For queer Palestinians like me, intersectionality isn’t working

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Twelve years ago, when I was a 19 and an undergraduate at Ben Gurion University, I first found out about the Palestinian queer movement.

I learned that that there were two major independent organizations working solely on Palestinian LGBTQ issues: AlQaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, and Aswat – Palestinian Feminist Center for Gender and Sexual Freedoms. These two groups effectively constitute the organized local queer movement for [Palestinians](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians).

Soon after, I decided to try and get involved in alQaws. Given that I lived in Be’er Sheva, however, I mostly connected with this newly-discovered [LGBTQ](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-lgbt-1.5599272) community online. That same year, I joined an alQaws retreat in Beit Jala, just outside Bethlehem. It was the very first time I had ever met a large group of LGBTQ Palestinians, mostly gay men, from the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and within the Green Line.

As a young adult, I had only just started breaking out of the small-town bubble of my village, Kuseife, a Bedouin community in the Negev, a gay desert in an actual desert. While I had realized and then embraced my queerness as a teenager, I still had trouble navigating my family life, community, and culture, and was still figuring out how I fitted in to them as a queer man.

When I first heard of alQaws, I expected that their central focus would be to work towards dismantling homophobia in Palestinian society, while creating spaces for LGBTQ Palestinians like me, who were still trying to imagine a future that would reconcile their culture and family with their queerness.

Instead, I constantly found myself in perplexing discussions dominated by terms such as intersectionality, pinkwashing, homonationalism, and settler-colonialism.

While I did not completely comprehend how these terms were, according to alQaws’ organizers, key to LGBTQ liberation, I knew enough to question this approach. But I did not feel comfortable making my voice heard, and so I remained mostly silent. I began to feel unsure how I fitted into alQaws’ world.

My attendance at their activities gradually lessened. I still attended their queer parties in Tel Aviv-Yaffa (an absolutely joyous space with Arabic music and drag shows) every two months. But that was all, despite my initial willingness to come out to my family and to overcome the significant geographical distance from the center of the organizing to become a fully-engaged activist.

Now, after a decade of living between the United States and Israel-Palestine, having pursued a master’s degree in gender and sexuality studies and now finishing a PhD in educational sociology, those same terms that were so foreign to me as a 19-year-old have become more familiar and coherent.

But even now, as an academic, sharing an intellectual language with the founders of alQaws and Aswat, and understanding how they see queer Palestinian liberation, I still have reservations about their terms and vision.

First, though, I recognize the unquestionable impact and [considerable efforts](http://https/youtu.be/2Kl4l-yKbUw) that alQaws and Aswat make, often in difficult circumstances: from emergency assistance to local queer individuals to organizing community events, providing emotional and practical support through their volunteer-run hotline, creating a comic book for queer youth, producing queer music, curating a local queer film festival, and holding workshops on LGBTQ issues for social workers and mental health professionals.

But my reservations about their guiding vision stand. At the center of the ideology of the organized Palestinian LGBT movement is intersectionality. In this context, intersectionality means the idea that queer liberation is intrinsically linked to the end of Israel’s occupation of the Palestinians, and to the end of Israel’s exploitation of queer Palestinians (pinkwashing) to create a better image of itself globally (homonationalism).

While this approach is extremely important for the queer Palestinian struggle and undeniably draws on real dynamics, it has a few problems. These problems became more evident starting in the summer of 2019, when the Palestinian LGBTQ struggle finally reached mainstream society, the public square and local media.

The first major issue with intersectionality is how theory-heavy it is. Its intellectual intricacies and its terminology are disconnected from where Palestinian society is in relations to its LGBTQ community, and vice versa.

My 12 years of engagement with the Palestinian queer community, and especially my year of fieldwork research for my doctoral dissertation on LGBTQ Palestinians, indicate that many queer Palestinians have never heard of terms like pinkwashing. I had to explain and introduce that language during my interviews.

For the broader Palestinian community, not well-versed in LGBTQ lives or struggles, this is not an effective starting point.

Intersectional organizing leads a two-pronged fight: both against Israeli colonialism and against conservative Palestinian culture. That alone puzzles a Palestinian public that is not engaged with or informed about LGBTQ identities to begin with. The intersectional discourse and its goals are too self-referential and intellectually dense. Teaching the Palestinian public about LGBTQ identities should start with simplified, but unambiguous, messages of love and tolerance. It should show the public that Palestinian LGBTQ people exist, and want to thrive.

This is a question of raising foundational awareness. But too often, the most public expressions of Palestinian LGBTQ organizing are largely framed in theory that is difficult to explain even to queer Palestinians themselves, such as the unprecedented [series of demonstration](http://https/www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-lgbtq-arabs-hold-first-ever-protest-in-israel-following-teen-s-tel-aviv-stabbing-1.7617641)s held in Haifa the last three years, the last of which in September 2021 was dubbed "A Rallying Cry for Queer Liberation," and featured both Palestinian and pride flags.

I monitored Palestinian reactions on news and social media platforms to the demonstrations, especially the first one in Haifa, in August 2019. It was clear that raising the Palestinian flag alongside pride and transgender flags drew more attention, and was considered more controversial and provocative, than being LGBTQ in and of itself.

The Palestinian mainstream was more concerned with defending the ‘honor’ of their national flag, and saw queers waving both as a source of shame and an act dishonoring the Palestinian cause.

The August demonstration was a protest against a wave of anti-LGBTQ violence and [incitement by politicians](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-targeting-lgbtq-organization-pa-police-calls-to-halt-west-bank-community-event-1.7723135), which at long last triggered real visibility for the LGBTQ Palestinian struggle and solidarity with its issues, from the streets to the media [to the Knesset](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-they-re-scared-lgbtq-rights-divides-israel-s-arab-lawmakers-1.9016346) and the Palestinian Authority.

But that message was lost amid the impact of the Palestinian flag. Instead of focusing on LGBTQ legitimacy and rights, the demonstrations turned into a debate about on who gets to identify as Palestinian. It’s all the more ironic because the outrage around raising the Palestinian flag was triggered by the bigoted idea that the LGBTQ community cannot be Palestinian.

The flags issue and the backlash illustrate why the insistence on a Palestinian queer struggle rooted in intersectionality distracts from other issues that are not less important, and which deserve equal if not greater attention.

The most obvious and pressing of these is the general intolerance of LGBTQ identities and the denial of their existence in Palestinian society. While alQaws’ organizers would argue that the persistence of such Palestinian homophobia should be [seen as related](https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-who-are-the-real-oppressors-of-gaza-s-gay-community-hamas-or-israel-1.5885509) to the persistence of the occupation, that does not make it any less urgent, nor does it prevent us from fighting it as aggressively and in parallel to the occupation.

Clearly, homophobic violence from within Palestinian society against the LGBTQ community, and the exclusion of the LGBTQ community from the Palestinian narrative are intimately related, and are surely basic issues crying out for resolution. Instead, however, while Palestinian homophobia has gradually received more attention over the past few years, a positive shift indicating that LGBTQ leaders are in fact adapting their priorities, that shift still doesn’t have much impact on the most public demonstration of LGBTQ organizing, on the streets.

But it goes even further: If there hadn’t been Palestinian flags at that demonstration, would that have concentrated attention on urgent LGBTQ issues rather than becoming a debate about Palestinian national identity? In other words, did intersectionality here actually do more harm than good to the cause of the Palestinian LGBTQ community?

While intersectionality is ideal in theory, in practice it encompasses too much, obscuring the targeting of specific needs. In the case of the protests against anti-LGBTQ violence: Who are they aimed at — the colonial power, or the deeply heteronormative Palestinian culture? For the organizers, this is an easy question to answer: Both, at once. But the Palestinian public is not yet ready for such a diffuse explanation of why they should accept LGBTQ visibility.

And what about the members of the LGBTQ community themselves, some of whom face violence, or intimidation, fear exposing their sexual or gender identity, or want to actively contribute to the struggle to confront and solve exactly these issues, without discarding the Palestinian national struggle, but also without making one contingent upon the other?

It strikes me as a poor strategy to demand participants always simultaneously claim their Palestinian-hood alongside their queerness alongside calling to end the occupation.

While these demonstrations are a hugely welcome milestone for the LGBTQ Palestinian struggle, they effectively denied space to those in the Palestinian LGBTQ community who want to highlight LGBTQ issues in their embedded sociocultural context, and to confront how they experience anti-LGBTQ hostility: the contentions that homosexuality is foreign, western, unnatural, and against the religious structures of Palestinian society.

Such an approach is surely both as reasonable and legitimate as dominant current framing of LGBTQ struggles as nationalist and anti-colonial.

Intersectionality’s monopoly on LGBTQ organizing has also pushed away queer Palestinians who would have otherwise have been powerful, authentic advocates for the community’s rights. I have spoken with many queer Palestinians who told me that the heavy focus on intersectionality and the occupation was the reason they left the movement.

Some felt that the anti-colonial mindset was so predominant in the movement’s spaces that it pushed out or even erased their queerness. Some simply stopped expressing their views honestly, knowing it did not match the dominant ideology perfectly enough.

The intersectionality monopoly on Palestinian LGBTQ organizing, with its dedication to the inclusive linkage of disparate issues, has thus actually ended up excluding some of the LGBTQ community to whom its first duty of care should surely be. There would have been more marchers at the demonstrations, and a bigger, stronger LGBTQ community in general had there been flexibility in the intersectional approach.

This doesn’t mean we should stop associating the LGBTQ struggle with the occupation. Instead, we should consider decentering that association, given that while the LGBTQ Palestinian struggle has long been active, it is still in the early stages of establishing even basic definitions and acknowledgement of LGBTQ issues in Palestinian society.

Before the inevitable accusations flow: No, I’m not a pinkwasher or a homonationalist. I am an uncompromising believer in the Palestinian LGBTQ cause, and I share the organizers’ dreams of a Palestinian society that is liberated from both the occupation and from homophobia, with a secure, equal place for queer Palestinians in it.

I do, however, believe that our conversation about how to achieve those dreams should be more diverse, fluid, and open to negotiation. I do think it is time to question whether the last 20 years of LGBTQ organizing would have yielded greater outcomes had they not been so focused on attaching queer life in Palestine to colonialism.

It is true that the conflict shapes everything between the river and the sea, especially for Palestinians, but we should not voluntarily give up any progress we can make in our own spaces by demanding it relate to the conflict.

Palestinian civil society campaigns – improving the status of women, against guns, against domestic violence, for free speech, for more diverse family structures, for access to higher education – are all vibrant efforts that are materially changing our society for the better. We shouldn’t let the occupation hold us hostage in areas of our own social and cultural progress.

The same should be true for LGBTQ rights. I firmly believe that it is a sign of the health of our community and our society to include all voices of LGBTQ Palestinians, from those committed to closely connecting the LGBTQ and national causes, to those who are interested in normalization to the extent of collaborating with [LGBTQ Israelis](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-gay-israel-1.5599221). They should have the right to do so without judgement or exclusion from Palestinian queer spaces.

Just like Palestinian society, the Palestinian LGBTQ community is diverse, and this should be a point of strength for us, rather than a source of factionalism. Ending the occupation is as urgent as ever, but there is no need to govern so strictly the hierarchy of what is immediate and urgent in terms of the LGBTQ community’s needs. We should embrace, as queer Palestinians, the rich heterogeneity of paths to personal and national liberation.

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