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Palestine

Resisting homophobia and occupation

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Haneen Maikey from the Palestinian queer group Al Qaws was in Amsterdam in June talking about their struggles for sexual emancipation and against the Israeli occupation. Alex de Jong spoke with her about being queer and Palestinian and the queer contribution to the Palestinian liberation movement for the Dutch newspaper Grenzeloos.

HM: I'm here to share my experience as a Palestinian queer activist. As a movement, we are often marginalized in the media – if somebody writes about queers in Palestine, it's often dismissive about what we have to say ourselves. Instead, the focus is on our supposed victim-hood, not on our accomplishments. That is one of the reasons we feel it's important to talk about our experiences in meetings like this one or a recent speaking tour I did in the United States. Al Qaws is a queer and LGBT grassroots group that focuses on answering people's individual needs and creating a community where people can freely acknowledge all their identities, without having to choose between for example being queer or being Palestinian. For us, this is part of a larger vision of challenging and breaking the current sexual and gender hierarchies in Palestinian society.'

Palestinian society is one of few Arabic societies in which during the last fifteen years a distinct queer voice has developed. Why do you think that is?

HM: Actually, there are also groups in North-Africa, there are many great but still informal groups. But Palestine and Lebanon are the only two places with formally organized groups. Palestinian society is very secular and very organized. Resistance is a daily fact of life and we have been challenged about our identity for decades. I grew up in a small village in the north and only when I moved to Jerusalem and was confronted with racism, I discovered I was Palestinian. In my family, people who experienced the trauma of 1948, the Nakba, didn't talk about it. Israeli society systematically denies a Palestinian identity to 'Arabs living in Israel'. So, the experience of discovering your identity and having to fight for it is familiar to many. Adapting such an experience to being queer was relatively easy.

In the last 63 years we have been constantly compared to Israeli society, we are for instance supposed to be homophobic and kill queers while they have gay rights. Such ongoing comparisons force you to think about these issues. When we started as a group, we were completely a-political: until the war against Lebanon in 2006 we didn't talk politics, we were only interested in our own experiences - but this became impossible, we couldn't escape politics. The Second Intifada, that started in 2000, was the first time Palestinians living inside Israel took part in the resistance. Palestinian citizens of Israel were killed by Israeli police during demonstrations. Events like this made us question our identity, I think this was the first time I asked my grandfather about his experience during the Nakba. It is not an accident a movement like ours developed in Jerusalem, the symbolic center of the confrontation between Israeli and Palestinian society. When I went there I immediately became the Other.

How does discovering your identity as Palestinian compare with discovering your identity as queer?

HM: It was more gradual, I never really 'came out of the closet' – there was no closet, so to speak. Through Al Qaws, we formed a space where people can explore their sexual identity in an easygoing way, listening to other people's stories. I remember when I understood I could be both Palestinian and queer – it felt strange before to be talking about queerness and on the way back be ordered by an Israeli soldier to identify myself because I'm Palestinian. Many other members experienced this. Western strategies like visibility and 'coming out' are irrelevant for us. The gay liberation movement in the West can inspire us, but we can not copy it. A Pride parade in Ramallah would not be useful – among other reasons because a lot of our members are not 'out' in the way Westerners think of being out of the closet.

We all have friends who know and some family members that know, but others don't. In different places, we can be different people. We can have this flexibility in our identity without having the 'ceremony' of coming out. We are not a christian culture, we don't have this tradition of confessing. In the Western context, 'coming out' grew organically from its social context. It's a very individual approach, from an individualist society. Palestinian society, however, is much more collective, you are part of a large family as it were. My parents are more angry about me moving away than being lesbian. Many people are very connected to their families and are not willing break with them by coming out in the Western sense. They are not afraid about violence or anything, they just value their ties with their family more. Coming out is not a precondition for a vivid movement, we proved we can build a community without everybody needing to be 'out' on all different levels.

Do you have any contacts with other Palestinian queer or feminist groups?

HM: We work closely with Aswat – meaning 'voices' in Arabic – an organization of Palestinian gay women. Aswat is an independent part of a feminist organization. Together, we operate a support line, we organize education and we have a large network of groups that work on sexual rights, feminism and Human Rights, both inside Israel and on the West-bank.

Do you have any contacts with Israeli groups?

HM: That's a complicated issue. Our main focus is on Palestinian society so we don't have much interest in cooperating with Israeli groups. On a personal level, we know each-other but in the last three years, we have taken different paths. We took a more radical and political road, talking about the connections between different forms of oppression while, unfortunately, many of the Israeli LGBT groups have come to accept the nation and strive to become integrated in it through winning specific rights. Whether you are Palestinian or Israeli, I don't agree with this kind of liberal activism. We do have good contacts with some radical anti-Zionist groups that try to defend their community's interests while not forgetting the wider social context.

Two years ago, two gay youth were shot in one of the gay centers in Tel Aviv and we expressed our solidarity against this hate-crime. But when we went to the large demonstration against these crimes, it was dominated by white men and right-wing politicians. Shimon Peres was on the stage, saying 'don't kill', while two months earlier he was part of killing hundreds Palestinians in Gaza, and the Israeli national anthem was played. So, as Palestinians we were excluded from this demonstration. We asked to speak from the platform but this was refused with the argument this was not the place to talk about politics – as if the whole issue is not political! This demonstration turned out to be a symbolic junction.

Aside from the occupation, what are the problems Palestinian queers are confronted with? Of course we hear a lot about the rise of religious fundamentalism...

HM: I actually don't think this political trend has an impact on daily life. Palestinian society is very secular, notwithstanding people wearing hijabs or growing beards. As someone who lives in Jerusalem and spends a lot of time on the West Bank, I don't see an extremist wave of religious revivalism. I think I drank more beer on the West Bank than in Tel Aviv.... But Palestinian society is very diverse, some people live in large cities, others in small villages, you can't say there is a single experience. For Palestinian queers, both inside Israel and outside, there are two categories of challenges. The first are the universal difficulties of feeling isolated, growing up in a hetero-normative society, to experience a crisis because you are different. And there is homophobia, another universal challenge for queers.

Of course, Palestinian society has its particularities: it is very patriarchal for instance. Even a younger brother might

expect he has the right to tell his older sister what to do. Another particularity is the taboo on talking about sexuality, even straight people will not talk about it. Talking about homosexuality is a way to push for talking about sexuality in general. We are not hiding we are lesbian, gay or whatever, but talking about sexuality is a precondition for a discussion on these subjects. Some Human Rights or women's groups might not be willing to be associated with us. But when sexuality in general is an issue, they can't pretend it's not an issue for them – sexuality is not limited to gays. Women's groups, Human Rights groups, LGBT groups, all have a shared responsibility.

The second category of challenges has to do with being a double minority, being both Palestinian and queer. You can't avoid discrimination that targets you as an 'Arab' or Palestinian. Not all the discrimination is systematic, organized. It can vary from when you buy food that people make fun of your accent, to riding on a bus and somebody telling you they don't want to hear Arabic or soldiers stopping you. The racism is pervasive. On the West Bank, people are dealing with the occupation in daily life, your freedom of movement is limited by all the checkpoints. We are facing homophobia in Palestinian and Israeli society and the occupation and racism.

What do you think, you as a queer group can contribute specifically to the Palestinian liberation movement?

HM: I think that the most marginalized have most to gain from social change and will be the most committed to change. You can choose to talk about homosexuality specifically and to work for gay rights – but you can also try to talk about sexuality in general and about other forms of marginalized sexualities, to talk about Human Rights and base yourselves on all the forms of oppression you experience. That is what we try to do, we want to include other categories than just homosexuals. For example, we want to also include people that feel oppressed because of their gender or because they don't want to get married. As a small group, we have to build coalitions to make change in society and that is what we are trying to do. We now exist ten years and the first seven years we focused on building our own capacities, discussing our vision. We are aware that different groups have tried to manipulate the issue of queers in Palestine. Some Palestinian groups said we were 'westernized' for example. Or there is the traditional liberal claim that sexuality is not political but only affects people in their private life. The Israeli government uses the issue of gay rights, trying to paint itself as a kind of gay haven in the Middle east and accusing Palestinian society of being inherently homophobic. Our experience gives us an unique perspective. When I was touring the United States, Zionists didn't engage with us. We would have liked to discuss but they just can't deal with Palestinian, political queers. Supposedly we are either killed by the Palestinian Authority or we don't exist at all.

One our main political campaigns is to counter what is called 'pinkwashing', a part of a broader campaign of the Israeli government: the cynical use of the relative progressive gay rights in Israel to divert international attention away from their Human Rights violations and occupation. I often hear the objection; 'so what if Israel wants to promote its gay-rights policies?' But its not about gay rights, Israel commits Human Rights violations and occupies another people and then abuses my difficulties and my name by saying my society is backward and homophobic. My struggle is dismissed and my people are demonized. This has a direct impact on our image internationally but more important is its impact on Palestinian gay youth who internalize these ideas and dream about running away to Israel, the supposed bastion of gay rights. But the law is very clear: Palestinians can not get refugee status in Israel, Israel will not help or protect Palestinian gays. The Israeli campaign of 'pinkwashing' is another reason we have to take a political stand.

That is also why you are now in Amsterdam, right?

HM: Yes, tomorrow I'm giving a workshop on pinkwashing and gay tourism to Israel. I will talk specifically about BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) as a tool to counter Israeli policies.

You are here to give a workshop on 'queer BDS' – can you say something about this?

HM: We consider ourselves an integral part of Palestinian society: we do not mean this is in a nationalist way but in the sense that we suffer from the same hardships as other Palestinians. The occupation also affects queers, racism doesn't distinguish between queers and straights. So we were already part of campaigns against the occupation, discrimination and the separation wall. We feel we can contribute a special perspective to this struggle and this is why we wanted to create a separate, independent group that can work to support the BDS campaign from a queer perspective. We see BDS as a promising strategy, it is well structured, non-violent and it is supported by the overwhelming majority of Palestinian civil society. It's creating a new wave of resistance, independent from the Palestinian Authority. After 63 years of occupation, peace-talks and all kinds of initiatives to support 'co-existence' have had no success, the BDS campaign is a new campaign, based on Human Rights. Its not about fighting Israeli's but about challenging the Israeli state's occupation. This campaign is the right place for us as Palestinian queers to express ourselves as part of Palestinian society and promote the BDS strategy in the queer context. Our main aim with 'Palestinian Queers for BDS' is to talk internationally with queer groups and to encourage both radical and mainstream groups to support BDS. Only external pressure can force Israel to give up the occupation.

The BDS campaign is gathering momentum internationally. What are your experiences with this?

HM: We are a young group – PQBDS started about a year and a half ago with making general statements. We issued a call to queer academics and artists to boycott Israeli institutes with links to the government. For us, we saw the most momentum, in Europe at least, in the campaign against IGLYO's decision to have its General Assembly in Tel Aviv this December. IGLYO is the International Gay and Lesbian Youth Organization, it has around 75 member organizations. Through this campaign, we reached many international groups. The main goal is to boycott the GA – not IGLYO itself – and this call opens the discussion on the issue of Palestinian queer rights and the occupation. Dozens of European LGBT groups were forced to have this discussion, we feel this was a huge accomplishment.

What do you consider your biggest achievements so far?

HM: 'After ten years of activism, we established ourselves as part of our society and proved we have a special contribution to make. Our ideas about identity and sexuality bring something new into Palestinian society, and there is a lot of interest in us, also among straight Palestinian activists. Even straight people are now coming to our events, they feel more free there. The greatest accomplishment of our movement is that we created a solid infrastructure and community.'