

I Exist: Obstacles and Opportunities for GLBT Organizing in the Middle East

An Honors Capstone Project

Spring 2011

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General University Honors

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April 25, 2011

### **Abstract**

Human rights violations against Middle Eastern GLBT individuals have garnered international condemnation, but the same advocacy tactics used in the West are often inappropriate in closed or semi-open states. Even in Middle Eastern countries with anti-sodomy laws, there are a growing number of indigenous organizations, magazines, and blogs supporting these communities. Using Helem in Lebanon as a case study, the capstone will explore the construction of a Middle Eastern homosexual identity, the institutional structures affecting community formation, the role resources play in shaping organizational priorities, and examples of successful strategies. Academic studies, Lebanese blogs, Helem's publications, and Western human rights organizations reports were examined, challenging the "coming out" model and showing the importance of allying with other human rights organizations. These findings necessitate a reevaluation of the Western human rights assistance and additional study to further delineate model practices for future GLBT organizing in the region.

## Introduction

*“Tortured and Killed in Iraq for Being Gay” (ABC News 2009).*

*“Gays Deserve Torture, Death Penalty, Iranian Minister Says” (Fox News 2007).*

*“Death Threat’ to Palestinian Gays” (BBC News 2003).*

*“Sexual Cleansing in Iraq: Islamist deaths squads are hunting down gay Iraqis and summarily executing them” (The Guardian 2008).*

These headlines on popular Western news outlets describe Iraqi militias using “a harsh interpretation of shariah law” to abduct and shoot children suspected of being gay, a Palestinian gay man threatened with deportation even after his family tried to kill him, and the hanging of gays in Iran. These sensationalist stories, though, neglect to moderate their story with any examples of the first public stirrings challenging this discrimination and violence. Gay communities in the Middle East have been socializing informally both on internet forums and at parties for at least twenty years, and in recent years, there are a growing number of indigenous organizations, magazines, and blogs supporting GLBT communities seeking both social and political acceptance (Dunne 1998). These organizations build coalitions with other human rights organizations and are harnessing the power of the internet, but they are limited by the goals of foreign funding and a “coming out” model that privileges public visibility. Therefore, successful outreach to the local GLBT community has been limited.

This study is limited to countries in the Arabic-speaking Middle East and discusses Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Morocco, Egypt, and briefly Saudi Arabia. Current magazines include *Mithly* magazine in Morocco, *Bekhsoos* in Lebanon, and *My. Kali* in Jordan, though these were not examined in my study. Instead, my primary focus was on the strategies used by organizations active in cyberspace. These include Aswat and Al-Qaws, registered in

Israel but appealing to residents of the Palestinian territories; Kif Kif in Morocco; and Helem and its woman's splinter group, Meem, in Lebanon. As Helem has best promoted itself in local and international media, the depth of information available allowed for a case study in Chapter 4. Previous academic work, blogs, each organization's own publications and website, external news stories, and Western human rights organizations reports all informed my study. My study is unique in its use of internet archiving tools to track and code Helem's website's news stories and other materials by subject and language. Responding to the criticism of the controversial Joseph Massad, the resulting data allowed me to add another dimension to analysis of the organization's local accountability. Though the data was not as skewed to an exclusively international audience of human rights proponents as Massad claims, there was certainly a preference for English-language media.

Other themes in this study include the construction of a Middle Eastern homosexual identity, the political obstacles and opportunities affecting community formation, the role resources play in shaping organizational priorities, and examples of the most successful strategies thus far. Broadly, my conclusions show an organizational bias favoring upper-class males, the importance of alliances with other human rights organizations and popular causes, and the difficulty of outreach to individuals who have homosexual sex but do not identify as GLB. These findings necessitate a reevaluation of the requirements placed on recipients of Western funding as well as a systematic identification of model practices to assist future GLBT organizing in the region.

In regards to the social constructionist critique discussed later in Chapter 1, I have chosen to use words familiar to Western audiences, like gay, GLBT, and homosexual. I realize that these words are given different meanings depending on the culture, but having not done field

work to further examine Middle Eastern conceptions of homosexuality, I have used these words rather than more clunky terms like “same-sex practitioners” “non-normative sexualities.” In addition, whether reflecting a foreign influence or a domestic conception of homosexuality, the groups I have studied all call themselves GLBT, gay, etc. on their websites. At some point, scholars must allow individuals the freedom to self-identify, no matter their reasons.

Admittedly, my study focuses far more on gay men than on gay women in the Middle East. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, little academic literature has been written on the topic besides Samar Habib’s *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*, and even these primarily focus on literary representations and historical descriptions of female relationships rather than contemporary everyday experiences. Secondly, prosecution under Middle Eastern anti-sodomy laws is applied to women far less often than to men. Thirdly, international funders have favored local projects focusing on the prevention of HIV/AIDS, a disease that affects homosexual men at a higher rate than homosexual women. In one of the most comprehensive studies of HIV/AIDS prevalence in the Middle East and North Africa, women who have sex with women are not mentioned once in 310-page study, though women comprised roughly 45.8% of the total HIV/AIDS cases in the region in 2003 (Abu-Raddad, et. al 2010 & Sufian 2004). Due to these reasons and a societal taboo towards woman’s sexuality in general, self-described GLBT organizations in the region provide fewer programs targeted specifically to women. More recently, Meem<sup>1</sup> in Lebanon broke off from Helem and a Palestinian organization, Aswat, was established exclusively for gay women. These new organizations provide greater space to deal with the intersecting concerns of a community of homosexual women in a patriarchal society.

I therefore harbor a conditional hope that conditions for homosexual communities in Middle Eastern countries will gradually improve. The success of these GLBT organizations

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<sup>1</sup> <http://meemgroup.org/news/>

ultimately comes down to whether or not the previously mentioned organizations can transfer from a largely international support base to a popular domestic one. These organizations need to discover strategies and sexuality discourses that resound within their communities and preclude suspicion of a new form of Western imposition.

### **Chapter 1: What is homosexuality in the Middle East?**

In 1963, Allen Edwardes and R.E.L. Masters wrote: “since the time of the Prophet, fabulous Araby has reeked of aphrodisiac excitement” (175). This proclamation is but one example of the Orientalist conflation of the Middle East and a permissive Islam with a pervasive, timeless sexuality. Homosexuality, in particular, was seen by Western colonizers as a culturally accepted norm dating back to the homoerotic writings of 8<sup>th</sup> century-Arab poet Abu Nawas, making the Middle East an ideal setting for their own homosexual encounters with natives. Both Edward Said and Joseph Massad have criticized the sexual politics of imperialism and have tried to show how Western writings on Arabs have affected their self-perception.

Joseph Massad and Terrence Powers are social constructionists in their study of homosexuality in the Middle East. According to Edward Stein in his introduction to *Forms of Desire*, “one cannot be a social constructionist and still think that sexual orientation is innate...[while an essentialist] is committed to there being transcultural, law-like generalizations that can be made about the nature and origins of sexual orientation” (1992, 330). Essentialist theorists studying homosexuality look at medieval writings, such as those of 9<sup>th</sup> century Ahmad Bin Mohamad Bin Ali al-Yemeni, and draw parallels to modern sexual categorizations. Samar Habib quotes al-Yemeni’s discussion of a particular type of woman and adds her own commentary after. “[The] second kind is a woman who is masculine (*mutatthakeera*) in

appearance and this *becomes apparent in her from an early age*...She rejects being fucked...and competes with men over deflowering other women, and she equals the men in jealousy over, and protection of, women.’ Would it be unfair and anachronistic of me to refer to al-Yemeni’s second type of woman as *similar* to a butch, top lesbian...does it become implausible that homosexuality existed?” (2007, 26). Further, al-Yemeni’s emphasis that these characteristics appeared at an early age suggests that her sexual preferences expressed some innate quality, rather than the result of years of cultural conditioning. In popular Western debates about how homosexuality develops, the innate quality is referred to as the product of “nature,” whereas cultural conditioning represents “nurture.”

For the sake of historical continuity, it is useful to therefore draw similarities between the past and present categories, recognizing that though this identity may have developed and changed over time, the most fundamental remains constant across time. “What is essential in homosexuality, as it is viewed in this study, is the role of sexual desire, even though many forms of homosexual activity are not expressions of homosexual desire but heterosexual desire or even a largely un-sexual desire to overpower or control or the desire to please or appease (outside the context of the sexual), or to gain social advancement” (Habib 2007, 34). Essentialist scientists studying homosexuality investigate the human and animal world to identify biological reasons for same-sex attraction, unfortunately often focusing on physiological similarities between homosexuals and the other sex. This becomes problematic in countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran today, when homosexuals are sometimes forced to undergo sex-change operations to “cure” them. The involuntary procedure is but a means for the gender roles dictated by society and religion to continue unchallenged (Zeidan 2010, 67-71).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the scientific and sociological study of sexual practices and reproduction rates became important in the context of estimating foreign nations' ability to wage wars (Gagnon 2006). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, U.S. intra-national studies began to discuss sexual practices in a morally neutral way, and atypical or non-heterosexual practices became "unconventional" or "non-conforming" rather than "sick" or "perverse" (41). During the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1990s, questionnaires and intra-national phone polls filled the quantitative gap on modes of virus transmission and the most vulnerable demographic groups to better focus public health outreach (46-50). Also in the 1990s, international bodies like the World Health Organization sponsored international studies of sexual practices and AIDS. In these reports, men who have sex with men (MSM) are specifically studied as an at-risk population (MARP), opening a discussion on homosexuality in the region in the more acceptable context of public health. However, the work done on HIV/AIDS worldwide lacks "a deeper understanding of multiple ways in which sex plays a role in everyday life in specific cultures..."(51). Therefore, human rights organizations focusing on GLBT issues use the same definitions and discourse developed alongside the U.S. gay liberation movement in their reports about human rights violations perpetrated against non-heterosexual individuals.

Amnesty International, for example, argues that "all people, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, should have access to all human rights described in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and Special Rapporteur Paul Hunt says that "...sexuality is a characteristic of all human beings. It is a fundamental aspect of an individual's identity. It helps to define who a person is" (2004). This is the Stonewall narrative, a model that requires "coming out," or revealing to others one's sexual preference for the same sex, as a sign of full self-acceptance and as a political act (El Menyawi 2006, 36-37). Amnesty International recognizes,



however, that individuals are rarely prosecuted by states for simply identifying as homosexual or transgender, but rather for acts, such as engaging in homosexual sex or dressing like the other gender. Social constructionists would say these non-conforming acts do not make up a fundamental part of an individual's identity and do not require the actor to identify as homosexual.

In general, social constructionist Joseph Massad argues that Western categories create an sexual identity that traps within its bounds "self-hating" individuals who resist categorization, making them more vulnerable to state repression in their new visibility. This repression only provides a pretext for the intervention of Western forces on the basis of human rights, or to serve as the "saviors" of the homosexual "victims" against the "savage" Arab regimes in a new formulation of the white man's burden (Mutua 2001; Massad 2007, 38-39). He then details examples the changing views of homosexuality in the Arab world throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century by examining the literary commentary on the 8<sup>th</sup> century poet Abu Nawas. His study challenges essentialist authors that see Arab and Islamic views on homosexuality as unchanging and cautions Western anthropologists against imposing their own experiences on individuals in other cultures.

Influenced by Victorianism and the social Darwinism of *The Origin of Species*, discussions of the homoeroticism in Abu Nawas' poetry were colored by the attempt to diagnose a cultural reason for Arab decadence and decline (Massad 2007; 15, 20). Commentators like Taha Husayn and Adonis admired his poetic style but cautioned against any audience beyond literary scholars reading it, as the general public would be easily corrupted (Massad 2007; 65, 71, 95-98). Others like 'Abd<sup>2</sup> al-Rahman Sidqi in 1944 instead denied the poet's homosexuality and

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<sup>2</sup> 'A denotes the ع letter in Arabic

claimed either that his debauchery was metaphoric or meant to refer to his womanizing (Massad 2007; 82, 84). ‘Abbas Mustafa ‘Ammar blamed Abu Nawas’ supposed Persian ancestry for his homosexuality whereas other intellectuals pointed to the influence of the Ottoman Empire, denying that Arab culture could have produced such decadent behavior (Massad 2007; 77, 51). Authors like Taha Husayn saw Abu Nawas’ homosexuality as a symptom of the Abbasid Empire’s decadence and decline, while others saw it as a sign that the empire was at its zenith and would soon fall (Massad 2007, 72-86). Echoing Sigmund Freud, ‘Abd al-Rahman Sidqi modified his previous denial of Abu Nawas’ homosexuality and explained that his deviance stemmed from his mother’s excessive love that was tempered after she remarried and traumatized young Abu Nawas (84). Each reason was a means to calm the fears of those who saw in Abu Nawas a symbol of an immoral Arab civilization continuing to decline.

Contemporary Arab discourse repeats many of the same themes regarding homosexuality seen in Massad’s 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature review. In the tradition of ascribing homosexuality to foreign influences, gays today are sometimes accused of collusion with Israel, even of serving as their spies, an argument further developed on page 12 (Whitaker 2006, 37). In response to these accusations, various self-described GLBT organizations in the Middle East, like Helem, speak out against Israeli “pink-washing,” or using its tolerance of homosexuality as a cover for human rights abuses against the Palestinians. In literature, the corrupting influence of foreign powers besides Israel is evoked by using the male-male sex act as a metaphor for the Western exploitation of Arabs (Whitaker 2006, 69-70).

In depicting the Arab as the “bottom” in the homosexual encounter and the Westerner as the “top,” authors refuse to recognize a loving male homosexual relationship without exploitative power dynamics. Other popular literary representations of exploitative same-sex encounters

conflate homosexuality and pederasty, exemplified by character of Hatim in Alaa Alwani's popular book, *The Yacoubian Building*. Hatim was the subject of pederasty as a child and grew to be an overbearing adult who used his money to control his reluctant male lover. Finally, a homosexual man is shown to be demasculinized by a lack of power in his Freudian love/hate relationship with his overbearing mother, as depicted in the film *Malatili Bath* (Whitaker 2006; 54, 104-105).

Like Taha Husayn and Sidqi who admired Abu Nawas' artistry while denying the legitimacy of his homoerotic subject matter, when gender-bending is presented in literature or comedy, it is excused as an unthreatening metaphor (Whitaker 2006, 102). When gender-bending or homosexuality appears in everyday life, however, tolerance is replaced by condemnation. Mainstream Islamic scholars see homosexuality as repugnant to God as shown in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and as a dangerous challenge to family unity and respectability (Whitaker 2006, 26). The story in the Quran is mentioned in 14 of the 112 chapters, including 11, 15, 54, when Lot protects his guests from the assault of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah. He asks the attacking townspeople whether they will "commit abomination (*al-faahisha*) knowingly? Must ye needs lust (*shahwatan*) after men instead of women?" Allah then destroyed Sodom Gomorrah, sparing Lot and his family due to their hospitality and protection of their guests (183-193). In addition, Islam prescribes specific duties for men and women in society and within a marriage, which is challenged by same-sex unions. For example, in examining news stories about a 2004 "gay wedding" in Medina, Brian Whitaker shows that the state perceived danger in the "wedding's" challenge to gender norms, where participants "behaved like women" (61, 124-125).

Authors like Samar Habib reservedly agree with Massad's basic argument about a limiting Western sexual identity that ultimately forces individuals to choose between a stigmatized homosexual lifestyle and a heterosexual one. However, the theory does little to theorize an alternate solution for studying identity once the entire system of thought on homosexuality is completely abandoned. For example, "in this sense, Massad's argument, while correct, leaves LGBTIQ communities in a straight-jacket with two bad choices: mobilize around sexual freedoms and be seen as an agent of the Gay International, or don't mobilize and be seen as part of the community, but suppress a movement that has to emerge alongside other movements for justice" (Abdulahdi 2009, 481). Perhaps Massad is correct in his claims that Western human rights associations have only convinced middle- and upper-class Arabs to adopt its categories and have then used these individuals as native informants to support their pre-conceived generalizations (2007, 39). Does this mean academics must completely discount the informants' perception of reality? Is it better to dismiss human rights abuses perpetrated by the state against "homosexuals" as either fabricated or as serving only to further demonize individuals already guilty of some other crime?

Nicola Pratt finds that the answer lies somewhere between these two poles in her discussion of feminist international relations theory surrounding the 2001 Queen Boat case in Cairo. Undercover Egyptian police arrested 60 alleged male homosexuals dancing on the Queen Boat riverboat and sentenced 52 of these men in military courts amid an international uproar over alleged police misconduct.<sup>3</sup> Though Whitaker and others see this crackdown as a ploy to distract the public from state shortcomings during an economic downturn, Pratt sees the state acting subconsciously to a perceived attack against state stability, which is personified by those who flout gender and religious norms (2007, 50). "The discourses and practices of national

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<sup>3</sup> See page 15

security are rooted in (gendered) assumptions of ‘masculinized dignity and feminized sacrifice...’” and the economic downturn had challenged the male’s role as provider for his family (130, 135). These insecurities only grew worse when international uproar threatened Egyptian sovereignty, which reacted by blaming the men’s activities on Jewish and Western influence (141, 13-139). This sentiment is expressed by Mohammed al-Gamaia, formerly the Egyptian Al-Azhar University’s representative to the US: “everywhere the Jews are spreading corruption, heresy, homosexuality, alcoholism and drugs. That is how they hope to take over the world” (Routledge 2005).

When gender norms are so intertwined with state conceptions of security, perhaps the Middle East at large is not yet ready for a whole scale challenge to sexual norms *a la* contemporary queer theory. As Max Kramer shows in his conversations with 40- to 60-year-old men cruising online chatrooms for gay sex, language referring to the “penetrator” and the “penetrated” or “top” and “bottom” are gendered into the feminine and masculine with the terms “husband” and “wife” respectively. In another example of linguistic reinforcement of sexual and gender norms, most Arabic words for homosexuality imply perversion or deviance, rather than the neutrality that the Western expression “homosexual” conveys. In response, GLBT organizations in the Middle East have struggled to invent more neutral language for use in their publications and encourage its use in mainstream discourse. Massad reminds us, however, that any broad-based societal conclusions based on linguistic devices must be done carefully when he chastises Arno Schmitt for his claim that the “nonexistence” of an Arabic word to express reciprocal gay sex implies the “nonexistence” of homosexuality in Arab culture. (Massad 2007, 170). The attempts of these organizations to shape contemporary discourse on homosexuality both through language and provision of information is further discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

## **Chapter 2: Obstacles and Opportunities to GLBT Organizing**

Few Westerners would be surprised to learn that there are multiple obstacles standing in the way of GLBT collective organizing in the Middle East. Indeed, public acceptance rates are low and religious and state institutions combine to create laws hostile to the adoption of a homosexual identity or the practice of same-sex acts. On the personal level, cultural conceptions of femininity and masculinity as well as family pressures also make any departure from the sexual norms problematic. On the other hand, Middle Eastern society also provides opportunities for same-sex practice or general collective organizing. Building on these and on the work of prior, more covert GLBT organizations, groups in the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, and Morocco have overcome the obstacles to form officially recognized NGOs, independent publications, and a community of virtual activists with new social media tools.

Muslim-majority countries are the least accepting region of homosexuality in comparison to countries with a majority of any other religious group, according to a recent study by Tilo Beckers. The Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Surveys in 2002 and 2007 only confirmed these findings. The survey asked respondents in 44 nations whether they thought homosexuality should be accepted by society. In both years, there was sometimes a gap of several percentage points between rejection and acceptance rates, perhaps accounting for toleration or conditional acceptance. In 2002, yellow indicates rejection and blue indicates acceptance, whereas in 2007, the colors are reversed.

2002 Pew Findings (19)

2007 Pew Findings (35)



A 2007 Gallup Poll measuring citizen's perceived acceptance for homosexuals in their countries showed roughly the same results in the Middle Eastern countries. Respondents were asked whether they thought their country would be a good place or bad place for homosexuals to live. The below table shows the findings.

	Good place %	Bad place %	Don't Know %	Refused Response
Palestine	7	79	10	3
Lebanon	25	64	10	1
Israel	27	56	15	2

Though the Tilo Beckers study also shows little difference in acceptance of homosexuality in Muslim-majority countries when populations were broken down into categories describing age, education, secular values, support for gender egalitarianism, or gender, he does find that those supportive of democratic values were the most likely to accept homosexuality. Though it is tempting to disregard the importance of religion in determining public opinion on homosexuality, the Pew Global Attitudes surveys also found that the majority in Arab countries did not support excluding religion from public policy, with the exception of Lebanon (2009, 37). Although it would be worthwhile to examine the influence of religious institutions on state policy, a detailed theological study of the legitimacy of traditional religious

doctrine that opposes homosexuality falls outside of the scope of this study, especially given the complications presented by a multi-confessional state like Lebanon.

Officially, Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco and Syria all have anti-sodomy laws on the books, arguably thanks to the legal influence of French and British colonizers (Sofer 1992). Ironically Egypt, the site of the most recent high-profile crackdowns against gay males, is the only country in my study without specific anti-sodomy laws. Instead, it has laws addressing habitual debauchery and prostitution which Egyptian legal jurisprudence treats as synonymous with same-sex acts even without any financial transaction (“In A Time of Torture” 2004). When that fails, the country resorts to conflating homosexuality with other crimes, like the insulting of heavenly religions, to both demonize the accused in the eyes of the public and allow for trials in the security courts that provide little opportunity for repeal.

Indeed, homophobia has taken a sinister forms in Egypt with the habitual police brutality against alleged homosexuals, but the intervention of Western governments and NGOs only gives the state more avenues to demonize homosexuality. In 2001, the 60 men arrested on or just before a raid on a gay disco on the Queen boat were tortured with beatings and involuntary anal examinations. In response, the Democrats in the U.S. Congress sent a letter to Congress demanding that the US withhold support for a free trade agreement with Egypt, the French president voiced his concern, and the European Parliament condemned the tortures. Thereafter, the state was even more vigilant against threats to its sovereignty and the Egyptian media framed homosexuality as a Western import (El Menyawi 2006, 41).

Several other countries, such as Lebanon, use the same tactics. In 2005, the Lebanese police raided two clubs primarily frequented by gay men, Acid and X-OM, arresting and detaining six men for three days. Police claimed the raids were in response to allegations of drug



use, underage drinking, and Satanism, and that twelve other nightclubs were raided on the same night as Acid. This was originally the stance of a seemingly unconcerned Lebanese GLBT organization, Helem, but later criticism by a local blogger prompted the organization to paint the raids as possibly homophobic (Chahine 2008, 33).

In other instances, GLBT organizers are able to take advantage of general state policies that institutionalize the creation of civil society or privacy rights. For example, in Lebanon, any NGO may form after applying with the Minister of the Interior. If, within 60 days of application the NGO is not rejected for reasons of incomplete documentation or violation of national security, state sovereignty, or public morality, the NGO is considered legal. The ministry can withhold an official registration receipt, however, impeding several of the organization's activities, like opening a group bank account.

In Saudi Arabia, the right to privacy is similarly institutionalized in spite of its anti-sodomy laws. The Basic Law in Saudi Arabia says "the home is sacrosanct and shall not be entered without the permission of the owner or be searched except in cases specified by statutes," leaving room for gay house parties and the private consumption of alcohol (Whitaker 2006, 58). Therefore, El Menyawi suggests that GLBT groups in Egypt focus its energies on fighting for further privacy rights as well as secularism, in conjunction with other human rights organizations and political parties (47-49). This will prove a particularly apt hypothesis in my study of organizations Aswat, Al-Qaws, Kif Kif, and Helem in Chapters 3 and 4.

Compulsory sex-segregation in Saudi Arabia has been theorized to provide another venue for same-sex experimentation (Labi 2007). This practice has been institutionalized by laws prohibiting gender mixing in the workplace, sex-segregated state education, and signs proclaiming "for women only" in certain public spaces (Le Renard 2008). Though heterosexual

dating in public is nearly impossible, it is perfectly acceptable for two men or two women to socialize. This practice has inspired novels and a controversial article in a Jeddah-based newspaper about schoolgirls having sex in bathroom stalls (Labi 2007, 74).

Beyond print media like books and expository pieces in popular magazines, the recent growth of the internet has provided a safe space for GLBT socializing and organizing in the region. Internationally-based gay social websites like Gaydar<sup>4</sup> provide Middle Eastern GLBTs with greater anonymity, where nicknames are common and photographs optional. It also provides them with a forum to better understand their own sexual orientation in terms of global definitions and locals to meet with. According to Pascal Chahine, the internet is the second most common means by which Beirut men met their last sexual partner (2008; 46 & Labi 2007, 76). In addition, personal and organizational blogs abound from a simple Google search. These new social media tools have partially replaced the mass email lists and Microsoft Internet Relay Chat (MiRC) chatrooms of the 1990s and further enrich the official contributions from NGOs focusing on advocacy.

Like Latin American lesbians and transgendered individuals in the US, GLBT groups in the Middle East rely on the Internet both as a low-cost tool to disseminate information quickly and as a space for the formation of a group identity (Cooper and Dzara 2010, 109). Internet activism has several phases, from support, to education, to political organizing and activism (Shapiro 2004). One benefit of Internet organizing is that it provides anonymity when public appearance is dangerous (Shapiro 2004, 166). Whereas in the past a movement's success was measured by the number of protests, their size, and the attention received, the success of Internet activism can be more difficult to gauge (Shapiro 2004, 174). On the other hand, this anonymity can create problems within the virtual community. Latin American participants on lesbian

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<sup>4</sup> <http://gaydar.co.uk/>

listservs often expressed their discomfort with those that read the listservs but never commented or showed their “faces” (Friedman 2007, 805). The “personals” site Gaydar also relies on measures of visibility for legitimacy. At least among Western users, a picture of the user’s face “demonstrates the user’s investment in and identification with a queer identity” and some users will not continue an interaction until a face-picture is shared (Mowlabocus 2010, 205-206). When “coming out” as a homosexual in the West was once about material signs like a particular manner of dress, appearance at a “gay” bar, or posting a face picture on Gaydar today, how do Middle Eastern gays enter a community when they are afraid of the visibility that comes with it (Mowlabocus 2010, 202-204)?

This is where Facebook’s tools can best be exploited. By joining certain groups, friending gay individuals, tagging pictures and adjusting privacy settings, the individual user can manage and negotiate their identity. Therefore, “coming out” becomes a process when bits of information are revealed to different people at different times (Cooper and Dzara 2010, 104). Much like American GLBT organizations, Facebook pages for Middle Eastern GLBT organizations publicize events, frame causes, and monitor media coverage of GLBT issues (Cooper and Dzara 2010, 108). “These forms of activism have included the development of online letter writing campaigns, distribution of activist materials to local level activists, and online protests and boycotts of organizations, companies, and service providers (Shapiro 2004, 173).” These spaces in general allow for a sexual identity to be tested and accepted, showing the user that they are not alone (Cooper and Dzara 2010, 106).

The origins of most of these more formal GLBT organizations in the Middle East can be traced back to internet activity in the 1990s, before Facebook or other social media platforms. Members of internet listservs, chatrooms, and other digital forums began meeting in private

homes or organizing informal meetups in designated bars and clubs. Building upon these meetings, prior organizations like the semi-formal Lebanese Club Free, the Palestinian division of the Israeli Jerusalem Open House<sup>5</sup>, and the widely-distributed Huriyah magazine, several formal organizations and magazines have formed in the Arabic-speaking Middle East in the last decade. In the Palestinian territories, these include the small women's LBT group, Aswat, and the larger multi-city Al-Qaws that originated with Jerusalem Open House. In Lebanon, Helem grew out of Club Free and now produces its own publications, *Barra* and *Bekhsoos*.<sup>6</sup> It has also inspired a newer associated group, Meem, that focuses exclusively on LBT women. In Jordan, *My.Kali* magazine<sup>7</sup> is published covertly, and a recent Facebook group has begun brainstorming for a GLBT youth group in the country.<sup>8</sup> In Syria, there is a website for a Syrian Same Sex Society<sup>9</sup>, but little information exists on the organization. Finally, there is the *Mithly* magazine<sup>10</sup> in Morocco and a GLBT movement called Kif Kif<sup>11</sup>, though its website suggests its headquarters have moved to Spain.

### **Chapter 3: Common Strategies Used by GLBT Organizations in the Middle East**

Aswat,<sup>12</sup> or "Voices" in Arabic, is a small Palestinian organization consisting of self-described LBTQI women in the Israel and the Occupied Territories. The current website cites 50-70 members on its online forum and 20 members who regularly come to meetings. Most members choose not to disclose their real names, so activist Rauda Marcos is their main spokeswoman. In 2002 or 2003, a Yahoo group was created for Palestinian gay women, a group

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.joh.org.il/index.php/english>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://mykali.weebly.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/LGBT-JORDANIAN-YOUTH-SUPPORT/103561849689156>

<sup>9</sup> <http://ssss-net.com/home.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.mithly.net/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.kifkifgroup.org/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.aswatgroup.org/>

which was later called Aswat when their website was established in 2006. The group is now headquartered in Haifa, Israel. Aswat intends to “provide a safe and stimulating environment for Palestinian LBTQI women and promote female leadership that works to allow LBTQI inclusion in our society through education, outreach, networking and advocacy. Through our programs and activism, we aim to foster a Palestinian community that is respectful and inclusive sexual diversity.” The group made the news when a planned 2007 conference in Haifa drew the ire of the Islamic movement, which published a condemnation and called it “a badge of shame” (Haaretz, “Drag against the occupation”).

Al-Qaws<sup>13</sup>, or “Rainbow” in Arabic, began as in 2000 as the Palestinian branch of the Israel GLBT organization, Jerusalem Open House. In 2006, it became an independent entity with NGO status in East Jerusalem. In a 2009 Haaretz article, the group numbered 600 members, which it claimed cut across religion, age and class (“Stop using Palestinian Gays to whitewash Israel’s image”). 30 members make up Al-Qaws’ senior membership and the organization has one paid staff member, Haneen Maikey. Al-Qaws stated goals are broad and are barely achievable within one lifetime. Thus, the organization intends “to live and work towards the realization of our dream of a non-hierarchical society that recognizes and respects the diversity of sexual and gender identity and expression; and to implement these values in the daily aspects of our work and in our organization” and “to contribute to the development of an alternative sexual and gender identity model that is inspired by Arab and Palestinian cultures, values, and history and that does not blindly conform to the Western model.”

These two organizations have attempted to build a GLBT community both virtually and face-to-face. Each maintains a physical office and holds meetings and bimonthly queer dance parties featuring drag shows and other artistic performances. For those who are isolated by

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.alqaws.org/q/>

travel restrictions in other parts of Palestine, the groups jointly provide a helpline every Wednesday from 5 to 10 pm. Staffed by professionally trained volunteers, the hotline provides a safe space for a sympathetic ear, initial counseling, and references to various services. Al-Qaws began their ad hoc hotline in 2002 and Aswat began theirs in 2007, but the uptick in calls led them to combine their hotlines in 2009 with the goal of eventually staffing it 24/7. Other services include Aswat's crisis fund benefiting women who are unexpectedly thrown out of their homes and Al-Qaws' extensive information in Arabic on the Internet addressing general questions about AIDS and safe sex practices and listing locations for rapid testing.

Both groups touch on the intersectionality of human rights issues. In the book, *Bareed Mistajil* published by Lebanese lesbian group Meem, an anonymous author relates that her activist friends find the fight for LGBT rights trivial when the country is plagued by violence and war. She finally realizes that she too is affected by human rights violations that are only worsened by her sexual minority status and vows to stop apologizing for her advocacy. Similarly, three other authors in the Lebanese compilation relate stories of rape when they were targeted both as women and as gay women. The Aswat group, therefore, refers to themselves as triple minorities: as LBT, as female, and as Palestinians. Perhaps this is why each group has chosen to also ally itself with other social and political causes espoused by local human rights associations.

Al-Qaws claims current relationships with Adallah, Al-Haq, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Frontline, and Helem Paris and it hopes to expand its network to include local human rights, professional, social justice, and feminist organizations as well as welfare departments and clinics. Aswat mentions that in 2005, the breadth of its organizational outreach benefited from inclusion in workshops held by the Israel Family Planning Association,

the Ministry of Education, and Al-Siwar: Arab Feminist Movement in Support of Victims of Sexual Violence. In 2004, it participated in various international conferences like the Feminist Conference in Tel Aviv, the Women in Conflict Zone Conference, and the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Youth and Student Organisation (IGLYO) conference in Spain.

In addition, both Aswat and Al-Qaws participate in a group of Arab queer organizations that speak out against Israeli “pink-washing” and call for boycotts, divestments, and sanctions (BDS). “Pink-washing” is the term used by supporters of Palestine to describe Israel’s campaign promoting its acceptance of homosexuality while hiding its human rights violations in the Palestinian Territories. To lobby for this issue, both groups sent delegates on a US tour in 2011 to speak about the condition of LGBT Palestinians and to denounce Israeli “pink-washing.” President Haneen Maikey says “it’s really pathetic that the Israeli state has nothing besides gay rights to promote their liberal image...Ridiculous, and in a sense hilarious, because there are no gay rights in Israel. There are specific court cases that, when won, allowed certain individuals for instance to adopt a child. What is worth noting is that these decisions are case-specific...” (Berthelsen 2009). Haneen has received some criticism from U.S.-based queer Muslim organization Al-Fatiha and commentators on the website pointing out that her criticism is too harsh, given that her organization is based in Israeli territory and that her article is freely published in an Israeli newspaper. However, her article is also posted on various websites calling for an end to Israeli “apartheid” and acknowledgment of human rights abuses.

Although the Internet can allow for more voices like Maikey’s to be published than traditional media, it does not overcome all barriers. Access to the Internet is still limited by race, class, gender, geographical, and linguistic markers even when Internet cafés can mediate the

differences (Friedman 2007, 791). These Internet divisions, along with the decline of gay neighborhoods and local gay newspapers in the US, may lead to less local accountability as some constituencies struggle to be heard (Usher and Morrison 2010). On the ground, both Aswat and Al-Qaws expand their outreach beyond the urban centers where they are based. Aswat rotates its monthly meetings between Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and Al-Qaws has four semi-autonomous groups in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa and West Bank that meet independently once or twice a month. These smaller groups are meant to better respond to local concerns, as well as prepare more individuals for leadership positions in the Palestinian queer movement.

On the other hand, both groups accept funding from Western organizations, which may limit their accountability to local issues and projects. Though Aswat limited itself to local support in its early years by establishing partnerships with feminist organizations Kayan and Shatil, it now also partners with the foreign Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, the Global Fund for Women, the Open Society Institute, and the Urgent Action Fund. This last U.S.-based organization funded an Aswat-Helem conference in 2006. Al-Qaws was supported by the Ford Foundation in Israel in its first year and now relies on the Arcus Foundation, the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, the New Israel Fund and Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders (EMHRF). Therefore, little of either organization's website is written in the Arabic language, and Moroccan Kif Kif reaches out to a Spanish audience with more Spanish-language materials than even French. Al-Qaws claims that its goal is "to develop a model of alternate sexuality and gender that is not necessarily Western," a difficult goal to achieve when language inaccessibility precludes a large section of the native population from participating in the debate.



Al-Qaws' website does concede, however, that "today more than ever, a growing number of Palestinians claim their sexual orientation and gender identity and identify themselves as LGBTQ persons," but it still carries out some projects to encourage a reconsideration of domestic views of identity and homosexuality specifically. Its goal is not necessarily a unilateral education program, but a discussion between it and the Palestinian community. To this end, it published a brochure called "The Game" to prepare society at large for a discussion on sexuality and gender with hypothetical questions like "Who am I," "How many identities do I have," "Where is my home," and "What is body?" Aswat also claims to have published articles in Arabic on the history of sexuality in the Arab world, lesbianism and health, world pride, homosexuality & lesbianism, sexual identity, "Home and Exile in the Queer Experience," and their participation in the International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) conference. As none of these publications are available on the current website, it is unclear whether these were ever completed. Both Al-Qaws and Aswat have held several lectures and conferences on sexuality and gender diversity and passed out such constructionist critique of sexuality as Joseph Massad's "Re-Orienting Desire-The Gay International and the Arab World" as well as "Compulsory Heterosexuality" by Adrienne Rich. These workshops have served to educate social workers, educational consultants, psychologists, teachers, and university students.

In a more indirect way, many of the GLBT organizations in the Middle East have also attempted to change public perception by promoting more positive language to refer to homosexuality. On the Arabic portion of Al-Qaws' website and earlier versions of Aswat's website, the organizations define new terms developed by US-based Bint el Nas, or "Daughter of the People" in Arabic. Popular derogatory terms like "shaz," or pervert, and "luti," or an individual who acts as Lot's tribe did in the Quranic story of Sodom and Gomorrah, are replaced

with terms like “mithly al-jins” and “mughiyer al jins.” These last words more neutrally refer to homosexuals and transgenders respectively and are promoted in campaigns to change Google’s negative Arabic translation of “homosexual”<sup>14</sup> and in domestic media references. One success story lies in the change from the use of the word “pervert” to the more neutral term on the Hezbollah-owned television station, Al-Manar (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 18-19).

Organizations besides Aswat and Al-Qaws rely more on the discourse of international norms enshrined in UN instruments rather than attempting to recreate a local discourse on homosexuality. Kif Kif was established in 2004 in Morocco, and though it is not officially recognized by the Department of the Interior, it is permitted to participate in educational seminars. The group has since established a chapter in Spain, resulting in a website with far more material in Western languages than in Arabic. The website asserts that Morocco, as a signatory to the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, violates the right to privacy with Article 489 of the Moroccan penal code. Article 489 punishes lewd acts against nature with persons of the same sex with jail sentences and fines (Sofer 1992). In one of the organization’s few pages in Arabic, it briefly explains the human rights guarantees found in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. It also cites Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports on the condition of gays in Egypt and in another article and calls on Spanish citizens to demand a democratic Morocco with a democratic constitution. The organization’s current location in Spain makes the citations of international precedents more palatable than it would have in Morocco, which often writes reservations into human rights treaties.

The patterns seen in Kif Kif, Aswat, and Al-Qaws are repeated in the following case study of Helem in Lebanon. Specifically, attempts are made to control public discourse through media promotion and language reform and anti-sodomy laws are framed as violating

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<sup>14</sup> <http://gaymiddleeast.blogspot.com/2006/07/open-letter-to-google.html>

international human rights treaties. In addition, an attempt is tie into popular anti-Israeli sentiment. Finally, organizers reach out to other NGOs and build coalitions based on privacy rights, gender equality, and sexual education as a means to broaden their outreach efforts.

#### **Chapter 4: Helem: A Case Study**

*Helem is an organization founded by a tiny minority of individuals who want to assimilate into the Western gay movement. They are often provided by Gay Internationalists as a local example of gayness. Aside from the influence and active participation of non-Lebanese in the founding of the organization, Helem represents only its own members and can only speak for them. According to Helem spokesman Sharbil Mayda', the organization only has 40 members, only 30 of whom identify as homosexual in a country of four million people, in a region of 300 million Arabs. It is hardly a major development as far as changes in sexual conceptions of identity. (Massad in "The West and the Orientalism..." 2009).*

Joseph Massad is technically correct in his statement regarding Helem's membership in the interview quoted above. Yet, as shown below, evaluating the reach of the organization's activities is more complex than simply citing membership statistics. Helem broadened its efforts and now focuses on other human rights causes more firmly established in the Lebanese NGO sphere, such as HIV/ AIDS prevention, solidarity against the Israeli promotion of its gay rights guarantees, and the reform of the penal code in favor of further personal privacy. On the other hand, much of the organization's funding still comes from foreign sources and its website has historically provided more English-language materials than Arabic. In addition, its periodic promotion of a GLBT visibility model and its socioeconomic homogeneous leadership has

alienated members of Lebanon's gay scene. Helem<sup>15</sup> is, however, the most vocal of the Middle Eastern GLBT organizations in this study, and the fruits of its self-promotion can be seen in local and foreign media alike. As the organization continues, it must learn from its successes and learn how to better manage accusations that it is too externally oriented in order to make an impact on Lebanese human rights, and more particularly GLBT rights.

In 1998, a group of friends formed a group called Club Free that met regularly in homes around Beirut. Members' concerns about being found out by family members and employers demanded the group maintain a measure of secrecy. To that end, admittance was limited to those who knew two current members. The group formed in the context of the increasingly destructive underground gay nightlife of 1990s Beirut, often characterized by drug use, depression, and reporting one's personal enemies so that they would be arrested by the vice police. The pressure of living a straight life during the day and the gay life at night had taken a psychological toll on many in the community, most of whom were middle- to upper-class with the means for the expensive internet connection required to find out about private gay parties and club nights. Some used the internet chat rooms found on Microsoft Internet Relay Chat (mIRC) to find others like them, creating an online clique that often banned suspicious chatters (Bareed Mistajil 2009, 106-111& 122-128). The location of popular cruising areas also indicates the privileged socio-economic status of much of Beirut's gay community, which could afford to frequent a Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks in the center of downtown (Chahine 2008, 75).

By 2000, Club Free counted 300 members, and the group decided to apply to the Ministry of Information for official recognition as NGO Helem in 2004 (The International HIV/AIDS Alliance 2005, 43). The Lebanese procedure for NGO registration allows for automatic legalization if the Ministry does not explicitly reject the application within 60 days. Yet, by

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.helem.net>

withholding official registration documentation, the government defends itself from the societal criticism that would result from direct approval. Therefore, though Helem is considered *de facto* legal, it has been denied the official NGO registration number that would allow it to open an organizational bank account and make its employees eligible for National Social Security coverage (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 15-16). The new visibility that came with formal NGO status drove away much of Club Free’s membership and Helem claimed roughly 150 active members in 2005 (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 5). Membership decreased drastically to 40 active members and 1000 additional supporters by 2006. According to the National Coordinator of Helem in 2008, membership shrank as many left the country during the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, feared possible police arrest after the 2005 police raids of nightclubs Acid and X-OM, or were influenced by the negative local press coverage (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 16).

In October 2005, a member of the Municipality of Beirut, Saad-Eddine Wazzan, submitted a complaint against Helem in the local press, saying that the local community of West Beirut Sunnis was upset with the promotion of homosexuality (Chahine 2008, 28). Rumors that Helem received 4 million dollars a month from George Bush also circulated (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 16). Though Helem issued a rebuttal in *The Daily Star*, police investigated the group. The general attorney found no evidence to support Wazzan’s claims and closed the case. However, after the 2005 celebrations associated with the International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) and the 2006 raid on “gay” nightclub Acid, the police investigated the group again, allegedly by undercover officers who attended Helem’s meetings (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 36). Saad-Eddine repeated his call to the Lebanese Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior to shut down Helem in an article posted on May 29, 2006 on Al-Arabiya.net, which had also published a

headline “Perverts Announce their Activities and Screen Sex Films in a Beirut Hotel,” referencing Helem’s IDAHO 2006 activities, just a few days earlier. The news website refused Helem’s request to remove either article (“Al-Arabiya.net Smear Campaign...” 2006).

Religious authorities had also recently been very vocal in their opposition to homosexuality. In April of 2006, Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq, a regional Shi’a religious authority, issued a religious ruling (fatwa) on his website prescribing a gruesome death for homosexuals. The cleric since removed the fatwa from his website, thanks to the efforts of the UK-based Iraqi LGBT, but he has never formally revoked the ruling (“Sistani removes ‘death to gays’ fatwa...” 2006). In August of 2003, another Shi’a cleric, Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadallah, stated that the death penalty in Islam should be reserved for only three crimes, including homosexuality. Christian religious forces have also affected Helem’s acceptance in Lebanon. For example, a documentary on a Lebanese Christian television station in 2003 set off a witchhunt against Satanism, resulting in the police raid and subsequent arrest of 10 individuals at Acid, a nightclub frequented by the gay community (“Interpretation of Homosexuality...” and “Law Enforcement Practices” 2006).

In November of 2005, vice squads in the Internal Security Force again raided Acid and X-OM nightclubs. In this case, other clubs that did not cater to a gay clientele were also raided on allegations of underage drinking and drug use, but at least 7 gay men were arrested and briefly incarcerated, though not charged. Helem released a brief news story to international organization Gay and Lesbian Arabic Society (GLAS), but a local blogger soon criticized the organization for not providing more press coverage. In response, the group claimed their silence was due to the desires of the incarcerated men arrested for public indecency. A few days later, however, Helem provided a website update and explained that the men were likely detained

under the anti-sodomy law, Article 534, rather than for public indecency as stated earlier (Chahine 2008, 33-37).

In 2002, police in Tripoli arrested 37 gay men and imprisoned them for two and a half years on various charges. Helem quietly monitored and provided legal advice for the prisoners, but was reluctant to involve international human rights organizations which would mark Helem as “Western” (Chahine 2008, 28). In another case, either civilians or security forces violently assaulted two men in Sassine Square in Beirut for engaging in “homosexual conduct” in January 2009. A month later, Helem organized a demonstration of a few dozen against this attack and the subsequent detainment of the men attacked. (“Country Advice: Lebanon” 2010, 3-4)

In spite of this public backlash, visibility is necessary for Helem’s legal existence. Court cases in the early 2000s challenged the legal standing of several NGOs accused of being “secret societies,” but courts ruled that groups subject to open media coverage could not be deemed “secret societies.” The group therefore is careful to use media exposure and public activities to defend itself from similar allegations (Chahine 2008, 28). International news organizations like Reuters, the Associated Press (AP), and the United Nation's Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRTN) covered Helem extensively from 2005 to 2006. The New York Times, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and, the French daily newspaper, *Liberation* syndicated many of these articles, though few Lebanese papers syndicated Helem’s articles or disseminated further news about the organization’s activities to Lebanese society (Chahine 2008, 37-38).

Helem’s main goal is the abolishment of Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which criminalizes “unnatural sexual intercourse,” including “the act of Sodomy, or any sexual intercourse between two men, which includes penetration. The article, theoretically and legally, does not apply to sexual practices that do not include penetration, and it does not cover sexual

acts between two women.” (“No to the Article 534” 2009). On the other hand, the organization earlier claimed in its shadow report to the 2005 Convention Eliminating All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) that two lesbians were prosecuted under Article 534 in a 1992 case. Helem further claims that the combination of Article 534 and Articles 518-522 of the Lebanese penal code effectively conflates lesbian sexuality with fornication (“The Status of Women...” 2005). Though few cases in the past five years have been prosecuted under Article 534, Helem shows that the existence of the statute allows for police harassment, intimidation, and blackmail against all GLBT persons (“Shadow Report: Violence Against Women on the Bases of Sexual Orientation” 2008).

Helem argues that this article contradicts the preamble of the Lebanese constitution, which provides for the respect of individual liberty, equality before the law, and the respect of the privacy of the home. Interestingly, Helem also taps into an international human rights discourse in its English-language publications to explain the necessity for repeal. For example, in 2005 and 2008, it submitted shadow reports at CEDAW and at the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/ AIDS in 2006. To prove the illegality of the Lebanese anti-sodomy law, it also cites UN treaties signed by Lebanon, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on Torture, as well as the European Convention on Human Rights (“No to the Article 534” 2009). Article 534 specifically violates Universal Declaration of Human Rights articles 5, 7, 12, 19 and 20, which forbid torture and degrading treatment, discrimination, and interfering in private lives and residences in addition to providing for freedom of opinion, expression, information, and association (“Law Enforcement Practices” 2006). The official Lebanese delegation to CEDAW in 2008 agreed to look into



discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation under Article 534 in its parliamentary committee for the reform of the penal code, though this body had been virtually non-functional since 2004 (“CEDAW 2008” 2008).

Helem’s outreach and educational efforts have seen some success in the community, particularly among the police. Hobeich police station, responsible for the 2000 beating of arrested gay men, referred gay men arrested in 2007 to Helem for legal advice (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 36). The vice squad’s commander in Hobeich had even admitted publicly in “Femme” magazine that he had tracked suspected gays and put them under surveillance. In 2006, relations between Helem and the police had warmed enough that when Helem launched its sexual health booklet at a hotel event, the police were invited and attended (Whitaker “Beirut Breakthrough” 2008).

Unfortunately, the failure of many of Helem’s visibility campaigns tempers this success. Their trilingual quarterly magazine, *Barra*, touted as the first LGBTIQ<sup>16</sup> magazine in the Middle East, only published three issues in 2005 before it was disbanded. As of 2008, “over five thousand copies of *Barra* were downloaded from Helem’s website...[but] there have only been five hundred copies distributed in Beirut and its outlying suburbs; none have been distributed outside of greater Beirut.” Beginning in 2005, Helem used the slogan, “EXIST,” that encouraged “coming out’ a la the European model” throughout its website and on T-shirts, but the Lebanese gay community rejected this approach and Helem slowly withdrew the campaign (Chahine 2008, 42-43). The organization’s coordinator claims that Helem “does not ask people to disclose their sexuality or confess to a gender identity,” though their website still included a section of personal stories about coming out (Chahine 2008, 44). Since 2010, however, the phrase “EXIST” has returned to the masthead of Helem’s website. Therefore, the group tries to provide a space for the

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<sup>16</sup> An abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexed, and questioning.

level of personal visibility that best suits their member's lifestyles. On the other hand, as an organization, it has never strayed far from a strategy public visibility, both to attract an international audience and to defend itself from domestic accusations of being a "secret society."

Helem has found common cause with non-GLBT NGOs around several issues that indirectly affect homosexuals, like the right to privacy and freedom of expression. In one case in particular, the personal right to privacy intersected with the issue of homosexuality, as Hassan El Manyawi predicted. For example, when police harassed a local Internet Service Provider (ISP) to reveal information about a foreign-based website, gaylebanon.com, for allegedly broadcasting immoral videos, the Lebanese organization Multi-Initiative on Rights: Search Assist and Defend (MIRSAD) launched an awareness campaign in 2000. As a result, military courts tried MIRSAD's director as well as the manager of the ISP for "tarnishing the reputation" of the vice police. Both were found guilty, though the three month jail sentences were later reduced to fines. ("Lebanon: Internet, Gay Rights Targeted" 2000). In another case, Helem recorded the testimony of a young gay man subjected to familial violence for his sexuality in December 2002. This same testimony was later shown by another NGO, Hurriyat Khasa, or "Private Freedoms" in Arabic, at its May 2003 conference entitled "Human dignity in the penal code." Soon after, Hurriyat Khasa built a coalition of 15 Lebanese NGOs, including Helem, whose platform included calls for the annulment of article 534. The platform also proclaimed "a lack of scientific evidence for considering homosexual relations to be against nature" and it argued that Article 534 infringed on right to privacy ("Interpretation of Homosexuality in Lebanese Society" 2006).

In another example of coalition-building to appeal to wider public concerns, Helem has joined other GLBT organizations in the Middle East, like Palestinian Queers for BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) in speaking out against Israeli "pink-washing." Interestingly, the first

mention of the campaign did not appear on its website until 2006, coinciding with the July 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel. The first campaign appeared on Helem's website in June of 2006 and called for the boycott of the Jerusalem World Pride festival. The following article explains the rationale for this boycott: "Human rights are universal, indivisible, and interdependent, and the rights of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders should not be placed in competition with the long struggle of the Palestinian people, including Palestinian LGBT people, for self-determination, for the right to return to their homes, and the struggle against apartheid and the occupation of the their lands." Helem then went further than simply writing an article supporting its ideological position. During the 2006 war, Helem offered its office as a headquarters for other NGOs working to provide for refugees (Aljazeera.net "Lebanon sees rare unity" 2006).

Helem's website was silent once again on the issue of "pinkwashing" until 2009, when it published a call to action from Queers Against Israeli Apartheid and others asking the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association to cancel its planned conference in Tel Aviv. It pointed to a shooting at a Tel Aviv gay center and a "state official report suggesting that '80% of gay teens in Israel suffer some sort of sexual orientation-related abuse.'" The statement argued that the Israeli claim to being a democratic gay haven for Palestinians, who were previously victim of their own society's homophobia, was based on little substance ("Call for Action: Tell IGLTA..." 2009 & "Palestinian Queers for BDS" 2010). In 2010, Helem signed and published a similar denunciation of the participation of organization StandWithUs, a US-based pro-Israeli organization, in the US Social Forum. The rationale was similar to their prior statements.

While Stand With Us is quick to point out the oppression of queer Palestinians under the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, it conveniently forgets that those same queers are not immune to the bombs, blockades, apartheid and destruction wrought upon them daily by

the Israeli government, and that Israel's multi-tiered oppression hardly makes a distinction between straight and gay Palestinians.

We refuse to be instrumentalized by anyone, be it our own oppressive governments or the Zionist lobby hijacking our struggle to legitimize the state of Israel and its policies, thus providing even more fodder for our own governments to use against us ("Say No To Pinkwashing at the USSF!" 2010).

Another campaign in 2010 called for a queer film festival in Lisboa, Portugal to return its financial support from the Israeli embassy ("No association between Queer Lisboa..." 2010).

In attempt to replicate the popular acceptance of Helem's struggle for a broader human rights agenda, Helem began providing refugee relief to GLBT Iraqis living in Lebanon in 2008. In an article arguing that Helem does indeed represent concerns other than that of an economically homogeneous 40- member group, Helem coordinator Ghassan Makarem recalls that (six) members of Helem appeared in the International Day of Mobilization protest against the war on Iraq and was also part of the steering committee of the "No War-No Dictatorships" coalition in the lead-up to the US invasion ("We are not agents..." 2009).

In another highly successful campaign, Helem has expanded its activities to joining the Lebanese government and other local NGOS in HIV/AIDS outreach. The first recorded AIDS case in Lebanon was reported in 1984 and the government declared that HIV/AIDS constituted a public health threat in 1988. Soon after, the Lebanese Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization created the National AIDS Control Program (NAP) in 1989. According to NAP, there were 1056 confirmed Lebanese individuals living with HIV in 2007, though estimates of unconfirmed cases brought this figure to 3000. Helem has taken the same-sex practices out of the privacy of the home and raised them in the public conscience as a public health issue. In 2002, NAP began to recognize men who have sex with men (MSM) as a vulnerable population

and focused its outreach to target MSM (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 11).

To better connect with this vulnerable demographic, the International HIV/ AIDS Alliance funded a Helem project to gather further information about STI transmission in the MSM population in 2006. It found that 75% of MSM surveyed “knew about HIV modes of transmission and prevention, yet only one-third used condoms all the time during the previous month, and 21% never used condoms.” Outreach was difficult, however, and “45% of MSM refused to talk to outreach workers because of the fear of stigma and social and legal repercussions” (“UNGASS Shadow Report” 2006, 5). In other cases, resistance to outreach was even more aggressive and involved verbal abuse and the destruction of surveys (Chahine 2008). Helem attempted to distribute materials on safe sex practices and condoms in nightclubs and bars, but found that the loud atmosphere precluded effective conversations (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008).

Since then, Helem has partnered with four other AIDS-focused local NGOs, like Soins Infirmiers et Developpement Communautaire (SIDC), KAFA, the Lebanese Family Planning Association and SCORA, training them for LGBT sensitivity and encouraging them to refer cases to Helem (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 22-23). Between January and August 2008, 120 individuals of all sexual orientations voluntarily visited Helem headquarters for HIV testing (25). Materials for HIV testing were provided by the Lebanese Ministry of Health, but the group had only administered 400 tests by 2009 (“Talking To: Helem Coordinator...” 2009 & “The ‘dream’ of Helem” 2009). It is unclear whether free HIV tests are still administered onsite. For those that cannot physically reach Helem’s headquarters in Beirut, the group provides a helpline 24/7 to address sexual and mental health and preliminary legal assistance, which NGO Kafa trained Helem to operate. Helem has also occasionally reserved the chat room on popular gay

personals sites like Manjam and Gaydar to address safe sex questions from the Lebanese MSM population (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 34). In the wake of Helem’s 2006 MSM survey findings, the organization published an Arabic language booklet about safe sex practices and also provides this information on their website.

The largest challenge that Helem faces today is targeting the language and themes in its outreach to better target the local concerns, rather than serving only to report on project results for international funders. Helem’s dependence on foreign funding indeed puts it at risk for elite co-option as suggested by resource mobilization theory (Jenkins & Eckert 1986, Haines 1984, Brown et. al 2002). Although Helem claims that it relied only on funds from private donors from 2004 to 2005, these donations made up 90% of all total revenues in 2005. (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 19 & Chahine 2008, 40). Since then, the organization’s website has born the logos of foreign benefactors like Astraea Lesbian Fund for Justice, Heinrich Boll Stiftung Foundation, and the Netherlands Embassy. These funders have helped Helem undertake very specific projects to the exclusion of general operating costs. The Dutch Embassy sponsored the publication of Helem’s sexual health booklet, the Heinrich Boll Stiftung Foundation sponsored annual events surrounding the International Day Against Homophobia, the Heartland Alliance funded upcoming research about GLBT communities in the Middle East and North Africa, and the Ford Foundation supported an online database to anonymously report discrimination and human rights violations (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 27).

The Helem website’s usage statistics and internal dynamics provide further proof of the undue influence of foreign financial actors. The organization’s coordinator also expressed disappointment that Helem had lost many of its local volunteers who now viewed Helem as a professional organization that didn’t need their involvement (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 42-

43). Helem has therefore had a difficult time serving both its international and domestic audiences. Though Helem has held several successful Beirut-based campaigns including HIV/AIDS outreach and appeals to popular anti-Israeli sentiment, Helem's website is an important means for both the Lebanese population outside of Beirut and throughout the region to learn about Helem's activities. Pascal Chahine shows that although Helem's website averages between 50,000 and 60,000 hits per month, roughly 95% of these originated outside of Lebanon in 2006 (2008, 39). It is no wonder that the website has attracted a primarily international audience, as the number of materials available on the website in Arabic are few. An informal study done by this researcher counted the number of news stories, explanatory articles, reports, and other materials found on [www.helem.net](http://www.helem.net) by their publication date. Beyond 2005, when the organization published 3 issues of the short-lived magazine, *Barra*, much of the materials were in English. English informational articles written in 2006 and 2007 were still found on the website in 2010 and 2011, skewing the language balance even further than this chart suggests.

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Arabic	49	5		10	12	
English	25	29	2	3	10	9
French	7	2	1		1	
Spanish	1					

Though Helem has made an effort to use Arabic in its summaries of news articles concerning GLBT people worldwide and in its longer reports that can be downloaded from the website, few materials explaining what homosexuality is, how to practice safe sex, and safer drug use were provided in any language other than English. In its articles explaining

homosexuality, Helem also repeatedly cites Western psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Alfred Kinsey. The inclusion of these theorists and statistics gleaned from American health studies is justified in the articles by the Lebanese preference for Western-trained doctors and psychologists. In this way, Helem attempts to shape the discourse on homosexuality in the context of a tradition that accepts homosexuality as a mixture of “nature” and “nurture,” rather than as a mental illness.

The group has also attempted to shape the Lebanese discourse on homosexuality by cultivating relationships with local media outlets to promote positive representations of the GLBT community. As a comparison, the most successful GLBT organization in the US to shape media discourse is GLAAD, which waged a successful campaign against the *Dr. Laura* radio show that linked local and national efforts in the 1990s. Its subsequent guide to successful media advocacy, “AM/ FM Activism” recognized “five different types of defamation in the media: vicious slander, negative stereotypes, casual prejudice, deference to homophobia, and invisibility.” The guide provided different tactics for dealing with each type of defamation, from recording instances of slander for legal purposes to building relationships with media outlets to reduce GLBT invisibility and deference to homophobia (Schilt 2004, 184).

Helem has similarly used different tactics to shape media discourse depending on the ideological affiliation of the outlet. In Arabic Lebanese magazine, *Alafkar*, the organization “emphasize[d] the link between tolerance of non-normative sexualities and genders on one hand and religious pluralism and intolerance of racism and domestic violence on the other” in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience (Zeidan 2010, 140). As a cautionary measure, the group only appears on live shows so that taped words cannot be manipulated before airing and usually chooses its heterosexual advocates to appear on the show. The organization also asks to read



print interview articles before they are published and tries to respond to homophobic articles with letters to the editor or follow-up articles in the same forum. Much as GLAAD did before them, Helem refuses to engage with homophobic arguments based on religion, perceiving such arguments as intractable and difficult to authoritatively address without religious credentials (“Helem: A Case Study...” 2008, 18-19).

Another informal study done by this author categorized the subject matter of news items posted on Helem’s website in an attempt to determine how the group balanced local and international concerns. Notable findings are that Helem’s “pink-washing” campaign did not start until 2006, or the year of the July War between Israel and Lebanon. After 2006, the campaign was forgotten until 2009. The number of articles concerning regional, Lebanese, and world news was relatively equal, and several articles, particularly in the early years, recounted recent Helem activities and participation in international conferences on human rights and homosexuality. There seems to be little discernible pattern of skewed coverage towards one issue area over the other consistently throughout the years, which disproves the claim that Helem uses its news coverage to cater to international audiences only.

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Regional		1	7	1	2	5	
World			5	1	5	6	1
Lebanon (534)	1	2				2	2
Lebanon (AIDS)	1		2		1		
Lebanon (other)	1	6	7		1	3	1
Helem	1	10	3		1	2	3
Pink-washing,			8			3	4

including about 2006 war							
International Conferences/ Helem's Participation in	1	2	4		1	2	3

Helem has ultimately seen limited success in Lebanon. Though it was investigated on multiple occasions by the vice squad, it now enjoys a warmer relationship with the police, who have attend Helem events and referred homosexuals detained at Hobeich to the organization's services. In addition, it has partnered with the government and various other Lebanese NGOs to provide HIV/AIDS outreach to men who have sex with men, recognized as a vulnerable population by the Ministry of Health. Its website has provided valuable information to the gay community in Lebanon and abroad about the effects of the anti-sodomy law, how homosexuality develops, safe sex practices, and community events since 2004, although its Arabic language accessibility needs improvement. Although much of its funding comes from abroad, it has also succeeding in making alliances with domestic NGOs in support of HIV/AIDS, the repeal of the anti-sodomy laws, and the boycott of Israeli "pink-washing" efforts. Ultimately, the group continues to walk a fine line between public visibility and the anonymity preferred by its original membership, and will continue to develop its programs to best serve the primary interests of its community.

### Conclusion

I began this project looking for Middle Eastern organizations that dealt exclusively with homosexual communities, and was at first disappointed that activities instead seemed unfocused, underdeveloped, and tackling too many non-gay issues. After seeing common patterns in Aswat,

Al-Qaws, Helem, and Kif Kif, however, I realized that linking to more accepted human rights issues was the best strategy to overcome societal taboos. Public discussion of homosexuality becomes more acceptable when sexuality is seen as a public health issue, so the organizations focus framing outreach in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. GLBT groups in the region are also more legitimate when vocally supporting popular domestic sentiment, whether that be against the U.S. invasion of Iraq or against Israel. They have recognized that human rights intersect, and that a lesbian raped cannot definitively say that she was attacked just for being a woman or for being gay. Therefore, Helem, Aswat, and others fight for feminism as well as for homosexual rights.

Encompassing all human rights within the struggle for an environment safe for homosexuals is a much larger project, but many of the issues are indeed crucial to further GLBT organizing in the region. Without a guaranteed right to privacy, police have raided the homes of homosexuals and arrested them under anti-sodomy laws, even if the act was not in progress. In the prisons where men like the Cairo 52 of the 2001 Queen Boat case in Egypt, police torture with impunity, performing invasive anal examinations and forcing prisoners to name homosexual friends. By simple association, these homosexual friends can be arrested and detained for months.

Even the internet, where Middle Eastern homosexuals have felt anonymous and safe enough to explore their identity and interact with a community of others like them, is vulnerable to state intrusion. Local internet service providers hosting gay websites are harassed to reveal information about website creators and police in Egypt and elsewhere impersonate gay men on the internet and arrest anyone who shows up at the designated rendez-vous. Such arrests even occur in states without anti-sodomy laws, where homosexuality is conflated with crimes like

prostitution or pederasty. The many gay-friendly commercial spaces give the impression that gays are accepted in Lebanon, but they too are subject to police harassment and blackmail.

One of the biggest challenges these organizations face, however, is common misconceptions about homosexuals. Homosexuals are seen as the product of foreign influence or as incapable of a loving sexual relationship without the power imbalance or exploitation experienced by male prostitutes. Colloquially, homosexuals are referred to as “perverts” or as those who sin as Lot’s people did. Therefore, GLBT organizations use the media to promote more positive stories about homosexuals and the use of neutral terms without the negative connotation of “pervert.” Helem especially has mastered this strategy of using media to shape public discourse about homosexuality, though it has been covered by international media more so than domestic.

Reliance on international funding makes several of these organizations vulnerable to the criticism of social constructionists like Joseph Massad, and although foreign funders do often dictate organizational priorities, an examination of website materials shows that this critique is exaggerated. Helem website materials explaining homosexuality, safe sex, and safer drug use are all in English, but the organization attempted to balance this with Arabic language news summaries and the failed magazine, *Barra*. Its website usage statistics show that the website is accessed from outside of the country 95% of the time, but its helpline has served an impressive number of callers from outside Beirut and other Arab Middle Eastern countries. Still more work needs to be done, however to shift from a largely international support base to a popular domestic one. Aswat, Helem, Al-Qaws, and Kif Kif need to continue to develop new strategies and sexuality discourses that resound within their communities and preclude suspicion of a new form of Western imposition in order to be more effective in the future. In addition, Western

human rights organizations must reevaluate the conditions placed on their assistance and consider if these conditions best serve the local homosexual population.

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