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Political Foreclosure of Queer Liberation: Notes from Lebanon

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ALI KASSEM, MAR 11 2024

During the first week of August 2023, Lebanon made international headlines for (a failed, performative) attempt to ban the movie *Barbie* by a (Muslim Shia) government minister in a country long lauded for its 'freedoms'. The minister's narrative focused on the movie's proclaimed (yet, I would argue, deeply wanting) 'homosexuality' and consequent corruption of 'moral values' in a space already grappling with insidious patriarchy and the violent marginalization of queer communities.

Beyond the sheer absurdity of this attempt, especially given the small country's current crises, this incident is part of a broader pattern of orchestrated statements and actions targeting the LGBTQ+ community that have escalated in the country (and more broadly globally) over the past years. Within this, both Christian and Muslim Lebanese groups have played significant, multiple, and converging roles as physical attacks on drag shows and 'LGBTQ-friendly' venues as well as rising homophobic narratives across social media platforms have gained momentum. In a relatively new development during the latter parts of 2023, Lebanese political parties, including the Muslim Shia party Hezbollah, became particularly vocal and aggressive actors within this. In the case of Hezbollah, this included public statements by the party's leader denouncing and issuing threats against gay people, a draconian draft law to criminalise homosexuality prepared and published by a party-backed civil society organisation, as well as various statements made by affiliated and related scholars across the party's powerful network of religious and non-religious institutions and spaces. This, I posit, has a violent impact on the possibility of producing liberatory (queer) alternative Islam(s) (see Ahmad 2016) – in addition to its material and emotional violent aggression against queer bodies and selves in the contemporary moment.

This escalation has a complex and layered infrastructure. Surely, it cannot be understood without accounting for Lebanon's political elite's violent and aggressive attempts to divert attention away from the country's multi-scalar collapse, polycrisis, and fragmentation. Further, these homophobic developments are not exceptional or unique to Lebanon but rather echo similar developments as part of a growing global anti-queer backlash. Here, rather than offering an explanatory analysis of *why* this moral panic is unfolding, be it in Lebanon or elsewhere, my aim is to gesture to and highlight *what* this is *foreclosing* – specifically for Muslims invested in a liberatory pluralistic decolonial project.

Since 2015, I have been conducting research within the religiously observant Shia community of Lebanon (Kassem 2018; 2021; 2023). This includes work in the Hawza – the religious educational institution responsible for training Shia scholars and leaders as well as producing *fatwas* (the religious rulings by which observant Shia Muslims live). This also includes participatory fieldwork across mosques throughout Lebanon's geography and particularly in Beirut's southern suburb where I attended sermons, classes, and discussion groups.

Over the past year, this research has specifically focused on the possibilities of a critical rethinking within the Hawza and institutional mainstream Muslim thought of extant positions around homosexuality, and the limits therein. As part of this, I presented and discussed re-readings of Islamic scripture and text (both Quran and Hadith) that have been developed by Queer Muslims to Shia Muslim scholars. This scholarship argues against the projection of homosexuality as 'un-Islamic' and works to articulate an Islamicate that embraces gender and sexual diversity. In this

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respect, it advances interpretations of Islamic texts that would legitimise non-heterosexual forms of life, primarily in the form of same-sex Muslim unions/marriages as well as Islamic versions of 'adoption'. My interlocutors here were mainly senior male scholars – teachers of advanced studies in the Hawza – and the conversation focused on Islamic views and rulings around both male-male and female-female sexuality.

Grating against common assumptions of a flat incommensurability of 'queer' and 'Muslim', my interlocutors were significantly receptive to these re-interpretations as 'possible' ones, lauding the 'effort' and encouraging its development and further engagement with the Hawza in view of 'articulating a *just fikh*', as one scholar said. Consistently, the overwhelming majority of them acknowledged the need to re-consider the standard Muslim position and 're-inspect the tradition' and the current religious rulings of permissibility and impermissibility, as many expressed. In this vein, multiple scholars encouraged me to translate this scholarship mostly written in English and/or to enter in conversation with senior *Maraji* as to advance such work and address what many of them called a pressing and important issue. Elsewhere, I conceptualise this as an 'arrested possibility' as I posit the need to work *with* as well as *against* the extant Hawza to advance a queer-embracing Islamicate lifeworld.

Beyond the institution of Shia Muslim knowledge-production, a growing critique of hegemonic patriarchal heteronormative scripts can be identified within wider observant Shia spaces such as mosques and Islamic schools and especially among middle-class youth. For example, outside my own interviews, I encountered multiple (male, given that most mosques are gender-segregated) youths in the mosque interrogating the standard demonization of gay people and the extant rulings of *hadd* (Islamic jurisprudential sentences). In various public settings including on Islamic TV talk shows, I heard Shia Muslim scholars insist on the 'jurisprudential impermissibility' of same-sex acts but, simultaneously, on the need for 'compassion', a rejection of 'condemnation', and an encouragement of 'understanding' of the 'plight they face' in response to questions from public callers. I similarly encountered both male and female youths contesting and negotiating patriarchal interpretations of hadith and wider *fikh* rulings around sexuality and scripts of reproduction for a significant disruption of heteronormative marriage and child-rearing as indispensable for a 'good Muslim life'.

The infrastructure of this is intricate and multifaceted and remains beyond the scope of this piece. It is shaped, among others, by what I would argue is the broader attrition of traditional masculinist patriarchal male-centric and misogynistic views and discourses. Ultimately, it reflects significant socio-economic and cultural changes that have unfolded over the past few decades within Lebanon. Further, it is influenced by senior Shia religious rulings (fatwas) establishing the permissibility of gender-affirming surgeries. Either way, what matters for my argument here is the identification of a growing discourse *humanizing* the violently dehumanized homosexual – albeit certainly recognising the limits of this discourse, its multiple forms of violence and exclusion, and its potential implication in the reproduction of queerphobic heteronormativity.

Indeed, this discourse remains multiply wanting. Within it lay multiple forms of mistranslation, wilful and unwilful ignorance, and the erasure of queer peoples and their experiences and voices. Further, it often remains an 'inclusionary' one that does not sufficiently disrupt extant (patriarchal, androcentric, capitalist, elitist) structures. Yet, I hold, it produces cracks – including enabling queer people *within* the religious community to further (limited) visibility, public presence, and life. Further, it indicates a significant shift in the actual as well as potential presence and/or acceptance of 'un-straight' lives specifically within the Shia observant religious community. Consequently, it indicates the *possibility* and the potential of developing and articulating un-straight Islam(s), offering a possible *starting point* (rather than horizon) for liberatory futures.

Yet, as the political and legal queerphobic campaign in Lebanon unfolded, I have seen multiple research interlocutors who had expressed significant willingness and even desire toward one form or another of 'queer inclusivity' retreat both in public statements and in private conversations. Many are now arguing that such 'intellectual' work is either 'misplaced', 'naïve' or must 'be paused' in the face of a progressing 'political imperialist plot' with an 'agenda' to 'spread western homosexuality' and 'corrupt youths' to 'move them away from political causes'. The (ironic) construction of queerness as 'alien' and 'western' – a threat to Arab, eastern, and Islamic identities and cultures is a key founding narrative of this. Its depoliticization and transformation into an individualist consumerist hedonism is another. Within this, authoritative discourses of 'authenticity' and an alarming co-optation of decolonisation can be

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identified – discourses that were largely absent from my conversations with the same scholars a few months before. Here, the possibilities themselves were foreclosed as reductionist scripts and binaries were (re)enacted.

What this does is erase longstanding queer histories – in multiple forms – of Arab and Islamic societies. It further erases the contemporary presence of queer Arabs and Muslims, as well as the key roles queer movements and activism has played in, among others, anti-Imperialist struggle in the region. Indeed, these plural and diverse realities are absented as queer communities are constructed as a *political* and *civilizational* as much as a moral threat. Consequently, the possibility of developing and articulating specifically (Shia) Muslim lifeworlds that are anti-patriarchal, non-heteronormative, and embracing radical sexual and gender diversity and plurality becomes less and less possible.

Alongside significant and major material, physical, and emotional implications on queer bodies and communities – ones that must remain centred – the recent queerphobic campaign has an epistemic dimension: foreclosing the development of liberatory Islam(s). Through its constructed reductionist violent identitarian Othering of queerness, *fikh* and wider Islamic knowledge become rigidly ossified. Against this, I would posit, the further and insistent public articulation of specifically Muslim queer projects that trace their genealogies, utter their horizons, and enact their possibilities through Islamic(ate) and Arab histories, symbolisms, and grammar could offer an important form of refusal and presence. The possibilities persist, I hope and hold, but are increasingly threatened.

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About the author:

Dr. Ali Kassem (he/him) is a Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the National University of Singapore, Singapore. He obtained his PhD from the University of Sussex, UK and was a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Edinburgh, UK. In 2020–2021, he was an early career fellow with the Arab Council for Social Sciences funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.