an activist space, we contribute to an elitist bubble that is all about "OMG, we are activists, and we lecture one another, and we're separated from the community". If that 'activist' doesn't see that trans person being kicked out of their house out on the street and struggling, how will they work with consciousness?*[242]

This community orientation remains a strong part of HELEM's ethos to this day. As an interviewee currently in the leadership of the organization mentions:

> *And if you ask the community what it needs now, you're going to have to prepare yourself for a lot of answers that you don't necessarily agree with, or you don't necessarily think are a priority, or you don't necessarily think are political. (...) It depends on which community you are serving. Are you serving very well-to-do middle-class queers who want less police interference in their clubs or more acceptance in general all the way up to gay marriage. (...) Or are we serving working class much more vulnerable, much less privileged members of the queer community. And if you ask them, they don't give a shit about the law, or about marriage, or about radical politics. They don't give a shit about that. They want services, they want to be able to afford things that support and protect them. They want shelter. They want nutritional food, they want access to healthcare. That's what they want. They don't give a rat's ass about going out and protesting.*[243]

Service-provision and an NGOized way of operation also receives criticism. Those that are critical of this model emphasize that LGBT people are relegated to the position of "victims" or "survivors" or "clients", but they are no longer decision-makers. "The least they do is patronize people. Because what they do is just provide service and charity. There is no politics."[244] This limited understanding of the 'political', however, is criticized by those who think that community work and services cannot lead to social change.

[242] Interview conducted online in Orleans, France and Budapest, Hungary on March 22, 2020.

[243] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on July 24, 2020.

[244] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on December 13, 2020.

> *That's a very Western-centric very American sort of way of approaching activism. Change the law, you change the behavior. Change the law, and it'll trickle-down through law enforcement. (...) That's not how it goes here. That's not how it goes in most of the Global South. Once you emancipate yourself from that sort of thinking, the opportunities for you to make change open up.*[245]

In the discussion about service provision or activism, we can see the interplay again of all three structuring dimensions of the debates: the politicization vs. depoliticization dimension is strongly present: the primary criticism launched against service provision is that it takes resources away from political work and thus depoliticizes the organization and the movement. The inclusion vs. exclusion dimension also structures the debate: on the one hand, the argument is put forward that prioritizing political work and protests are exclusionary, as only a few elite members of the community care about it, on the other hand the argument is also made that the service-logic excludes community members from decision making. Finally, the West vs. local dimension is also present, both the service-provision focused NGO model, as well as advocacy targeted at changing laws are denounced as being unsuitable for the Lebanon.

5.7. Revolutionary priorities

The months immediately preceding my fieldwork were dominated by the 'October Revolution', a large wave of non-sectarian anti-government protests prompted by the Lebanese government's planned introduction of a set of new taxes including one on voice calls over online messaging apps.[246] The Revolution provided an unprecedented opportunity for LGBT organizations and activists to have their voices heard. As the protests grew, the organizations became more and more vocal about their participation in the events: Marsa, the sex health clinic focusing in LGBT people reported it "went on strike", HELEM posted that

[245] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on July 24, 2020.

[246] BBC, "Lebanon Scraps WhatsApp Tax as Protests Rage."

"our schedule is temporarily on hold due to the revolution". On October 26, 2019 HELEM set up a tent on the streets with a rainbow-colored sign saying "All of us means all of us" to offer assistance and engage in public discussions with anyone interested.

Somewhat surprisingly, an even greater LGBT participation and visibility were brought about by homophobic incidents. لوطي (*lūṭī*) is a derogatory term equivalent to the English term 'fag' or 'poof'. When it was used as a chant at the demonstrations against the Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, some demonstrators challenged it, and a whole campaign was started to remove it from the vocabulary of the protests. لوطي مش مسبّة! (*lūṭī mish masabba*, *lūṭī* is not a slur!) became a chant and a common graffiti on the streets of Beirut.[247] The public challenge of homophobia prompted more members of the community to participate in the demonstrations, this time in larger groups with rainbow flags, and chants against homophobia and transphobia: "Justice for everyone, this is our primary demand. We won't shut up, nor will we forget, we want gay rights. We are not leaving the squares, we want trans rights". When Charbel Khalil, a pro-government TV producer criticized the revolution for promoting a homosexual agenda, his comments were met with widespread skepsis and ridicule being featured in dozens of very popular online posts or memes, such as "When you order a conspiracy theory from Aliexpress!" or "Syrian revolutionaries turned out to be zombies and the Lebanese revolutionaries turned out to be gay!" ridiculing an earlier nefarious comment he made about Syrian refugees.

While there were some critical voices about how LGBT organizations and activists reacted to homophobic and sexist slur at the protests,[248] the participation in the protests drew

[247] Ali Harb, "How LGBT Rights Found a Place in Lebanon's Protest Movement | Time," *Time*, 0 13, 2019, https://time.com/5726465/lgbt-issues-lebanon-protests/; Moussa Saleh, "Queers for the Revolution: Scenes from the Heart of the Lebanese Revolution," *My Kali*, April 3, 2020, https://www.mykalimag.com/en/2020/04/03/18772/.

[248] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on February 24, 2021.

surprisingly little contestation from the community. As one of my interviewees currently in a leadership position in HELEM recounts:

> *The space for the discussion was open. (...) A lot of people, 60 or 70 people attended that meeting. (...) It was a no brainer. People also agreed to the vehicle through which we were participating, we were doing what we do best which is create spaces. So we created a space in Revolutionary Square. (...) What we wanted was to encourage LGBT people to be part of the revolution, not to represent LGBT issues inside the revolution. That was our approach from the beginning and it was really successful.*[249]

5.8. Core controversies

While the debates reconstructed above covered very diverse issues such as the question of visibility, the role of businesses or diaspora members, classism and sexism in the movement, services provision and community building, and the relationship of the movement to other social justice or political issues, yet we can see a relative consistency in how these debates were structured. Differences of opinions were divided along three sets of oppositions or dimensions which marked the positions of various contributors to these debates.

The first dimension was the 'Western' vs. local dichotomy, which was very decisive in the debates about visibility, services provision, the role of diaspora, and the role of businesses. While Western models of activism were mentioned a few times in a positive light as a source of inspiration, those who criticized the Western models of organizing and rejected its applicability to the Lebanese context, or who questioned the Western vs. non-Western binary were of clear majority.

The second dimension was the politicization vs. depoliticization dichotomy. There were activists who ascribed to a more political and those who ascribe to a more apolitical approach to organizing. It has to be noted, however, that 'political' in these circles is very often identified with left or radical left political agenda, so those who define themselves or label others as 'apolitical' often mean by it a liberal or pragmatist approach. These pragmatic

[249] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on July 24, 2020.

activists emphasize that there is not one single solution and the strength of a multiplicity of approaches should be recognized.

The third and final dimension was the inclusion vs. exclusion dichotomy, which was the most common, as well as the most flexibly applied dichotomy in the debates: activists mutually accused each other of being exclusive (based on class, gender, political views, diasporic existence, educational background), debates about the appropriate forms of activism often revolved around different understandings of inclusivity.

5.9. Conclusion

As opposed to Massad's view of Lebanese LGBT organizing as static, monolithic and naïve, this survey of major disputes that took place within the Lebanese LGBT movement in the past showed that much like Western LGBT activism, Lebanese LGBT activism is also dynamic, contentious, and engaged with theoretical discussions. Through the identification of core controversies, I have also showed that while the 'West' vs. local dichotomy was present in many of the discussions, it was not the main dividing line: critics of Western models of organizing took diverse stances in the various discussions and were found on both sides of the same debates.

CHAPTER 6:

CONTESTED COLONIALITIES

"You either criticize the West, and are on Massad's side, or you do not, and then you're going to be a traitor. This is the dilemma we're stuck in."[250]

Ever since Massad published his highly influential thesis about the 'Gay International', activists and academics committed to transforming oppressive sexual and gender relations in the WANA region cannot avoid but devote significant time and effort to challenging his arguments. One such line of contestation argues that as opposed to Massad's claim that Arab and Lebanese LGBT activism is a replica of the (earlier) Western model of LGBT organizing, it is in fact a very localized struggle differing significantly from its Western counterpart. Makarem for example asserts that "the few gay and lesbian organizations that emerged in the last few years in Lebanon and in the Palestinian community in Israel are (…) the product of their own conditions."[251] Their distinctiveness lies in the fact that they are committed to a broad ideal of social justice that includes anti-colonial, anti-war and anti-racist causes, as opposed to focusing solely on acquiring social recognition for oppressed sexual and gender minorities. Moussawi also highlights how Lebanese LGBT organizations "contest and engage with dominant models of Euro-American LGBTQ organizing."[252]

While I am highly critical of Massad's interpretation of Lebanese LGBT activism being a mechanistic copy of 'the Western model', I am also rather skeptical about romanticizing Lebanese LGBT activism as a completely distinct and very original form of

[250] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on February 24, 2021.

[251] Makarem, "We Are Not Agents of the West."

[252] Moussawi, "(Un)Critically Queer Organizing," 595.

activism that developed in opposition to Western LGBT activism. While the 'West' vs. local dichotomy is a common trope in the debates analyzed in the previous chapter, that binary does not fully structure the debates, the politicization vs. depoliticization and inclusion vs. exclusion dimension cross-cut that binary. In the current chapter I will argue that rather than seeing Lebanese LGBT activism as either fully 'Western' or fully 'non-Western', we should rather recognize that local forms of activism developed in dialogue with different Western models of LGBT organizing, and that these local forms also played a role in shaping what 'Western LGBT activism' currently is. I will also argue that the insistence on conceptualizing Lebanese LGBT activism as non-Western derives from the need to respond to the hegemonic interpretation and widespread criticism that these activists are 'agents of the West'.

6.1. Local challenges, global dilemmas

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, besides the 'West' vs. local dichotomy, debates within the Lebanese LGBT movement were largely structured by the inclusion vs. exclusion and the politicization vs. depoliticization dichotomy. While these distinctions correspond directly to local challenges LGBT activists on the ground need to tackle, they also feed into and are strongly connected to universal debates around the world within and about LGBT movements.

Take for example the politicization vs. depoliticization dichotomy. Those Lebanese activists that have in the past two decades consistently argued for a less politicized movement in the disputes concerning sexism, intersectionality, service provision and the role of businesses fear that if deep political divisions present in the Lebanese society rooted partly in sectarianism, partly in differing views about the geopolitical orientation of the country are made integral to LGBT organizing, it will reproduce such divisions within the movement, lead to constant infighting and ultimately lead to the disintegration of the movement. They see politicization as a form of exclusion alienating potential activists and allies. They believe that

a pragmatic orientation focusing on the problems LGBT persons routinely face is able to bring activists with different political orientations together to work on common causes.

Those Lebanese activists that have meanwhile called for a more politicized movement in those same debates are skeptical of sexual and gender nonconformity being able to integrate the movement on its own. Deep gender, class and sectarian divisions are difficult to overcome, unless there is a coherent political vision or ideology that is able to integrate these various aspects of a person's identity and social position. It is impossible to disentangle the problems LGBT people routinely face from other social and political problems of the country, hence the only possible solution is political mobilization and alliance-building. The difficulty of such an approach is that political allies are scarce, and support for LGBT causes do not always come from political actors with an ideology activists necessarily align with. A notable example is the recent commitment to decriminalization and the abolishment of Article 534 by the Kataeb Party, a Christian political party in Lebanon that played a major role in the Lebanese Civil War.[253]

In these debates concerning 'politicization' and 'depoliticization' multiple understandings of 'politics' and 'the political' are at stake. On the one hand, politics is understood as institutionalized political decision-making, so the call to politicize or depoliticize LGBT issues is about whether such topics should be discussed by politicians and political parties, and more specifically if LGBT groups should cooperate with such political actors to achieve their goals. Politics is also understood as the antagonism between various value orientations and ideological convictions, politicization thus means taking a clear stand along the lines of those ideological cleavages, while depoliticization means keeping activism away from taking sides unless it directly impacts LGBT people. And finally, some activists

[253] Tamara Qiblawi, "Gay Rights Come to the Fore as Lebanon Prepares to Vote - CNN," *CNN*, May 4, 2018, https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/04/middleeast/lebanon-elections-lgbt-rights-intl/index.html.

use depoliticization synonymously with neoliberalism and its tendency to transform social problems into technical questions, thus politicization is understood as the opposition to neoliberalism and a commitment to leftist a political project.

Debates concerning (de)politicization are not internal to the Lebanese LGBT movement, contemporary queer movements in Western countries emerged out of a similarly discontent with identity based, 'depoliticized' forms of LGBT organizing. In the politicization / depoliticization debate one can recognize the distinction Jonathan Alexander makes between the 'community of identity' and 'community of values' approaches:[254] those that call for more politicization agree with Alexander that only a strong commitment to common values can provide sufficient ground for movement integration.

Similar dynamics are in place for the inclusion vs. exclusion dichotomy. The debate about class and the role of businesses grew out of specific concerns regarding the commodification of gay male bodies for international tourism and the pricing decisions of LGBT venues in Lebanon, yet they link to similar debates in Western activism and academia concerning the commercialization of gay identities and subcultures.[255] It was specific incidents of sexism and harassment against women that prompted broader discussions about women's role in the movement and the relationship between the LGBT movement and feminism, but as Adam, Duvenyduk and Krouwel note "the relation between gender-mixed or non-mixed social movement organizations was (and is) a hotly debated topic" in LGBT movements in all

[254] Alexander, "Beyond Identity: Queer Values and Community."

[255] Alexandra Chasin, *Selling out the Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Ssteven M. Kates and Russel W. Belk, "The Meanings of Lesbian and Gay Pride Day: Resistance through Consumption and Resistance to Consumption," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30, no. 4 (0 1, 2001): 392–429; Lisa Peñaloza, "We're Here, We're Queer, and We're Going Shopping!," *Journal of Homosexuality* 31, no. 1–2 (June 21, 1996): 9–41.

national contexts.[256] Discussions about the rights of refugees are difficult to avoid in a country like Lebanon where about one fourth of the population are refugees, and where many of them seek services from LGBT organizations. Nevertheless, debates about LGBT refugees and ethnic and racial minorities within the LGBT communities have been increasingly on the agenda of LGBT movements in the West as well.[257]

The connections between local challenges and global dilemmas show that it would be equally problematic to treat the debates as being mere imports of Western discussions or to treat them as purely local contestations cut off from similar discussions in other contexts. The transnational linkages described in *Chapter 4*, and in particular the peripatetic migration of activists among different social and activist contexts helps activists make connections between their local struggles and different models of Western activism. Massad and other postcolonial critiques of LGBT activism in non-Western contexts focus on Western donors, embassies and international human rights organizations as the primary motors behind LGBT activism in the region. As my analysis shows, an equally important part is played by activists moving back and forth between Lebanese and Western sociopolitical contexts. These activists were not only exposed to LGBT activism through the prism of hegemonic actors such as donors, embassies and international human rights organizations, but rather had firsthand experience with the diverse forms of LGBT organizing in Western countries.

As opposed to Massad's claim that HELEM and other LGBT organizations in the region follow an earlier phase of Western gay activism,[258] what we see in fact, is that Lebanese LGBT activists draw inspiration from and are engaged critically with several different forms of Western LGBT activism. Focusing on community building and providing

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[256] Adam, Duyvendak, and Krouwel, *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, 347.

[257] Jane Ward, "White Normativity: The Cultural Dimensions of Whiteness in a Racially Diverse LGBT Organization," *Sociological Perspectives* 51, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 563–86.

[258] Massad, *Islam in Liberalism*, 227.

safe spaces is a very different form of activism from using international human rights mechanisms to put pressure on the Lebanese government to decriminalize homosexuality. And they are both very different from intersectional coalition building to introduce labor protections or re-appropriating derogatory terms such as queer or *shāz* to challenge prevalent notions of normalcy in society. None of these forms of activism are specific to Lebanon. While some local activists argue that HELEM and other local organizations developed a model of LGBT activism radically different from those prevalent in the West, my argument is rather that local forms of activism developed in dialogue with different Western models of LGBT organizing, and that these local forms also played a role in shaping what 'Western LGBT activism' currently is.

6.2. Contesting the Western/local binary

While the politicization vs. depoliticization and inclusion vs. exclusion dimension of the debates can be interpreted through the lens of Western LGBT activism, the 'West' vs. local dichotomy lends a markedly postcolonial dimension to the disputes. When local LGBT activists define their activism in opposition to Western models of activism, they do so in an effort to respond to two hegemonic interpretations of LGBT activism in the region: the local political discourse and the radical postcolonial critique, both of which portray their work as foreign intrusion or imperial imposition. The proximity of the arguments of the two forms of criticism surprised many activists. As a former board member of the Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality puts it:

> *We incur a backlash from homophobes and we incur a backlash from radical leftist crazies who believe that all of this is part of the Western sexual imperialist project, that this is internalized colonialism. (...) They are repeating the same exact arguments. The reactionary right is saying that we are inauthentic, we are inorganic, we don't belong in the social fabric of our society, we are results of Western conspiracy. And*

> *then this far left is making the same exact point. I expected the homophobes, I expected the Zionists. I didn't expect the far-left cuckoos.*[259]

A similar opinion was shared by a former executive director of HELEM in an academic exchange with Massad in the

> *The real problem with Massad's interview is the lies, fabrications, and insinuations of being agents of the West against the people in HELEM. This is an opinion we have heard many times from Salafists and chauvinists. (...) While Massad tries to hide behind a mask of scholarship and self-proclaimed progressiveness, he manages to voice an opinion that reflects the most bigoted religious currents in the region.*[260]

Activists try to neutralize both of these forms of criticisms by two methods: (1) appropriating the same discourse of an opposition between the 'Western' and the local, but inverting it, claiming that is in fact their opponents that are too 'Western', or (2) deconstructing the 'Western' / local binary altogether.

Local political and religious discourses hostile to gender and sexual non-conformity are manifold. As Dalacoura argues, the issue of homosexuality has become a 'cultural battleground' in West Asia. Historical processes described in the literature review lead local political elites to adopt unfavorable attitudes towards sexual and gender non-conformity, first as part of an effort to modernize and adopt Western moral standards, and then later on as Western states and societies became increasing more accepting towards homosexuality, they reformulated their rejection of such practices as a form of opposition to Western values "affirming their cultural integrity and authenticity."[261] In Lebanon, the sectarian nature of the state and of society also provides a local political dynamic in which expressing negative attitudes towards sexual and gender non-conformity serves as a tool to maintain sectarian

[259] Interview conducted online in Berkeley, CA, United States of America and Budapest, Hungary on October 13, 2020.

[260] Ghassan Makarem, "We Are Not Agents of the West," *Reset DOC*, December 14, 2009, https://www.resetdoc.org/story/we-are-not-agents-of-the-west/.

[261] Katerina Dalacoura, "Homosexuality as Cultural Battleground in the Middle East: Culture and Postcolonial International Theory," *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 7 (August 9, 2014): 1291.

belonging. With Israel's practice of pinkwashing, expressing such negative attitudes also forms part of an anti-Zionist political stance.

Regarding the local political and religious discourse that portrays homosexuality and LGBT activism as Western imposition, activists argue that it is not homosexuality, same-sex desire or gender ambiguity that is a Western imposition, but rather homophobia and transphobia. Common references to the colonial roots of Article 543, the law criminalizing unnatural sexual acts is used to support this claim. Furthermore, both activists and academics try to uncover the hidden 'queer archive' of non-Western sexuality,[262] to show that same sex desire and gender ambiguity was in fact part and parcel of the pre-colonial culture of the region, and it was the Western morals of the colonizers, and the appropriation of those morals by local elites that introduced hostile attitudes towards same-sex desire or gender-nonconformity in the region.[263]

Regarding the postcolonial academic critique of their work, they emphasize that such critique is in fact much more Western, than the local activism they carry out. Such postcolonial critique is launched by academics linked to Western academic institutions, building on Western theoretical models, and writing to Western audiences. Their position is described as a 'privileged outsider position' since they do not have to deal with the everyday struggles and challenges of movement building on the ground. As a member of HELEM currently in a leadership position of the organization describes:

> *The overwhelming majority of these forms of academic and cultural production are always written with a Western audience in mind. It's as if they are always written to convince a Western academic audience of their own complicity in the colonization of the Arab world. Unfortunately, that has negative repercussions on us as activists in the region, it paints us as collaborators with the West, it strips us of our agency. None*

[262] Corrie Decker, "Sexuality in Colonial Africa: Current Trends and New Directions," in *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism*, ed. Dagmar Herzog and Chelsea Schields (Milton Park; New York: Routledge, 2021), 42–54.

[263] Rao, "Echoes of Imperialism in LGBT Activism."

> *of this information is useful for us in terms of knowing how we serve our populations, how we make things better.*[264]

The lack of usefulness, however, does not mean that activists on the ground do not engage with academic knowledge production about their work. The debate between Massad and Makarem in the online magazine *Reset Dialogues on Civilizations*[265] already mentioned in *Chapter 4* is still remembered by many as the greatest visibility HELEM's work received internationally. Engagement is not limited to the work of Massad. For example, following the publication of her book *Terrorist assemblages*,[266] HELEM invited another key postcolonial writer on LGBT movements, Jasbir Puar to give a talk. Academic knowledge production matters for the activists, as they themselves are often rooted partly in academia, and also because such public intellectuals greatly shape the image of the movement both locally, as well as internationally with potential allies and donors. As a former member of HELEM once holding leadership position in the organization notes:

> *It's of course a power dynamic. Because when Puar says you're a homonationalist, you are a homonationalist. This is what happened with Massad. Agents of the west. Joseph Massad said it, so they must be. It is in a sense a reaction to what is happening, but actually there is also a lack of understanding. Sometimes they miss the whole point, especially when it comes in relation to organizing, to actual change on the ground.*[267]

The homophobia of the local political and religious elites is easy to shrug off, as activists quite evidently construct their struggles in opposition to such adversaries. But when criticism comes from those perceived to be allies, it impacts radically the way activists—especially left-wing activists resonating with the political commitments of postcolonial academics—think about their own work. As Sa'ed Atshan notes in his recently published

[264] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on July 24, 2020.

[265] Makarem, "We Are Not Agents of the West."

[266] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

[267] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on December 13, 2020.

book on Palestinian queer activism: “The figure of Joseph Massad (...) loomed over queer activists in the region. They shudder at the prospect of being called “local informants” of the “gay international” by him and his followers.”[268] Such a feeling was shared by many of the Lebanese activists I’ve interviewed.

Taking into consideration such a deep impact of the postcolonial critique on the self-image of activists, it is not surprising that charging the opposing side of the debate with the claim of being ‘too Western’ also makes it into the disputes within the movement. The plurality of the Western forms of activism as points of reference and postcolonialism as a hegemonic discourse explain why the rejection of Western models of activism are so common in these debates. Distancing oneself from the Western models of activism is equally used when for example arguing for and against the greater politicization of LGBT struggles, for and against more intersectional forms of organizing, for and against focusing on service provision, for and against community building as primary strategy.

Besides creatively mobilizing a rejection of Western forms of activism, activists also try to overcome criticism of being too Western by deconstructing the Western / local binary as such. This latter approach was particularly apparent in the interviews I made with activists reflecting on those past debates they had. Such a rejection of the Western / local binary applies both to models of sexuality and to activism as. As a former board member of the Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality expresses this point with much clarity:

> *The thing is that I don’t believe there’s a binary between the Western modality of sexuality and the Lebanese/Arab modality of sexuality. I don’t think these are homogenous categories, because when we say Western that includes Europe, that includes North America, Canada, the United States. It includes a gay rich white man in Chelsea, New York and it includes a poor person from a rural area in Montana or Missouri… So I'm uncomfortable with homogenizing as if there is one Western*

[268] Atshan, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*, xii.

> *sexuality model because there are many and similarly there is no one Lebanese or one Middle-Eastern sexuality modality, there are many.*[269]

Resonating with academic models of cultural hybridity[270] that emphasize that cultures develop in interaction with each other, and that the idea of 'pure' or 'authentic' cultural forms is—in the best case—a fiction, or—more likely—an ideological construction, activists similarly undermine the belief that there was ever an authentically Arab or Levantian model of sexuality. "I don't think that the region has ever been as closed as Massad really thinks in terms of identity, in terms of beliefs. It was never as pure as he wanted it to be"—says a former executive director of HELEM.[271]

Most activists on the ground adopt a similar framework for thinking about their own activism. They reject the approach that Western models of LGBT activism should be uncritically embraced or outright rejected. Activism is construed more as a dialogue or a learning process where inspirations from Western models of LGBT activism should be analyzed and reworked to fit local realities:

> *It's not a black-and-white! I mean, it's almost like saying the science of the West doesn't apply to the East, no! There are common human things, but there are also some local nuances... The whole question is not about to be with or opposed to... So should we take everything and force it there? No! But take it, try to fit it, and if it doesn't fit then say it doesn't fit... We are part of one big network on the internet, so we cannot say what's relevant or what's not relevant in the East. Accept it, learn it, and devise your own version!*[272]

[269] Interview conducted online in Berkeley, CA, United States of America and Budapest, Hungary on October 13, 2020.

[270] Marwan M. Kraidy, "Hybridity in Cultural Globalization," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 3 (2002): 316–39; Richard Werbner and Homi Bhabha, *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, 2nd edition (London: Zed Books, 2015).

[271] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on December 13, 2020.

[272] Interview conducted online in Paris, France and Budapest, Hungary on October 30, 2020.

6.3. Conclusion

In the current chapter I argued that both Massad's contemptuous approach that sees Lebanese LGBT activism as a copy of earlier models of Western LGBT activism and his critics' romanticizing approach that see Lebanese LGBT organizing as completely distinct and autonomous from Western LGBT activism are partial and thus untenable. I argued instead that local forms of LGBT activism in Lebanon developed in dialogue with different Western models of LGBT organizing, and that these local forms also played a role in shaping what 'Western LGBT activism' currently is. I explained the urge to define local LGBT activism in opposition to Western activism as a response to hegemonic interpretations of LGBT activism as a Western imposition in both the local political discourse and postcolonial academic critique of these movements.

CONCLUSION

As my thesis tried to demonstrate, the history of the LGBT movement in Lebanon is fraught with heated debates, loud schisms, deep rifts and reoccurring tensions. As a partial outsider to the debates, a former board member of the Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality notes: "Lebanese queers are always fighting online on every single issue under the Sun. (...) Maybe things have died down with the Lebanese crisis. But before the major eruptions in Lebanon, the Lebanese are constantly arguing, constantly."[273] Many activists I've interviewed were rather bitter about the way these debates went, interpreting them as a "clash of egos", as "organizational jealousy" or "a deadly competition for resources". My thesis tried to show that reducing these debates to personal differences or organizational interests misses the greater point: the debates in fact result from the interplay of larger dilemmas that LGBT movements around the world have to face, the local challenges of movement building and the particular postcolonial dynamic of Lebanon.

The classical approach to social movement infighting exemplified by the work of Gamson[274] and McAdam[275] would predict that with such high levels of infighting, the LGBT movement in Lebanon is likely to disintegrate. Heated disputes indeed often resulted in schisms and the establishment of newer groups or organizations that maintained a rather tense relationship to each other. Such a proliferation, however, did not result in the disintegration, but rather the strengthening of the LGBT movement in Lebanon. Splitting along key dividing lines in those debates allowed organizations to focus on different priorities or different styles of organizing. Being the first registered LGBT organization in the whole WANA region, the

[273] Interview conducted online in Berkeley, CA, United States of America and Budapest, Hungary on October 13, 2020.

[274] Gamson, *The Strategy of Social Protest*.

[275] McAdam, "The Biographical Impact of Activism."

stakes of the debate within and about HELEM were rather high. As a member of HELEM currently holding a leadership position recalls: "It was almost as if whatever this organization is, dictates what the LGBT movement or priorities look like in Lebanon and consequently in the rest of the region. (...) Many people saw it as a fight for the movement's soul in a way."[276] Once organizations started to proliferate and that burden was taken off of HELEM's shoulder, the intensity of the debates somewhat decreased.

It would be a clear exaggeration to argue that disputes on their own contributed to the flourishing of the LGBT movement in Lebanon. Surely, increased funding, changing domestic political opportunity structures, and an international political landscape increasingly favorable to the rights of LGBT people all contributed to the development of the movement. Nevertheless, the debates allowed newer and newer generations of activists to get involved, and allowed the movement to change its strategies to respond to newer challenges. Ghaziani argues that infighting is likely to be productive when linked to practical tasks that movements must carry out.[277] Responding to police raids, the banning of LGBT public events, and the need to organize humanitarian support for refugees or those most affected by the country's economic collapse all provided opportunities to dispute and redefine the priorities of the movement.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick warns against the tendency of scholarly writings on sexuality to follow a paranoid reading and be trapped in the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', a constant need to expose concealed truths and unveil hidden patterns of violence.[278] Massad's critique of LGBT activism in the Arab region is a prime example of such paranoid reading, which

[276] Interview conducted online in Beirut, Lebanon and Budapest, Hungary on July 24, 2020.

[277] Ghaziani, *The Dividends of Dissent*.

[278] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–37.

prioritizes academic virtuosity to compassion with local activists fighting repressive regimes on the ground. A 'paranoid reading' of the disputes I've analyzed would focus on uncovering hidden biases, gaping blind spots and unspoken agendas that participants of these disputes had. I chose instead to offer a 'reparative reading' of these disputes focusing on the productive, rather than immobilizing aspects of these debates. Disputes and conflicts are not antithetical to social change, but rather conducive to it. As one of my interviewees so expressively put it:

> *There is always a struggle and a fight when someone goes outside the comfort area of action (...) If it triggered debate and it triggered passionate feelings, then it's definitely very healthy to exist, because it helps us widen and reconsider the boundaries of what we can do. (...) Whatever causes debate, and passionate debate, is definitely beneficial.*[279]

Documenting and analyzing the disputes that shaped Lebanese LGBT organizing is an important step to have a more nuanced understanding of LGBT movements in non-Western contexts, and to challenge the simplistic view that portrays these movements as the imposition of hegemonic Western models of sexuality and social movement organizing. The research, however, also opened up a set of new questions that the current research could not answer due to its limited scope and methodology. Were these debates restricted to a limited number of veteran activists or do they have a broader impact on grassroots activist mentality in contemporary Beirut? How do the positions taken by different activists and organizations in the disputes impact the actual work they carry out on the ground? How does the presence of Lebanese activists in Western contexts shape the current state of Western LGBT activism? Do LGBT movements in other non-Western contexts face similar challenges? Such questions could be answered by comparative, multi-sited ethnographic research which I plan to pursue as part of my doctoral studies.

[279] Interview conducted online in Paris, France and Budapest, Hungary on October 30, 2020.

APPENDIX 1:

INFORMATION SHEET AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Information sheet

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project.

This information sheet details the purpose of this study, a description of the involvement required and your rights as a participant.

If you have any further questions on the study or the processing of your personal data, you can reach me at the following address: Ahmad Al-Kurdi <Al-Kurdi_Ahmad@student.ceu.edu>

About the study

I carry out this study as part of my Master's thesis research at the Central European University (CEU).

The purpose of this research is to understand the development of the Lebanese LGBT movement in the context of transnational networks.

The method used to meet this purpose will be one-on-one interviews carried out in person or over videophone. The interview will be recorded to accurately capture your insights in your own words. The recording will only be heard by me for the purpose of this study. If you feel uncomfortable with the recorder, you may ask that it be turned off at any time. The recording will be transcribed verbatim, the analysis will be performed on the transcribed text. In some cases I might contact you for a follow-up interview at a later stage of the research.

You will receive no direct benefit from the research, but your contribution will help to have a better understanding of LGBT organizing in Lebanon, and thus help organizations working in this field. Talking about your life history might bring back bad memories, you can at any time ask to stop the interview or skip a question you wish not to answer. Non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities might have negative social and legal repercussions, but your personal data will not be released to third parties. If you wish so, you can remain fully anonymous during the research by picking a pseudonym.

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. In the event you choose to withdraw from the study all information you have provided (including recordings) will be destroyed and omitted from published materials.

Processing your personal data

Your personal data will be processed for the purpose of carrying out the research described above. The legal basis for processing your personal data is your consent (GDPR Article 6 (1) a)).

Personal data processed will include any personal information that you share with me during the interview. This might include special categories of data including data concerning your sexual orientation, your sex life, ethnicity, religious or political beliefs.

Your personal data will not be shared with any third parties. Research results will only be published in an anonymized form. Quotes from the interview might be included in published materials, but such quotes will not contain any personal information that might make you identifiable.

Data processors: In case of videophone interviews a copy of the interview will be stored on the servers of Microsoft for 30 days after the interview is conducted. For all interviews, the recording and the transcribed text will be stored on my personal computer (password protected) and on the servers of Google. You can read more about the privacy policy of Microsoft and Google at https://privacy.microsoft.com/en-us/privacystatement and https://policies.google.com/privacy

I will process your personal data until my thesis research is completed. All personal data will be deleted six months after the successful defense of my Master's thesis. In case I decide to continue this research as part of my further studies or academic work, I might request from you that the data processing period is extended. In case you do not consent to the extended data processing period, all of your personal data will be deleted.

Your rights as a data subject

At any point while I am in possession of or processing your personal data, you, the data subject, have the following rights:

- Right of access – you have the right to request a copy of the information that I hold about you.
- Right of rectification – you have a right to correct data that I hold about you that is inaccurate or incomplete.
- Right to be forgotten – you can ask for the data I hold about you to be erased from my records.
- Right to restriction of processing – you have the right to restrict certain types of processing.
- Right to object – you have the right to object to certain types of processing.
- Right to judicial review – in the event that I refuse your request under rights of access, I will provide you with a reason as to why. You have the right to complain as outlined in the following section.

All of the above requests will be forwarded to data processors named above in case the request concerns data processed by them.

Complaints

In the event that you wish to make a complaint about how your personal data is being processed by me or third parties as described above, or how your complaint has been handled, you have the right to lodge a complaint directly with CEU's Data Protection Officer or the supervisory authority.

The details for each of these contacts are:

	Supervisory authority contact details	**DPO contact details**
Contact Name:	National Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information	Irisz Szel, Legal Counsel and Data Protection Officer, Central European University
Address:	H-1125 Budapest, Szilágyi Erzsébet fasor 22/C. Hungary	H-1051 Budapest, Nador u. 9. Hungary
Email:	privacy@naih.hu	privacy@ceu.edu
Telephone:	+36 1 391 1400	+36 1 327 3000

Informed consent form

I, _____ hereby

DECLARE that

I have received from Ahmad Al-Kurdi all information about his MA thesis research project conducted at the Central European University (CEU) with special regard to its purpose and procedures;
I have had the chance to ask questions and I have got answers that I consider clear and satisfying;
I have received the *Information sheet* of the study as well as a copy of this consent form.

Therefore
I agree to participate in the research and to the processing of my personal data (GDPR 2016/679). I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary, that the information I provide is confidential and that I am free to withdraw at any time.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's signature_____ Date _____

APPENDIX 2:

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? If not covered, prompt about: How old are you? Do you work / study, what? Where do you currently live? Have you lived there all your life? If not, where did you grow up? Can you tell me about your family background? Is your family religious?

If abroad: Why did you decide to move to <city or country>? How was that experience for you? If not covered: Has your choice to be public about your sexuality played a significant role? How?

If abroad: How did you or your family end up in <city or country>? Do you like living here? Do you ever think of moving back to Lebanon?

How strong is your relationship to Lebanon? Do you have family or friends there? Do you travel there often? Do you follow developments in the country? What are your main sources of information? If not covered: media (ask which ones), social media (ask about particular groups or pages), friends?

Activism

How did you get involved with LGBT activism? If not covered, prompt about: Were you involved in other forms of social or political activism before? Why did you think it was important to work on LGBT issues specifically?

How did you get in touch with the organization? What were your first tasks? What is your current role or position? What do you do in practice?

If abroad: Are you in contact with LGBT groups or organizations in Lebanon or organizations that (also) work in Lebanon or with the Lebanese people living abroad? Which ones? How did you come in contact with these groups or organizations? How are you involved with their work?

If founder: How did the idea of the organization come up? Who came up with the idea?

What were the first steps of formation? Who came together, where, when? I have already read a lot about your organization, but the information is somewhat contradicting, so I am interested in your take on its history.

What documents (manifesto, constitution, by-laws, etc.) were produced? Who drafted them?

How was the registration done? Was there any difficulty with this? Did you get any help from outside?

What kind of publicity did the establishment of the organization receive? Where was it reported? Have you received any feedback of support or protest?

How are decisions made in the organization? Who are formal leaders? Who elects them and how? Who else is involved in decision-making or has a significant impact on decisions made? Why don't they hold a formal position?

If not the founder: Why did you join this particular organization? Were you also active in other organizations? What made this one more appealing?

How are decisions made in the organization? Who are formal leaders? Who elects them and how? Who else is involved in decision-making or has a significant impact on decisions made? Why don't they hold a formal position?

Can you recall any controversies, disputes or debates from the life of the organization or more broadly within the movement? What were the different points of views? Who took those views? What was at stake in the debate? If not mentioned: value-ideological differences; differences from situation assessment-tactical considerations; personal conflicts. In what forums did the debate take place? How did the debate go? What impact did the debate have on the life of the organization?

[If it is not mentioned, ask one-by-one:] Other interviewees have also mentioned that there was a debate...

… whether organizations should focus more on community organizing or on activism;
… whether gay businesses (bars, clubs) play a positive role in the life of the community, or only exploit them;
… whether (some) LGBT organizations paint a too bright picture about the acceptance of LGBT people in Lebanon or in Beirut;
… whether Beirut Pride is beneficial to the community or brings about too much hostility;
… whether linking LGBT issues to other contested social issues (feminism, refugee rights, workers' rights) is useful;
… whether LGBT organizations should participate visibly as an organization in the anti-government protests;
… whether Western models of LGBT activism work in Lebanon apply to Lebanon where sexuality is structured differently then in the West?

[For all the contestations, ask:] Do you remember that debate? How important was it for the movement? What were the different points of views? Who took those views? What was their positionality? If not mentioned: local activist, local academic, Lebanese activist/ academic living abroad, Western academic, volunteer from abroad. What was at stake in the debate? If not mentioned: value-ideological differences; differences from situation assessment-tactical considerations; personal conflicts.

In the academic literature on the Lebanese LGBT movement, it is often mentioned that it is an "intersectional" movement. Do you agree that this label applies? How would you define intersectional activism in this context?

Do people from abroad play any role in the life of the organization? Do they provide any help? In what form? If not mentioned: financial support, connections, sharing and liking

contents, volunteering, spreading news about the organization, expressing their view / shaping priorities of the organization. Do they have a different approach to activism than locals?

If organization failed: What were the biggest challenges in sustaining the group or organization? Why do you think it failed?

Private life

How would you describe your sexuality? Is there any term or label that best describes your sexual desires or practices? Have you always identified with this label? If not: when and how did it change?

Does your family know you are <label used>? If yes: Have you had any reservations about coming out to them? Has your coming out changed your relationship with them? If not: Do you think it is important to come out to your family? Why/why not?

Further contacts

Can you suggest other activists outside Lebanon (either in <their country> or elsewhere) that play a role in LGBT organizing in Lebanon or in among Lebanese people living abroad? Can you give me their email address / phone number / facebook account? Would you introduce me to them?

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