

Eight questions Palestinian queers are tired of hearing

[Ghaith Hilal](#), 27 November 2013

Ghaith Hilal is a queer Palestinian activist from the West Bank who has been part of [Al-Qaws](#) leadership since 2007.

You might think that the main goal of a group of queer activists in Palestine should be the seemingly endless task of dismantling sexual and gender hierarchy in one's own society.

It is. But you might think otherwise, judging from the repetitive questions we get during our lectures and events, or from inquiries we receive from media and other international organizations.

We intend to end this once and for all. Educating people about their own privilege is not our burden. But before we announce our formal retirement from this task, here are the eight most frequent questions we get, and their definitive answers.

1. Doesn't Israel provide Palestinian queers with a safe haven?

Of course it does: [the apartheid wall](#) has sparkly pink doors lining it, ready to admit those who strike a fabulous pose. In fact, Israel built the wall to keep Palestinian homophobes out and to protect Palestinian queers who seek refuge in it.

But seriously: "Israel" creates refugees; it does not shelter refugees. There has never been a case of a Palestinian — a descendant of a family or families who were forcibly displaced, sometimes massacred, often thrown in jail without charge — magically transcending the living legacy of this history to find him or herself granted asylum in "Israel" — the state that committed these atrocities.

If some people manage to cross the wall and end up in Tel Aviv, they are considered "illegal." They end up working and living in horrible conditions, trying to avoid being arrested.

2. Aren't all Palestinians homophobic?

Are all Americans homophobic? Of course not. Unfortunately, Western representations of Palestinians, particularly lesbian, gay, transgender or queer Palestinians, tend to ignore diversity in Palestinian society.

That being said, Palestinians are living under a decades-long military occupation. The occupation amplifies the diverse forms of oppression that are experienced in every society.

However, homophobia is not the way we contextualize our struggle. This is a notion comes from specific type of activism in the global north.

How can we single out homophobia from a complex oppressive system (patriarchy) that oppresses women, and gender non-conforming people?

3. How do you deal with your main enemy, Islam?

Oh, we have a main enemy now? If we had to single out a main enemy that would be occupation, not religion — Islam or otherwise.

More fundamentalist forms of religion are presently enjoying a global resurgence, including in many Western societies.

We don't view religion as our main exceptional challenge. Still, increased religious sentiment, regardless of which religion, almost always creates obstacles for those interested in promoting respect for gender and sexual diversity.

Palestinian nationalism has a long history of respect for secularism. This provides a set of cultural values useful in advocating for LGBTQ Palestinians.

Furthermore, religion is often an important part of Palestinian LGBTQ people's identities. We respect all of our communities' identities and make space for diversity.

4. Are there any out Palestinians?

I'm glad you asked that question. We have great Palestinian gay carpenters who build such amazing closets for queers with all the Western comforts you can dream of — we never want to leave.

Once again the notion of coming out — or the politics of visibility — is a strategy that has been adopted by some LGBT activists in the global north, due to specific circumstances. Imposing this strategy on the rest of the world, without understanding context, is a colonial project.

Ask us instead what social change strategies apply to our context, and whether the notion of coming out even makes sense.

5. Why are there no Israelis in al-Qaws?

Colonialism is not about bad people being mean to others (“bad” Israelis don’t steal queer Palestinians’ lunch money). Being super “good” doesn’t magically dissolve systems of oppression.

Our organization works within Palestinian society, across borders imposed by the occupation. The challenges that LGBTQ Israelis face are nothing like the ones faced by Palestinians.

We are talking about two different societies with different cultures and histories; the fact that they are currently occupying our land doesn’t make us one society.

Moreover, being queer does not eliminate the power dynamic between the colonized and colonizer despite the best of intentions.

We resist the “global, pink, happy, gay family” sentiment. Palestinian-only organizing is essential to decolonizing and improving Palestinian society.

6. I saw this film about gay Palestinians (*Invisible Men/Bubble/Out In The Dark*, etc.) and I feel I learned a lot about your struggle

You mean the films that were made by privileged Israeli or Jewish filmmakers portraying white Israelis as saviors and Palestinians as victims that needed saving? These films strip the voice and agency of Palestinian queers, portraying them as victims that need saving from their own society.

Moreover, these films rely on racist tropes of Arab men as volatile and dangerous. These films are simply pinkwashing propaganda, funded by the Israeli government, with a poignant oppressed/oppressor love story the glitter on top.

If you want to learn about the reality of our community and our struggle, try listening to what queer Palestinians have to say, at the [Al-Qaws](#) or [Palestinian Queers for BDS](#) websites.

7. Isn’t fighting for gay rights a more pressing issue than pinkwashing?

Mainstream LGBT groups in the North would have us believe that queers live in a separate world, only connected to their societies as victims of homophobia.

But you cannot have queer liberation while apartheid, patriarchy, capitalism and other oppressions exist. It’s important to target the connections of these oppressive forces.

Furthermore, [pinkwashing](#) is a strategy used by the [Brand Israel](#) campaign to garner the support of queers in other parts of the world. It is simply an attempt to make the Zionist project more appealing to queer people.

This is another iteration of a familiar and toxic colonial fantasy — that the colonizer can provide something important and necessary that the colonized cannot possibly provide for themselves.

Pinkwashing strips away our voices, history and agency, telling the world that Israel knows what is best for us. By targeting pinkwashing we are reclaiming our agency, history, voices and bodies, telling the world what we want and how to support us.

8. Why do you use terms from “the West” like LGBT or queer to describe your struggle?

Though we have occasionally been branded as tokenized, complicit with Israel, naïve and Westernized (by those based in the West), our activists bring decades of experience and on-the-ground analysis of cultural imperialism and Orientalism.

This has provided the raw material for many an itinerant academic. However, the work of those in the Ivory Tower is rarely, if ever, accountable to those working in the field nor does it acknowledge its power (derived from the same colonial economy) on activists.

We are accountable to our local communities and the values developed over years of organizing.

Language is a strategy, but it does not eclipse the totality of who we are and what we do. The words that have gained global currency — LGBTQ — are used with great caution in our grassroots movements. Simply because such words emerged from a particular context and political moment does not mean they carry that same political content when deployed in our context.

The language that we use is always revisited and expanded through our work. Language catalyzes discussions and pushes us to think more critically, but no word whether in English or Arabic can do the work. Only a movement can.

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