

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE QUEER ENEMY: HOMOPHOBIA, RELIGION, AND STALEMATE IN LEBANON

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

BY

OMAR SAFADI

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2025

Copyright © 2025 by Omar Safadi

All rights reserved

This work is dedicated to:

Lina

and to all who love against their conviction(s)

“If there are as many minds as there are men, then there are as many kinds of love as there are hearts.” – Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (138)

“The Prophet said that Truth has declared: ‘I am not hidden in what is high or low. Nor in the earth nor skies nor throne. This is certainty, O beloved: I am hidden in the heart of the faithful. If you seek me, seek in these hearts.’” – Sufi proverb.

“The true lover finds the light only if, like the candle, he is his own fuel, consuming himself.” –  
Sufi proverb

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	VII
ABSTRACT .....	VIII
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	X
INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF QUEER PUBLICITY .....	1
METHODOLOGY .....	49
CHAPTER 1: THE SACRED AND THE SODOMITE: QUEER APPROPRIATION, HOMOPHOBIC CENSORSHIP, AND THE SEXUALITY OF SECTARIANISM’S SYMBOLIC ORDER .....	56
PART I: THE SYMBOLIC ORDER OF SECTARIANISM .....	59
PART II: THE THREAT OF QUEER CULTURAL PRODUCTION.....	65
PART III: HOMOPHOBIA AS A LOGIC OF CENSORSHIP .....	90
PART IV: CONCLUSION—ON ANTI-HOMOPHOBIC RESISTANCE.....	108
CHAPTER 2 - SOLDIERS IN THE LAND OF GOD: SECURITY, TERRITORY, AND HOMOPHOBIC MILITANCY IN POST-REVOLUTION LEBANON .....	113
PART I: MASCULINE VIOLENCE, TERRITORY, AND THE CONDITIONS FOR HOMOPHOBIC MOBILIZATION .....	118
PART II: THE QUEER THREAT TO SECTARIAN TERRITORY.....	125
PART III: HOMOPHOBIC TERRITORIALITY—PARADES, CHECKPOINTS, AND RAIDS.....	146
PART IV: CONCLUSION—ON THE GENERALIZATION OF HOMOPHOBIC TERRITORIALITY.....	159
CHAPTER 3: REDEFINING NATURE: HOMOPHOBIA, HETEROSEXUALITY, AND THE LEGAL GROUND OF SECTARIAN PLURALISM.....	168
PART I: THE HETEROSEXUAL FOUNDATION OF SECTARIAN PLURALISM.....	171
PART II: THE THREAT OF HOMOSEXUAL DECRIMINALIZATION .....	175
PART III: HOMOPHOBIC DISCOURSING ON HETEROSEXUAL “NATURE” .....	186
PART IV: CONCLUSION—A MORE ORGANIZED HOMOPHOBIC RESISTANCE .....	219
CHAPTER 4: “THE WAR ON CONSCIOUSNESS”: EMPIRE, RESISTANCE, AND THE THREAT OF QUEER EDUCATION .....	224
PART I: CAUSES AND EDUCATION IN LEBANESE SECTARIANISM .....	235
PART II: THE THREAT OF QUEER EDUCATION .....	238

PART III: HOMOPHOBIC RHETORIC AND ANTI-COLONIAL RESISTANCE.....	260
PART IV: CONCLUSION—OF QUEER RECEPTION AND RESISTANCE.....	272
CONCLUSION.....	279
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHIES.....	300
APPENDIX 1: THE SACRED AND THE SODOMITE .....	314
APPENDIX 2: SOLDIERS IN THE LAND OF GOD.....	317
APPENDIX 3: REDEFINING NATURE.....	320

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Blaspheming Homosexual, 2019 (screenshot by author).....	81
Figure 2: “Samandal’s 7th Issue,” (captured by author, courtesy of Hatem Imam).....	83
Figure 3: Qitabi pro-queer books, 2023 (screenshot by author).....	240
Figure 1.1: Madonna and Fanboy, (screenshot by author) .....	314
Figure 1.2: Samandal Case File, (courtesy of Lebanese Court of Cassation 2014).....	314
Figure 1.3: Young Christian Man Incites Against Mashrou` Leila, (screenshot by author) .....	315
Figure 1.4: Father Daoud Warning Against Mashrou` Leila, (screenshot by author) .....	315
Figure 1.5: Archdiocese Press Release Against Mashrou` Leila, (screenshot by author) .....	315
Figure 1.6: Hayek Threatens Mashrou` Leila, (screenshot by author) .....	316
Figure 2.1: About Us Page on Soldiers’ website, (screenshot by author) .....	317
Figure 2.2: Report on Gemmeyze Drag Show, (screenshot by author).....	317
Figure 2.3: Report on Homosexual Prostitution in Port District, (screenshot by author).....	318
Figure 2.4: Warning to Parents and Call to Boycott, (screenshot by author).....	318
Figure 2.5: Report on German Television Show, (screenshot by author) .....	319
Figure 2.6: Report on Sunni Sheikh’s Homophobic Stance, (screenshot by author) .....	319
Figure 3.1: Mawlawi’s Memo, (screenshot by author).....	320
Figure 3.2: Dar al Fatwa Press Release, (screenshot by author).....	320
Figure 3.3: Qiblan’s Position, (screenshot by author) .....	321
Figure 3.4: Anti-Gay Demo in Tripoli, (screenshot by author) .....	321

## Abstract

What are the political uses of homophobia in Lebanon's sectarian system? And what does politicized homophobia in Lebanon tell us about the threat queer publicity poses to national political orders more generally? My dissertation investigates how homophobic mobilization blocks democratization and reproduces sectarian rule in the wake of the 2019 Lebanon Revolution. In existing literatures, homophobia has been primarily treated as a form of state-led violence, a kind of moral panic, and a type of reactionary social movement. These approaches figure queers as targets of criminalization, demonization, and scapegoating. While I draw on these approaches and consider queer populations as vulnerable targets of persecution, I also go beyond them by considering queer sexuality as a veritable political enemy to Lebanon's sectarian order. In recent years, queer desire has engendered forms of social and political association that do not take sectarian kinship as their organizing principle or biological reproduction as their function.

More than just challenging the demographic perpetuation of sectarian groups, I argue that the queer threat pertains to three specific qualities of queer sexuality as an axis of power and identity. First, and unlike religious, racial, and national difference, queer sexuality is not inherited through the family but emerges through covert forms of sociality that threaten the traditional family form. Second, queer culture puts forward seductive possibilities that challenge the status quo: it offers new forms of living, relating, and enjoying that compete with sectarian and heterosexual lifestyles. Finally, queers are ubiquitous: they exist in all sects, they intermix, and they form bonds that cut across sectarian groups. Consequently, the phenotypic invisibility, seductive potentials, and protean mobility of queer sexuality render it a potent solvent for



sectarian boundaries and identities. Across four chapters, I show how queer sexuality threatens the cultural, territorial, legal, and geopolitical reproduction of sectarianism.

I also explore the various ways in which homophobic discourse articulates the queer threat: 1) as a threat to the cultural sanctity of religious icons; 2) as a threat to the territorial dominion of religious groups; 3) as a threat to the legal foundation of the Lebanese family; and 4) as a threat to the anti-US and anti-Israel resistance in Lebanon. In each case, homophobia works politically: 1) as a mechanism of cultural censorship, 2) as a practice of territorial militancy, 3) as a mode of political alliance building, and 4) as a type of anti-imperial claim-making. I draw upon two years of on-site ethnographic fieldwork in Lebanon and bring together the literature in queer theory, political science, sociology, and Middle East studies. Ultimately, and by foregrounding the Lebanese case, the dissertation showcases how homophobia operates as a tool of political, social, and cultural reproduction: homophobia not only arouses but also manages political violence; it reproduces communal difference; and it mediates inter-group relations in times of crisis.

## Acknowledgments

This project, the scholarly path it has forged, and the person I have become are owed to the curiosity, support, and love of those who have entered, remained in, and exited my life with such profound impact. While I single out a few below, this dissertation—and the thought contained within it—owes itself to innumerable people, places, encounters, situations, and events that are the stuff of life. Which is why I beg the pardon of all who I have failed to include but whose impressions have inspired the written and the unwritten in these pages.

It seems only natural to begin with my committee: Lisa Wedeen, Linda Zerilli, and Paul Amar. As obvious as it sounds, this project would not have happened without them. I am particularly grateful for their encouraging me to write on this “topic”—a topic that I knew would open wounds and would, at times, make life more difficult for me. They saw the potential of this project and they believed in my capacity to do it, especially in the moments when I had lost faith in myself and my voice. With their steadfast guidance, I was able to recognize those external and internal resistances and to let them go.

I owe a special thanks to my advisor and dissertation co-chair Lisa Wedeen who has been my mentor since my undergraduate days at the University of Chicago. Stumbling into her Arab Uprisings class as a sophomore in 2014, I was struck by Lisa’s brilliance, wit, and style. Everyone was. But what especially struck me then was the truth with which she saw and grasped Syria. Her scholarly commitment to the ordinary—to what people say and do, to what is in plain sight but nearly impossible to see—queered for me what Political Science is and allowed me to reimagine what it could be. For more than a decade, Lisa’s mentorship, pushback, and trust have modeled for me an approach to life and politics to which I am indebted—an approach based on interpretive generosity, creative estrangement, and heartfelt curiosity.

I am also grateful to my dissertation co-chair and mentor Linda Zerilli, who has insisted on the value of my work and who has helped me find my voice and to use it. Linda's fierce intellect, her razor-sharp questions, and her refreshing perspective(s) have influenced me in ways that I have yet to discover. Her commitment to the ordinary—to seeing, thinking about, and being in the everyday world—has captivated me since my first meeting her in graduate school. It has been a pleasure to witness her in seminars, in workshops, and in conferences, where one succinct comment or question from her could elevate the debate to a level no one in the room had even conceived. The way I think, speak, and write have her marks all of it.

And to Amar, I am thankful for his teaching me that intellectual interventions do not need to be battles. His astuteness, kindness, and lightness of touch have disarmed me in my most defensive moments during this journey. Amar's cutting-edge and cross-cutting research models for us all what intersectional scholarship truly means. I will continue to learn from his graceful way of seeing, studying, and being in the world.

Institutionally-speaking, I am grateful to the University of Chicago Political Science Department, the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality (CSGS), and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) for their intellectual and material support. Thank you to the CSGS Workshop as well as the Political Theory Workshop for providing a forum for productive, frank, and extremely generative conversations. At CSGS, I want to especially thank Bonnie Kantor for her astounding capacity to listen, reassure, and affirm my sense of reality; to Tate Brazas for her reliable and assuring presence; and to Kat Myers and Helen Ross, my exceptional officemates, who have shared with me physical, emotional, and intellectual space. The project also owes itself to the countless spirited conversations I have had with my friends and colleagues Bastian Herre, Anthony Lanz, Burak Tan, Aylon Cohen, Lucile Richard, Rose Owen, Larry

Svabek, Silvia Fedi, Winston Berg, Michael Dango, Zoe Berman and Andrew Atwell. An especial thanks is owed to Matthias Staisch, a dear friend and a mentor who has witnessed my transformation(s) since before the Ph.D. program. Thank you for your love and investment.

In Lebanon, I am grateful to my interlocutors whose desire to speak to me and to let me into their worlds has been the bedrock of this dissertation. I will always remember, with an intense nostalgia, the hours of conversation over coffee and cigarettes, the theorizing we did, and the new understanding(s) we were able to reach through our exchanges. I thank them for their trust, their generosity, and their way(s) of seeing.

Throughout my fieldwork, friends and lovers were the soul of my thinking: in that regard, I want to thank Mohammad Ali Faour for giving me a love I'd never encountered and for taking me into a dream from which I never want to wake. Samer Dada for the walks along the sea, for the words and the silences, and for the heights our souls reached together. Hachem Abdul-Kader for his voice, his magnetism, and his *tarab*. Saleem Zein for his tender yet fierce love and his eyes that could only speak truth(s). Hussein Baydoun for the laughter and friendship that carried on to the US. Zeina, my oud-instructor, who taught and showed me a new dimension of human creativity. Nadia Bou Ali for welcoming me to Lebanon and to her home. Youmna Makhoulf, whose kindness, boldness, and clarity have inspired me and a generation of academics and activists who are invested in gender and sexual reform. And finally, to Beirut itself, a city whose loves, pains, and treasures have left me the richest boy alive.

In Chicago and in Mexico City, my friends and lovers have provided me with a base of security from which to depart and to which I return. Brandon Schatt, for the quiet confidence in which he loves me, cares for me, and believes in me. I thank him for being a companion to my soul, for housing me in his heart, and for loving freedom as much as I do. Nadine Abi-Younes,

for her perception, lucidity, and stability. Merely being in her presence reassures me of my place in the world. Mirza Shams, for their limitless love and passion, for being a *rafiq* in *tassawuf*, and for giving me an expansive ground and a sky. Delana Tavakol, for her invaluable companionship since college, her loving perceptiveness, and her encouraging me to pursue freedom over convention(s). Bryan Howard, for a love that unlocked my heart and set it in motion. Abel Amezcua for literally picking me up outside of Smartbar, for bringing me into his rich world, and for giving me an education in sound and soul. Jesús Gudi for making me feel like home in Roma (Sur), for our movie nights, our walks in Parque Mexico, and our discoursing on freedom, boys, and politics. And to Paco Ramírez, for how he looks, for our love of cinema, for the world we have created across two cities, and for teaching me patience and forbearance in love.

Finally, I want to thank my family: my sisters Reem and Rama Safadi and my mother Lina Majzoub. Reem, thank you for your unconditional presence in my life, for your unbridled desire to understand despite what you may believe, and for the support that you've given to me in our time together and apart. Rama, for the radiant curiosity in your young eyes and for the way you love me even when I don't think I deserve it. And to Lina, thank you giving me a love that is more than unconditional, one that is beyond human words, politics, and understanding. Though I tried to do so in these pages, I have accepted that your love is neither possible nor necessary to wrap my mind around.

## **Introduction: The Problem of Queer Publicity**

In 2017, judge Rab`i Malouf issued a court ruling that re-interpreted homosexuality as a practice of a “natural right.”<sup>1</sup> A product of nearly fifteen years of pro-queer legal activism, Ma`louf’s ruling effectively “de-clawed” the Penal Code’s Article 534—the law that criminalizes all sexual acts “against the order of nature”—rendering it nearly impossible for the state to criminalize private queer sex among citizens. While queer life in Lebanon had been flourishing in the shadows, 2017 marked the first year in which Lebanese queers went fully public. In May of 2017, queer and secular civil society actors launched the inaugural Beirut Pride and IDAHOT (or the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia). Comprised of a week’s worth of queer community-building events and celebrations, the publicity of Pride was a groundbreaking novelty. So too was the publicity of ordinary queers, their symbols, and their relations. M—a Lebanese gay man in his thirties and a member of a queer-adjacent civil society organization in Beirut—describes scenes that were at exhilarating and alien to Lebanon:

There was a gathering (tjamu`) in Mar Mikhael.<sup>2</sup> A big section of the road was closed. There were no cars and [there were] a lot of people and Pride flags. A handful of shops and cafes lining Armenia Street also hung Pride flags outside. And there were police, standing with their Kalashnikovs. I even remember [there were] two boys kissing and they were in close proximity to the police. And the police pretended not to see. It didn’t make sense. It felt dystopic [and] out of place for you to see [this] in Beirut. It is an alien idea to happen in Lebanon. And outside! We used to do our own Pride events in private, in closed spaces and its fine. But you’re talking about Mar Mikhael. In the heart of Beirut, there were Pride flags. It was a really glorious moment for Lebanon.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Al-Modn. (2017, January 26). *Al-mithliya haq tabi`i*. Al-Modn. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>2</sup> A district in Christian-majority East Beirut, adjacent to the Beirut Port, and a commercial hub packed with cafes, restaurants, bars, and clubs.

<sup>3</sup> M. (2025, May 14). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

By publicly displaying queer symbols and queer love, the 2017 Beirut Pride was indeed groundbreaking: for the first time in the history of the region, Lebanese queers had collectively disclosed their presence to a straight public and, in doing so, had broken the tacit and societal non-disclosure agreement that kept their sexualities largely censored and out of view.

This historic moment of disclosure owed itself to nearly two decades of queer activism and advocacy that successively de-criminalized homosexuality. Beginning in 2002, pro-queer activists and lawyers proposed the reform of Article 534 and opened the first public debate on homosexuality among Lebanese judges and lawyers. In 2005, the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri and the withdrawal of the Syrian Army from Lebanon reorganized the country's political factions and invigorated Lebanon's secular civil society.<sup>4</sup> Taking advantage of this political opening, a group of queer activists founded Helem—Lebanon's first queer advocacy organization—and continued to work on anti-homophobic reform. Three years later, and in 2009, queer and pro-queer lawyers founded Legal Agenda, a research center dedicated to the gender and sexual reform of the Lebanese Penal Code. Over the next decade, the lawyers of Legal Agenda lobbied Lebanese judges, produced reports on the torture of LGBTQ people, and garnered landmark judicial rulings that culminated in the 2017 decision by judge Rabi' Ma'louf who ruled that homosexuality is *not* against “the order of nature” but a practice of a natural right.<sup>5</sup> This and a series of precedent rulings have rendered it nearly impossible for the Lebanese state to prosecute private gay sex between citizens.

Indeed, the 2017 ruling led to a dramatic decrease in state-led crackdowns on private and semi-private queer spaces in the country. Before this, and in 2013, for instance, Lebanon's

---

<sup>4</sup> For a deeper analysis of this moment as well as the 2006 Cedar Revolution, see Salloukh, B. F., Rabie Barakat, Al-Habbal, J. S., Khattab, L. W., & Shoghig Mikaelian. (2015). *Politics of sectarianism in postwar Lebanon*. Pluto Press.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of this decriminalization process.

Internal Security Forces (ISF) raided Ghost (*Taif*)—what used to be the most famous gay club in Beirut’s Qarantina District—arrested its clientele and closed the establishment.<sup>6</sup> In 2016, the ISF raided Hammam al-Agha—a gay bathhouse in Hamra—and arrested its mostly Syrian workers.<sup>7</sup> In addition to raiding establishments, the ISF also would engage in baiting practices that apprehended individual gay men and women through dating apps, denouncements, and other means.<sup>8</sup> However, and by the time of the 2017 ruling, incidents of individual queer arrest became more sparse while queer advocacy and activism became more public.

In these ways, and in the two decades that preceded the 2019 Lebanon Revolution, queer activism had worked to generate the conditions for the publicity of queer culture and politics in Lebanon. As we have seen, judge Ma’louf’s ruling set the stage for Beirut’s first queer Pride in 2017. In 2018, Helem and the Arab Foundation for Equality (another prominent LGBT advocacy group in Lebanon) organized Nedwa, a conference that brought together queer activists, scholars, and policymakers from across the Middle East. That year, the Arab Foundation also produced a music video—“Kil al-Alwan” (All the Colors)—that featured members of Beirut’s queer community avowing and celebrating gender and sexual plurality.<sup>9</sup> And in August of 2019, Mashrou’ Leila—a queer-identified Lebanese indie rock band—was set to perform in Lebanon’s Byblos Music Festival. Given the vocal queer politics of the band’s lead singer, the concert would have been a site for public queer congregation around a collective queer identity.

---

<sup>6</sup> Nammour, K. (2013, December). *Dekwaneh’s “no gay land” triggers debate on homophobia - legal agenda*. Legal Agenda. <https://english.legal-agenda.com/dekwanehs-no-gay-land-triggers-debate-on-homophobia/>

<sup>7</sup> Wansa, S. (2014, November 11). *Torture at every stage: The unofficial narrative of the hammam al-Agha raid - legal agenda*. Legal Agenda. <https://english.legal-agenda.com/torture-at-every-stage-the-unofficial-narrative-of-the-hammam-al-agma-raid/>

<sup>8</sup> Key interlocutors in the dissertation have recounted these experiences, which have happened mostly in the first decade of the 2000s.

<sup>9</sup> Manel Mallat. (2019, July 4). *Manel mallat - kol al alwan [official music video] (2019)*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfYokXcyU5c>



While these events may have signaled a progressive trajectory and a growing social acceptance of queer identity and culture in Lebanon, the de-criminalization of private queer sex in has led both state and societal actors to mobilize against queer publicity instead. In May of 2017, the ISF turned a blind eye to gay kiss in front of them, only to raid and shut down Beirut Pride a few days into the festivities. In 2018, units from the ISF worked with Sunni religious authorities and Beirut street gangs to cancel Nedwa, a Beirut-based and regional conference on gender and sexuality.<sup>10</sup> Though the state did not prosecute anyone, it blacklisted foreign LGBTQ activists and scholars from entering the country.<sup>11</sup> In 2019, state inaction against the purported artistic trespasses of Mashrou` Leila—a Lebanese and queer indie-rock band—incited a grassroots censorship campaign that succeeded in canceling their Byblos performance.<sup>12</sup> And while Lebanon’s queer communities were publicly out in the 2019 Revolution, the onset of financial collapse, the beginning of COVID, and the devastation of the Beirut Port Explosion had led queer publicity and politics to take a backseat.

Indeed, the years of collapse (late 2019—early 2022) witnessed moments neither of queer publicity nor of homophobic backlash. Nevertheless, the wins of progressive and anti-sectarian MPs in the May 2022 elections encouraged activists to organize and host Beirut Pride once more. One month later, and in June of 2022, the public circulation of Pride advertisements and the public display of a gay rainbow flag in Beirut ignited the most ferocious homophobic campaign in Lebanon’s history.<sup>13</sup> Bringing together communities, organizations, elites, clerics from across Lebanon’s sects, the campaign incited popular anti-gay collective action and culminated in a

---

<sup>10</sup> *Lebanon: Entry ban follows gender, sexuality conference.* (2019, August 27). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/27/lebanon-entry-ban-follows-gender-sexuality-conference>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *"Difa'an "an al masihiya"... taharukat w tahdidat l-man" haf1 "mashrou leila' fi lubnan.* (2019, July 22). Raseef 22. <https://raseef22.net/article/1074477>

<sup>13</sup> See chapter 2 and 3.

securitarian ban on all Pride-related events, assemblies, and gatherings.<sup>14</sup> And though the ban was overturned by Lebanon’s Supreme Court, the targeting of public queer bodies, signs, and spaces gained further momentum in 2023 and gave rise to a more organized, violent, and inter-sectarian homophobia in the country.

Seen in this light, and since 2017, homophobic opposition has primarily responded to the problem of queer publicity in Lebanon. Across sectarian divides, homophobic discourses have explicitly politicized the public “promotion of deviancy” (*tarweej al shuzooz*) as a threat to *all* of Lebanon’s sects. For instance, Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi’s 2022 memo figures the Pride-related “promotion” of “deviancy” as a threat to all of Lebanon’s “Abrahamic religions” (*adyan al samawiya*).<sup>15</sup> Clerics like Maronite Father Abdo Abu Kassem cite the “promotion of homosexuality” as a threat to Lebanon’s “plural sects” and its interreligious civil peace.<sup>16</sup> The Soldiers of God—an anti-gay vigilante group—have militantly warned against the public presence of queer symbols and the public promotion of “deviancy” in Christian-majority areas.<sup>17</sup> And in Tripoli, ordinary men demonstrate against the promotion of a phenomenon (*thahira*) that violates all religious doctrines in Lebanon.<sup>18</sup> Especially after the 2019 Revolution, queer publicity in Lebanon has given rise to a new, homophobic, and inter-sectarian discourses that frame queer “promotion” as a threat to Lebanon’s entire sectarian system. This framing has allowed homophobia to work as a counter-revolutionary strategy, mobilizing individuals, communities, and elites anew and around Lebanon’s seemingly failing sectarian settlement.

Historically and in the present, discourses that frame queer “promotion” as a threat have been a key feature of homophobic mobilization around the world. In Thatcherite Britain, for

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> See chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> See chapter 1.

<sup>17</sup> See chapter 2.

<sup>18</sup> See chapter 3.

instance, societal and state actors mobilized against homosexual publicity by banning anything from queer cultural products to individual queer schoolteachers. In the 1980s US, convoluted laws around the disclosure and non-disclosure of gay identities similarly placed queer individuals in double binds of secrecy.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the institutionalized practice of “don’t ask don’t tell” in the US and elsewhere has responded to fears around what public queer disclosures threaten to do. In today’s era of global homophobic resurgence, fears around the publicity and promotion of queer identity are re-articulated in discourses about the “grooming” of children. It has led to the passage of laws like the “Don’t Say Gay” Florida law that effectively prevents k-12 education about gender and sexuality. Around the globe, the threat of queer “promotion” has mobilized censorship campaigns “from above” and “from below” that attempt to contain the public circulation of queer knowledge, queer signs, and visibly queer bodies.

Anchoring my investigation in contemporary Lebanon, my dissertation takes seriously the claims, discourses, and representations that figure queer publicity and promotion as a political threat to certain societies and states. In that light, I ask the following: what political threat does queer publicity pose to Lebanese sectarianism? What are the political conditions, uses, and effects of homophobia in pre and post-Revolution Lebanon? Finally, what does politicized homophobia in Lebanon tell us about the threat that queer publicity poses to national political orders more generally?

### Argument

I argue that queer publicity—that is, publicly accessible knowledge of gender and sexual pluralism, publicly displayed queer symbols (like Pride flags), and publicly circulating queer and trans bodies—threatens Lebanese sectarianism because publicity promotes a new and influential

---

<sup>19</sup> For full discussion of this time, see the introduction of Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.

form of collective identity that threatens to give rise to queer conversion. Here, I theorize conversion as a process of transformation whereby queer and not-yet-queer subjects encounter knowledge about the existence of queerness and allow that knowledge to transform their gender, sexual, and religious identities. In turn, the public uptake and disclosure of queer forms of identity and social organization could entail a process of de-adherence—even defection—from sectarian groups. [So too does political organization]. Put simply, queer youth, once organized around their sexual identity, could abandon their filial duty to biologically, financially, and socially reproduce their families and communities. As such, queer publicity threatens sectarianism by promoting the uptake of a political identity that disrupts the reproduction of sectarian, familial, and hetero-patrilineal lineages—lineages upon which the sectarian state founds and perpetuates itself.

On a more fundamental level, queer publicity threatens sectarianism insofar as queer identification runs counter to the conception of heterosexuality that all sectarian groups share and that, in turn, allows them to share public power and space in the state. Following feminist scholar Monique Wittig, I refer to this conception of heterosexuality as a “heterosexual contract” that grounds Lebanon’s power-sharing settlement.<sup>20</sup> On my account, this heterosexual contract has two key stipulations: 1) it mandates the appearance of a heterosexually absolutist public that is 2) secured by the public non-disclosure of non-normative gender and sexual identities. By encouraging the public avowal of queer identification, queer publicity thus exposes what I call “heterosexual absolutism”—the idea-cum-law that there exists no sexuality but heterosexuality—as a founding fiction. In doing so, queer publicity also introduces a new and sexual form of pluralism into politics. This undermines the position of religion as the privileged form of political pluralism in Lebanon, the power that religious authorities exercise in the state,

---

<sup>20</sup> See the essay “On the Social Contract” in Wittig, M. (1992). *The straight mind and other essays*. Beacon Press.

and the role of sectarian factions as the principal players in Lebanon's political arena. From this angle, the publicity, uptake, and spread of queer identification indexes broader processes of secularization that threaten to unmake sectarianism and to re-make it into a different kind of socio-political order. In that regard, I use conversion to signify processes not only of subjective transformation but also of processes that transform and transition bodies politic.

In the dissertation, I show how the “converting” threat of queer publicity exposes four different dimensions of Lebanon's power-sharing settlement and their precarious dependence on the maintenance of public heterosexuality. In four registers, I also show how homophobia answers this precarity by politicizing sectarianism's heterosexual foundations. For instance, the first chapter shows how queer cultural production appropriates religious symbols and threatens their public legal status in sectarianism. By pre-figuring a public order in which neither heterosexuality nor religion is sacred, public queer art threatens to *symbolically* convert—or transition—sectarianism into a secular political regime. In chapter two, I show how queer settlement in Beirut threatens to unmake the territorial boundaries and membership criteria of sectarian-majority areas. Here, public queer settlement threatens to convert the sectarian identity of urban territory. In chapter three, I show how attempts to legally decriminalize homosexuality involve transforming legal conceptions of (heterosexual) human nature in the Lebanese Penal Code—conceptions upon which the authority of Lebanon's religious courts depends. Finally, the fourth chapter deals with how the publicity of queer education threatens to transform the political allegiances of queer, women, and secular subjects. Through these four lenses, I show how queer publicity threatens heterosexual absolutism, and in doing so, threatens the symbolic, territorial, legal, and geopolitical ground of sectarianism.

Responding to these threats, homophobia works as a strategy of sectarian reproduction. Not figuring it as a universal category, I illustrate how the political uses of homophobia in Lebanon are inextricable from the sectarian discourses, contests, and structures from which they emerge and on which they work. Through four different aspects, I illuminate how homophobia opposes queer publicity, maintains queer non-disclosure, and perpetuates the appearance of a heterosexually absolutist order. By politicizing sectarianism's heterosexual contract, homophobia also works to shore up the symbolic, territorial, legal, and geopolitical terms of Lebanon's power-sharing agreement. Incited in the wake of the 2019 Lebanon Revolution and the 2022 Parliamentary Elections, inter-sectarian homophobia has worked to stalemate transition and to block anti-sectarian transformation from within. In that sense, homophobia in Lebanon appears not as a phenomenon of democratic backsliding but as a phenomenon of counter-revolution, one that emerges in a time of (partial) democratization and factional deadlock.

#### A Note on the Term "Queer"

In the dissertation, I use the term queer to signify homosexuality, LGBTQ, as well as most non-normative and non-straight sexual identities. In the Arabic, the closest term that corresponds to queerness or homosexuality is the recently coined term "al-mithliya," which comes from "mithl" or "same." Al-mithliya corrects for the derogatory term "al-shuzooz," which appears in homophobic discourses and denotes "deviancy," a pathological condition of sexual corruption. "Liwat"—a term that means "sodomy"—comes from the Qur`anic myth of the Prophet Lot and comes to name the (homo)sexual practice(s) which Lot's people lived by. "Lutti," or sodomite, is the derogatory name given to those who practice homosexuality. It is also a term that has been re-appropriated and positively re-signified by queers, in the same way the term "queer" has been in the West. Another recent and respectful term in Lebanon that is used to

denote queer *communities* is “mujtama’ al-meem” or “the society of M,” “meem” being the first letter of “mithliya.” This term appears in the discourses of anti-homophobic, pro-queer, and civil society actors. For the purposes of the dissertation, I use only the term queer, differentiating in the text between queer desire, queer identity, and queer communities.

### Background Conditions: Sectarianism in Stalemate

Because of its historically entrenched heterogeneities—its sectarian power-sharing agreement, the diversity of its population (staggering refugee and migrant populations), and its regional proxy position—Lebanon serves as a particularly generative case for studying the political uses and effects of homophobia. Neither authoritarian nor centralized, Lebanon is a state held together by a power-sharing agreement between the elites of the country’s major sects. Enshrined in the constitution, laws of sectarian representation bear on the apportionment of parliamentary seats, the division and function of state bureaucracies, and voting regulations for Lebanese citizens.

Emerging out of an encounter between European and Ottoman imperial powers in the 1860s, Lebanese sectarianism took on the paradoxical dimensions of a “political solution and social malady.”<sup>21</sup> In principle, sectarianism was imagined to be the solution to the problem of religious plurality in Lebanon.<sup>22</sup> The political fragmentation of the state would ensure that no one group possessed a true monopoly on power and violence. And, although sectarianism would take on the key explanatory variable for war and violence in the state, the sectarian power-sharing settlement foreclosed on the possibility of centralized state violence and authoritarian politics.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Weiss, M. (2010). *In the shadow of sectarianism: Law, shi’ism, and the making of modern Lebanon*. Harvard University Press.7.

<sup>22</sup> Makdisi, U. (2000). *The culture of sectarianism: Community, history, and violence in nineteenth-century ottoman Lebanon*. University of California Press.

<sup>23</sup> Makdisi, U. (2019). *Age of coexistence : The ecumenical frame and the making of the modern arab world*. Univ Of California Press.

However, sectarianism provided fertile conditions for political clientelism and elite corruption. Through sophisticated patronage networks, populations have been tethered to their zu'ama (political bosses who represent confessional communities) through material tactics (like vote buying) and other ideological mechanisms.<sup>24</sup> In fact, political sectarianism's function depends as much on the latter as on the former, with politicians persuading their populations that sectarian representation is all that stands between them and the outbreak of sectarian civil war.<sup>25</sup> In this way, sectarianism's survival is contingent on its own precarity.

Despite episodes of extended and isolated “sectarian” violence—that are, in truth, multiply determined—the Lebanese political arena was and continues to be vibrant and contentious; it is populated by a diverse array of political actors and groups. This contention is supported by Lebanon's historically liberal freedom of speech and press laws that set it apart from the rest of the Arab world.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, sectarian affiliations and clientelist relations heavily structure Lebanon's press and media landscape, producing an array of sectarian, religious, and secular publics.<sup>27</sup> Religious institutions enjoy a wide-margin of autonomy within Lebanon, even as their power is legally circumscribed by the state above them; their jurisdiction pertains to matters of personal status: the family, marriage, inheritance, and birth and death rites.<sup>28</sup> Despite the limits on the roles of church and mosque in Lebanon, religious institutions are very much embedded within overlapping clientelist networks that link them to constituencies,

---

<sup>24</sup> See Cammett, M. (2014). *Compassionate communalism*. Cornell University Press.;

Deeb, L., & Harb, M. (2013). *Leisurely islam : Negotiating geography and morality in shi'ite south beirut*. Princeton University Press; Khalaf, S. (2009). *Lebanon Adrift*; Nucho, J. R. (2016). *Everyday sectarianism in urban lebanon: Infrastructures, public services.*. Princeton University Press.. Salibi, K. (1988). *A House of Many Mansions*.

<sup>25</sup> Hermez, S. (2017). *War is coming between past and future violence in lebanon*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>26</sup> For a historic account of Lebanon's vibrant and contentious publics, see Toufoul Abou-Hodeib. (2017). *A taste for home*. Stanford University Press; and Ogle, V. (2015). *The Global Transformation of Time*.

<sup>27</sup> Marwan Kraidy. (2010). *Reality television and arab politics : Contention in public life*. Cambridge Univ. Press.

<sup>28</sup> Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, secularism, and the state in lebanon*. Stanford University Press.



political parties, and state institutions. They exercise a considerable degree of political power in the country.

But alongside religious institutions and sectarian publics are non-sectarian and secular-identifying counter-publics, as well as an active civil society of local, regional and international NGOs. In the fifteen years leading up to the 2019 Lebanon Revolution, these organizations and collectives have been at the forefront of anti-sectarian contestation. With the withdrawal of the Syrian Army from Lebanon in 2005 and the Cedar Revolution in 2006, Lebanon’s civil society began to flourish.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this was when queer and pro-queer organizations like Helem, the Arab Foundation for Equality, and Legal Agenda were formally registered with the state. With the outbreak of the Arab Spring, anti-sectarian movements in Lebanon—like “al-sha’ib yureed isqat al nizam” (or “the nation demands the fall of the regime)—began mobilizing among civil society contingents.<sup>30</sup> And while this movement was stymied by sectarian crackdowns in 2012, another movement emerged in 2015—“til’et rihetkon” or “You Stink”—which responded to the harrowing garbage crisis that elite corruption had produced in Beirut.<sup>31</sup> Building on the momentum of this movement, civil society actors launched “Beirut Madinati” (Beirut My City), a municipal electoral campaign that pushed for anti-sectarian reform.<sup>32</sup> Though it did not win any seats, the campaign challenged the status quo by bringing non-sectarian civil society actors into the political arena. It also set the stage for the 2019 Lebanon Revolution.

In October of 2019, the Lebanon Revolution emerged from and showcased the growing power of the country’s anti-sectarian civil society. Not only did the revolution mobilize hundreds

---

<sup>29</sup> Salloukh, B. F., Rabie Barakat, Al-Habbal, J. S., Khattab, L. W., & Shoghig Mikaelian. (2015). *Politics of sectarianism in postwar Lebanon*. Pluto Press.

<sup>30</sup> Abu-Chakra, M. (2021, April 20). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Jazeera. (2015, August 25). *Til’et rihitkon tuhiz jidran al-sultah bi-lubnan*. Aljazeera.

<sup>32</sup> Beirut Madinati: Another Future Is Possible. (2025). *Beirut madinati: Another future is possible*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/beirut-madinati-another-future-possible>

of thousands of Lebanese. It also led to the formation of anti-sectarian activist organizations—groups like La Haki (For My Right), Muwatineen w Muwatinat Fi Dawla (Citizens in a State), etc.—that proposed secular political alternatives.<sup>33</sup> Queer activists and communities were also out in Lebanon’s squares, making claims on the current and the future Lebanese state.<sup>34</sup> With the onset of Lebanon’s fiscal collapse, the beginning of the COVID Pandemic, and the escalation of formal and informal repression, however, the solidarity and euphoria of cross-sectarian collective action fell apart. Nevertheless, and despite these contingencies, Lebanese civil society—including the newly formed activist organizations—continued their work. So too did an array of independent and anti-sectarian candidates who were running for the 2022 Parliamentary Elections. Surprising the entire nation, the May 2022 elections yielded 13 independent MPs, rupturing the monopoly sectarian factions exercised over Lebanon’s Parliament and signifying (at least) a partial democratic transition.<sup>35</sup> This terrified and mobilized the sectarian establishment. From 2020 and onwards, we see sectarian factions deadlocking anti-sectarian reform; fighting each other in the streets; forming domestic and geopolitical alliances; and shuffling material and human resources to secure their power and portion in the state.

It is in this context of revolution, collapse, transition, and deadlock that homophobia comes to do its political work. As we shall see, the first moment of homophobic incitement post-Revolution occurs just one month after the 2022 Parliamentary Elections when Pride Month flags and advertisements publicly circulated in Lebanon. Indeed, queer publicity (rightly) condensed the threat of anti-sectarian transition and articulated it as a process of gender and

---

<sup>33</sup> I. (2020, November 3). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>34</sup> Younes, R. (2020, May 7). *“If Not Now, When? Queer and Trans People Reclaim their Power in Lebanon’s Revolution.”* Wwww.hrw.org. <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2020/05/07/if-not-now-when-queer-and-trans-people-reclaim-their-power>

<sup>35</sup> Reuters. (2022, May 17). *What is the make-up of Lebanon’s new parliament?* *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-make-up-lebanons-new-parliament-2022-05-17/>

sexual reform. Given the homophobic societal consensus that reigns in Lebanon, the potential of queer equality and freedom allowed sectarian actors to use homophobia as a tool of counter-revolution. Throughout the dissertation, we see how anti-gay discourses figured transition as a sexual conspiracy and attacked the popularity of anti-sectarian coalitions in Parliament and civil society. But we also see how homophobia incites anti-homophobic opposition, generating stalemates between sectarian and anti-sectarian factions that work to perpetually delay reform and bolster the sectarian settlement in times of political, fiscal, and geopolitical crises.

### Literature Review: Existing Approaches to Homophobia

In existing social scientific literature, political homophobia has been approached in four distinct ways: 1) as an elite tool that intentionally diverts public attention from real political crises; 2) as a state-led practice that formally criminalizes flesh-and-blood queer bodies; 3) as a kind of moral panic that demonizes queer subjects; and 4) as a type of exclusionary social movement that leads to democratic backsliding. Though I draw upon these bodies of work, these approaches primarily understand queers as a persecuted scapegoat, the queer threat as a false construction, and homophobia as a displaced (mis)reaction to unrelated political problems.

#### I. Homophobia as an Elite Tool

In recent years, political scientists have analyzed political homophobia as a “conscious” and “purposeful” strategy that is used by elite and state actors to consolidate their authority and to divert or distract public attention from unrelated political and economic issues.<sup>36</sup> In these

---

<sup>36</sup> For instance, and for scholars Michael Bosia and Meredith Weiss, homophobia drives “state-building and retrenchment,” is produced through transnational influence peddling and alliances, and is integrated into “questions of collective identity and the complicated legacies of colonialism.” Similarly, scholar Ashley Courrier considers “politicized homophobia” in Malawi as a “strategy used by African political elites” to consolidate their moral and political authority.” [Bosia, M. J., & Weiss, M. L. (2013). *Global homophobia : states, movements, and the politics of oppression*. University Of Illinois Press. (1-2); Currier, A. (2019). *Politicizing sex in contemporary africa: Homophobia in malawi*. Cambridge University Press. (1).

accounts, homophobia appears as a “modular” and transposable political phenomenon whose functions are consistent despite the diversity of political contexts in which it appears.

There are two related problems in this literature. First, political homophobia is understood as an intentional strategy that works mostly as a smokescreen. Here, actors—mostly state elites—consciously use homophobia to “discredit” queer and non-queer opponents, to garner power, and to divert popular attention from veritable crises that are not related to queer sexuality at all.<sup>37</sup> This “diversion” hypothesis arises from the proposition that, second, homophobia generates a queer scapegoat—an “LGBT bogeyman”—that is an easy (because marginalized and powerless) target for villainization and victimization.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Bosia, Currier, and others in this tradition imply that queers do not and cannot pose a real threat to existing social and political orders. Instead, this scholarly approach leaves us with a view of homophobia as a set of cynical maneuvers by self-interested and deceitful elites.

## II. Homophobia as a Practice of State Securitization

Second, and in some strands of anthropological scholarship, homophobia has been treated as a state-led practice of sexual governance and policing. For instance, Paul Amar illustrates how, in the Egyptian and Brazilian contexts, circulating logics about sexual security enable alliances between militaristic states, right-wing social movements, and civil society actors.<sup>39</sup> Discourses about sexual threat further allow states to justify militaristic interventions that criminalize queer (and other marginalized) populations in order to construct and police national

---

<sup>37</sup> Ashley Currier writes, “In the “context of crisis,” politicized homophobia can become a strategy of convenience, allowing political elites to divert national attention toward gender and sexual dissidence and away from manufactured crises and orchestrated deceit. Believing that most citizens harbor antihomosexual sentiments, elites may seize this reactive strategy to “win the support of the masses.” Thus, politicized homophobia functions as a “tool” political elites can use to shore up their weakening grip on power.” (Currier 24)

<sup>38</sup> “State homophobia” Bosia writes, “. . . conceptualizes and produces tradition through an increasingly modular LGBT boogeyman as key claims in building state and nation.” Ibid 34.

<sup>39</sup> Amar analyzes how “new forms of sexualized and moralized governance that emerged in the 1980s and circulated between zones of struggle” in the Global South, more generally. Amar, P. (2013). *The security archipelago: human-security states, sexuality politics, and the end of neoliberalism*. Duke University Press. 3.

urban space.<sup>40</sup> In the Indian context, Jyoti Puri argues for how forms of state-led sexual governance racialize not only queer bodies but also Sikh ones.<sup>41</sup> Drawing on Foucault’s analysis of biopolitics, she further points to how the management of sexuality produces a “state effect”—or the illusion that states are normal, unified, and indispensable to the functioning of the social order.<sup>42</sup> Adding to Puri’s analysis, Maya Mikdashi examines how the Lebanese state violates queer and non-queer bodies and generates for itself a sense of unity and omnipresence.<sup>43</sup> And in the American context, Jasbir Puar describes how discourses around homosexual-inclusivity in the US facilitated the state-sponsored demonization of Muslims inside the US.<sup>44</sup> For Puar, the state’s management of queer sexuality has also played a key role in justifying American imperial ventures in the Middle East and elsewhere.<sup>45</sup>

In the dissertation, I think with this scholarship as to how sexual threat is implicated in the management of demography, population, and national urban space. However, I place my analytic emphasis not on top-down processes of state securitization, but on how homophobia becomes a site of inter-factional struggle and how demands for anti-gay securitization often come “from below”—that is, from popular and societal actors. I also point to how homophobia

---

<sup>40</sup> Amar writes how, “two historically, culturally, and politically distinct global cities, Rio and Cairo, experienced a similar fusion of paramilitarization processes and humanitarian rescue-type interventions as urban-planning projects became reconfigured and re-gendered in an effort to arrest what policymakers in both cities referred to as ‘the perversions of globalization.’” Ibid 67.

<sup>41</sup> Puri, J. (2016). *Sexual states: Governance and the struggle over the antisodomy law in india*. Duke University Press.

<sup>42</sup> “Governing sexuality,” Puri elucidates, “helps sustain the illusion that states are a normal feature of social life, unified and rational entities, intrinsically distinct from society, and indispensable to maintaining social order” (5).

<sup>43</sup> Mikdashi theorizes Lebanon as an “epidermal state,” whose violations “materializes the state as bounded, contained, and sovereign entity as it turns inwards, exerting violence against people positioned differently, and at various levels of precarity, in a sextarian system” (155). Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, secularism, and the state in lebanon*. Stanford University Press.

<sup>44</sup> Puar, J. K. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Duke University Press.

<sup>45</sup> According to Puar, “national recognition and inclusion, here signaled as the annexation of homosexual jargon, is contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary. At work in this dynamic is a form of sexual exceptionalism—the emergence of national homosexuality, what I term “homonationalism”—that corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire. Further, this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects.” (Ibid 2).

in Lebanon does not generate the appearance of unified state sovereignty but reveals a fragmented state whose different parts—parties, communities, and institutions—contest each other. This is not to say that Lebanon is a “weak state.” Rather, it is to illustrate how homophobia works in a non-authoritarian, pluralist, and factional political regime.

Furthermore, and by examining processes in which queer *and* non-queer bodies are criminalized, these approaches risk figuring the political problem that queers pose to states as interchangeable with those of other marginalized populations (like sex workers, working class youth, foreigners, religious minorities, etc.). While the analysis of intersecting marginalization(s) is critical, my approach foregrounds the distinct dimensions of the queer threat and the specific modes of securitization that respond to it. On this note, and like the political homophobia literatures, scholars of sexual security theorize queers primarily as vulnerable scapegoats of persecution.<sup>46</sup> Though I too consider queers to be scapegoated in some ways, my account shifts the focus from the unjust criminalization of queer bodies to how the public expression of a political queer identity in Lebanon threatens to unmake state *and* societal architectures.

### III. Homophobia as a Kind of Moral Panic

A third approach to homophobia casts social mobilization around sexual threat as type of moral panic. Like the above approaches, moral panics scholars largely consider the threat of sexuality to be amplified, imagined, or outright mendacious. In *Sex Panic and the Punitive State*, for example, Roger Lancaster defines a moral panic as responding to “a false, exaggerated, or ill-defined moral threat to society.”<sup>47</sup> Echoing the political homophobia scholarship, Lancaster also

---

<sup>46</sup> For instance, Mikdashy contends that “Homophobia is most viciously deployed against people whose multiple vulnerabilities – legal status, class, nationality, gender performance, and race – make them more available for violence in Lebanon” (174). This is absolutely true. Nevertheless, the fact that a group is vulnerable does not make it unthreatening. In fact, political systems disenfranchise groups precisely because they are a threat to reigning orders.

<sup>47</sup> Sex panics, for Lancaster, give rise to “bloated imaginings of risk” and “inflated conceptions of harm.” Their objects are often “imaginary folk devils,” victims, and scapegoats who serve as targets for the projection of social fears and desires.” (2) [Lancaster, R. N. (2011). *Sex panic and the punitive state*. University of California Press.

figures sex panics as expressing—in an “irrational, spectral, and misguided way”—social anxieties that are not related to sex at all.<sup>48</sup> For Lancaster, then, panics construct an imagined threat and a scapegoat. Writing on sex panics, Gayle Rubin also figures sexual threat as imagined, queer people as “innocuous,” and homophobic reactions as irrational displacements of social issues that “bear no intrinsic connection” to sexuality.<sup>49</sup> And while moral panics scholar Stanley Cohen does not exactly take threat to be false, he nevertheless considers societal reactions to threat to be “disproportionate to the actual seriousness of the event.”<sup>50</sup> This is also why Cohen insists on the term “panic” in the first place: it exposes societal reaction as “tendentious”—(that is, slanted in a particular ideological direction)—and misplaced or displaced (that is, aimed, whether deliberately or thoughtlessly) at a target which is not the ‘real’ problem.”<sup>51</sup>

Applying the lens of moral panics to homophobia, we thus see how the queer appears as a demonized scapegoat, the threat appears as false (or amplified), and homophobia appears as a

---

<sup>48</sup>Panics displace *other* unrelated problems onto the figure of the sexual deviant. And they mobilize societal affect that is misplaced: the panic, enmity, and contempt follows from a misapprehension of real risk and threat. And they incite political processes that victimize innocent populations and securitize the public while diverting attention from the *real* threat at hand: the punitive state. [Ibid].

<sup>49</sup> “Disputes over sexual behavior,” she writes, often become the vehicle for displacing social anxieties and discharging their attendant emotional intensity” (4). The wars over sexuality, Rubin continues, are often “aimed at phony targets” and “conducted with misplaced passions.” (25). Like Lancaster, Rubin holds that the personal and social apprehensions that sex panics express bear no “intrinsic connection” to queer sexuality (25). Instead, social fears “attach” to a sexual scapegoat – “an unfortunate sexual activity or population” who are innocent victims. For Rubin, homosexuality, prostitution, and other deviant activities are “innocuous.” As such, sex panics neither point to nor alleviate any real problem. Rather, they generate “phantasms” and aim at “chimeras and signifiers” in order to reproduce an ideological dominance of heterosexuality. Thus, and on Rubin’s account, heterosexual ideology constructs a false threat and mobilizes around a false enemy who is, in fact, a socially innocent and politically harmless scapegoat. [Rubin, G. (2011). *Deviations: a gayle rubin reader*. Duke University Press].

<sup>50</sup> Cohen concedes that, in the absence of a universal metric for judging threat, it is impossible to arrive at an objective understanding of threat. Nor should it be the sociologist’s job to assess risk or threat, but to show the different ways in which it is perceived. Nevertheless, he cautions against retreating into a kind of relativism of threat-perception. There is still a qualitative way to name and expose disproportionate responses and “over-reaction (exaggeration, prejudice, and panic)” (43). As such, and though the threat of any given folk devil might not be entirely imagined, Cohen maintains that, more often than not, the framing of threat amplifies risk and produces a disproportionate societal reaction. [Cohen, S. (1972). *Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of the mods and rockers* (3rd ed.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. (Original work published 1972). 34-40.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 34.

displaced societal (over)reaction. And as such, these accounts fall short in analyzing how queerness could pose any societal or political harm at all. Not taking queers as merely a scapegoat, my account takes seriously the real political threat that a public queer identity poses; it also treats homophobic mobilization not as an expression of misplaced and “irrational” affect, but as responses to a problem in the sexual organization of state and society.

#### IV. Homophobia as a Type of “Anti-Gender” Social Movement

Finally, a fourth approach to homophobia appears in recent sociological literatures that treat anti-gay and “anti-gender” mobilization as a kind of populist social movement that scapegoats gender and sexual minorities and symptomizes democratic backsliding. Writing on the East European context, scholars like Agnieszka Graff and Andrea Peto further consider “anti-Gender” ideology to be a coherent, substantive, and transposable formation that animates anti-gay and anti-trans social movements around the world.<sup>52</sup> And though these authors attempt to take seriously the anti-gay and anti-gender concerns of these movements, they ultimately figure “gender” as an “empty signifier” through which heterogenous factions unite to roll back the rights of queers and women.<sup>53</sup>

While these scholars provide important traction on the content of anti-gender ideology, they too frame queers as only a scapegoat. They also figure homophobic mobilization as a phenomenon that is largely transferrable and external to the political order from which it

---

<sup>52</sup> Köttig, M., Bitzan, R., & Petö, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43533-6>; Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2021). *Anti-Gender politics in the populist moment*. Routledge; Peto, A. (2018, September). *Gender as a symbolic glue makes european freedom of education at stake*. Ssrn.com. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3898855](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3898855).

<sup>53</sup>In *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, scholars Agnieszka Graff and Elzbieta Korolczuk explore the “growing visibility of anti-gender movements, discourses, and campaigns” in contemporary Poland and Eastern Europe.<sup>53</sup> Drawing from Laclau and Mouffe’s account of hegemony, Graff conceptualizes gender as an “empty signifier” that relates issues concerning “the family, kinship, sexuality, and the nation” in a single chain of equivalence.<sup>53</sup> By generating a chain of equivalence between disparate causes, anti-gender ideologies work to politically constitute a homogenous and anti-pluralist version of “the people.” (Graff 2). In a similar vein, scholar Andrea Peto denotes “gender” as a “symbolic glue” that relates disparate right-wing actors in common and concerted action.



emerges. And though these literatures attend to the work of anti-gender ideology in different locations, their analysis of homophobia and transphobia remains similar across contexts. Departing from the view, I use the Lebanese case to show how homophobic mobilization does not propound a globally transposable “anti-Gender” ideology but works to reproduce a specific political order. Furthermore, I argue for how, in the case of homophobia, “heterosexuality” does not serve as an “empty signifier,” but as a substantively specific one. In Lebanon, this specificity relates to 1) heterosexuality’s foundational role in the architecture of the sectarian state and 2) the federating—rather than “unifying”—work that heterosexuality, as a signifier, does for homophobic actors. In other words, invocations of a shared heterosexuality in Lebanon does not smooth over differences among factions but works to accentuate them. Finally, I also suggest that homophobia works not only as an anti-pluralist and authoritarian phenomenon. Instead, the Lebanese case evidences how homophobic discourse invokes pluralism and deadlocks nascent processes of democratization.<sup>54</sup>

#### My Contribution: The Reality of the Queer Threat and the Granularity of Homophobia

In sum, these four approaches to political homophobia largely figure the queer as a scapegoat, the queer threat as a false construction, and homophobic mobilization as a misplaced reaction to political issues that are unrelated to the specific problem queer sexuality poses. Though I draw on these literatures, I argue that, in Lebanon, queer publicity threatens the sectarian order insofar as it publicizes a new and non-sectarian form of collective identity whose uptake and spread unmakes the public heterosexuality upon which sectarianism is founded and through which sectarian families, communities, and factions reproduce their influence and

---

<sup>54</sup> Here, we glean another important difference: while scholars figure anti-sexuality and anti-gender mobilization as a symptom of democratic backsliding, the Lebanese case shows how sexuality is politicized to halt, oppose, or stalemate processes of democratization. In this way, my account about the relationship between homophobia and democratic politics is informed by scholars Nancy Bermeo and Dan Slater’s understandings of democratic erosion as a dynamic process of careening and stalemate, rather than “backsliding.”

authority. Here, I draw from queer theorist Lee Edelman, who considers queerness to be a veritable threat to the biological reproduction and ideological perpetuation of society.<sup>55</sup> While Edelman conceptualizes the queer threat in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, I instead advance a granular and ethnographic approach that traces how and why homophobia works to reproduce specific kinds of political regimes.

In that regard, I think with scholar Christopher Chitty, who sees homophobia not as a “timeless force of social exclusion” but as emerging from “concrete socioeconomic conditions.”<sup>56</sup> Though illuminating, Chitty’s materialist analysis of sexual repression risks rendering homophobia an epiphenomenon of capitalist organization. To complexify this view, I draw on Joseph Fischel, who considers sex panics and repression to be articulations of “deeper and diachronic” problem places that are related to the political and sexual organization of society.<sup>57</sup> Here, I use Monique Wittig and Eve Sedgwick to further theorize the specific problem-spaces that homophobia articulates in Lebanon: namely how queer publicity threatens the ways in which heterosexuality and religion are publicly instituted in sectarianism. I also bring in my ethnography to argue that the threat of public queerness pertains to quagmires in the sectarian settlement itself—that is, problems in the symbolic, territorial, legal and geopolitical

---

<sup>55</sup> Edelman conceptualizes this ideology as “reproductive futurism,” which orients politics, ethics, and meaning around the figure of “the Child” and the promise of a better future. Standing before the Child, the queer, Edelman argues, stands in for society’s “death drive.” According to Edelman, the political value of queerness lies in rejecting incorporation into liberal society and in accepting the “no-future” position of queers. (2-5). [Edelman, L. (2004). *No future: Queer theory and the death drive*. Duke University Press].

<sup>56</sup> Chitty, C. (2020). *Sexual hegemony : Statecraft, sodomy, and capital in the rise of the world system*. Durham ; London Duke University Press. 23.

<sup>57</sup> Fischel argues that societal concerns over child sexual abuse are not only “irrational projections, transmuted latent hostilities, erotophobic, homophobic or reflective of traditional gender norms” (25). Not merely working through displacement, sex panics, Fischel argues, superficially condense a deeper, diachronic, and specific problem-space around the “desires and vulnerability of youth and the social specialization of sex.” His account further emphasizes the ways in which both the media and the law frame the problem of predation as one of childhood innocence and sexually coercive relations. While the threat of child predators and sexual harm are real, Fischel explains, their reality is not fully captured by legal discourse and popular sex panics. Nevertheless, legal and societal reactions are not specious to the actual problem at hand but attempt to articulate its reality. [Fischel, J. J. (2016). *Sex and harm in the age of consent*. University of Minnesota Press].

organization of sectarian power-sharing. As such, I use my ethnography to relate literatures in queer theory and Lebanese sectarianism and to show how homophobia gains its political meaning(s) and functions through context-specific political structures, struggles, and histories.

### Conceptualizing Political Threat, Enmity and Harm

To theorize how homophobia works against the threat of queer publicity in Lebanon, I also draw on literatures that relate how process of political “threat-framing” contribute to violent mobilization.<sup>58</sup> Here, my dissertation aims to develop the insights of civil war scholars by investigating how *real* and *sexual* threats to political structures mobilize homophobic political actors. For example, queer publicity does not merely threaten the “ideology” of the ruling government in Lebanon; it threatens the sexual architecture of Lebanon’s power-sharing settlement.<sup>59</sup> Departing from analyses that argue for the relativism of threat, I argue that threat exists beyond the ideological perception of any particular political actor or project. My wager is that grasping the reality of threat would allow us to better understand how and why threat mobilizes in the ways that it does. This requires a structural (or realist) approach to political threat that appraises that which exists in the present, that which groups are invested in, and that which is at stake of loss in a given political context. It also necessitates identifying the specific features of the political and social regime that make a threat threatening in the first place.

---

<sup>58</sup> Scholar Paul Staniland shows how the perception of threat in civil war depends upon the ideological position of ruling governments. In turn, ideology determines which armed groups the regime will mobilize against and which can be incorporated into the state.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, and in the context of the 1992 Georgian-Abkhaz War, scholar Anastasia Shesterinina details how “threat-framing” from above and below led everyday communities to take up arms against invading forces.<sup>58</sup> In both accounts, the mobilizing capacity of a political threat depends upon perception which is in turn politically or ideologically constructed. Figuring threat as relative, Staniland and Shesterinina thus remain agnostic about the objective value of political threat. [Staniland, P. (2021). *Ordering violence: Explaining armed group-state relations from conflict to cooperation*. Cornell University Press. 28]; Shesterinina, A. (2016). Collective threat framing and mobilization in civil war. *American Political Science Review*, 110(3), 411–427. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055416000277>. 411.

<sup>59</sup> The difference I am pointing to seems miniscule but it shows that a change in government will not produce a change in the heterosexual foundations of Lebanese state and society. Or if it did, the new government would have to unmake and remake the existing order.

The objectivity of the queer threat—and its politically unmaking capacities—is also why I consider queers to be not only a scapegoat but an “enemy” in Lebanon’s sectarian system. While scapegoats are innocent of the charges levied against them, an enemy poses a real and existential harm. Here, I think with Carl Schmitt who defines the political enemy as he who “intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one’s own form of existence.”<sup>60</sup> On Schmitt’s account, the enemy is an existential threat not because he is morally evil but because he intends to change, attack, or unmake how a society politically exists. In Lebanon, I contend that the queer is an enemy because the political incorporation of queers as equal participants in public life would require the abolition of the sectarian regime or its radical alteration such that it is no longer heterosexual in its foundation nor sectarian in its organization. Queers, then, are politically threatening not because they harm individual human beings, families, or children—as homophobic discourse insists—but because their formal incorporation in sectarianism would harm sectarian modes of political organization and alter how hetero-sectarian groups exist in the state (if they were to politically exist at all).<sup>61</sup>

In different registers across the dissertation, I show how queer publicity violates sectarian political structures. In chapter 1, for instance, we see how queer cultural production appropriates religious symbols and violates laws that ensure for those symbols public and reverential status. In chapter 2, public queer settlement in sectarian-majority areas violates-by-altering the membership criteria of sectarian territory. Both cases foreground how queer publicity politically harms sectarian groups by violating their territorial dominion(s) and their symbolic status in the state. From an anti-sectarian or secular-liberal view, this harm is a moral “good” insofar as it

---

<sup>60</sup> Schmitt, C. (1999). *The concept of the political* (p. 27). University Of Chicago Press.

<sup>61</sup> Seen as such, the conception of harm that underlies my account of the queer threat is not a liberal one—that is, it is not violence done to the moral autonomy of rights-bearing individuals—but one that foregrounds the violence done to political groups, regimes, and life-worlds.

targets oppressive structures. From the vantage point of hetero-sectarianism, however, the harm of queer publicity is “bad” insofar as it unmakes the existing order. This does not mean that I take harm to be relative. From both views, queer publicity *is* harmful to sectarianism despite how differently positioned groups value that harm. Again: I do not hold queer individuals to be harmful or dangerous. What I contend is that queerness, as a distinct, public, and socio-political form of identity, undermines the political existence, authority, and influence of sectarian factions.

### Queer Identity and the Specificity of Sexuality

I argue that the threat of queer publicity owes itself to three specific aspects that make queerness a distinct form of political identity.

#### I. The Origin-lessness of Queer Desire

First, queer desire gives rise to individual and collective forms of life that disrupt the reproduction of the hetero-patrilineal family and the inter-generational inheritance and transmission of religious identit(ies). Indeed, queer desire itself is not inherited through the family; nor is that desire the basis of a unified familial identity.<sup>62</sup> Rather, queer desire appears in individual family members as an origin-less secret that differentiates and alienates queers from their heterosexual families and societies.<sup>63</sup> While the phenotypic invisibility of sexuality allows most queers to “pass” as straight, the individuating and differentiating effects of queer desire on queer subjects throws a wrench in the willingness of queers to biologically reproduce heterosexual family structures. The threat to reproduction is further amplified once individual

---

<sup>62</sup> That is, and unlike race, ethnicity, or religion, family members do not all share the same identity.

<sup>63</sup> As scholars Eve Sedgwick, Donald Cory, and Sarah Schulmann describe, the particular struggles associated with being queer relates to the isolation that queer individuals experience within both homophobic society at large and among their homophobic families. This makes it such that the family is not a place of respite from majoritarian oppression—one function the family has for other minorities—but a principal source of domination for queer individuals. See Cory, D. W. (1975). *Homosexual in America : A subjective approach*. Arno Press; Schulman, S. (2009). *Ties that bind: Familial homophobia and its consequences*. The New Press; Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.

queers encounter others, disclose their identities, and create alternative forms of kinship that do not take biological reproduction as their organizing principle nor blood as their criteria of membership. As such, queer identity is not only distinct from ethnic, racial, religious, or even national identities; it also disrupts their transmission and their perpetuation across generations.<sup>64</sup>

In Lebanon, queers are threatening insofar as they threaten the demographic reproduction of the sectarian and patrilineal family—the vehicle through which sectarian identities and allegiances are transmitted and through which sectarian groups maintain their political presence across time. That the existence of queer desire differentiates and alienates queers from their families and communities also serves as a condition of possibility for the construction of alternative forms of belonging and kinship. Indeed, the homophobic refusal to accept and incorporate queers-as-queers has historically provided a legitimate motive for queers to defect from their filial duties, obligations and allegiances to hetero-only families, communities and societies. Queer publicity amplifies this threat of defection by making known alternative and viable forms of life and kinship to hetero-sectarianism. As such, queer publicity does not only threaten the future reproduction of hetero-only membership groups.<sup>65</sup> It also threatens the willingness of queer individuals to emotionally, financially, and politically support anti-gay families and communities in the present.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> On this note, scholar Eve Sedgwick argues for how the phenotypic invisibility of queerness allows homophobic power to make queerness into a secret in the first place. And while Sedgwick shows that the phenotypic invisibility of sexuality-differences makes homophobia similar to forms of religious or ethnic oppression like anti-Semitism, Sedgwick also notes that, unlike Jewish identity, queerness does not attach to an inter-generational and patriarchal lineage. Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press. 47.

<sup>65</sup> Here, I think about sects and sectarian families as membership organizations in line with feminist scholar Jacqueline Stevens' characterization of the family as the membership organization that found and reproduce the state. Stevens, J. (1999). *Reproducing the state*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>66</sup> Given the lack of state provision, many parents, families, and communities depend on their youth for financial care and support. Especially in conditions of collapse, many queer youth—who speak English and usually have more access to American dollar-paying jobs—have become the primary breadwinners for their families. This dependence also has to do with the fact that queers do not marry and create families of their own, and as such, have bigger disposable incomes. Seen from this material view, the threat of queer defection is also a threat to the material reproduction of parents and families today. Ironically, the dependence of some families on their queer members

## II. The Seductions of Queer Culture

A second and related aspect to the threat of queer publicity pertains to the seductions of queer culture. Not only does queerness offer alternative forms of kinship and collective belonging. It also puts forth exciting and transnational forms of leisure, enjoyment, and entertainment that appeal to queers and non-queers alike.<sup>67</sup> By publicly circulating knowledge about the existence of queer identities, public queer culture authorizes queer self-definition among queer and proto-queer children, youth, and even adults. That is because queer self-definition depends on queer individuals encountering knowledge that allows them to give a viable, identitarian, and even political form to their desire. Queer self-naming also requires encountering queer spaces in which to meet other queers, learn about queer culture, and practice being queer.<sup>68</sup> In this way, publicly circulating queer signs—like rainbow flags and other symbols—makes known the existence of spaces for queer self-exploration and, in doing so, creates the conditions for more queer self-disclosure(s). This could also authorize queer self-definition not only to closeted homosexuals but also to those who may not have strictly gay or lesbian desires.<sup>69</sup> In that regard, queer publicity authorizes and “promotes” forms of conviviality that could engender and expand queer identification in society.

By modeling alternative forms of enjoyment and leisure in Lebanon, the seductions of queer culture risks diverting queers—and to a certain extent non-queers—from the reproduction of hetero-sectarian culture(s). In fact, the sexual freedom, expression, and conviviality that queer

---

means that queers have accrued more power and leverage during collapse, making the threat of defection all the more real.

<sup>67</sup> The far-reaching appeal of global drag culture is a case in point: queerness itself has been promoted to heterosexual audiences through international television programs like RuPaul’s Drag Race, as well as through local drag shows across the globe.

<sup>68</sup> Given that queer culture is not inherited through familial or communal ancestry, becoming queer depends upon knowledge of and access to spaces and sites of queer sociality, leisure, and politics. In turn, knowledge of a queer alternative depends upon the publicity and visibility of queer sexuality and queer culture.

<sup>69</sup> This is also supported by the fact that in recent years, the category of “queerness” has opened itself up to those who may not identify as exclusively gay or lesbian, but somewhere in between.

culture authorizes directly hit against the reproductive mandates of sectarian communities and expose the compulsory nature of their membership.<sup>70</sup> That sectarian communities and leaders mobilize to censor any and all signs of queer culture further evidences how the maintenance of sectarian group membership requires the disappearance of anything that could stoke desires for non-heterosexual and non-reproductive life options.

### III. The Intersectionality of Queer Relationality

A third and final aspect that makes queer identity a threat to the reproduction of sectarianism relates to how queers exist and form relations and associations across categories of inherited differences. Queer inter-mixture produces an identity category constituted of people who are culturally, ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse. Because queer spaces are often hubs of inter-demographic association, they offer individuals the chance to meet out-group others; to experiment with new forms of relationality and belonging; and even to cast off inherited—i.e. religious, familial, and heterosexual—identities. Indeed, the “slantwise”<sup>71</sup> and “diagonal” position of queers in the social fabric figures as a condition of possibility for the creation of unpredictable alliances and for the transformation—even the dissolution—of

---

<sup>70</sup> Though Amar does not fully theorize it, he points to how cultures of queer conviviality can come to be threatening to national political orders. He writes: “In the sphere of culture, sexualized intermingling between nations and classes was characterized by metaphors of colonialism as rape of culture and penetration of the nation, rather than by terms which would portray sexual public spheres as fonts of conviviality and diversity, sources of more complex or vibrant forms of national identity.” Amar, P. (2013). *The security archipelago: human-security states, sexuality politics, and the end of neoliberalism*. Duke University Press. 3. Amar, P. (2013). *The security archipelago: human-security states, sexuality politics, and the end of neoliberalism*. Duke University Press. 70.

<sup>71</sup> In his seminal essay “Friendship as a Way of Life,” Michel Foucault locates the political potential—and threat—of homosexuality in the “slantwise” position that homosexuals occupy in society. It is this position, that for him, provides the possibility for gay freedom and disrupts “sanitized” societies. He writes, “Our rather sanitized society can’t allow a place for [homosexual relations] without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force. I think that’s what makes homosexuality ‘disturbing’: the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sex act itself. To imagine a sexual act that doesn’t conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another—there’s the problem. The institution is caught in a contradiction: affective intensities traverse it which at one and the same time keep it going and shake it up... Institutional codes can’t validate these relations with multiple intensities, variable colors, imperceptible movements, and changing forms. These relations short-circuit it and introduce love where there’s supposed to be only law, rule or habit.” Foucault, M. (1997). *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth (essential works of foucault, 1954-1988)* (P. Rabinow, Ed.). New Press. Friendship as a Way of Life. 136-137.



instituted separations between ethnic, racial, religious, and even national groups.<sup>72</sup> This is why a collective queer identity would especially threaten societies that institute divisions based on blood and kinship and that require those divisions to be perpetuated across time.<sup>73</sup>

In Lebanon, queers exist and associate across categories of sectarian, gender, class, and national difference. Indeed, queer spaces in Lebanon are hubs where queer men, women, foreigners, and others congregate around a shared identity that transcends familial, sectarian, and even national allegiances. In the dissertation, I show how queer concerts, bars, advocacy organizations, and theaters all serve as public and semi-public sites for social and political association. By forming social and romantic relations that cut across sectarian boundaries, Lebanese queers further de-naturalize inherited differences and expose their political constructed-ness. And unlike straight Lebanese who marry across sectarian lines, queers bypass instituted rules for interreligious marriage and conversion altogether.<sup>74</sup> This means that unlike straight and secular Lebanese, Lebanese queers threaten to divest forms of sectarian and heterosexual forms of relationality of their authority.

### The Heterosexuality of Sectarianism

Thus far, I have argued for how part of the threat of queer publicity pertains to three aspects that make queerness a distinct kind of political identity. Now, I show how the queer threat also emerges from the specific architecture of political sectarianism. I contend that the

---

<sup>72</sup> Foucault writes, ““Homosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the “slantwise” position of the latter, as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light.” Ibid. 138.

<sup>73</sup> While Lara Deeb explores how inter-mixed marriages also threaten to de-signify sect, homosexuality bypasses, that is, short-circuits sectarian law(s) altogether.

<sup>74</sup> Here, I think with Lara Deeb who explores how interreligious marriage in Lebanon contributes to the reduction of the salience of sectarian identification. While that may be true, the fact that Lebanese straights are marrying in the religious—or “personal status”— court system nevertheless reproduces the authority of heterosexual marriage in Lebanon. In other words, yes, mixed marriages are threatening to the system but they are not threatening in the same way or to the same degree as queer relationality. [Deeb, L. (2024). *Love across difference: Mixed marriage in lebanon*. Stanford University Press.]

sectarian settlement is founded upon an inter-sectarian and (until recently) silent consensus on public heterosexuality. Understanding this heterosexual consensus—or contract—is key to grasping the reproductive work of homophobia in Lebanon. By bringing the heterosexual contract into view, the dissertation further exposes specific dimensions of the sectarian settlement that depend upon the maintenance of public heterosexuality and that have been largely under-theorized in Lebanon-specific scholarship.

In recent years, scholars of Lebanese sectarianism have explored the imbricated production of religious and gendered identities. The most comprehensive account is Maya Mikdashi's *Sextarianism*.<sup>75</sup> Informed by Joan Scott's contributions to the critique of Western secularism, Mikdashi argues for viewing sectarianism as a liberal-secular regime whose sovereignty is produced through the co-governance of religious pluralism and gender dimorphism. But Mikdashi goes further, arguing that, in purporting to manage naturally-existing religious and gender difference, the Lebanese state ends up producing categories of sectarian and gendered—or "sextarian"—citizenship.<sup>76</sup> Following scholar Saba Mahmood's insights on colonial and postcolonial governance of religious difference,<sup>77</sup> Mikdashi foregrounds the bureaucratic co-production of religion and gender and exposes what she calls "the banality of religion" in Lebanon's sectarian system.<sup>78</sup> In that regard, *Sextarianism* elaborates a tradition in postcolonial scholarship that highlights continuities between colonial and postcolonial political

---

<sup>75</sup> Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, secularism, and the state in lebanon*. Stanford University Press.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> In particular, Mikdashi draws on Mahmood's analysis of how the legal codification of family law worked in tandem with colonial and postcolonial state-building. See Saba Mahmood. (2016). *Religious difference in a secular age: a minority report*. Princeton University Press, Cop.

<sup>78</sup> Mikdashi, M. *Sextarianism*. 83.

systems,<sup>79</sup> while at the same time disrupting orientalist imaginaries of religious, gender, and sexual essentialisms in the Middle East.<sup>80</sup>

By investigating how political homophobia reproduces Lebanese sectarianism, my dissertation builds on Mikdashi's powerful insights on the production of sectarian and gendered citizenship. However, my dissertation places its focus on sexuality and advances a queer political theory of sectarian power-sharing. Departing from Mikdashi's bureaucratic emphasis, I show how a common and inter-sectarian conception of heterosexuality enables religious difference(s) to exist within the same political framework. It is this conception that homophobic power(s) invokes and aims to guard. By foregrounding how homophobia mobilizes intense and violent affects, my dissertation further illustrates the *passions*—rather than the banality—of religion in Lebanon. Indeed, my focus on sexuality reveals the limits of inter-religious tolerance as well as the central role that homophobia plays in maintaining the sectarian civil peace.

To make these arguments, I draw on queer and feminist scholarship, primarily relying on Monique Wittig's theorization of the "heterosexual contract" in her collection of essays in *The Straight Mind*.<sup>81</sup> According to Wittig, heterosexuality operates as a social contract insofar as it stipulates adherence to:

...the rules and conventions that have never been formally enunciated, the rules and conventions that go without saying for the scientific mind as well as for the common people, that which for them obviously makes life possible, exactly as one must have two legs and two arms, or one must breathe to live.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> I am referring here to the contributions of scholars like Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and Hussein Ali Agrama whose work seeks to reconceptualize secularism by figuring it as a continuation of Judeo-Christian worldviews and an afterlife of liberal empire in the Middle East.

<sup>80</sup> Here, see also Ghassan Moussawi's *Disruptive Situations*, which aims to disrupt orientalist visions of Beirut as a gay-friendly hub in the Middle East. Ghassan Moussawi. (2020). *Disruptive situations : Fractal orientalism and queer strategies in beirut*. Temple University Press.

<sup>81</sup> Wittig, M. (1992). *The straight mind and other essays*. Beacon Press.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid 40.

Heterosexuality appears like a natural fact whose obviousness makes it such that it need not be formally named. According to Wittig, this is where heterosexuality gains its unique power: it is the thing that “goes without saying” while also being the thing that governs every aspect of human life. Indeed, heterosexuality appears to exist outside of time, possessing an “always-already” there quality, as if it was “external to the social order” itself.<sup>83</sup> Seen from Wittig’s frame, that heterosexuality appears eternal and extra-social renders it the perfect ground for the naturalization and eternalization of political societies.

In the dissertation, I adopt Wittig’s characterization of heterosexuality as a social contract to bring into view the “rules and conventions” that have never been—at least until recently—formally enunciated in Lebanon but which nevertheless found the sectarian order. In conceptualizing heterosexuality as a contract, I, like Wittig, point to the “certain number of acts and things one ‘must’ do,” including queers, whose adherence to public heterosexuality signals adherence to an agreement that fundamentally excludes them. More, I share with Wittig her frustrations with defining heterosexuality, given that, for her, it is a “non-existent object, a fetish, and an ideological form which cannot be grasped in reality, except through its effects.”<sup>84</sup> Despite its elusive nature, I show how the heterosexual contract in appears in full view in episodes of queer publicity and homophobic incitement. Indeed, and as we shall see, the public appearance of queerness occasions the articulation of heterosexuality, albeit under different signifiers.

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid 43.

<sup>84</sup> Wittig writes, “The problem I am facing in trying to define the social contract is the same kind of problem I have when I try to define what heterosexuality is. I confront a nonexistent object, a fetish, an ideological form which cannot be grasped in reality, except through its effects, whose existence lies in the mind of people, but in a way that affects their whole life, the way they act, the way they move, the way they think. So we are dealing with an object both imaginary and real. If I try to look at the dotted line that delineates the bulk of the social contract, it moves, it shifts, and sometimes it produces something visible, and sometimes it disappears altogether. It looks like the Mobius strip. Now I see this, now I see something quite different. But this Mobius strip is fake, because only one aspect of the optical effect appears distinctly and massively, and that is heterosexuality. Homosexuality appears like a ghost only dimly and sometimes not at all” (41)

While I adopt Wittig's conceptualization, I also underscore how the heterosexual contract is not universal across societies. Rather, its form depends upon the organization of the society in question. Nevertheless, the ubiquitous aspects of heterosexuality that Wittig points—namely its appearance as an eternal and external fact—contribute to the foundation of a power-sharing settlement between groups who hold mutually-canceling truths and who worship incompatible Gods. This is why sectarianism requires a “natural,” extra-political, and inter-religious fact on which all groups agree and that allows heterogenous groups to conceive of each other as equal participants in the same system. Using Wittig's lens, I show how heterosexuality figures as the contract that precedes the sectarian settlement and underwrites the appearance of equal power-sharing between agonistic groups. But we can also conceive of heterosexuality through Hannah Arendt's conception of the “inter-est,”—the common thing that exists between different people(s) and that politically relates them.<sup>85</sup> In Lebanon, heterosexuality serves as the inter-sectarian “inter-est” insofar as it is the only fact—or belief—that all sects share and that makes possible a common world characterized by inter-religious pluralism and tolerance. Indeed, and as we shall see, homophobic discourses invokes the inter-sectarian consensus on heterosexuality and avows it as a necessary precondition for sectarian coexistence.

Even in war, the fact of an inter-sectarian heterosexuality—of “natural” men, natural “women” and the “natural” hierarchical marital relation between them—allows adversaries to conceive of each other's political presence as just and war between them as valid.<sup>86</sup> As such, the presence of a fact beyond factional disputes grounds sectarian war and limits the possibility that

---

<sup>85</sup> See Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* (2nd ed.). University Of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1958).

<sup>86</sup> In this way, the existence of a shared sexuality between them allows sectarian adversaries to be what Carl Schmitt in *Nomos of the Earth* terms “just enemies:” In doing so, it limits the possibility of what he calls “total civil war” between different groups. [Schmitt, C., & Ulmen, G. L. (2006). *The Nomos of the earth in the international law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*. Telos Press.]

enemies could regard each other as totally abject and eliminable. Put another way, the heterosexual contract secures against what Schmitt terms the outbreak of “total civil war” and ensures that sectarian factions remain recognizable and tolerable to each other. In this way, inter-sectarian heterosexuality provides a common and a-factional ground for war and peace, thereby underwriting the possibility of inter-sectarian politics and multi-religious tolerance in Lebanon.

That heterosexuality functions as the common and “natural” ground of sectarianism also pertains to its ordinariness: across forms of religious difference, heterosexual normativity appears everywhere and publicly like an, everyday and incontrovertible truth. Because of its ordinary and everywhere-all-at-once quality, heterosexuality appears more incontrovertible than the existence of the sectarian Gods, which cannot be seen or proven. One can say that heterosexuality in Lebanon stands in for God, allowing different groups with different Gods to live unthreatened in their truths and worldviews. In this way, the appearance of heterosexuality as natural, eternal, and absolute secures the political authority that monotheistic religious groups exercise in the Lebanese state.

Furthermore, the ordinary, “natural,” and “goes without saying” value of heterosexuality reinforces the fiction that sects are also natural groups that have always existed and will always exist. As Lebanese theorist Mehdi Amel has elucidated, the existence of the sectarian state depends on generating the illusion that sects are eternal and timeless groups that are external to the social order.<sup>87</sup> For Amel, the “natural” existence of religious pluralism is precisely the “what goes without saying” of sectarianism; it obscures the political construction of sects and the relations of hegemony that relate them in the state. By purporting to manage pre-political—or extra-political—groups, the Lebanese state, Mehdi goes on, also uses the founding myth of naturally-occurring religious pluralism to naturalize and—in the words of Amel—to “eternalize”

---

<sup>87</sup> Amel, M. (1984). *Fi al-Dawla al-Tai'ifya. (In the Sectarian State)*. 26. (My translation).

(*ta`bid*) itself.<sup>88</sup> Thinking with Amel and Wittig together, what we glean is how the natural and eternal aura of sects in Lebanon is generated by that which is more “natural,” eternal, and universal than any Abrahamic religion: heterosexuality. Put another way, the sectarian state legally and socially founds itself upon heterosexuality because it gives sects a semblance of natural necessity—since they govern heterosexual marriage—and it gives the state an aura of interreligious universality—since it governs sects.

Indeed, heterosexuality in Lebanon does not only function as a silent social contract; rather, the man-woman marital relation also serves as the elementary metric through which the state gives equal legal and political form to Lebanon’s different religious communities. More precisely, the state provides an architecture in which the country’s 15 officially recognized sects appear structurally the same, despite the heterogeneity of their doctrines, beliefs, and practices. This sameness is secured by the consensus on sexual nature—man, woman and nothing but the hierarchical relation between them—that all groups hold to be extra-political, universally valid and absolutely mandated. By instituting 15 religious courts, Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution also institutes 15 ways to marry, to divorce, to be born, to die, and to inherit—in other words, 15 different ways to govern what amounts to the same thing: heterosexuality.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, the capacity to be born or to die, to inherit or to divorce all depends upon the products of heterosexual marriage and reproduction: children, families, inter-generational capital accumulation, etc. Even the capacity to be properly buried in Lebanon depends one one’s being born to a Lebanese father and a family within a religious community.<sup>90</sup> Given the commonality

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>89</sup> Here, I elaborate Mikdashi’s analysis of how sectarianism produces fifteen different kinds of female and male citizens to show how the legal system also produces fifteen different kinds of heterosexualities.

<sup>90</sup> Rawi Hage’s novel *Beirut Hellfire Society* tackles this exact problem-space by telling a story about a coroner who buries those anti-religious, gender and sexual dissidents who are rejected from the traditional sectarian cemeteries in Beirut. [Rawi Hage. (2020). *Beirut Hellfire Society*. W.W. Norton & Company].

of heterosexual marriage across forms of religious difference, sectarianism takes the marital man-woman relation as its object of governance and makes it the absolute metric through which to produce the legal sameness of different religious doctrines and communities.<sup>91</sup>

It is in this regard that I complicate Mikdashi's figuration of sectarianism as a secular-liberal regime: unlike secular political systems, the sectarian settlement safeguards the public significance and authority of *both* religion and (hetero)sexuality in society and state.<sup>92</sup> Article 9, for instance, grants the religious "personal status" courts authority over the sexual and religious lives of its citizens. The Lebanese Constitution and the Penal Code further uphold the public status of religious symbols in state and society. Likewise, Article 534—the law that outlaws "all acts against the order of nature"—secures religious conceptions of heterosexuality under the signifier of "the natural order." And while Article 13 of the Constitution protects the liberal rights of citizens—like freedom of speech, assembly, etc.—those rights, as we shall see, are circumscribed by legal and societal mandates to publicly respect religion(s). Seen as such, sectarianism sits between secular regimes on the one hand and mono-religious authoritarianism(s) on the other. In that sense, it would be more accurate to describe sectarianism as a Janus-faced regime that is stalemated from one direction by its instituted communalism and, from another, by its liberal individualism. In fact, the liberalism of the sectarian state has been a condition of possibility for queer politics and publicity. And its communalism has been key driver of homophobic opposition. Indeed, homophobic and anti-homophobic contestation

---

<sup>91</sup> And while conversion between sects is a fundamental right that the Lebanese state upholds, the structural sameness of sects works to prevent mass conversion. In fact, and as Mikdashi and Deeb elucidate, Lebanese convert across sects largely for bureaucratic and cynical purposes, rather than out of a genuine desire to become other.

<sup>92</sup> But this is not to say that sectarianism is a theocratic regime insofar as it identifies with any one religion or any one God. In fact, the God of sectarianism is heterosexuality, which allows it to identify with *all* Abrahamic religions at the same time.



exposes, at once, the precarity and resilience of the instituted deadlock between communal representation and individual rights.

On this note, my dissertation foregrounds not only sectarian and gendered legal structures but also how contests over queer publicity serves as a site of political deadlock and inter-factional contestation. Put more precisely, contests over queer publicity bring into view how the survival of sectarian power-sharing depends on securing the “heterosexual contract.” The episodes in the dissertation further reveal how queer publicity induces cracks in the hetero-sectarian edifice, and in doing so, threatens the built-in precarity of both the sectarian settlement and the heterosexual contract that underwrites it. It is this precarity that homophobia works through and against. For instances, discourses around the precarity or vulnerability of communal rights in Lebanon allow homophobic activists, clerics, and elites to articulate, in a sexual register, the terms of the National Pact, the Constitution, and the postwar Ta’if settlement. Here, the heterosexual contract emerges through discourses about political constitutions that guard communal representation in the state. In this way, the threat of queer publicity occasions the re-articulation of sectarian contracts in (hetero)sexual terms—terms that *all* factions could agree on. Seen as such, homophobia incites political discourse that brings the heterosexual contract into view and that gives sectarian agreements a new lease on life in times of political unmaking.

#### The Terms of the Contract: Heterosexual Absolutism and Queer Non-Disclosure

What exactly are the terms of the heterosexual contract in Lebanon? Above all, the heterosexual contract that underwrites sectarianism aims to secure what I call *heterosexual absolutism* in the Lebanese public sphere. I theorize heterosexual absolutism as a kind of political and social order that holds there to be only one, true, and universally-applicable human sexuality: that which organizes two “natural” (pre-political) groups—men and women—in

relations of sexual hierarchy and subordination. In this regime, heterosexuality has no specific name and need not be named so long as its truth is not contested. Interestingly, we see how, in light of queer publicity, homophobic actors grapple with politically naming heterosexuality for the first time. Indeed, heterosexuality appears in homophobic discourses under shape-shifting signifiers—*tabi'a* (nature), *fitra* (Muslim sexual nature), *al-nizam al tabi'i* (the natural regime), *al-qiyam al-akhlaqiya* (ethical values), *al-qiyam al-insaniya*, (human values)—but always in reference to an absolute, cross-civilizational, and pre-social conception of sexual ontology.

Conversely, heterosexual absolutism signifies queerness—and those genders and sexualities that fall outside of its dictates—as human “deviancy” or (*shuzooz* in Arabic): a pathological condition whose name reinforces the unity and health of heterosexuality. In fact, discourses of heterosexual absolutism refuse to name, recognize, or affirm the viable existence of gender and sexual pluralism, avowing instead a reality in which there is no sexuality but heterosexuality.<sup>93</sup> This absolutism is further supported by the understanding that heterosexuality is an extra-human fact; like divine truth, the truth of man-woman is eternal and external to the realm of human affairs. Consequently, and under absolutism, heterosexuality is a matter beyond the consent, judgment, or desire of individual human-beings.

From this view, heterosexual absolutism functions as a kind of monotheistic religion that transcends—or grounds—the monotheistic religions of the groups that constitute the sectarian state. Like God in monotheism, heterosexuality is without rivals and competitors: there could be only one. Indeed, heterosexuality serves as the one true God of sectarianism because it exists above the Gods of all groups. What is more, the unrivaled status of heterosexuality—and the

---

<sup>93</sup> We see here how heterosexual absolutism echoes the monotheism of Abrahamic religions. More precisely, my turn of phrase aims to evoke the Muslim *shahada*, the “witnessing” or the phrase one must say to convert to Islam—“there is no God but God, and Mohammad is his Prophet.” In a way, heterosexual absolutism mandates that there is no sexuality but heterosexuality and marriage is its proper form.”

inter-factional consensus on that status—guarantees relations of competition between political groups who hold their God to be true and the others false. In that regard, heterosexual absolutism works like a religion because it provides a unified reality that allows groups with mutually canceling worldviews to exist, compete, and share public power.<sup>94</sup>

Importantly, I consider heterosexuality as *absolutist* not because it *is* the only sexuality that exists in Lebanon but because it is publicly instituted as an absolute truth. This truth is secured by the ordinary appearances of gender normative men and women and the exclusive appearance of sexual relationality between the two genders in public. And though it may allow for some flexibility in gender expression (see chapter 2), heterosexual absolutism in Lebanon prohibits any kind of public sexual expression—kisses on the mouth between two men or two women, hand holds, other acts of romantic or physical intimacy—that undeniably denotes the existence of non-heterosexual relations. As such, the truth of heterosexual absolutism is sustained by securing the sole appearance of one kind of human sexuality in Lebanon’s public sphere.

That heterosexual absolutism is largely sustained by public appearances gets us to the second stipulation of the heterosexual contract: queer non-disclosure. Under heterosexual absolutism, queers must not identify themselves—in word or in deed—as queer; nor should they publicly act in ways that could make the existence of queerness impossible to ignore or deny for ordinary straight audiences. Empirically, what this means is not a state of sexual totalitarianism. For those who are initiated into knowledge about queer identities—like other Lebanese queers,

---

<sup>94</sup> Here, the definition of religion by religious ethics scholars could be helpful. Schweiker and Clairmont, for instance, define religion in the following way: “What the traditions, beliefs, communities, and practices in this book seem to share is that they provide ways for a community of beings to get access to, empowerment by, and orientation from something(s) believed or experienced to be ultimately real and ultimately important and related to but not isolated from other domains of meaning and reality.” Schweiker, W., & Clairmont, D. A. (2019). *Religious ethics : Meaning and method*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. 18.

seculars and Western foreigners—queer men and women appear in open-view in some of Lebanon’s more liberal areas—like parts of Christian East Beirut, Hamra, or the beaches of Tyre in the Lebanese South. Here, queer and classed aesthetics—haircuts, accessories, fashion, and comportment—come to be markers of queer phenotypes that distinguish queers from traditionally appearing men and women (see chapter 2). But by revealing knowledge about queerness to those who *already* know, queer aesthetics signal queerness in a way that allows it to be largely ignored by straight majorities.

Nevertheless, there are limits: despite their aesthetics, queer men and women must be able to publicly and plausibly “pass” as cis-gender and straight. Similarly, and in this regime, trans individuals bear the brunt of public violence given that their phenotypes expose them as non-cis and expose heterosexual absolutism as a fiction. A cis-gay man, however, can appear gay—in the clothes he wears, the accessories he dons, and the haircut he sports—without violating the stipulation on queer non-disclosure. But if here were to verbally disclose his gayness, hold his boyfriend’s hand on Beirut’s corniche, or kiss his boyfriend on the lips, these acts would undeniably disclose his gay identity, make gayness impossible to publicly ignore, and subject him—and his boyfriend—to a high risk of public physical violence from the men in the vicinity.

Sadly, the prohibition on queer relationality extends even to queer spaces in Beirut. For example, at Ego—a Friday-night queer pop party in Beirut’s Qarantina District—the queer club-owners hire thuggish (and ostensibly straight) security guards to stand on the perimeter of the dance floor and keep watch for signs of queer intimacy and sexuality.<sup>95</sup> The moment two boys or two girls get too close or kiss, these guards swoop in to aggressively separate them. If one violates this code repeatedly, they are removed from the club. This does not happen to straights,

---

<sup>95</sup> During my ethnography, I frequented Ego and other gay clubs regularly and observed this same

who are free to practice and display physical intimacy. Paradoxically, the vast majority of this rooftop club's clientele is visibly queer. There is even a drag performance. From their end, the club-owners justify this censorship as a security measure for queers: pictures could be taken and the club could be raided. Nevertheless, the censorship of queer relationality casts into bold relief what is at stake for heterosexual absolutism: though queer individuals can appear different in how they look, queers must not publicly disclose queer identity, or relationality let alone publicly practice their sexuality. And though this rule has never been formally enunciated, all queers know that they must not display affection publicly lest they subject themselves to violence.

In this way, the prohibition on verbal or physical disclosures of queer identification serves as a condition for a limited kind of public queer expressivity, one that reinforces the “goes without saying” status of heterosexuality and upholds the state of public (and studied) ignorance around queerness. As such, heterosexual absolutism tolerates the publicity of queer individuals while absolutely prohibiting any public avowal of an organized queer identity or expression of sexual intimacy between members of the same gender. In doing so, the prohibition on public queer disclosure and identification prevents the public exposure of knowledge about the existence of gender and sexual pluralism and it reinforces the mirage of universal straightness.

It was this mirage that was broken in the 2017 Beirut Pride when two boys, standing in the middle of Mark Mikhael—a busy commercial district in East Beirut—kissed amidst a congregation of queers and within full view of the area's inhabitants and the police.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, and in 2018, G., a trans Iraqi interlocutor, describes her elation when she publicly appeared for the first time in a dress and make-up at the hotel in which a Pride-related celebration took place.<sup>97</sup> Unfortunately, the frontier that these acts of queer publicity opened was quickly

---

<sup>96</sup> See opening vignette.

<sup>97</sup> G. (2019, August 7). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

foreclosed on when bands of thugs and security forces raided both events. Indeed, and during my time in Beirut (2019-2023), I had never seen acts that publicly avowed the presence of queer relations and societies. Neither have my interlocutors. In fact, and especially after the 2019 Lebanon Revolution, homophobic mobilization worked to stymie the successful trajectory that queer politics had been on pre-2019 and put queers in Lebanon back in the (half)closet.

Here, I think with Eve Sedgwick's analysis that shows the constitutive role of secrecy in the function of homophobic power and the formation of modern homosexual identities. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick takes issue with Michel Foucault's "repressive hypothesis" which focuses on how the modern regulation of homosexuality was a phenomenon of discursive incitement.<sup>98</sup> While Sedgwick does not discount Foucault's analysis, she points to how power does not only operate by putting something into discourse but also by the silence(s) it safeguards. In the case of modern homosexuality, Sedgwick shows how non-disclosure, secrecy, and ignorance were as central to homosexual subject-formation as discursive incitement about homosexuality has been in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>99</sup> I take both Sedgwick's and Foucault's insights to Lebanon, showing how the homophobic prohibition on queer publicity works as a form of power that 1] maintains public ignorance around the existence of gender and sexual pluralism, 2] upholds the public truth-value of heterosexual absolutism, and by doing so, 3] secures the founding fact/fiction of Lebanese sectarianism. As such, censorship does not only silence public queer expression. It also reinforces Lebanon's heterosexual contract and through it, Lebanon's sectarian settlement.

In this light, queer publicity threatens the heterosexual contract by making this state of ignorance impossible to sustain; and it threatens the authority of religious communities which

---

<sup>98</sup> Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.

<sup>99</sup> Indeed, and for Sedgwick, the double-edged problem of disclosure/secrecy is *the* factor that distinguishes gay and lesbian identities from any other form of individual or collective identification.

take heterosexuality to be an absolute and divine fact. As we shall see, one way homophobic discourse(s) works against queer publicity is by figuring this state of public ignorance around gender and sexual pluralism as an absolute precondition for the practice of religious freedom in Lebanon. Across sectarian divides, homophobic actors invoked queer non-disclosure to re-articulate the terms of religious freedom in sectarianism as a freedom from knowing, seeing, or hearing anything that could induce doubt about the absolute status of heterosexuality. Seen in that light, the public ignorance that the heterosexual contract sustains becomes a way through which to upgrade the political meaning of religious freedom and to secure the public power that religious communities exercise in Lebanese society and state.

### Homophobia as a Strategy of Sectarian Reproduction

Having understood the imbrication of sectarianism and heterosexuality, I theorize homophobia as a phenomenon of political and social reproduction in Lebanon: its discourses politicize the heterosexual contract and render it a site for the re-making of sectarian identities, territories, laws, and causes. Departing from approaches that consider homophobia to be an intentional and conscious political strategy, I instead draw on Michel Foucault to theorize homophobia as a “strategy without a strategist”<sup>100</sup>—that is, a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the intentional actions or decisions of anti-gay political actors but that arises out of a constellation of power relations, structures, institutions, and situations. Indeed, the political uses and effects of homophobia often take on a life of their own and go beyond the conscious direction of any one actor or institution. Here, I also think with Christopher Chitty to emphasize how homophobia—as a political phenomenon—is not external to or autonomous from the

---

<sup>100</sup>See Part IV “The Deployment of Sexuality” in Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of sexuality. Volume I: an Introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.; Vol. 1). Vintage Books.

political order on/in which it works.<sup>101</sup> Rather, the political significance and utility of homophobia depends upon its articulation through sectarian-specific struggles, identities, and histories. In that sense, “seeing” homophobia in Lebanon requires us to first see the (hetero)sexuality of sectarianism. I would even venture to say, that least in Lebanon, there is no homophobia without sectarianism and there is no sectarianism without heterosexuality.

Importantly, my granular and context-specific approach does not mean that homophobia in my account is not “generalizable.” I instead contend that the generalizability of homophobia in Lebanon has less to do with homophobia itself and more to do with the regime on which homophobia is working. Put another way, homophobia in Lebanon reveals certain aspects about how sexuality and religion are politically instituted and how they politically organize. These aspects could help bring into view sexual and religious architectures of regimes that are formally not sectarian at all.

Across the dissertation, I show how sectarianism gives homophobia its political form(s), uses, and effects. In each chapter, both the queer threat and homophobia appear in different dimensions. In chapter 1, for instance, homophobia responds to the threat of queer cultural production and emerges as a set of censorship logics that rearticulate the sexual limits of Lebanon’s symbolic order. Chapter 2 figures homophobia as a group of territorial practices—checkpoints, raids, and parades—that respond to the building of a “gayborhood” and that govern the movement of queer bodies within and across sectarian-majority areas. Chapter 3 traces how homophobia shows up in clerical discourses on human sexual nature. And Chapter 4 treats homophobia as a style of anticolonial claims-making that works against efforts by civil society toward public queer education. By casting homophobia in these different aspects, I illustrate how

---

<sup>101</sup> Chitty, C. (2020). *Sexual hegemony : Statecraft, sodomy, and capital in the rise of the world system*. Durham ; London Duke University Press.



homophobia does not exist in a “pure” form nor can its analysis be separated from an analysis of the hetero-sectarian discourses, affects, and practices in which it appears.

Throughout the episodes in the dissertation, homophobic discourse invokes sectarianism’s heterosexual contract and use its stipulations—heterosexual absolutism and queer non-disclosure—to re-assert the terms of sectarian power-sharing. For instance, the transgressions of queer cultural production provide an occasion for Christian activists and clerics to re-assert the public reverence of religious symbols as a precondition for parity between sects. Chapter 2 shows how queer settlement in Christian-majority areas mobilizes ordinary men to defend public heteronormativity and to guard the territorial dominion of religious communities. And in chapter 3, circulating Pride Month advertisements incite state and popular clerics to invoke Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution—the article that grants the religious courts power in the state—in order to renew the authority of Lebanon’s personal status system in times of electoral transition. Finally, chapter 4 illustrates how queer education incites discourses that re-frame anticolonial resistance as a heterosexual project.

In all of these cases, heterosexuality serves as an extra-political fact and allows political actors to figure their particular causes in extra-partisan and universalist terms. Indeed, I show how the queer figures as a universal enemy against which all sects could mobilize. Here, I think with scholar Darryl Li in order to theorize this function of homophobia as a “practice of universalism”—that is, a discursive practice in which political actors claim “the mantle of the universal” and speak in the name of humankind.<sup>102</sup> Across the dissertation, we see how

---

<sup>102</sup> In *The Universal Enemy*, Darryl Li begins with the observation that participants in transnational jihads are often cast as “the enemy of mankind.” For Li, that status is not due to the jihad fighter’s “implacable hostility to humanity,” but because he has been condemned as an enemy by those who speak in the name of a liberal universalist project. Not focused on debunking the validity of liberal universality, Li instead theorizes transnational jihad as a universalist project in its own right. By tracking how his interlocutors claimed the “mantle of the universal,” Li theorizes “universalism” as a practice of ordinary political speech rather than of ideology. Li, D. (2020). *The universal enemy : Jihad, empire, and the challenge of solidarity*. Stanford University Press. 3.

homophobic elites, clerics, and ordinary people politically speak in the name of “all sects” rather than from the position of their sect alone. For example, anti-gay male demonstrators in Tripoli figured homosexual legalization (*tashri’ al-shuzooz*) as a transgression of all sectarian doctrines. The heads of the religious status courts invoke Article 9 to speak in the name of the entire religious court system. Even the late General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah rhetorically figures the “battle” against homosexuality as a battle “for the human”—one that transcends the boundaries of sectarian, national, and even regional identification. I contend that this “universalist” use of homophobia relates to the consensus on homosexuality’s abjection in Abrahamic worldviews: across doctrine(s), homosexuality is an abomination (*fahishah*) and a crime unlike any other. Politically, homosexuality’s abject status across religious difference(s)—as well as the majoritarian opinion behind the heterosexual contract—makes homophobic appeals costly for elites—sectarian or anti-sectarian—to contest.<sup>103</sup>

But as we shall see in chapter 3, this universality does not mean that homophobia politically unifies sectarian actors. Though homophobia provides a unique site for alliance-building across sectarian divides, invocations of a universal heterosexual ground—and a universal queer enemy—work to reinforce sectarian differences rather than to transcend or “process” them.<sup>104</sup> In fact, that sectarian factions agree on heterosexuality despite their differences gives heterosexuality the semblance of external “objectivity.” Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt and Linda Zerilli, I show how differences in homophobic perspectives allow

---

<sup>103</sup> As Lee Edelman writes in the American context, “[homophobic] rhetoric was intended to avow that this issue, like an ideological Mobius strip, only permitted one side.” This is why, for Edelman, homophobic political claims are distinct from the “partisan discourse of political argumentation.” (Edelman 2).

<sup>104</sup> According to Li, universalism does not demand “total homogeneity.” It does rest, however, upon a claim to transcend difference. Not erasing differences, universalisms “process” them. That Muslims were globally diverse, Li explains, was a central part of the jihad’s appeal. Not aiming to resolve diversity into commonality, jihadist universality sought to relate differences based on shared terms of reference. For instance, and through the imagined figure of the *Ummah* (Muslim Community), the jihad stressed universalist ideals like the “cultivation of virtues, the creation of kinship bonds, and the founding of a new community.” Li, D. (2020). *The universal enemy : Jihad, empire, and the challenge of solidarity*. Stanford University Press. 3.

heterosexuality to appear as if it exists above and below the worldviews of any one sect. In this way, homophobia materializes the ground of sectarianism as an objective reality, and in doing so, helps generate a worldly “in-between” for all of Lebanon’s sects. As such, I think of homophobia as a practice of universalism and of hetero-sectarian world-making.

Importantly, and while I also analyze the political uses of elite-driven homophobia, the episodes in the dissertation casts homophobia as a phenomenon that emerges largely “from below” and is inextricably linked to popular authority. Indeed, homophobia reveals the populist dimensions of the sectarian settlement. Across the dissertation, we see how ordinary men, thugs, clerics, and pundits invoke the consensus on the heterosexual contract to contest their elites and to claim popular virtue. Homophobia also serves as a site for autonomous and violent collective action, organizing local men, and allying them with in-group and out-group others. Functionally, homophobia provides individuals and street factions with a way to express and practice violence, not at each other, but at a common queer enemy. Here, we glean another use of homophobia: it “conducts” popular male violence in a manner that does not threaten the outbreak of inter-factional street war. Instead, homophobia sustains the sectarian civil peace by allowing men to fight in the name of that which is above (or below) all adversaries.

Despite its popular and universalist appeal, homophobia is not without contestation in Lebanon. The dissertation shows how each episode of queer publicity incites homophobic *and* anti-homophobic resistance. In chapter 1, for instance, pro-queer civil society factions litigated against homophobic censorship campaigns. In chapter 2, queer activists and communities organized a demonstration against the escalating activity of homophobic gangs. In chapter 3, we meet pro-queer lawyers who have been working on homosexual decriminalization for two decades. And in chapters 3 and 4, we see how the 2022 Parliamentary Elections brought into

power anti-homophobic and anti-sectarian elites who stood in solidarity with Lebanon's queer communities. Indeed, the very possibility of queer publicity's occurrence in Lebanon evidences the fact that homophobia is not totalizing in its uses or its effects.

Anti-homophobic contestation notwithstanding, homophobia reproduces sectarianism not because it eliminates pro-queer opponents or dominates queer communities but because it blocks the gender and sexual reform of sectarianism's sexual ground. By inciting homophobic and anti-homophobic opposition, queer publicity generates a series of stalemated struggles that produce zero net movement. All the while, these stalemates provide opportunities for both homophobic and anti-homophobic factions to regroup and organize. Across the years of the dissertation (2019-2023), we see how homophobic politicking becomes more sophisticated and precise; we also see how queer interests come to be represented by anti-sectarian members of Parliament and judges in Lebanon's Court of Cassation.<sup>105</sup> Pushing with equal-but-opposite forces, neither homophobic nor homophilic factions claim total victory in any of the dissertation's episodes.

Stalemates, however, do not indicate a failure of sectarianism but are a sign of sectarianism's *successful* functioning. In fact, Mehdi Amel theorizes stalemate—or *ma`ziq*—as the very “assignment” (*wazifeh*) of sectarianism.<sup>106</sup> Or, its elementary political use and its end. That is because the incapacity for any one faction to politically vanquish the others works to preserve the purportedly equal presence of all factions in Lebanon, as well as the religious communities they represent. Importantly, the presence of an anti-homophobic opposition in Lebanon contains the lethal potentials of anti-gay mobilization—as in neighboring Syria or Iraq. But anti-homophobic opposition—in civil society and in Parliament—also serves to strengthen sectarianism by providing sects with coalitional enemy against which to coordinate and ally.

---

<sup>105</sup> Or Lebanon's Supreme Court.

<sup>106</sup> Amel, M. (1984). *Fi al-Dawla al-Ta`ifya* (pp. 1–50). (my translations).

Especially in the wake of the 2019 Lebanon Revolution and the 2022 Parliamentary Elections, the stalemating function of homophobia has primarily worked as a tool of counter-revolution. By exposing the pro-queer interests of some anti-sectarian MPs, homophobic discourses have cast both revolution and (partial) electoral transition as partially driven by homo-secular and western imperialist conspiracies. In chapter 3, for instance, we see how the homophobic discourse of elites and clerics figure sectarianism as a safeguard for “projects” that seek to destroy the “natural regime.” In chapter 4, the late General Secretary of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah rhetorically renders queer publicity as an American imperial “war against consciousness.” More generally, and across the dissertation, we see how homophobia works to mobilize ordinary Tripolitan actors—actors who were at the forefront of the 2019 Revolution—in defense of sectarianism. Indeed, homophobic discourses have all but spelled out that, without sectarianism, there could be no future guarantees for the heterosexual contract in Lebanon. And they are correct. But what is also correct is that without the heterosexual contract, there could be no sectarianism. As such, and by stoking ordinary attachments to heterosexuality, homophobia has worked to renew the appeal—or the acquiescence—to sectarianism, at least among Lebanon’s hetero-religious and homophobic majorities. In these ways, I contend that homophobia does not only “discredit” revolution and democratization; it gives sectarianism the credit for guarding the heterosexual ground of Lebanon’s religiously plural societies.

## **Methodology**

This dissertation is based on more than two years of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted between 2019 and 2023, a time of social movement protest, fiscal collapse, state breakdown and regional war. In Lebanon, I translated and carried out discourse analysis of Arabic language judicial court documents, newspaper articles, graphic magazines, films, and social media pages. I also observed demonstrations and analyzed art and monuments in public and semi-public spaces in Beirut, Tripoli and the villages along the Lebanese/Israeli border. Finally, I conducted, translated, and distilled data from nearly 60 semi-structured, Arabic-language and on-site interviews with lawyers, civil society actors, cultural producers, militants, refugees, and ordinary people. These interviews amount to over 100 hours of content. All Arabic source excerpts that appear in this dissertation, unless stated otherwise, are my original translations.

My interest in Lebanon was sparked by my first visit to Beirut in 2009. Though I was a closeted 14-year-old at the time, my love for Arabic pop music translated into a deep desire to see Beirut—a hub of Arab cultural production and a city I had only seen on satellite television. That summer, my mother, sister, and I were in Damascus, visiting family and spending the last months we were to spend in Syria. It was then that I begged my mother and aunt to take the three-hour drive from Damascus to Beirut and to spend the day there seeing the sights. While the entire trip captivated me, it was really the sexuality of the water-front corniche that got me: all around, shirtless, muscled, and beautiful men ran, walked, and exercised among those strolling. So too did scantily clad and sports-bra wearing women. Indeed, it was a sight that was unfamiliar in conservative Damascus, a sight more akin to Chicago's Lakefront. But even then, the sexual

publicity of the corniche—and of Beirut in general—made it a special place in a region whose publics are dominated by patriarchal and religious sexual norms.

Fast-forward seven years to 2016. I had just graduated from college at the University of Chicago and decided to take a ten-day solo-trip to Beirut. Having been out as a gay man for about five years, I was excited to explore the city on my own terms. Couch-surfing with an American journalist who was living in Beirut at the time, I was introduced to a group of young Lebanese queer and secular people, who took me out to the bars of Mar Mikhael and the queer and queer-adjacent clubs of Beirut. It was at one particular party at the Beirut Sporting Club—“Decks on the Beach” or just “Decks”—where I experienced my first and only public kiss with another man on the club’s open air dance floor, the moonlit Mediterranean behind us. It was transgressive, exhilarating, and reparative: reparative insofar as I had felt for the first time that my queer and Arab identities did not need to be severed from each other, but that Beirut was the place where they could meet. At least in some spaces.

A year later, I decided to spend the summer in Lebanon before starting grad school. I arrived in Beirut a week after the 2017 Beirut Pride, and though I did not know the topic of my dissertation at the time, I lived, witnessed, and partook in the contradictions and conundrums of what I would come to describe as the “half in/half out of the closet” condition of most queers in the city. I met more gays—men and women—and I began developing a clearer picture of what life as a queer person was like in a heterosexually absolutist society. Given my being raised in a heterosexually-absolutist religion and family, most of the codes and stipulations of public heterosexuality were not foreign to me. And those that were, I picked up through experience. What I did learn is that so long as you neither expressed nor disclosed your queer identity, so

long as you looked like a man or a woman, and so long as you left yourself room to plausibly deny your sexuality, you were safe.

Two years later, and in 2019, I returned to Lebanon on official research for my master's thesis. Having been wrestling with Joseph Massad's provocative thesis in *Desiring Arabs*, I wanted to write about empire and sexuality. But that summer, I landed in Beirut in the midst of the Mashrou' Leila Controversy—all the queers, seculars, and other liberals around me were talking of nothing else. Which was why I decided that *this* would be the MA. Living just two buildings from Helem at the time, I conducted interviews with queer and trans activists, pro-queer lawyers and researchers, secular cultural producers, club-owners, and other figures among Beirut's burgeoning secular-liberal publics. I even had the chance to attend Mashrou' Leila's "counter-concert" at the Aresco Palace Theater, where I witnessed the conviviality and defiance of Beirut's queer and secular communities. Complementing my official ethnography, my ordinary life as a young gay man in Beirut and my walks in the city helped give me a sense of the implicit and explicit system of sectarian codes, taboos, and boundaries that would all come to inform my analysis of homophobia in Lebanon. Entitled "Sectarianism and the Sodomite" my MA laid the ground for crafting a dissertation proposal on the political uses and effects of homophobia in sectarianism. And though COVID—not to mention Lebanon's 2019 Revolution, fiscal collapse and 2020 Port Explosion—had rendered the possibility of doing fieldwork uncertain, I nevertheless arrived in Lebanon in September of 2020 and remained there till September 2022.

Upon my arrival, I found the city that I had left in August of 2019 partly in ruins. Remnants of the explosion, the revolution, and the fiscal collapse were everywhere: East Beirut's Port-view high-rises were but mere skeletons; mounds of debris and glass in likely and unlikely



places; anti-regime graffiti nearly everywhere and in plain view; and more Syrian refugees and children begging in the streets than I'd ever seen. I began speaking with my old queer activist-interlocutors, only to realize that queer publicity, politics *and* homophobia seemed to be on the backburner. Here, I decided to cast my ethnographic net wide and begin, not with homophobia, but with the 2019 Lebanon Revolution. I met with civil society leaders, activists, and ordinary people, and compiled accounts of what had happened in Beirut's Martyrs' square—how mobilization began and how solidarity broke down.

What was most interesting about these accounts was that they strayed. Indeed, my semi-structured and open-ended approach to the interviews intentionally allowed for— even encouraged—deviations, such that I found myself with multi-layered and often ordinary accounts of life in sectarianism: of familial and communal identities, of checkpoints and territorial boundary-crossings, of religious authority and its abuses, of histories of war, violence, and death; of antagonism and enmities that seemed to touch every last person in the country. Though I departed from my original topic, I was developing an everyday and ethnographic account of Lebanon's sectarian settlement—a necessary precondition for my own arguments about homophobia's granular political work in Lebanon. In fact, the majority of my two years in Lebanon—2020-2022—were devoted to empirically and theoretically investigating political enmity—rather than homophobia—how it was expressed in the Lebanon Revolution between ordinary people, and how it has contributed to the reproduction of sectarian groups and the relations between them.

It was only in June of 2022—and the last few months of my time in the country—that political homophobia broke out with the appearance of a Beirut Pride advertisement. Suddenly, my original dissertation project was relevant once more. Upon my return to the States for

writing, I brought together my original proposal on homophobia with the fieldwork I had done on sectarian antagonism(s), producing a project that theorized homophobia as a particular form of political enmity and a specific tool of sectarian reproduction. I returned to Lebanon in December of 2022 for a period of two months in order to visit friends and family and to conduct targeted interviews with lawyers and activists who were working in conditions of renewed homophobic *and* sectarian incitement. And since my return to the States in late January of 2023, I have conducted a few remote interviews with interlocutors I had already sat down with in person. As such, and apart from the incitement of homophobic mobilization in 2022, I did not directly witness the episodes of homophobic incitement in the summer of 2023 nor the Israel/Lebanon War. Nevertheless, the ethnography devoted itself to understanding the ordinary, sectarian, and heterosexual ground from which homophobia could even emerge.

What I soon realized was that the dissertation project had been there all along: I had been living and breathing it in my own experience as a queer person living in Ashrafieh and socializing among Beirut's queer communities. Walking daily past a security checkpoint to reach my apartment, for instance, and fearing being stopped over my earring or my Syrian accent spiked my interest in checkpoints and territoriality. My relations with my queer friends and lovers—and the painful double-binds of secrecy we had to navigate—also brought into view the heterosexual absolutism that we, as queers, had “took without saying,” and whose condition of queer non-disclosure we were deeply complicit in upholding. This is not to say that we were to blame, but to acknowledge how we, as Arab queers, seemed resigned to—and even defensive of—why it was that we could not hold our lovers' hands or kiss in public, disclose ourselves to our families, and be afforded the public equality, freedom and respect that the straights around us took as their “goes without saying” birthright.

During my time in Lebanon, what I often encountered from queers was a self-directed belittlement that trivialized activism around LGBTQ equality and freedom in the Middle East relative to the “bigger” and “more important” issues. In this context, I have heard arguments from Lebanese and Arab queers passionately explaining how “coming out” is a Western colonial construct—an effort to intellectually normalize, for themselves and for others—the everyday and political reality of sexual inequality and subordination. For years, I have been guilty of this myself: in fact, Joseph Massad’s *Desiring Arabs* has been a key resource for intellectually fortifying me and many Arab queers against coming to terms with the heartbreaking reality of our situations. The reality that our self-disclosure could make us enemies to our otherwise loving, caring, and understanding families. That one “mere” disclosure could incite an intimate war against us, dispossessing us of the emotional, financial, social and physical protections that (some of) our families afford us. In other words, we know why queer disclosure could threaten the family peace,<sup>107</sup> revoke our familial citizenship, and make us into refugees. Which is why many Arab queers uphold non-disclosure and often render it to be a non-problem and a “personal choice.” In the face of such structural homophobia, however, the insistence on silence being a free choice is but an “inauthentic flight” from the tragic truth of our situations.

In Lebanon, the situation(s) of queers are characterized by deep emotional, financial, and social dependence(s) on the family. Not only is the family the lynchpin of political organization and a precondition for citizenship in Lebanon. Membership in the family provides individuals with security, protection, access, and myriad privileges that neither the state nor any other social body could provide. Indeed, even with my American passport, my own estrangement from my family—my lack of a familial passport—rendered me a pariah among my Lebanese friends and lovers. It felt that my refugee-dom reminded them of the nightmare that they were desperate to

---

<sup>107</sup> In Arabic, the term denoting “the civil peace” is “al-silm al-ahli” which literally translates to “family peace.”

avoid. Which was why I was often met with significant resistance(s) from queers who did not want to see our shared queer fate. This is also why I felt more at home with Syrian refugees, queer and otherwise, who had lost everything—including family—in the civil war next door. With them, I felt a kinship based not on a shared nationality but on a shared experience of loss, survival, and freedom.

To reckon with queer responsibility in homophobia is not to blame those queers who have “chosen” to hide themselves. It is to understand how this “choice” contributes to the isolation of those who have “chosen” freedom and to the oppression of those who do not have a choice to hide. Indeed, and while the cis-gendered, straight-passing Lebanese queers exercise the familial privileges that non-disclosure secures for them, and while they enjoy the margins of “freedom” that Lebanon’s heterosexual contract affords them (clandestine clubs, Grindr, private sex), it is those who cannot pass as cis, as straight, or as citizens—trans people and queer Syrian refugees without families—who bear the brunt of homophobic violence in the country. For those vulnerable individuals, there is little to no solidarity from the queers around them.

Finally, to point to queer complicity in homophobia is not a moral indictment. We as queers have all learned that silence is the surest way to stay safe, especially when the majority around us, including our families, consider us to be an other-worldly enemy. But perhaps when we, as Arab queers, activists, and academics, decide to fully face the loss of our privileges in this heterosexually-absolutist and familial order—a loss that many queers the world over have painfully suffered and continue to work through—we can finally pre-figure a world of sexual equality and freedom, a world where we, as queers, can shed the false masks we have been forced to wear and to authentically partake in the happiness of a shared and public world.

\*\*\*

**Chapter 1: The Sacred and the Sodomite: Queer Appropriation, Homophobic Censorship,  
and the Sexuality of Sectarianism’s Symbolic Order**

On August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Mashrou` Leila—a local and queer-identified indie-rock band—was set to perform at the Byblos International Music Festival in Lebanon. About a month before their performance, however, a campaign took off among Christian right-wing actors calling for the censorship of the band’s musical performances. In an emblematic video widely circulated on social media, Naji Hayek—the political pundit who ignited the controversy—is flanked by a group of local youth (*shabab*).<sup>108</sup> With the green hills of Mount Lebanon behind them, the men stand with severe expressions and determined postures. “Freedom,” Hayek asserts with a pointed finger, “stops at the insulting of religions and *muqadasat* (sacred objects).”<sup>109</sup> Here, Hayek is addressing Mashrou` Leila’s subversive appropriations of Christian iconography in its then-latest album—songs with lyrics like “I will baptize my liver in gin, in the name of the father and son.”<sup>110</sup> Hayek was also referring to a picture posted to the Facebook page of the band’s gay lead singer that shows Madonna, the global pop icon, cradling Jesus in place of the Virgin Mary.<sup>111</sup> “You cannot insult Jesus and the Virgin,” Hayek continues. “These songs are insulting, these words are not acceptable, and [Christians] are not going to accept it.”<sup>112</sup> Interestingly, Hayek denied that the band’s queer identity motivated his actions. Rather, it was the band’s creative appropriations that violated constitutional prohibitions against the expression of religious contempt and the incitement of sectarian discord. This is why, Hayek explains in the video, he has filed an official complaint against Mashrou` Leila with Mount Lebanon’s General

---

<sup>108</sup> AgoraLeaks. (2019, August 20). *Naji hayek yuqadem ikhbar bihak Mashrou` leila, 'ala alniyaba al'ama tataharak*. Facebook.com. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1049669132091090>

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Leila, M. (2015). *Djinn* [Music]. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8H\\_HTyZGzU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8H_HTyZGzU)

<sup>111</sup> See Figure 1.1, “Madonna and Fanboy” in “Appendix 1: The Sacred and the Sodomite.”

<sup>112</sup> AgoraLeaks. (2019, August 20). *Naji hayek yuqadem ikhbar bihak Mashrou` leila, 'ala alniyaba al'ama tataharak*. Facebook.com. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1049669132091090>.

Prosecutor. Appearing in another televised interview, Hayek elaborates his position:

Listen, there was a deep violation, a violation and a touching of deeply held emotions and attachments to our Christian religion...this thing that they did is not a small thing... there is this feeling [in Lebanon] that, those Christians, we can do with them whatever want. That we can mock them and ridicule them. This is not acceptable. The issue has reached a critical point for us, and Christians will defend themselves.<sup>113</sup>

Mashrou` Leila's musical trespasses, however, did not just provoke Hayek. They also incited a popular censorship campaign that explicitly problematized the band's homosexuality. Mobilizing para-state religious organizations, ordinary priests and local Christian men, this campaign demanded that the state punish the band for its violations. But these actors also took matters into their own hands, issuing threats that ultimately censored Mashrou` Leila's upcoming concert in Byblos, a religiously symbolic city for Lebanon's Christian communities.

Happening just months before the 2019 Lebanon Revolution, the campaign to censor Mashrou` Leila emerged out of a context characterized by impending fiscal collapse, escalating xenophobia against Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and the accelerating corruption of the sectarian political establishment. In the context of the controversy, critics of the Christian political establishment were quick to figure Hayek's censorship campaign as a stunt and a last-ditch effort to garner legitimacy for the unpopular Christian President Michel Aoun.<sup>114</sup> Secular and anti-sectarian commentators further indexed the rising trends of religiously motivated artistic censorship and violations of artistic freedoms of expression—freedoms that are explicitly enumerated in the Lebanese Constitution. Indeed, critical commentators rejected the possibility that Mashrou` Leila's appropriations could even constitute a trespass against religious communities and their sacred objects. They also minimized the homophobic dimensions of the

---

<sup>113</sup> OTV Lebanon. (2021, April 21). *Hiwar al yawm ma' al nashit al siyasi fi tayyar al watani al hurr d naji hayek*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nas6ZNRXaWA>.

<sup>114</sup>Thaqafa, A.M. (2019, July 17). *Hamla massihiya did Mashrou` leila w hammed sinno yarud*. Al Modn.

copyright campaign itself.

Departing from this perspective, this chapter takes seriously the claims of symbolic violation behind religiously motivated and homophobic censorship. Taking the 2019 Mashrou` Leila controversy as my empirical anchor, I ask the following: what specific threat does queer cultural production pose to the “sacred objects” (*muqadasat*) of sectarian groups? How and why does homophobic censorship respond to this threat? And does the case of Mashrou` Leila reveal about the challenges that religious attachments to collective symbols pose for political transformation?

### Argument

In the first part of the chapter, I investigate the veritable threat that queer cultural production poses to sectarian symbols. In the case of Mashrou` Leila, that threat is twofold. First, the band’s appropriation of Christian rites and rituals in its music transforms the meaning of objects whose significance is fixed by sectarian law and society. Unlike past instances of censorship, the band’s queer identity and the abject status of homosexuality in sectarian society renders their appropriation a specific act of symbolic mal-transformation and defilement. Second, Mashrou` Leila’s then-upcoming concert in Byblos, a historically sanctified Christian town in Mount Lebanon, would have been a public site for mobilizing around a political queer identity. By positively re-signifying queer sexuality, Mashrou` Leila’s concerts thus threaten to divest heterosexuality of its sacred, absolutist, and public status in sectarianism. By altering the significance of heterosexuality, the publicity of the band’s queerness—and their efforts at queer normalization—would attack the common sign around which the sectarian order is built.

In the second part of the chapter, I figure homophobia as a set of censorship logics. Working against the transformative effects of queer cultural production and publicity,

homophobic censorship works to preserve the public and immutable status of sects and their symbols. It does so in three ways: first, homophobic censorship articulates a populist version of sectarian identity and recruits for it. Second, popular and para-state censors utilize logics of religious freedom to re-affirm heterosexuality as a shared principle and a necessary precondition for sectarian power-sharing. Finally, and by abstaining from censoring either queer cultural production or homophobic violence, the Lebanese state produced a deadlock that contained the effects of queer publicity, quelled the violence of populist factions and preserved the inter-sectarian consensus on heterosexuality. By reinforcing the symbolic status of heterosexuality in sectarianism, homophobic censorship ultimately works to shore up the sacred symbols of all groups while also resisting processes of cultural and political secularization in Lebanon.

#### Part I: The Symbolic Order of Sectarianism

In order to understand how Mashrou' Leila's appropriations could constitute a threat to Lebanon's sectarian order, we must first understand how sectarianism operates as a symbolic order between different groups and their *muqadasat*. In Lebanese Arabic, the term *muqadasat* refers to physical objects (signs, symbols, and spaces), ideas (the idea of God, sexual nature), or practices (rites and rituals) that religious communities invest with sacred value.<sup>115</sup> Unlike the privatized status of religious signs under secularism, sectarianism provides religious communities with legal, political, and symbolic recognition.<sup>116</sup> In doing so, the Lebanese state does not identify with any one group or its *muqadasat*, but creates a symbolic order in which the

---

<sup>115</sup> Empirically, the prominence of particular religious signs accords with the demographic prominence of a group in a given territory. For instance, and in Christian-majority areas, symbols – like crosses and crucifixes, Virgin Mary statues, and Church towers – dominate the public landscape. In Sunni and Shi'i majority parts of Lebanon, Muslim signs – like minarets, crescent moons, religious calligraphy, and martyr posters – indicate Sunni and Shi'i proprietorship of space. And in mixed-sect areas, like Beirut's downtown district, crescents appear alongside crucifixes, minarets alongside church towers.

<sup>116</sup> By granting each religious community its own "personal status" court in the state, Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution grants political recognition to Lebanon's different sects. In doing so, Article 9 also bestows legal personality upon religious communities and their representatives (see later).



sacred objects of all Abrahamic religions appear equally inviolable and publicly revered. In this way, the equal protection of all groups' *muqadasat* allows the sectarian state to generate relations of parity between different sects, their symbols, and their worldviews.<sup>117</sup>

Because they work as a proxy for sectarian equality, sacred objects also figure as sites of potential collective injury and inter-group violence. This is why the Lebanese state relies upon a system of formal and informal prohibitions whose aim is to anticipate and prevent the symbolic transgression of inter-group boundaries. While Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution grants religions symbolic and political representation in the state, it is the Lebanese Penal Code that secures religions against public transgression. Article 317 of the Penal Code punishes with one to three years of imprisonment “any action, word, or statement whose aim is to incite religious or racial (*irqiya*) or to provoke discord between sects or other parts of the population.”<sup>118</sup> Article 473 punishes “anyone who blasphemes (*jadafa*) against the name of God.” Likewise, Article 474 sentences “whoever undertakes any action with the intent to harmfully belittle (*isa`a*) religious rites that are performed publicly or incites to the contempt (*tahkir*) of any of these rites” with 6 months to three years of prison. And Article 475 criminalizes “disturbances during the performance of religious rituals, celebrations, and representations” as well as “threats and violence” against the aforementioned events. It also sentences those who “destroy, break, deface, desecrate, or pollutes places of worship or symbols (*rumooz*) that are respected by the followers of a particular religion or a group of people.”<sup>119</sup>

---

<sup>117</sup> See also Maya Mikdashi's discussion of sectarian parity in *Sextarainism*. Though indebted to Mikdashi's analysis, my analysis diverges insofar as I do not consider the Lebanese state as a secular entity, but as a specific regime of factions. This puts my analysis closer to that of Lebanese theorist Mehdi Amel in his *In the Sectarian State*.

<sup>118</sup> *Lebanese penal code*. (1943). [https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/lebanon-penal-code\\_html/Lebanon\\_Penal\\_Code\\_1943.pdf](https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/lebanon-penal-code_html/Lebanon_Penal_Code_1943.pdf)

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

By purporting to protect all religious groups against symbolic attacks and incitement, these legal prohibitions bear the semblance of anti-hate speech laws. Upon closer examination, however, prohibitions against anti-religious “contempt” and “incitement” do not only “say no” to symbolic transgressions; they also mandate that the *muqadasat* of all religious groups be regarded, represented, and generally handled with reverence and respect, at least publicly. This in part relates to Lebanon’s histories of war. By anticipating and preempting potentially violent conflicts over religious insults and blasphemies, these laws further work to uphold a state of symbolic parity between groups. Indeed, legal and societal prohibitions ensure the undiminished and equal value of all sacred objects, and by proxy, of all sects. In turn, the preservation of symbolic equality aims to secure against the use of violence as a means of restituting a group’s standing following a symbolic trespass.

For some scholars of Lebanese sectarianism, legal provisions that relate violations of sectarian equality to the outbreak of civil war are informed by orientalist imaginaries of inevitable religious violence. From Maya Mikdashi’s viewpoint, for instance, the modern Lebanese state was created as an over-arching entity whose *raison d’être* is the preservation and management of its eighteen officially recognized sects.<sup>120</sup> For Mikdashi, the idea of pre-existing religious differences naturalizes communal boundaries, inter-sectarian violence, and the state’s role in maintaining a peaceful “balance.”<sup>121</sup> In a similar vein, Sami Hermez points to how the Ta’if postwar settlement reinforced the inevitability of sectarian antagonism by figuring equality among factions as, at once, fragile and necessary for the preservation of Lebanon’s civil peace.<sup>122</sup> This contributes to an ever-present threat of war, which for Hermez and Mikdashi, works largely

---

<sup>120</sup> Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism*. Stanford University Press.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Sami Hermez. (2021). *War is coming: Between past and future violence in lebanon*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

as a regulatory fiction that shores up state sovereignty. Seen through the interpretive frames of these accounts, then, prohibitions against the expression of religious contempt, the “touching” of *muqadasat*, and the violation of sectarian parity respond to a mostly imagined threat and provide elites with an alibi to exercise power.

While Mikdashi and Hermez are right to point to how the sectarian state finds itself on imaginaries of violence, it is important to acknowledge that legal and societal prohibitions against “religious contempt” also respond to the very real charge of religious symbols, as well as to the inter-group violence that they have provoked in Lebanon. Historically, violence against out-group signs and symbols was a popular mode of inter-group combat in Lebanon’s 1975-1990 Civil War. Churches were burned. Mosques were ransacked. And out-group members were killed at gunpoint for having a visible cross around the neck or a hijab at the wrong neighborhood checkpoint. Indeed, and during the war, acts of desecration proliferated. They blurred the boundaries between symbolic and physical war violence. And they violently mobilized ordinary men in defense of their communities. In fact, the problem of symbolic transgression and inter-group violence was central to the formation of modern Lebanon itself: it arose in the civil war of 1860, and it informed what Usama Makdisi describes as an unstated consensus—an “absolute commitment to not transgress the religious beliefs and dogmas of each religious community.”<sup>123</sup> In this light, we can see how histories of symbolic violence in Lebanon inform, at least partially, the social and legal prohibitions against the trespassing on out-group *muqadasat*.<sup>124</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> Usama Makdisi. (2021). *Age of coexistence: The ecumenical frame and the making of the modern arab world* (p. 96). University of California Press.

<sup>124</sup> The ordinary escalation of violence over sacred objects is dramatized by Lebanese director Nadine Labakeh’s 2009 film, *And Where do We Go Now*.<sup>124</sup> Set in a remote mountain village in the course of the Lebanese Civil War, the film tracks how sectarian tensions ignite between the village’s coexisting Muslim and Christian populations precisely over the question of sacred objects. In one scene, the villagers wake up to find the local Church and its icons vandalized. This incites the fury of the Christian male villagers, who beat up a Muslim youth, and accuse the

## Censorship and the Cultural Battles over Sacred Objects

Since the Lebanese Civil War, sectarian conflicts over sacred objects have been fought mostly in the realm of cultural production; indeed, censorship struggles have allowed war over the status of religious symbols in Lebanon to continue by other means. But since the war, censors have predominantly targeted “mis”-representations of religion(s) and sexuality in secularized cultural productions. According to lawyer Nizar Saghie, Article 4 of the 1947 Law in the Constitutional translates the prohibitions on symbolic transgression in the Penal Code into guidelines for the censorship of films, music, and other kinds of cultural production.<sup>125</sup> In fact, and since the postwar period, this law has been used mainly to censor series, films, and movies that are deemed offensive, insulting, and provocative by the representatives of Lebanon’s religious communities.<sup>126</sup>

Activating a network of state and para-state actors and institutions, the practice of cultural censorship has worked to reassert the authority of religious communities and their right to be the final arbiters on public representations of their faiths. In the past two decades, both the Sunni Muslim Scholars’ Council and the Catholic Media Center—two cultural organizations that function like public relations centers for the Sunni Dar al Fatwa and the Maronite Catholic Church in Lebanon—have worked in partnership with Lebanon’s General Security<sup>127</sup> to censor local and foreign works that represent religious signs in proximity to depictions of sex and

---

Muslim villagers of the profaning act. The next morning, the villagers wake up to find the local mosque ransacked and filled with livestock, now igniting the rage of the village’s Muslim men. Marking the origin of inter-sectarian violence in the film, this scene also emblemizes a historic problem: namely, how the touching of sacred objects could provoke popular and reciprocal acts of violence whose aim is to restore equality between groups. Indeed, it is the potential of restitutory violence that state prohibitions against “religious contempt” aim to prevent/govern. Consequently, sectarian law operates preemptively (to prevent inter-group strife) rather than reactively (after the violence has occurred). Labak, N. (Director). (2011). *Hala’ la wein (where do we go now)* [Film].

<sup>125</sup> As Nizar Saghie analyzes, Article 4 of the 1947 Law put into practice “the emotions and sentiments of the public shall be respected and the stirring of racial and religious discord and strife shall be avoided.” Saghie, N. (2016). *Censorship in Lebanon: Law and practice*. 112.

<sup>126</sup> Saghie, N. (2016). *Censorship in Lebanon: Law and practice*.

<sup>127</sup> The state security bureau that manages external affairs and who is the final arbiter on matters of cultural censorship.

sexuality. According to Nizar Saghieh, these works constitute a category of censorship unto itself. For example, censors removed a scene from the film *Slave of New York*, which depicts a cross on the bare breasts of a woman.<sup>128</sup> In another film, a scene was censored in which a picture of Jesus Christ appears in a room of pimps and prostitutes.<sup>129</sup> In the 1999 Lebanese film *Congratulations*, censors removed an exchange in which one character describes a church as a “pile of concrete lit by a cross.”<sup>130</sup> And in 2009, General Security demanded the removal of a scene from a local television show that showed the naked heroine putting on her veil as her naked lover lies in bed and watches.<sup>131</sup>

In all of these instances, censors problematized the proximity between sanctified symbols (crosses, churches, hijabs, Jesus), on the one hand, and profane-coded bodies and acts, on the other (breasts, nudity, and straight sex outside of wedlock). And though censors did not consider that the entire works insulted religions, they deemed the removal of these scenes necessary to uphold the undiminished and unmixing value of sacred objects. By disappearing frames that mix the sacred and the profane, censorship also anticipates and preempts the violent public reaction(s) that the mixture of religion and sexuality may provoke.<sup>132</sup> As such, censorship functions as a mechanism of symbolic governance. It maintains the distance between sacred and profane objects in public and cultural representations. And in doing so, it maintains the equal

---

<sup>128</sup> Saghieh, N. (2016). *Censorship in Lebanon: Law and practice*. 115.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Here, logics of censorship in Lebanon resemble those of contemporary India. As William Mazerella elucidates in *Censorium*, Indian state officials censor scenes of sexuality that may provoke purportedly uneducated, rural, and male audiences to violence. In doing so, Mazerella shows how censorship reproduces a colonial-era imaginary of the Indian subaltern as backward in need of state-sponsored reform. Mazerella, W. (2013). *Censorium*. Duke University Press.

value of all sacred objects and contains the violent consequences that may arise from their symbolic devaluation.<sup>133</sup>

## Part II: The Threat of Queer Cultural Production

While the Mashrou` Leila Controversy should certainly be understood in a context of intensifying censorship—particularly around sex and sexuality—the band’s cultural appropriation poses a distinct problem. First, and unlike the problem of representative proximity between unauthorized forms of heterosexuality and religious icons, the band’s queer identity and the specifically abject status of homosexuality in sectarian society renders their musical appropriation a particularly injurious act of defilement, rather than of profanation. I argue that it is the specific mixing of homosexuality and religious iconography—and the semiotically mutating effects of that mixing—that incited anti-gay Christian actors to censorship. Second, and more importantly, the members of Mashrou` Leila are not only cultural producers; the lead singer is a prominent queer activist in the Middle East. Indeed, the band’s concerts are public sites for queer solidarity building and for the normalization of a public queer identity in Lebanon. In turn, queer activism fundamentally challenges—even unmakes—the consensus on heterosexuality that exists between different groups and that allows them to publicly share symbolic power.

More generally, the threat of Mashrou` Leila’s music and performance pertains to how the queer re-signification of religion and sexuality could alter the meaning(s) of symbols that are

---

<sup>133</sup> Here, we can think with sociologist Émile Durkheim, who, in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, argues that the distinction between the sacred and the profane is foundational to all collective life, and it is sustained through rituals and prohibitions that enforce their separation. For Durkheim, the mixing of the sacred and the profane does not only threaten the status of sacred objects; it also threatens the identity of the group that invests objects with sacred value in the first place.<sup>133</sup> Seen through Durkheim’s frame, censorship in Lebanon operates to enforce the distance between sacred objects and profane elements—especially sexualized bodies and acts. By policing visual and narrative proximity between religion and sexuality, sectarian censors thus enact a kind of semiotic purification: they excise potential scenes of profanation lest they transform the meaning of sacred symbols, undermine the status of sectarian collectives,, and provoke the violence of sectarian fanatics.

meant to be eternal and unchanging. By deploying religious signs in homosexual contexts, the band's performances expose the symbolic fetishism behind sectarianism; that is, how the sacred meanings of religious and sexual symbols do not inhere in themselves nor are they divinely ordained—and thus unchangeable—but are humanly constructed. By changing the public meanings associated with homosexuality *and* heterosexuality, Mashrou' Leila's cultural politics symptomize how anti-sectarian transformation is a process that targets the public and cultural significance of both religion *and* (hetero)sexuality. In order to investigate how queer cultural production threatens the symbolic reproduction of sectarianism, I now turn to an analysis of the Mashrou' Leila Controversy.

### The Mashrou' Leila Controversy

In July of 2019, Hammed Sinno, the openly-gay lead singer of Mashrou' Leila, was attacked on social media for a photo he had shared (and not authored) in 2015 on his personal Facebook page. Entitled “Madonna and Fanboy,” the photo could be described as a contemporary adaptation of the universally recognized icons of baby Jesus in the arms of the Virgin Mary.<sup>134</sup> Replacing the face of the Virgin Mary, however, is the face of global pop star Madonna. In this predictably subversive appropriation of Christian iconography, Jesus is rendered Madonna's “fanboy.” Four years after the publication of this Facebook post, news of the image circulated among Christian-affiliated public and private Facebook pages, Whatsapp group messages, and Twitter accounts, sparking outrage in its wake.<sup>135</sup> For right-leaning Christian activists, the image was taken as proof of blasphemy and a broader campaign (of which Mashrou' Leila was a part) to undermine and attack the rights of the Christian sect in Lebanon. What was further problematized was the source of this threat: a “shaz” (deviant/faggot), devil-

---

<sup>134</sup> See Figure 1.1: “Madonna and Fanboy” in “Appendix 1: The Sacred and the Sodomite.”

<sup>135</sup> AgoraLeaks. (2019). Naji Hayek: 'eib “OrientleJour” tu'taber al shatem bil massih w al haza` bil 'adra `amr 'adi. In *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2407984662786263>;

worshipping lead-singer, who is also a Sunni Muslim. This fact—that an openly homosexual Sunni man should be the one to defile and “touch” the Christian faith—added to the gravity of the trespass.

Soon after the circulation of “Madonna and Fanboy,” Christian social media groups, activists, and religious leaders began publishing videos, posts, images and articles that highlighted the blasphemies contained in the lyrics of Mashrou` Leila’s music.<sup>136</sup> Many of the videos featured lyric-by-lyric exegeses that revealed an assemblage of criminal vices—mainly, the band’s promotion (*tarweej*) of devil worship, homosexuality, debauchery, and drugs.<sup>137</sup> Of the band’s discography, two songs (also produced in 2015) were highlighted: “Djinn” and “Asnam.” The name of the former refers to the spirit beings (both good and evil) that inhabit the Earth. However, Mashrou` Leila plays on this word and its associations throughout the track. In fact, the song is more about a rebellion against the unjust political and social status quo—a status quo that, for the members of Mashrou` Leila, is responsible for the “exodus” of the youth out of Lebanon. In order to forget the daily strain of life in an infrastructurally failing state, an unemployment rate of 25%, and a status quo of institutional and political corruption, the song implies, “we” (the youth) must get exorbitantly drunk and “surrender ourselves to the night.” It is in this context that Sinno sings what would become the most widely cited and infamous lyrics of the song:

w ‘midet kibdi bil gin, bir`ous la ‘oud min al djinn  
rah ghattis kibdi bil gin, bi `ism al 2ab wil `ibin  
Liver baptized in gin, I dance to ward off the djinn

---

<sup>136</sup> AgoraLeaks. (2019, July 25). Shahidu fideo Mashrou` leila alati yuji`un bihi al mahrajan jbeil, tuskhar min al messih w tuhanahu b absha` alturek. *AgoraLeaks*.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.



Drown my liver in gin, in the name of the father and son<sup>138</sup>

Christian activists were livid that a religious rite as holy as baptism be appropriated to the ends of drunken debauchery, homosexuality and “devil worship.” In the eyes of the band’s critics, this was not just an artistic transgression, but a specific and deviant assault on the symbolic status of Christian icons, rites, and rituals, and by proxy, on the standing of Christianity in Lebanon.

For these activists, Mashrou` Leila’s crime lay in the fact that it “touched”<sup>139</sup> the sacred objects of Christianity—an abject touch that trespassed on the legally untouchable boundaries of Christianity and all religions in the Lebanese state.<sup>140</sup> Deploying a nationally shared and constitutionally enshrined language of religious toleration, Christian activists and leaders demanded the immediate cancellation of Mashrou` Leila’s upcoming Byblos concert.<sup>141</sup> Backed by institutions like the Archdiocese of Byblos, the Maronite Patriarchate, and the Catholic Media Center, right-leaning Christian political pundit Naji Hayek who we met in the vignette took the initiative and filed a public complaint (*ikhbar*) with Mount Lebanon’s General Prosecutor Ghada Aoun, where he accused the band of expressing religious contempt, inciting sectarian discord, and violating the protections guaranteed to religious communities by Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution. On those legal grounds, Prosecutor Aoun subpoenaed Mashrou` Leila’s members for immediate investigation.

While secular critics figured Hayek’s accusation as bogus, Mashrou` Leila’s religious irreverence—its appropriation of Christian icons, rites, and rituals in its music—was, from the vantage point of sectarian law, a crime against symbolic parity. Their song “Djinn” (above), for

---

<sup>138</sup> Leila, M. (2015). *Djinn* [Music]. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8H\\_HTyZGzU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8H_HTyZGzU)

<sup>139</sup> “Mas” in the Lebanese Arabic. The full expression is “al-mas bil muqadasat” which implies a harmful, injurious and abusive kind of touching or mal-use.

<sup>140</sup> OTV Lebanon. (2019, August 14). *OTV: Joseph Abu Fadel on Mashrou` Leila* [Video File]. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0poiwaJE\\_gE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0poiwaJE_gE).

<sup>141</sup> *Naji Hayek Files a Report to the General Prosecution Against Mashrou` Leila*. (2019, August 20). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbMCRsn6Hf0>.

instance, represents baptism outside of its fixed Christian context and re-deploys it in a musical context of drinking, pleasure, and sex. This redeployment gives new meaning to a sign (“baptism”) whose significance and signification is legally, socially, and communally fixed in sectarianism. By changing the meaning of a sign figured as immutable, the band’s artistic irreverence further de-elevated a sign that is specifically positioned in sectarianism’s symbolic order vis-à-vis other signs. As we have seen in the last section, the symbolic order of sectarianism is not reducible to any one group’s system of signs. Rather, sectarianism elevates *all* religious signs—at least Christian and Muslim ones—and puts them into relations of symbolic equality. The equal and inviolate status of collective signs further serves as a proxy for the equal standing of sects in the state. This means that Mashrou` Leila’s irreverent appropriation Christian signs and not Muslim ones symbolically de-elevates the status of Christian sects vis-à-vis Muslim ones. This results in a condition of symbolic imparity between one group and the rest.

Indeed, symbolic imparity between Christian and Muslim *muqadasat* is precisely what Naji Hayek problematized in an interview on OTV, the media channel of the center-right Christian Free Patriotic Movement. According to Hayek, Mashrou` Leila’s trespass expresses a sense that Christians can be easily mocked, ridiculed, and insulted in comparison to Lebanese Muslims. Referring to incidents of symbolic trespasses against Muslim *muqadasat*, he explains:

The [Christian] director Charbel Khaili did a sketch and he made a joke about Sayyed Hassan<sup>142</sup>... Christ for us is God, and Sayyed Hassan is a human. That joke turned the world upside down. They [bands of Shi’i men] came to Rue Monot and attacked and destroyed until he went out and apologized... And the fact that when the Danish cartoons of Prophet Mohammad came out, they attacked the Danish embassy in Ashrafieh and took the crosses down with it.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> The then-General Secretary of Hezbollah and a sanctified icon/leader in the Lebanese Shi’i community.

<sup>143</sup> OTV Lebanon. (2021, April 21). *Hiwar al yawm ma’ al nashit al siyasi fi tayyar al watani al hurr d naji hayek*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nas6ZNRXaWA>

Here, Hayek cites examples in which the misrepresentation of Muslim icons (Nasrallah and the Prophet Mohammad) provoked retaliatory violence against Christian symbols and on Christian territory (Rue Monot/Ashrafieh). For Hayek, however, Muslim violence was a publicly accepted reaction. This contrasts with how reactions to the violation of Christian *muqadasat* have been either challenged in most media outlets or considered as unworthy of being taken seriously.

Hayek's point about Muslim and Christian imparity—at least when it comes to controversies over symbolic appropriation—was reiterated by Mark, a gay-identified Christian, an FPM supporter, and an interlocutor. “If you open Netflix around the world,” Mark begins, “you see that there are hundreds of films that insult Christianity. And they are being broadcast in Lebanon.”<sup>144</sup> While Mark is generally critical of religiously-motivated censorship attempts, he also saw Hayek's point: “let this [cultural] openness be maintained, but why isn't there an equal treatment of [Muslim and Christian] representations? Why does Netflix choose to broadcast these films about Christians in the Middle East, and why does it not broadcast films about Islam? Well, Netflix doesn't dare (*ma byistarju*), they know that if they broadcast something like this, you'll die...”<sup>145</sup> Here, Mark—like Hayek—(rightly) suggests how the potential of popular Muslim violence leads cultural producers and production houses like Netflix to be more cautious toward the representation of Muslim icons and symbols than toward their Christian counterparts.

In Hayek's discourse, the imparity between the value of Muslim and Christian *muqadasat* has to do with the drop in the symbolic status of Christian minorities in Lebanon after the 1975-1990 civil war: “What happened? We've lost our advantages, we have only 10% of state employment. Now every time we ask for rights, they say that we are sectarian. Just like now, when I am asking for my right, which is to prohibit the touching of Christian symbols and rites,

---

<sup>144</sup> Mark. (2020, November 6). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi , Interviewer) [Personal communication].

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

they are saying that I'm provoking violence."<sup>146</sup> Here, Hayek's demands for censorship are reflected through narratives of relative deprivation that have circulated among predominantly right-wing Christian communities since the war. And though inflammatory, these narratives are not totally wrong: Christian militias were the informal losers of the civil war, with that loss being reflected in the reorganization of power in the postwar Ta'if Accords. But for our purposes, what Hayek's discourse reveals is how demands for homophobic censorship in 2019 were articulated in reference to the post-war settlement and to sectarian-specific histories and struggles. Indeed, Hayek takes the trespasses of queer culture to breathe new life into an old narrative of persecution. "We're not doing a conspiracy theory," he insists, "but there's a truth—I'm of the opinion that there is a targeting of Christians in Lebanon and in the Middle East. This incident [Mashrou' Leila] is within this targeting. I'm not saying that the band is in on the conspiracy, but we as Christians should not accept this any longer."<sup>147</sup> In these ways, Hayek figured Mashrou' Leila's trespasses as the most recent instantiation of an anti-Christian project in Lebanon and the broader Middle East. In doing so, his discourse worked to inflame the sentiments of those Christian individuals and communities who hold experiences, narratives and claims of Christian loss that remain historically, socially, and politically unacknowledged in Lebanon. Indeed, homophobia allows Hayek to politicize this loss anew and to indirectly remind Lebanon's non-Christian political factions and publics that this loss has not been forgotten.

In addition to attacking the symbolic parity that is instituted by sectarian law, the band's appropriations of Christian symbols also trespassed on the de facto right that religious communities' have in publicly interpreting their own faiths. This communal right to interpretation was articulated in the censorship case of *Al-Messih*, an Iranian-produced television

---

<sup>146</sup> OTV Lebanon. (2021, April 21). *Hiwar al yawm ma' al nashit al siyasi fi tayyar al watani al hurr d naji hayek*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nas6ZNRXaWA>.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

series that aired in 2009.<sup>148</sup> Broadcasted on Al-Manar and NBN (two stations owned by Shi'i Muslim political parties), the series represents Christ not as the Son of God, but as a prophet among the Abrahamic prophets. While this depiction accords with Muslim scripture, it falsifies the understanding of Christ's exceptional—and sacred—status in Christian theology. Following objections by para-state religious institutions—namely the Catholic Church's Ecclesiastical Committee and the Catholic Media Center—both NBN and al-Manar took the decision to halt the broadcasting of the series lest it become a cause for political advantage-taking and incitement. The incident, however, provided Tarek Mitri—the Lebanese Minister of Information at the time—with an occasion to publicly interpret the state's commitment to religious freedom. Standing before an audience that had congregated outside the Catholic Media Center, Mitri declared that the state grants:

...every believer the right to interpret his own religion, and that others must respect this interpretation and this faith... Thus, none of us shall speak of the others' religion in a manner that the other does not find himself in, religiously, historically or in his own interpretation of his faith.<sup>149</sup>

What this means is that religions—their beliefs and symbols—must be represented only in accordance with the interpretation of the group to which those beliefs and symbols properly “belong.” In this discourse, religious representation and interpretation thus figure as the exclusive political rights of the group that owns those symbols and beliefs.<sup>150</sup> In this light, we see how sectarian law institutes a kind of copyright law over sacred symbols. And in doing so, the legal and societal prohibitions against religious contempt and incitement—and their invocation

---

<sup>148</sup> Saghie, N. (2016). *Censorship in Lebanon: Law and practice*. 117.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ironically, what Mitri's interpretation glosses over is that Christ is a symbol that is shared by both Islam and Christianity. This throws into question which group properly owns Christ and his image. Indeed, pursuing this line of inquiry is too big for the dissertation, but will appear in the book, given that it directly hits against the precarity of sectarianism's symbolic order.

in censorship cases—work to safeguard the dominion that groups have in their symbols and the rights of ownership and reproducibility they exercise over them.

By guarding the un-alienated self-understanding that in-group members have of themselves, prohibitions against out-group appropriations preempt the outbreak of violent conflict over symbolic trespasses between groups. In doing so, however, sectarian law takes for granted—that is, renders commonsense—the injuriousness of symbolic “mis”-representation and the violence it could stir. Throughout the controversy, the state never questioned why it is that Hayek, his men, and the Lebanese Christians they represented should feel so viscerally insulted by Mashrou` Leila’s irreverent act. Not only was their reaction “natural” from the vantage point of sectarian state and society. An insult against religion was also a plausible reason for the activation of sectarian ‘asabiyat.

Here, a foray is necessary: according to the 14<sup>th</sup> century Arab political theorist, Ibn Khaldun, ‘asabiya is a deeply affective and political phenomenon that relates individual members to their groups.<sup>151</sup> Among the affects of ‘asabiya are jealousy, pride, and affection for the group, guardedness and defensiveness over its honor and standing, and aggression toward that group’s enemies. Fundamentally, these affects are protective in nature: they allow members to perceive threats to the life or existence of the group and to mobilize against them. As such, in Ibn Khaldun’s theory, ‘asabiya emerges as a kind of collective security system, one that is individuated in all group members and one that functions primarily for safeguarding and reproducing collective power. But at its core, ‘asabiya is a phenomenon that emerges from and is productive of political violence.

---

<sup>151</sup> While the English translation figures asabiya as “group feeling,” I use the original Arabic to coin a working translation of asabiya as “defensive-aggression.” For the English translation, see ‘abd Al-Rahmān B Muḥammad Ibn K̄aldūn, Franz Rosenthal, Dawood, N. J., & Lawrence, B. (2015). *The Muqaddimah : an introduction to history*. Princeton University Press.

Not only is it an overlooked political concept in Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, 'asabiya is also an ordinary word in colloquial Lebanese and an essential term in sectarian politics. Throughout my fieldwork, the topic of sectarian 'asabiya appeared time and again in discussions of socio-political transition in Lebanon. For instance, Ra'ed, a queer Lebanese man and an activist in the 2019 Lebanon Revolution figured the 'asabiyat of sectarian men as a key feature of sectarian violence and a principal obstacle to change. When I asked him how he would define 'asabiya, Ra'ed answered in terms of identity and attachment:

So I think when it comes to 'asabiya, it is a kind of almost aggressive form of entanglement with a certain identity, [a] feeling of duty and responsibility in order to protect that identity, and internalizing [identity] to the extent where it becomes part of one's own individual dignity, your individual understanding of the world, and ultimately, your own identity. Imagine your name... it is something that is always around you, it is something that you identify with, and something that you want people to call you by, and something that you want people to respect. If people make fun of your name, you are going to have a problem with that.<sup>152</sup>

According to Ra'ed's theorization, the feelings associated with 'asabiya—obligation, duty, dignity, humiliation—render group identification a matter as personal as one's own name. Indeed, in ordinary language and in Ibn Khaldun's own conceptualization, 'asabiya names a condition in which the boundaries between collective and individual identification are blurred.<sup>153</sup> This blurring between the self and the group is primarily why insults and trespasses against collective signs, symbols, and boundaries are felt individually—and viscerally so—and why they can provoke such violent affect among sectarian fanatics, who are keen to defend the honor, standing, or name of their groups. For Ra'ed, this is exactly what happened in the Mashrou`

---

<sup>152</sup> Ra'ed. (2020, November 29). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>153</sup> See also Ibn Khaldun's theorization of 'asabiya in *al-Muqaddimah*. 'abd Al-Raḥmān B Muḥammad Ibn Ḳaldūn, Franz Rosenthal, Dawood, N. J., & Lawrence, B. (2015). *The Muqaddimah : an introduction to history*. Princeton University Press.

Leila Controversy: insults against collective signs were felt as personal attacks, which in turn, mobilized ordinary men in defense of their groups and in preservation of their *muqadasat*.

Seen through the frame of ‘asabiya, sectarian laws against contempt work to manage and contain the individual and violent expression of collective attachments. However, these laws also contribute to preserving the violent attachments that group-members—mostly men—have toward their collectives, their religion, and their sacred objects. In fact, laws against the expression of religious contempt take as a given the existence of violent religious attachments and they perpetuate the idea that they cannot be eliminated or reformed but only managed and/or governed.<sup>154</sup>

In his appraisal of the Mashrou` Leila controversy, Mark—the gay, FPM activist we met earlier—also cited Christian ‘asabiya to explain the intensity of popular Christian reactions. As an atheist, Mark insists that he is critical of religious attachments and feelings; but he nevertheless blamed Mashrou` Leila for engaging in a kind of politics that the country, with its instituted sectarian ‘asabiyat, is not yet ready for:

Look, this band decided, that in order to gain more celebrity and fame for itself, to touch and bump into *muqadasat*. And you can't touch (religion) in this country! You have to first create freedom, you have to make people conscious (wa'i) of freedom... before you go and do something like [what Mashrou` Leila] did. How, in this country that's missing this consciousness and is divided, do you want to come critique religion? For me, this was idiotic and stupid work. Critique, negotiate, but don't go and take religious symbols and icons and put it into a song and make a concert in a Christian area.<sup>155</sup>

---

<sup>154</sup> Here, we find a close analog in the figuration of femicide as a “crime of passion.” This logic states that violence against women is understandable if that woman had engaged in infidelity. That is, her trespassing on the boundaries of her marriage contract legally sanctions – or at least, socially legitimates – the violence done against her. Indeed, and on this logic, the veritable crime is not the vengeful husband's, but the initial boundary-violation that brought on the violence itself. Culpability thus falls on that which provoked the violence rather than that which meted it out. In similar ways, religious trespasses are coded as crimes of passion whose triggers must be criminalized for violence to be avoided.

<sup>155</sup> Mark. (2020, November 6). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi , Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.



While freedoms of expression are enumerated in the Lebanese Constitution, Mark points to how the kind of secular “consciousness” that is a prerequisite for Mashrou` Leila’s act is not yet established in Lebanon. This is why the band’s appropriation was problematic: they did not take into account the attachments, sentiments, and ‘asabiyat that many of Lebanon’s sectarian populations have toward their religions and their *muqadasat*. The country’s sectarian divisions, Mark implies, further amplify the stakes of symbolic appropriations, rendering these acts inseparable from the volatility of factional politics. While he does not naturalize the violent reactivity of religious populations and their fanatics, Mark also does not dismiss them—something he accuses the band and its supporters of doing. And like Naji Hayek, Mark too invoked the controversies over the Prophet Muhammad Cartoons to exemplify his point about the imparity of violent religious attachments.

Interestingly, and during my ethnography, the consistent comparison between the Mashrou` Leila Controversy and the Prophet Muhammad cartoon scandals—and between Christian and Muslim injury—highlights the sectarian aspect of cases involving symbolic appropriations, religious violation, and popular violence. In the interviews cited above, figures like Mark and Hayek reference a 2005 controversy in which a Danish newspaper’s demeaning cartoons of the Prophet incited protests, diplomatic threats, and violent attacks on Danish embassies. A decade later, the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shootings followed a similar pattern: two Muslim-identified gunmen murdered the cartoonists for their blasphemy. These episodes sparked polarized debates around the world. Some critics condemned the appropriation of Muslim icons as “hate speech” inciting violence against Muslims, while others defended it as a matter of free expression. This debate even took on an academic turn, with scholars like Saba Mahmood, Judith

Butler, Wendy Brown, and Talal Asad intervening on both sides.<sup>156</sup> The most notable of these interventions was Saba Mahmood's "Religious Reason and Secular Affect." Partially echoed in Mark's logic, Mahmood argues for how secular-liberal conceptions of free expression fail to recognize how anti-Muslim blasphemy violates the ethical relationship between believers and their sacred icons.<sup>157</sup> For Mahmood, the misrepresentation of religious symbols produces "affective pain" that alienates believers from their worldviews and does violence to their attachments. However, Mahmood's analysis treats religious attachments to sacred objects and personas as a given rather than as a politically constituted phenomenon. Indeed, she does not interrogate why seeing an image—or hearing a lyric—can feel so painfully violating at all.

From an academic standpoint, Mahmood's analysis also affirms the logic of the sectarian state: religious symbols must remain untouched lest they trigger group feelings and provoke violent retaliation. This naturalizes the collective—and often violent—feelings that bind believers to their signs and symbols. By rendering certain symbols outside the realm of appropriation and critique, sectarian law preempts the activation of *asabiyat* by evading that which could trigger them. But in doing so, sectarian law criminalizes the trigger of violent affect rather than the expression of violent affect itself. In other words, responsibility for violence is placed on the agent who provokes violence rather than the agent who "reacts" with it. In this way, sectarian prohibitions against symbolic appropriation governs '*asabiyat* not by targeting violent group reactions but by criminalizing that which provokes feelings of collective injury in the first place.<sup>158</sup>

---

<sup>156</sup> Asad, T, Brown, W., Butler, J., & Mahmood, S. (2013). *Is critique secular? blasphemy, injury, and free speech*. Fordham University Press.

<sup>157</sup> Mahmood, S. (2013). "Religious reason and secular affect: an incommensurable divide?" in *Is critique secular*. 70.

<sup>158</sup> Here, we find a close analog in the figuration of femicide as a "crime of passion." This logic states that violence against women is understandable if that woman had engaged in infidelity. That is, her trespassing on the boundaries of her marriage contract legally sanctions – or at least, socially legitimates – the violence done against her. Indeed,

## Homosexual Abjection and Defilement

Though Mashrou` Leila's irreverent appropriations certainly counted as a symbolic trespass in sectarianism, I contend that it is the band's public queer identity that made their act particularly provoking for Christian actors. That is because Abrahamic scriptures and sectarian discourses signify homosexuality with a specifically abject, repugnant, and defiling status. In the Torah and the Old Testament, for instance, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah figures the transgression of heterosexual boundaries as the definitive reason for the divine destruction of both cities. The Levitical laws explicitly signify male-male sexual relations as "abominations" and a threat to the sanctity of Israelite moral and sexual codes. In Christian scripture, the Pauline epistles reinforce this prohibition by casting queer desire as evidence of humanity's estrangement from God. And in the Qu'ran, the story of the Prophet Lot figures the divine evisceration of Lot's people as a direct result of their homosexual transgressions.<sup>159</sup> In different-but-similar ways, Abrahamic discourse figures the homosexual as the natural and defiling enemy to all human, social and divine boundaries.<sup>160</sup> In the sectarian state, homosexuality's abject status is institutionalized by Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which outlaws "all acts against the order of nature" (see later).<sup>161</sup>

Conferred with otherworldly powers and meanings in Abrahamic and sectarian law, homosexuality comes to represent—not the profanity extra-marital straight sex and sexuality—

---

and on this logic, the veritable crime is not the vengeful husband's, but the initial boundary-violation that brought on the violence itself. Culpability thus falls on that which provoked the violence rather than that which meted it out. In similar ways, religious trespasses are coded as crimes of passion whose triggers must be criminalized for violence to be avoided.

<sup>159</sup> See Genesis 19, the Torah; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, the Bible; Surat al A'raf 7:80-84, Surat Hud 11:77-83, the Qur'an.

<sup>160</sup> In that sense, homosexuality in Abrahamic discourse occupies what Michel Foucault describes in his lectures "Society Must be Defended" as the position of the "barbarian" in political theory discourse – the element that is outside all civilizations. As Foucault explains, the barbarian acts as an enemy to all civilizations and, unlike the figure of the "noble savage," cannot be brought in without the demise of civilization tout court.

<sup>161</sup> Lebanese penal code

but what Emile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, calls the “sacred impure.”<sup>162</sup> As a sacred force in its own right, the sacred impure figures the diabolical and defiling forces that oppose the divine forces of the “sacred pure.” Whereas the sacred pure evokes feelings of reverence, majesty, and wonder, the sacred impure elicits feelings of horror, repugnance, and contempt. Though they oppose and negate each other, both the sacred pure and the sacred impure, according to Durkheim, are mutually constitutive and are essential to the identities of all religious collectives.<sup>163</sup>

While the distinction between the sacred pure and the sacred impure echoes the binary of the sacred and the profane, Durkheim elaborates a distinct problem associated with the two kinds of sacreds: the different feelings and meanings associated with the pure and impure are unstable and “contagious.”<sup>164</sup> In other words, sacred pure and sacred impure objects can infect each other with their charge and reciprocally transform both kinds of sacreds into each other. For Durkheim, the risk of mutual transformation owes itself to the fact that the “pure and the impure are not two separate genera,” but share in the same elementary sacred substance.<sup>165</sup> Accordingly, it is this sameness—this lack of separation—that explains why sacred objects of the pure and impure variety must be kept from contact with each other. And though the sacred pure and impure are existentially harmful to one another, their meaning as sacred-but-opposite objects nevertheless depends upon maintaining an absolute distance between them.

Seen through Durkheim’s concept of the “sacred impure,” we can more clearly grasp why homosexuality would be a distinctively defiling agent for the “sacred pure” objects—or

---

<sup>162</sup> Durkheim, E. (2012). *Elementary forms of religious life* (pp. 412–416). (Original work published 1912)

<sup>163</sup> See also Julia Kristeva’s theorization of logics of abjection and defilement, especially as it pertains to women, in *The Powers of Horror*; See also Linda Zerilli’s discussion of how “Woman” comes to signify abjection, and how that signification works in the political theories of Rousseau, Burke, and Mill in *Signifying Woman*.

<sup>164</sup> Durkheim, E. (2012). *Elementary forms of religious life*. 412.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.* 414.

*muqadasat*—of sectarian groups. Indeed, and in the course of the popular campaign against Mashrou` Leila, sectarian discourses echoed Durkheim’s analytic points and consistently figured homosexuality as a sacred impure and a defiling object—one that must be cordoned off, contained and quarantined lest it mal-transform sacred symbols, groups, and spaces. For instance, one article on AgoraLeaks, a right-wing Lebanese Internet forum, figured the Mashrou` Leila controversy as the fulfillment of a Christian prophecy:

The members of Mashrou` Leila resort to playing with words and expressions and in the mysteriousness that is evident in their name. This is the prophecy of the coming of the Anti-Christ, who will steal God’s titles, blaspheme against Him and his Christ, fight the saints, persecute them, bring false signs and phenomena (a’ajeeb kathiba) and mislead (yodel) the many. This prophecy is beginning to come true...Many world leaders entered into secret Satanic organizations and heresies, and Satan infiltrated with his many arms into the media, cinema, art, and music, and satanic theories were introduced into literature, philosophy, medicine, psychology, sociology, health sciences, and the family. Satan and his agents wreaked havoc and destruction on society, the family, and the church to mislead and destroy souls.<sup>166</sup>

Seeking to de-mystify the mystery around Mashrou` Leila—“Project of Night” in Arabic—the article figures the band as a sign of the return of the Anti-Christ. Like Satan, the Anti-Christ is an emblematic figure of the sacred impure in Christian theology: a figure that is against God but could pass as him.

According to this discourse, the threat of the Anti-Christ, of Satan, and of Mashrou` Leila who stands in for both, relates to how these characters appropriate God’s truths and manipulate them with falsities. Furthermore, and in Christian scripture, both figures—Satan and the Anti-Christ—are diabolical derivatives of divine (or “sacred pure”) power. Though both share in the same sacred substance, they are oppositely charged entities, which in proximity and without the

---

<sup>166</sup> AgoraLeaks. (2019, July 25). Shahidu fideo Mashrou` leila alati yuji`un bihi al mahrajan jbeil, tuskhar min al messih w tuhanahu b absha` alturek. *AgoraLeaks*.

proper separations, risk transforming into each other. From the Abrahamic worldview, this is why the sacred impure is so dangerous: like the Anti-Christ or Satan, figures of the impure could dispossess the sacred pure and masquerade—or pass—as it. Put another way, false signs and figures could appear as true ones, (mis)leading “the many” from that which is true (and purely sacred) to that which is false and (destructively sacred). In this way, the discourse that emerged against Mashrou` Leila shows how, at the heart of queer defilement, is a worry about the dispossession of sacred signs and the transformation of their meanings.

Anxieties around the mal-mixture of homosexuality and religious symbols were further stoked by an image (left, figure 1) that Christian activists circulated on social media and that gained particular notoriety. It shows a shirtless, muscled, and hairy-chested man in a leather harness. Behind him is a rainbow flag. In his left arm, he carries a thick golden book with a rainbow heart stamped on its cover. Solemnly



Figure 1: Blaspheming Homosexual, 2019 (screenshot by author).

looking at the camera, he points his right index finger upward. Although no cross or other Christian icon is visible, the figuration is clear. The leathered homosexual is postured as a saint, holy book in one arm, finger pointed to the heavens. Activists and bloggers circulated this image on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, under the false impression that the man in the picture is none other than Haig Papazian, the gay violinist of Mashrou` Leila. Regardless of its falsity, the controversy around this image served to evidence for injured Christians how homosexuality’s

proximity to sacred objects dispossesses them of their meaning and transforms them into something that is the anti-thesis of the purely and recognizably sacred.

Though anxieties about homosexual and religious defilement appeared most vividly in the 2019 Mashrou` Leila Controversy, they were also at play in a less sensationalized 2014 censorship case against *Samandal*, an independent graphic arts magazine. Attending to this case further exemplifies the legal logics that underwrite how the sectarian abjection of homosexuality makes queer cultural production particularly defiling to sectarian signs and objects. Inaugurated in 2007 by Hatem Imam, *Samandal* creatively targeted religious norms, mores, and absolutes. Remarkably, and during its first three years, *Samandal* had operated with little censorship. According to Imam, this was owed to the specificity of the comic form and the prejudices around it: “There is a huge number of people who think that comics are for children. This [allowed] our magazine to go under the radar, and we published things that have sex, drugs, and explicit language without anyone taking notice.”<sup>167</sup> This lack of scrutiny also pertained to Lebanon’s censorship laws: unlike cinema, theater, or musical performances, print materials do not need pre-approval from Lebanon’s General Security. This means that the censorship of books and magazines only occurs if someone complains.

Unfortunately for the magazine, its seventh issue proved to be the occasion for the *Samandal*’s first and final complaint. Under the title “Lebanese Recipes for Revenge” (“*Wasfat Libnaniye lil-Tha`r*”), *Samandal*’s cartoonists illustrated colloquial expressions of revenge.<sup>168</sup> This includes “taksir al ras” (the breaking of the head); “`asf al `imir (the shortening of life); and most controversially of all “hark al din” (or the “burning of religion”). The latter is an ordinary exclamation that denotes an intense state of anger, one that could bring an individual to

---

<sup>167</sup> Imam, H. (2019, August 14). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>168</sup> Imam, H. (2014). *Wasfat libnaniye lil tha`r*. *Samandal*, 7.

renounce—or in colloquial Lebanese, to “burn” his faith. In the comic, this was illustrated by a woman who pours gasoline on a priest and a veiled woman and lights them both on fire.

Owing to the complaint of the Catholic Media Center, this provocative issue soon landed on the desks of the General Security censors. What proved impossible for state censors to swallow, in particular, was another comic in the same issue (below figure 2). This one depicted the story of a Roman general who, after getting drunk with a subordinate soldier, proceeds to receive fellatio from him. Waking up the next morning, the general remembers the gay sex, kills the soldier, and denies the murder to his comrades: “I don’t know... this is probably some new sect. The Christians.” This accusation then incites a war against Christianity, ultimately ending with Jesus on the cross. In the end, the shame-faced Roman general looks up at Jesus and projects: “It’s you who’s gay” (“C’est toi qui est PD”). “If you follow the logic of the story,” Imam explained to me, “you’re considering homosexuality a sin, and that’s what the general did. He’s throwing the sin onto Christ, so in a sense, the story is very Christian, because Christ died for our sins. But of course, nobody read anything, they just looked at this image and read this

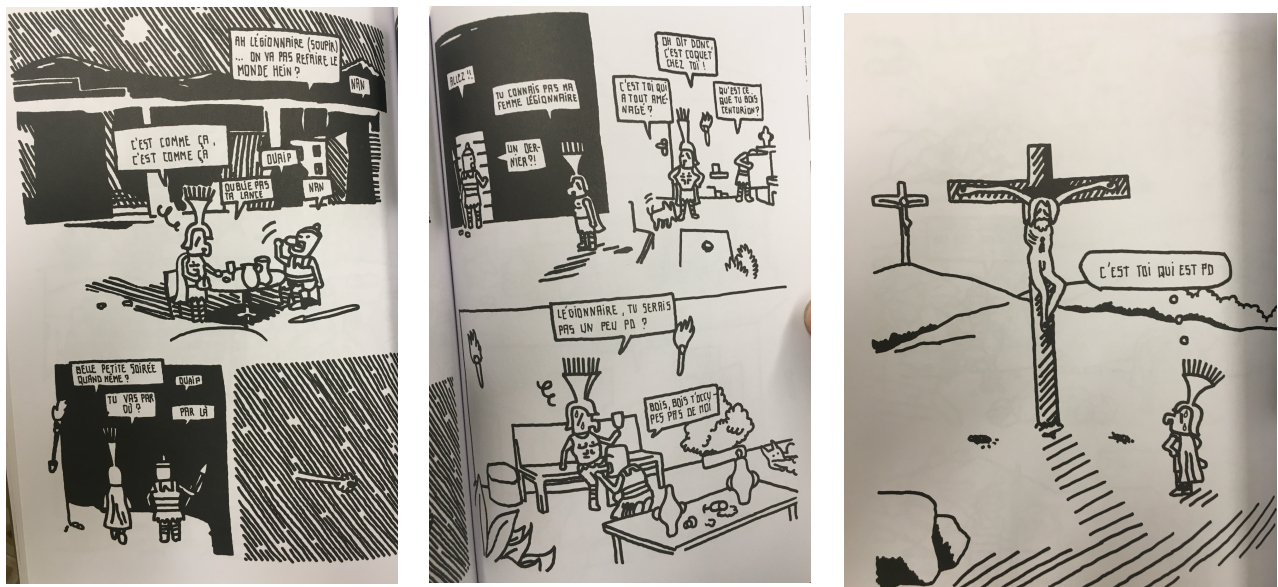


Figure 2: “Samandal’s 7th Issue,” (photos captured by author with permission of Hatem Imam).



thing and went mad.”<sup>169</sup>

Given the mixture of homosexual sex with Christian sacred objects—namely crosses, resurrection, and the figure of Jesus—the CMC and the General Security demanded the legal prosecution of the blaspheming magazine. Invoking Article 9, Article 534 against sodomy, and Articles 473, 474, and 475 from the Lebanese Penal Code, the prosecution and the legal decision against *Samandal* figured the magazine’s crime as that of (mis)representation, symbolic defilement, and the incitement of sectarian strife:

Given that the cross is a symbol (ramz) of Christianity that is recognized in Lebanon, and given that the operations of crucifixion and resurrection are at the heart of the said religion, and given that the Lebanese Constitution does not recognize homosexuality (*mithliya*) and that Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code punishes that which is against nature; and given that the persecution of the “new sect” in Roman times belittles (*taskhif*) the operation of crucifixion; and given the association of the crucified with homosexuality, [the cartoon] is considered contempt for the Christian religion in all of its sects.<sup>170</sup>

The decision begins by affirming the Lebanese state’s formal recognition of Christianity and its symbols (Article 9). But by referencing the anti-sodomy statute (Article 534), the decision affirms the state’s lack of recognition of homosexuality and *its* signs. According to this legal logic, the problem was that legally protected and legally unprotected signs mixed, appearing in the same public representation. By figuring an accusation of homosexuality against Jesus Christ, the cartoonists further mixed sacred pure and sacred impure symbols. In doing so, they defiled signs and rituals whose meaning is fixed by state law. By invoking Article 534, the judge further implied that the meaning of homosexuality—as a prohibited “act against nature,” and not as a “normal” sexual identity—is also legally fixed in sectarianism. Consequently, *Samandal’s* crime

---

<sup>169</sup> Imam, H. (2019, August 14). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>170</sup> *Samandal v al sha’ib libnani*, (Lebanese Court of Cassation April 27, 2015). See Figure 1.2: “Samandal Case File” in “Appendix 1: The Sacred and the Sodomite.”

consisted in representing two oppositely charged signs whose mixture risked defiling—that is, transforming and de-elevating—the meanings of both religion and heterosexuality which, according to the decision, qualified as an expression of religious contempt.

Taken together, the *Samandal* case and the Mashrou` Leila Controversy expose the double-edged threat that queer cultural production poses to sacred objects: by representing religion and homosexuality in close proximity, queer artistic appropriations work to alter the meaning of sacred signs as well as the meaning of homosexuality—a phenomenon which all of Lebanon’s Abrahamic religious sects hold as sacred impure and abject.

### The Concert and the Threat of a Queer Political Identity

More than their defiling musical appropriations, it was Mashrou` Leila’s upcoming concert at the Byblos International Music Festival that was the most urgent matter for Hayek and other Christian activists. The latter is a yearly event that takes place in Byblos, a coastal town that is sanctified in the Lebanese Christian imaginary. Indeed, the campaign against the band’s appropriations served mainly as a pretext to mobilize against the concert, which would have been a public site of queer solidarity, celebration, and political identity-making on Christian soil. In sectarian and homophobic discourses, however, the threats associated with the construction of a political and collective queer identity in Lebanon—namely the threat of cultural secularization and waning sectarian identification—were figured as threats of heretic promotion (*tarweej*) on sacred Christian-coded territory. In the article we encountered above, the concerned collective of anonymous writers goes on to explain the danger of Mashrou` Leila’s imminent concert:

Now, Mashrou` Leila is attending the Byblos festival, and most of its members are homosexuals, and its leader, Hamme Sinno, publicly declares his homosexuality. And at this band’s concerts, the flags of homosexuals are raised. They have previously caused many incidents in countries they tried to desecrate by

spreading propaganda for their despicable homosexuality. Now they bring them to Jbeil, the city of culture and creativity.<sup>171</sup>

According to this article, the central problem with Mashrou` Leila is that its members publicly inhabit their homosexual identities *and* promote (*yurawej*) homosexuality in their concerts.

These claims are not new, but have been made across the Arab World where Mashrou` Leila's concerts were targets for censorship by Arab state security apparatuses. The most notable case was in 2017, when in the course of the band's Cairo concert, queer activist Sara Hejazi unfurled a rainbow flag while dancing atop a friend's shoulders.<sup>172</sup> Within the hour, Egyptian state security forces invaded the concert, arrested dozens of audience members, and banned Mashrou` Leila from Egyptian soil.<sup>173</sup> In 2018, Jordanian officials decided to evade the matter altogether by issuing a preemptive ban on the band itself.<sup>174</sup>

But unlike Jordan and Egypt, Lebanon's non-authoritarian political system has rendered it a specifically fertile site for queer activism, culture and publicity (see introduction and chapter 2). This has also meant that calls for homophobic censorship primarily originate from societal and para-state actors who articulate their homophobic claims through sectarian discourses and logics. Not using the authoritarian grammar of a nationalist security threat (as was the case with Jordan and Egypt), Lebanese Christian actors framed Mashrou` Leila as the vanguard of a deviant sect whose public performances amount to the promotion of a heretic (read: queer) doctrine among Christian *and* non-Christian youth in Lebanon. Indeed, the Christian voices, like those from the article above, figured Mashrou` Leila as a threat to which all sects are vulnerable:

---

<sup>171</sup> AgoraLeaks. (2019b, July 25). Shahidu fideo Mashrou` leila alati yuji` un bihi al mahrajan jbeil, tuskhar min al messih w tuhanahu b absha` alturek. *AgoraLeaks*.

<sup>172</sup> Papazian, H. (2020, July 16). Opinion | she waved a rainbow flag at our cairo show. tragedy followed. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/opinion/culture/mashrou-leila-fan-suicide.html>

<sup>173</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2020, October 1). *Egypt: Security forces abuse, torture LGBT people*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/01/egypt-security-forces-abuse-torture-lgbt-people>.

<sup>174</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2019, July 26). *Mashrou` leila: akher dahiyet qami3 li-hurriyet al ta'bir fi lubnan*. <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2019/07/26/332462>.

We as active Christian youth in the heart of the Church appeal to every Muslim and Christian cleric, to every Jubalite, and every Lebanese, to confront those who corrupt the morals of our youth and children and desecrate our land. For the love of God, the love of humanity, the love of innocence and purity, respond and prevent this impurity from Jbeil our beloved city.”<sup>175</sup>

Invoking the threat of defilement, the writers point to how Mashrou` Leila’s performances seek to mal-transform not only sacred objects, but also sacred spaces (Byblos). More pressing for the writers is that the band’s presence in Byblos would threaten to mal-transform the faiths of Christianity’s most vulnerable adherents. From this vantage point, exposure to the “mal”-influences of Mashrou` Leila—namely its homosexuality—could de-adhere young people from their religious communities, a separation that is figured by this discourse as a coercive process of corruption. Indeed, this threat, the writers tell us, does not respect sectarian boundaries, but affects all sectarian groups. In this way, the universal abjection of homosexuality across sectarian lines allow the writers to position their particular concerns as non-factional, universal, and beyond politics itself.<sup>176</sup>

While homophobic discourse codes queer publicity and promotion as defilement and corruption, I argue that its appraisal of the band’s threat is partially correct: Mashrou` Leila’s concerts are semi-public spaces where queers congregate, associate and display group symbols. More generally, queer parties, concerts, and raves function in ways similar to Emile Durkheim’s analysis of religious festivals: both elevate individuals and give them access to a collective enjoyment that transforms the self, while also reinforcing group identity.<sup>177</sup> Seen as such, Mashrou` Leila’s concerts could rightly be viewed as religious experiences in which individuals

---

<sup>175</sup> AgoraLeaks. (2019b, July 25). Shahidu fideo Mashrou` leila alati yuji` un bihi al mahrajan jbeil, tuskhar min al messih w tuhanahu b absha` alturek. *AgoraLeaks*.

<sup>176</sup> See Lee Edelman’s discussion of “reproductive futurism” in *No Future*. Writing on the American context, Edelman shows how homophobic discourses that center the figure of vulnerable Child make figure that politics has no politics at all. For no one could be against the Child. Edelman, L. (2004). *No Future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive*. Duke University Press.

<sup>177</sup> Durkheim, E. (2012). *Elementary forms of religious life* (Original work published 1912)

enjoy and transcend themselves around the totem of a queer collective identity. In turn, this effervescent experience bears the potential to attach queer and non-queer subjects to their gender and sexual freedom while simultaneously detaching them from sectarian or familial forms of identity and belonging. Indeed, and throughout the campaign against Mashrou` Leila, Christian activists conferred diabolical power to rainbow flags and emphasized that they are flown at the band's concerts. This indexes an anxiety on the part of sectarian groups around the formation, publicity, and uptake of a new, sexual, and cross-sectarian political identity.<sup>178</sup>

Furthermore, homophobic anxieties around queer conversion lean on reality: Mashrou` Leila's concerts provide a space in which the direct experience of queerness can be the door to queer disclosure, identification and/or other possibilities of gender and sexual self-determination. This relates to how Mashrou` Leila's concerts are spaces of desire and seduction: they attract queers and women from all sects, as well as foreigners, allowing them to intermix and relate around a common experience.<sup>179</sup> That experience is one of collective conviviality, effervescence and bodily pleasure: concertgoers are under the influence of music, alcohol and/or drugs. Both lower inhibitions and allow concertgoers to transcend and remake their identities. Queer parties, in particular, are places where queer and non-queer individuals could directly experience the joys of queer freedom, sex, and community. By creating a queer public, queer concerts allow individuals to inhabit, express, and experiment with their sexual identities—with others and before the eyes of others.

---

<sup>178</sup> In another article on Agoraleaks, for instance, the writers published photos of rainbow flags at Mashrou` Leila's concerts, warning families and communities of the band's promotional activity. AgoraLeaks. (2019a, July). Nad`u ahali jbeil lildaghit la yaqif haflet firqet Mashrou` leila al-shatha al jinsiyya. *AgoraLeaks*.

<sup>179</sup> See here Paul Amar's analysis of how spaces of queer conviviality are sites of demographic, national, and international mixture, as well as how this mixture poses a threat to the Egyptian state's urban neoliberal projects. Amar, P. (2013). *The Security Archipelago Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism*. Duke University Press.

Seen in this light, Mashrou` Leila's concerts emerge as sites of queer politics and experimentation. They create a queer public sphere with a new system of gender and sexual signs, meanings, and representations, a system that does not take heterosexuality as the absolute universal nature of humankind. Indeed, the understandings of gender and sexual plurality that Mashrou` Leila propagate threaten the symbolic order of sectarianism, insofar as they normalize and re-signify a phenomenon—homosexuality—that all sects take as abject. At the same time, and by divesting homosexuality from its abject status, Mashrou` Leila's cultural production also divests heterosexuality from its sacred, universalist and absolutist status. Indeed, Mashrou` Leila's concerts pre-figure a public in which queer sexuality is no longer defiling but ordinary and a public in which heterosexuality is no longer absolute but a kind of sexuality among others. The band's concerts thus provide young and old with a direct and public experience of this knowledge, which in turn risks unmaking the homophobic and hetero-only meanings that Abrahamic beliefs, scriptures, and faiths propagate. Put another way, Mashrou` Leila's concerts figure as sites of queer exposure and re-signification: they publicly expose people to the truth(s) of queerness while also exposing the falseness of religious doctrines that figure heterosexuality as the absolute and universal ground of human nature.

Consequently, the threat that Mashrou` Leila's cultural production and concerts pose to sacred objects pertains to the capacity of queer spaces and representations to alter both religious and sexual meanings that are meant to be publicly immutable. Taking sacred signs and deploying them in queer contexts, they show how sacred and/or sexual meaning does not inhere in specific objects, practices, or relations but are constituted by human consensus. By exposing the human consensus that underwrites the sanctity of sacred objects, the band's cultural production further exposes how purportedly eternal religious and sexual meanings *could* change. From the

homophobic vantage point, this was what was so dangerous about the band's Byblos concert: the concert would have pre-figured a secularized Lebanon in which queerness is ordinary, publicly inhabitable, and even celebrated. This is also why Christian homophobic actors mobilized against queer publicity: to secure the abject meaning of homosexuality *and* the universalist meaning of heterosexuality on Christian territory.

Despite the symbolic threats that queer publicity and culture pose to sectarianism, Lebanon's General Prosecutor Ghada Aoun dismissed charges of "sectarian incitement" and "religious contempt" against Mashrou' Leila. Aoun also did not heed calls for the censorship of the band's August 9<sup>th</sup> concert at the Byblos International Festival. This provoked outrage on the part of Hayek, Christian activists, and clerical actors, who accused Ghada Aoun—a Christian associated with the President's FPM Party—of undermining Christian power and presence in the state. Regarding the Catholic Media Center and the Archdiocese of Byblos, both demanded that the band formally apologize to the Maronite Patriarch for their symbolic trespasses. In the absence of state censorship, the apology, so their logic went, would have functioned to symbolically reconstitute the status of Christian *muqadasat*, and by proxy, the standing of the Christian sect. The band, however, did not apologize. And though the state let their trespasses go unpunished, the popular Christian campaign against Mashrou' Leila only escalated in intensity, as activists like Hayek and the still nascent Soldiers of God took censorship into their own hands.

### Part III: Homophobia as a Logic of Censorship

Thus far, I have argued for how queer cultural production and publicity pose a threat of defilement to the symbolic order of Lebanese sectarianism. In the following section, I continue with my focus on the Mashrou' Leila Controversy, turning toward how homophobic mobilization responded to the threat of the band's upcoming performance in Byblos. Here, I cast homophobia as a set of censorship logics whose aim is to preserve the public and sacred status of

sectarian symbols against the transformative effects of queer cultural production. It does so in three ways: first, homophobic censorship articulates a populist version of sectarian identity, providing religious, institutional and popular actors with a common project that reinforces the role of religious authority in the state. Second, censoring agents utilize logics of religious self-determination in order to publicly insulate communal belief(s) from contestation. This also works to maintain the supremacy of sectarian groups over and above non-religious citizens, their beliefs, and their associations. Finally, and by censoring that which all of Lebanon's factions hold as abject, anti-queer censorship targets a cross-sectarian trigger of violent affect and preserves the cross-sectarian consensus on heterosexuality. This, in turn, preserves relations of symbolic equality and peace that that consensus guarantees between different religious groups.

#### A. Censorship and the Incitement of Sectarian Populism

In the summer of 2019, the homophobic censorship campaign against Mashrou' Leila was articulated in reference to sectarian-specific political contests and histories. At the forefront was Naji Hayek—a political pundit associated with the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), the center-right Christian party to which then-President Michel Aoun belonged. By that time, both Aoun and the FPM were deeply unpopular, facing mounting resistance in Parliament and widespread public discontent.<sup>180</sup> That summer also saw the CEDRE conference, which promised sweeping neoliberal economic restructuring, and the push for a new Budget Law that threatened massive cuts to the public sector—developments that exacerbated Lebanon's economic precarity and heightened anti-FPM sentiment across Lebanon's publics.<sup>181</sup>

---

<sup>180</sup> Azzi, G. (2019, August 6). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>181</sup> Makhlouf, Y. (2019, August 4). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.



What further compounded this situation was the rising presence of Syrian and Palestinian refugee populations in Lebanon. That summer specifically, Lebanon witnessed an intense public debate over the extension of labor rights to Syrians and Palestinians. While the Sunni Future Party pushed for the protection of those rights, the leaders of the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces and Free Patriotic Movement—the party of then President Aoun—scapegoated Syrians and Palestinians for the country’s economic and political instability.<sup>182</sup> The leaders of these parties even encouraged their constituents to film illegally working refugees, while publicly making claims about an American-backed conspiracy to nationalize Palestinians in Lebanon—a move that would decrease Christian demographics in the country.<sup>183</sup> Additionally, the Mashrou’ Leila Controversy happened just weeks after an armed confrontation in Qamarshoun—a town in the Druze Mountains. En route to the Mountains, President Aoun’s motorcade was shot at by Druze gunmen and prevented from entering the area.<sup>184</sup> Naji Hayek tellingly cites this incident in his OTV interview, explaining: “Christians [do not even have] the right of mobility... we can’t even go up to Shouf (the Druze Mountains)... journalists criticized the President going there and then you get bullets fired at him!”<sup>185</sup> That summer, territorial tensions between opponent sectarian factions and elites were at an all time high.

Against this political backdrop, right-wing Christian commentators—including Naji Hayek—interpreted the FPM’s declining popularity as an existential threat to the political presence of Lebanese Christianity itself. It was in this climate that Hayek’s campaign against Mashrou’ Leila took shape, not only as a crusade against the band but also as a populist effort to

---

<sup>182</sup> Azzi, G. (2019, August 6). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>183</sup> Thaqafa, A.-M. (2019, July 17). *Hamla massihiya did Mashrou’ leila w hammed sinno yarud*. Al Modn.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> OTV Lebanon. (2021, April 21). *Hiwar al yawm ma’ al nashit al siyasi fi tayyar al watani al hurr d naji hayek*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nas6ZNRXaWA>.

reclaim Christian presence in Lebanon. Given that the sacred objects of groups figure as proxies for the political standing of sects, Hayek's homophobic campaign sought to reconstitute Christianity's place in the state—both against the symbolic trespasses of Mashrou' Leila and against Christian elites, whom populist actors blamed for the sect's political weakness.

Importantly, the emphasis on Christian political presence implicates *real* histories and feelings around the political and post-civil war marginalization of Christian populations in Lebanon. While the state maintains a formal narrative of “no victor no vanquished” (*la ghaleb w la maghlub*), Christian militias and political actors emerged as the informal losers of the 1975-1990 civil war.<sup>186</sup> Since the 1989 Taif Accords, which instituted a new balance to sectarian power-sharing, the loss of Christian hegemony over the country's political and economic affairs have fueled popular discourses around the deprivation of Christian communities relative to other sects in Lebanon. These discourses appear and circulate most prominently among the popular bases of right-leaning Christian political parties, like the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces. In the course of sectarian politics, establishment parties make use of loss and deprivation narratives to figure themselves as the “true” defenders of the faith, and to mobilize Christian voters to the causes of those specific parties.

But in the summer of 2019, it was not the Christian establishment that politicized homophobia and the cause of Christian presence, but populist and para-state elements. Happening just two months before the 2019 Lebanon Revolution, the campaign to censor Mashrou' Leila provided a political entry-point for populist actors like Naji Hayek and the ordinary Christian men who would later form the Soldiers of God (see chapter 2). Indeed, homophobic mobilization allowed these actors to generate alliances with religious institutions

---

<sup>186</sup> Hermez, S. (2021). *War is coming: Between past and future violence in lebanon*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

like the Catholic Media Center, the Archdiocese of Byblos, and the Maronite Patriarchate. By taking a hard stance on Mashrou` Leila, these actors claimed virtue for their cause and distinguished themselves from the political elites who appeared lax on the band's anti-Christian trespasses and on the question of Christian presence in the state.

Throughout the controversy, ordinary men and everyday priests appeared in online videos explicitly criticizing representatives from Christian establishment parties for not taking a public position against Mashrou` Leila. For instance, one widely circulating video shows a young Christian man—and an alleged member of the then nascent “the Soldiers of God”—in his car who provides an overview of the Mashrou` Leila controversy and shames Christian politicians:

This band is going to throw a concert in Jbeil and everything seems normal. In all simplicity, they've insulted Christ and the Virgin and they are going to have a party here. I'm going to be the first person that goes to Jbeil to stop this concert from happening. And if you are loyal to Christ you should come out with me. You go down to the streets for your politicians and zu`ama; you fight and argue with each other. But for Christ, no one moves. No one moves for the one who gave us life. Who was crucified for us. Who carried our sins. At least we can go down in peace... because we're not violent. Because if we don't go and oppose this, the insults will increase against Christ, and Christ will become a punching bag.<sup>187</sup>

Criticizing the readiness of Christian citizens to mobilize at the behest of their sectarian political leaders, the narrator makes an implicit distinction between the everyday and worldly politics of sectarianism and the divine status of Jesus Christ. This critique of the everyday politics that tie political leaders to their constituencies opens space for the articulation of a sectarian populism in which citizens mobilize independent of their leaders to protect their faith and their Lord. The narrator further criticizes the appeals for intervention made to the state and to religious leaders. “Aren't we the nation of Christ, of God?” he indignantly polemicizes. The protection of

---

<sup>187</sup> See Figure 1.3: “Young Christian Man Incites Against Mashrou` Leila” in “Appendix 1: The Sacred and the Sodomite.”

Christian icons and figures should be the task of the people – of the nation. For him, this mobilization is paramount because “we’re in the age of attacks against Christians that the Bible spoke about.” According to this biblical temporality, attacks by devil-worshipping and sodomite band against the Christian nation signal the end of the world—an end that, according to this discourse, must be prevented.

Seen as such, homophobic censorship incites discourse that is on the one hand, a novel articulation of sectarian populism and on the other, an instantiation of a global populist rhetoric that figures the Christian faith as under worldwide attack. For Father Daoud—a local Greek Orthodox priest and a Youtuber—the queer assault on Christianity’s sacred objects exemplifies the weakening of Christian identity in Lebanon and a corruption of Christian authority around the globe. In a video published and circulated on social media, Father Daoud appears framed by the towering cedars of Christian Mount Lebanon and warns:

There is a satanic band coming to you, a group of youth that calls themselves Mashrou` Leila. This band is encouraging and promoting debauchery and homosexuality (read: faggotry) ... Please don't give in to this 'deviant' project that seeks to corrupt and brainwash the younger generations. [This band] seeks to assault our collective identity and throw into question our presence in the East, as the only Christians remaining in this pocket of land... let's not let them succeed in doing what they couldn't get us to do during the civil war: our exodus.<sup>188</sup>

In this way, Father Daoud draws a line of continuity between Mashrou` Leila’s symbolic trespasses and the persecution of Christian communities in the 1975-1990 civil war.<sup>189</sup> Histories of sectarian strife are thus used as an interpretive frame for the present to warn of the existential danger that Lebanese Christians face at the hands of their sectarian and deviant enemies.

According to Father Daoud, the goal of this broader campaign (of which Mashrou` Leila is an

---

<sup>188</sup> See Figure 1.4: “Father Abou Tadros Daoud Warning Against Mashrou` Leila” in “Appendix 1: The Sacred and the Sodomite.”

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

instantiation) is the ethnic cleansing of Christians from Lebanon. Thus the battle against Mashrou` Leila becomes a territorial one in which Mount Lebanon is figured as the last remaining sanctuary for Christianity in the Cradle of Civilization. Sectarian geographies are activated against a boundary-blurring, hyper-aggressive homosexual agent who seeks to efface Christianity in the Arab Levant. To allow Mashrou` Leila to perform in Byblos would be to announce Christian resignation to, and even acceptance of, a future Levant devoid of Christianity. For Father Daoud, popular group identification thus becomes a necessary solution to the centuries-old problematic of Christian survival in the Muslim world.

Echoing global homophobic discourses, Father Daoud continues, underscoring how a critical dimension of the danger to Christian presence in Lebanon also lies in homosexuality's specific relationship to global secular power. In the video, Father Daoud disdainfully explains how the Vatican has re-signified homosexuality and divested it of its abject status in Christian theology. But that is not all, Father Daoud conspiratorially continues, for the debaucheries of the gay political project have presently culminated in Canada's (alleged) legalization of bestiality.<sup>190</sup> Homosexuality appears to be the licensing condition for instituting all kinds of perversions. Destroying morality, ethics, and all kinds of social boundaries through myriad ideological state apparatuses, homosexuality's goal is the imposition of a queer world order. In this discourse, the homosexual's perceived position as a local manifestation of a global perversion (and conversely, a perversion of globalization) further lends traction to the activation of sectarian and nationalist affects. That is because a powerful and monolithic imaginary of a secular, homosexual-licensing West animates this homophobia. This imaginary positions Lebanon (and the Levant, more generally) as one of the last places on the globe that has not yet been submerged by the

---

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

homosexual flood. Lebanese Christianity, in particular, is figured as the final bulwark against a global homosexuality that has even brought the Vatican to its knees

Daoud also suggests that because this queer conspiracy has already corrupted the Vatican, Christian communities in Lebanon can no longer look toward the Western Church for direction. They must instead preserve their virtuous and morally pure position against the mutating forces of global homosexuality:

The topic of global debauchery and homosexuality (deviancy) in all its kinds, is not just physical (bodily), [it's also] deviancy in faith, sexual deviancy, devil's deviancy... the world has worn a robe, and they're forcing all of us to accept it, and the last place to impose this new order is the Mashreq, the East.<sup>191</sup>

Mashrou` Leila becomes a local sign of a global project that seeks to upend a universally ordained but locally implemented order of nature. No longer is homosexuality confined to the West, Daoud tells us, but has reached the shores of the Levant. As such, the homosexual indexes not just a locally produced and sectarianizing threat to the nation, but a threat that is tied to a global conspiracy of liberal-secular world-building.

The Western church's re-signification and normalization of homosexuality also allows Father Daoud to further distance and differentiate "Eastern" (read Lebanese/Arab) Christianity, producing it as more authentic, more civilized, but also more vulnerable. In a twist on the ways in which LGBT rights produce a hierarchy of nations—from civilized to barbaric<sup>192</sup>—here, homophobia becomes the marker of civilization, distinguishing a corrupt and decadent West from a virtuous and morally pure East. Colonial imaginaries and temporalities are thus turned on their head. The West may be "ahead" of the Arab world; however, this is no sign of progress but decay. In fact, the secular West is used as an example of the horrors to come if homosexuality

---

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Rao, R. (2014). The locations of homophobia. *London Review of International Law*, 2(2), 169–199. <https://doi.org/10.1093/lril/lru010>

were to be legally and socially sanctioned. Father Daoud explicitly indicates that the West itself has deviated from the “original” lessons of Christianity. This leaves the civilization of Christ in the hands of Eastern Christians, who enjoy physical and spiritual proximity to the origins of the faith. After all, “nihna al ‘asl/we are the originals,” Father Daoud reminds his viewers. Because of this global reality, Lebanese Christian communities must no longer look toward the West, but must preserve themselves against it. In this way, the community is thus positioned and (re)produced against a hostile, homosexual and corrupt West.

In these ways, the threat of queer cultural production provided a specific occasion for everyday men and ordinary priests to address Lebanon’s Christian communities; to resist processes of globalization; and claim the mantel of Christian representation. By politicizing homophobia, they also asserted their resistance to any trespasses on the symbolic and political authority of Christianity in the Lebanese state—trespasses with which, from the point of view of sectarian populist discourse, Christian *political* elites have been complicit.<sup>193</sup> Their anti-elitist stance further allowed popular Christian actors to figure their action against queer cultural production not as one motivated by factional interests, but as a universal cause, one that transcends sectarian politics and affects all of Lebanon’s religious communities. On this count, the mutual threat that queer cultural production poses—the notion that all groups’ symbols are vulnerable to queer appropriation and re-signification—enabled popular actors like Naji Hayek, Father Daoud, and the still nascent Soldiers of God to figure themselves as the proper guardians of Christian symbols and as the exemplary guards of all religious iconography in Lebanese state and society.

---

<sup>193</sup> For instance, the General Prosecutor Ghada Aoun’s decision to release the band and to not censor their concert led Hayek and others to accuse Aoun – who is herself a Christian and a member of the Free Patriotic Movement – of facilitating attacks on Christian symbols in the public and Christian presence in the state.

## B: Religious Freedom and the Heterosexual Foundation of Inter-Sectarian Coexistence

Though the anti-gay and sectarian discourses that emerged in the course of homophobic censorship was of a new and populist strain, their articulation depended upon institutionalized logics of religious freedom. Both the cross-sectarian valorization of religious freedom in Lebanese legal and societal discourses—as well as the cross-sectarian abjection of homosexuality across Abrahamic sects—allowed para-state and popular Christian actors to argue for how the censorship of queer cultural production guards not only religious freedom of conscience, but also the shared and inter-sectarian heterosexuality that makes religious pluralism and freedom a possibility.

At the outset of the controversy, the popular campaign against Mashrou` Leila impelled the Catholic Media Center and the Maronite Archdiocese of Byblos to release a statement that explicitly related the censorship of queer cultural production to the protection of religious freedom in Lebanon. Replying to those accusing the Maronite Church of repressing individual freedoms of expression, Father Abdo Abu Kassem, the director of the Catholic Media Center, asserts:

The Church has defended and continues to defend freedom in all its forms, from religious freedom to the freedom of consciousness... [but] freedom has transformed in the eyes of some [to mean] the license to do anything and say anything without any concern for the humanitarian values and ethics that make up the foundation of society. Freedom [in its proper sense] is committed to the dignity of the human and his rights; freedom is in line with [the] justice and equality [that is] needed to build a humanitarian society. Moreover, freedom does not consist of being absolved of the responsibility of respecting the other and respecting religions. [Rather] freedom is linked to the prohibition on touching religious rituals because in that [touching] there is a danger to the [plural] societies of Lebanon and a threat to the civil peace.<sup>194</sup>

---

<sup>194</sup> Catholic Media Center. (2019, July 29). Report on Mashrou` Leila. <http://centre-catholique.com/ar/2019/07/29/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%84%d8%ac%d9%86%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d8%b3%d9%82%d9%81%d9%8a%d8%a9->



According to Abu Kassem, arguments that framed Mashrou' Leila's appropriative crime as an exercise of individual freedom are erroneous insofar as they confuse freedom with license. While license entails the right to "do anything and say anything" with little responsibility, freedom, Abu Kassem clarifies, depends upon respecting—that is, abstaining from trespassing on—the boundaries that religious communities draw around their symbols, their beliefs, and their rituals.<sup>195</sup> For Abu Kassem, freedom in a multi-sectarian society thus finds its support in societal taboos and prohibitions against "touching religious rituals" given that this touching is a form of license. Echoing scholar Ussama Makidisi's insights, Abu Kassem asserts that this taboo—"the societal consensus against trespassing on the other's belief"—is central to the maintenance of peaceful relations between Lebanon's sects.<sup>196</sup>

Claims of license were again repeated in the formal plea made by the Archdiocese of Byblos to censor Mashrou' Leila's upcoming concert:

After the investigation of the motives of the band Mashrou Leila and the songs that it will perform – the songs that touch (toummis) religious and humanitarian values and that offends sacred Christian objects (muqadasatt) – the Maronite Archdiocese of Byblos (Jbeil) boycotts the concert that will take place on August 9<sup>th</sup> in the Byblos International Festival. For Byblos is a city of tolerance and culture, and it's not fitting to welcome/host concerts like these, especially ones that offend – in a direct fashion – the values/ethics of the Christian faith. And we ask the Byblos Music Festival to cancel the concert of Mashrou Leila on the holy land of Byblos – the land of civilization and history.<sup>197</sup>

---

[%d9%84%d9%88%d8%b3%d8%a7%d8%a6%d9%84-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a5%d8%b9%d9%84%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%b7%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a8%d8%aa/](#)

<sup>195</sup> In this sense, Abu Kassem articulates what scholar Rahel Jaeggi calls "ethical abstinence" in liberalism – the principle of abstaining from critiquing others' forms of life. Jaeggi, R. (2018). *On the critique of forms of life*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>196</sup> Makdisi, U. (2021). *Age of coexistence: The ecumenical frame and the making of the modern arab world* (p. 96). University of California Press.

<sup>197</sup> See Figure 1.5: "Archdiocese of Byblos Press Release Against Mashrou' Leila" in "Appendix 1: The Sacred and the Sodomite."

Like Abu Kassem, the Archdiocese implies that Mashrou' Leila's crime goes beyond the fact that it touched the sacred objects of Christianity. More fundamentally, the band trespassed on the "humanitarian values," ethics, and freedoms that are shared across sects. Here is where we get to the heart of the matter: in order for freedom not to turn into license, Kassem and the Archdiocese explain, individuals and groups must abstain from trespassing on the "values and ethics" that are universal to *all* of Lebanese society, that is, the values, ethics, and codes of heterosexuality.

Though Abu Kassem and the Archdiocese of Byblos do not explicitly name heterosexuality, it nevertheless appears under other signs that signify the natural, universal, and common sexual ground that exists between Lebanon's sects. This supports feminist theorist Monique Wittig's theorization of heterosexuality as the discourse that "goes without saying" and the social contract that silently founds society as absolutely heterosexual.<sup>198</sup> More than the sacred objects of any one group, Kassem and the Archdiocese of Byblos imply, it is this inter-sectarian heterosexuality—the shared "ethics and values" between different groups—that must remain untouched lest freedom transform into license and sectarian coexistence into war. Without naming it, the discourse of Kassem and the Archdiocese figures public adherence to the values of heterosexuality as the absolutely necessary precondition for the inviolable exercise of religious freedom for all groups. But more than that, this discourse elevates heterosexuality to the status of a universal belief or principle, one that is shared and respected across forms of religious difference. Indeed, this anti-gay articulation of religious freedom advances homophobic censorship as a means to preserve the public status of heterosexuality as the *only* belief or value that is shared across sectarian difference(s). In this way, heterosexuality emerges as the "goes without saying" principle and absolute value of political sectarianism, one whose inviolability

---

<sup>198</sup> See introduction.

underwrites the capacity of different groups to peacefully share political power and symbolic space in the first place.

By reinforcing the shared heterosexual principle of sectarianism, the censorship of queer cultural production further shores up the privileged position that sects enjoy vis-à-vis non-religious citizens in the Lebanese state. In an interview with one of Mashrou' Leila's lawyers Youmna Makhoulf, she pointed to how Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution legally protects freedoms pertaining to individual and artistic expression in Lebanon. Despite these safeguards, Makhoulf explains, Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution grants political recognition *and* legal personality to religious communities. This makes sects—rather than individual citizens—the primary legal agents in the sectarian system. Makhoulf explains how the privileging of sects over citizens pertains to the exceptional founding of the Lebanese state:

In Lebanon, because there was specificity, because there was no majority or minority, all of them were minorities, this is how the state was created, that there had to be this equality between the different religious groups, and that the religious communities had to continue to have their prerogatives in the family law, and it was conceived as something protective of collective identities, so it was to protect the religious identit[ies]..<sup>199</sup>

While sects enjoy jurisdiction over “family law”—processes of heterosexual marriage, birth, death, and inheritance—the Lebanese state presides over the criminal code, which includes codes against the incitement of sectarian discord (see above), as well as the prohibition on the practice of homosexuality (Article 534). What this means is that sects have no de jure influence over the prosecution of religious contempt, inter-sectarian incitement (*tahrid*) or public homosexuality. Nevertheless, religiously-motivated actors wield Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution to censor

---

<sup>199</sup> Makhoulf, Y. (2019, August 4). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

anti-religious cultural production and public speech acts, something the Article was not intended to do. As Makhlouf elucidates:

Article 9 [was intended to] preserve (religious) diversity... it's not about giving the religious community the exclusive right over what can be said and what cannot be said. So when you see the motives of the legislatures, it is just so there would not be religious conflict. [Article 9] is not about preventing someone from criticizing a religion, it is not about forbidding someone to express an idea that is completely out of the religion.<sup>200</sup>

Despite its original intent to preserve religious pluralism and prevent inter-religious violence, Article 9 has been deployed in the last decade to de-limit individual free expression by rendering religion(s) as the absolute red line of public and cultural criticism.

In the case of Mashrou` Leila, Article 9 was also invoked to protect the public value of the shared and inter-sectarian heterosexuality upon which Lebanon's different religions stand. Indeed, religious actors articulate this heterosexuality as a precondition for the inviolate protection of Article 9. In doing so, state and para-state religious actors—like the Catholic Media Center and the Archdiocese of Byblos in the case of Mashrou` Leila—exercise political influence, expand their legal jurisdiction, and politically act as the guardians of the sectarian state's heterosexual foundation. Seen as such, the political deployment of Article 9 allows religious authorities to go beyond their legally circumscribed limits, as well as to reinforce the supremacy of sects and heterosexuality in the Lebanese state.

### C: The Homophobic Evasion of Inter-Sectarian Violence

Throughout the Mashrou` Leila controversy, pro-queer activists and legal advocates rejected the idea that the band's cultural production could constitute anti-religious hate speech. "If I sing a song that says, 'I'm gonna kill all the Muslims'—that is something that incites

---

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

sectarian violence,” Youmna explains, drawing a distinction between violent speech and artistic expression.<sup>201</sup> But despite Youmna’s appraisal of what should or should not count as violent speech, queer publicity in Lebanon has repeatedly provoked violent mobilizations by religious groups, associations, and ordinary men. In 2017, for instance, gangs of Sunni men—backed by the Sunni Muslim Scholars’ Association and encouraged by local sheikhs—attacked queer workshops, events, and associations organized for the International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHOT) in Beirut.<sup>202</sup> Declaring homosexuality an “abomination,” they demanded its disappearance. A similar mobilization occurred in 2018 when Sunni gangs violently opposed NEDWA, a regional conference for queer and feminist activists.<sup>203</sup> While secular voices insist that public homosexuality should not provoke violence, in practice, it has consistently incited the violent *‘asabiyat*—or group feelings—of sectarian factions and fanatics.

That queer cultural production, politics and publicity could trigger sectarian violence—or at least threaten to—was just as evident during the 2019 Mashrou` Leila Controversy. In the wake of the General Prosecution’s decision to drop charges against Mashrou` Leila and to abstain from censoring its Byblos concert, Najji Hayek and other actors issued public threats against the band and its audiences lest they “pass” into Mount Lebanon.<sup>204</sup> On his Facebook page, Hayek published the following post:

This is not a warning regarding the concert on August 9<sup>th</sup> in Byblos, this is a direct threat to the group and to all who support them. This concert will be stopped with force. He who insults Christ has no place in Jbeil.<sup>205</sup>

---

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Azzi, G. (2019, August 6). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> LBC International. (2019, July 24). *Intiha` al tahqiqat ma` afrad firqat Mashrou` leila.. wa iklha` sabiluhum*. LBC.

<sup>205</sup> See Figure 1.6: “Hayek Threatens Mashrou` Leila” in “Appendix 1: The Sacred and the Sodomite.”

Similarly, the “Christian Democratic Party,” an anonymous Facebook page whose members would later become the Soldiers of God, delivered a similar warning:

Here’s the devils trying to hit again and trying to have a concert on August 9<sup>th</sup> for his worshippers. We call on all to gather with us in preventing this concert, not through peace, but through force.<sup>206</sup>

In response to these threats, Youmna and the band’s legal team filed a complaint with the state prosecutor calling for protective action. But the state refrained from investigating the case of Mashrou` Leila any further. In doing so, the state (in)directly sanctioned the popular threats against Mashrou` Leila’s August 9<sup>th</sup> concert. Understandably, the potential of thug violence against the band and its audiences resulted in the Byblos International Festival’s decision to cancel the concert. Citing the risk of violence from local actors, the festival coordinators disclosed that they could protect neither the band nor its audiences.

According to Youmna, Lebanese state officials cite both the threat of sectarian violence and the institutional jurisdiction of religious communities as reasons for its unwillingness to act against homophobic censorship and mobilization. She explains:

When you talk about LGBT+ rights, the state says, ‘How are we going to reform when there are religious communities?’ But when you look at the Constitution and the laws, you see that all of these laws are state laws... The organ that can come and reform is the state. Because when you look at other domains where there are important prerogatives for the state, like nationality, the state intervenes, whatever the religious communities say. And they don’t care what the religious community or their laws say.<sup>207</sup>

For Youmna, the state’s selective intervention exposes a double standard: while it asserts authority in matters like nationality, it defers to religious groups when it comes to gender and sexuality.

---

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Makhlouf, Y. (2019, August 4). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

But what Youmna’s astute critique of the Lebanese state does not address is that sexuality—specifically heterosexuality—is not just another domain of governance or reform; the governance of heterosexuality serves as the *raison d’être* of the Lebanese state (see introduction/chapter3). As I argued earlier, heterosexuality serves as the principle that guarantees both legal and societal equality between sectarian communities. This means that any state intervention into gender and sexuality—whether by granting LGBT rights or passing a unified civil marriage bill—would tamper with the only common principle that relates different sects and the only metric that makes them equal in the eyes of the state and of each other. Because the governance of heterosexuality underwrites sectarian power-sharing and guarantees sectarian equality, sexual reform would not merely challenge the system but unmake it altogether. This is also why Father Abdo Abu Kassem could rightly frame queer publicity as a “danger to the plural societies of Lebanon and a threat to the civil peace.”<sup>208</sup> It propounds a new doctrine of sexual equality that contradicts heterosexual absolutism—the very ground of sectarian state and society.

By promoting a new, non-straight, and non-religious form of collective identity, queer publicity also threatens the supremacy of hetero-religion and the affect that secure that position in the state. As we saw, one key function of the Lebanese state is to manage sectarian group feelings—or *‘asabiyat*—and to quell the political violence that these feelings can generate. While, in most cases, sectarian violence arises from encroachments on one group’s interests by another, queer publicity figures as a distinct trigger of sectarian *‘asabiyat* precisely because it contradicts the common heterosexuality that all sects are founded upon. Largely silent but in plain sight, this common heterosexuality is an object of deep feelings and ordinary attachments across Lebanon’s sectarian communities. It is these attachments that are triggered by instances of queer publicity and legal reform. Seen as such, Father Abdo Abu Kassem’s claim about the queer threat to the

---

<sup>208</sup> Catholic Media Center. (2019, July 29). Report on Mashrou’ Leila. Beirut, Lebanon.

civil peace leans on reality. Given that it contradicts the heterosexual absolutism that underwrites sectarian pluralism, and given that it provokes cross-sectarian violence, queer publicity does indeed bear the potential to unmake the heterosexual contract<sup>209</sup> that exists between sectarian groups and that precedes the sectarian power-sharing settlement. In turn, the dissolution of this heterosexual contract could also dissolve the power-sharing agreement, thereby igniting large-scale political violence.

From the perspective of sectarian state and society, then, the censorship of queer publicity and cultural production serves to govern and maintain violent attachments to the heterosexual contract of sectarianism. This sheds light on why the state abstained from addressing the threats made by Christian actors against Mashrou` Leila and its audiences. For if the state intervened—by either prosecuting the threat-makers or protecting the targets—it risked becoming embroiled in a violent confrontation with Christian street factions and their fanatic men. And though state security forces may possess the capacity to control such confrontations, it is not in the state's interest to do so, as this could fuel further anger and escalate the potential of popular and communal Christian violence. By refraining from intervention and allowing the threats to do their work, the Lebanese state thus adhered to one of its central functions: managing the ‘asabiyat of sectarian communities, preempting the expression of violent religious affect, and avoiding inter-group confrontations that could trigger civil war.

Seen in this light, the Lebanese state's response to Mashrou` Leila’s “touching of sacred objects” reveals how anti-gay censorship 1] preserves the symbolic order of sectarianism; 2] reinforces the affective architecture—the ‘asabiyat—that sustains the charge of those symbols; and 3] guards the heterosexual contract that allows those ‘asabiyat to coalesce around a common

---

<sup>209</sup> Here, I use Monique Wittig’s term for heterosexuality, which she adopts from Rousseau’s “social contract.” Wittig, M. (1992). *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Beacon Press.



and inter-sectarian ground. Indeed, the controversy around Mashrou` Leila points to how public heterosexuality serves as a pre-condition for peaceful relations between hetero-absolutist religious groups. By reproducing the absolute and public status of religion(s) *and* heterosexuality, the censorship of queer cultural production thus shores up the public and symbolic significance of all Abrahamic religions in Lebanon, and as such, the common ground that allows sectarian groups and symbols to exist and relate peacefully and in close proximity.

#### Part IV: Conclusion—On Anti-Homophobic Resistance

While the Christian campaign against Mashrou` Leila ultimately succeeded in the cancellation of the band's Byblos concert, homophobic censorship also mobilized secular, queer, and civil society actors in a counter-campaign whose goal was to safeguard freedom of expression in Lebanon. At the helm of this effort was Legal Agenda, the research center tied to the firm of Mashrou` Leila's lawyers Nizar Saghieh, Youmna Makhoul, and Karim Nammour.<sup>210</sup> Working with 11 human rights, political, and cultural organizations, Legal Agenda hosted a media conference on religiously motivated censorship.<sup>211</sup> There, representatives took turns enumerating the dangers posed by religious "non-tolerance" and announced the filing of a counter-complaint (*ikhbar*) to the Attorney General's office in regard to the threats issued against Mashrou` Leila. Hala Bijana, from the group "Kiluna Irada" (We are All Will), explains the motivations behind the *ikhbar*:

What happened is at a high level of danger... because for the first time we have heard of "hadr al dam" (bloodshed) for purposes of opinions/views. This not only threatened the public safety, but also weakened the institutions of the state and the prosecution, after the "street" took the place of the prosecution/justice. [This also] suffocates personal freedoms and artistic expression. We're not exaggerating when we say that

---

<sup>210</sup> Al Mufaqrara al Qanuniya. (2019, August 3). *Mu`tamar sahafi: mukafahat al la-tasamuh w al kirahiya*. Youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AE3PaczD\\_p0&list=PLNLI3HH6SAbhDU0eKX\\_-XWANCaSIEPHRZ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AE3PaczD_p0&list=PLNLI3HH6SAbhDU0eKX_-XWANCaSIEPHRZ)

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

the actions of these groups (who engaged in hate speech etc) have led to negative consequences on security, and social and justice apparatuses, etc.<sup>212</sup>

According to Bijana and others, the danger lay in how popular actors—“the street”—usurped the functions of the state, eroding state institutions in the process. The Mashrou` Leila Controversy further revealed the threat of popular violence, as well as the unwillingness of state security apparatuses to face it. As Sahar Mandour—the representative of the group “`afou al Duwali—reminds the audience, “Our society is armed... we can expect anyone to say ‘This won’t pass’, and ‘it won’t pass,’ and ‘we are going to go down with blood and arms’ in any case.”<sup>213</sup>

Despite the threats of bloodshed against the band and its audiences, the cancellation of the Mashrou` Leila concert in Byblos also spurred secular and queer cultural actors to organize a counter-concert in Beirut. Centered on the protection of free expression the August 9<sup>th</sup> counter-concert in the Aresco Palace Theater in Hamra brought together supporters of the band and opponents of religious authority in the state.<sup>214</sup> Film directors and producers, photographers and artists, nightclub and bar owners, LGBT activists and their entourages, NGO leaders and foreign journalists, queer youth and secular yuppies: all showed up and staged a queer, secular, and decidedly anti-sectarian version of “the people.”<sup>215</sup> And despite Mashrou` Leila not being present, the Aresco Concert was a party replete with rainbow flags, belly dancers, and other blasphemous performances. Paradoxically, it was more explicitly political and queer than any Mashrou` Leila concert in the Arab World had been. Happening just two months before the Lebanon Revolution, Aresco was, the occasion for the public expression and mobilization of a collective and political queer identity in Lebanon.

---

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> July-August 2019 Field Notes. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>215</sup> Butler, J. (2015). *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Harvard University Press.

While the threats from populist Christian actors in Byblos did not materialize in Beirut, right-wing Christian political pundits were livid over the concert. In an interview on the FPM-sponsored OTV, commentator Joseph Fadel, for instance, exclaims in righteous indignation to the host:

You are not understanding! They went and did it in a different area, to spite us, to spite the Christians in this country... Why did they do a party there in [Hamra]? Who encouraged them? Who told them not to apologize... They want to do a party like this in Byblos? To put a cross and the flag of the homosexuals next to each other!?<sup>216</sup>

Though Fadel accused the concert organizers of spiting Lebanese Christians, the concert did happen in Hamra—a non-Christian, non-sectarian, and largely commercial area in Beirut. That is to say, and despite its subversiveness, the concert organizers respected the territorial dominion of sectarian groups, opting to host the blasphemous concert in a “secular” part of the capital. This decision understandably owed itself to the threats of violent retaliation circulating on right-wing Christian social media. Nevertheless, the concert ended up reproducing the territorial and symbolic boundaries of sectarianism.

Two months later, on October 17<sup>th</sup> 2019, these territorial boundaries would be breached as hundreds of thousands of demonstrators—including gender and sexual minorities—descended into the streets and squares of Lebanon. In a historic episode of mass mobilization, protestors condemned elite corruption and demanded the wholesale abolition of the sectarian regime. Acting as the vanguard of anti-sectarian organizing, queer and feminist activists blocked roads, held discussions on anti-gay and anti-women violence, and demanded a secular civil state in

---

<sup>216</sup> OTV Lebanon. (2019, August). “Joseph Abu Fadel: There was someone who incited Mashrou’ Leila to sing in Hamra to spite the Christians.” Youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0poiwaJE\\_gE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0poiwaJE_gE).

place of a confessional one.<sup>217</sup> But what specifically distinguished queer and feminist politics was that they pre-figured a public order characterized by non-normative gender and sexual expression. Feminists and queers publicly inhabited their sexual non-normativity in full view of the rest. Their parties were also public and visible. Raya, a friend and interlocutor, for instance, described scenes from Beirut's Martyrs' Square that were akin to a queer music festival: raves in civil war-torn buildings; public drug-taking and hashish joints passed from hand to hand; piercings, dreadlocks, and tattoos, and gays everywhere.<sup>218</sup> In the square, sexualized bodies rebelled against the silent mandate of public heterosexuality and public queer non-disclosure.

Tragically, the sexual and secular conviviality of revolution dissipated as a result of the same crime that Mashrou` Leila was accused of two months before: the "touching" of sacred objects (*muqadasat*). This time, it was not queers who were the explicit culprit, but those who made televised insults against Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah—the General Secretary of Hezbollah and a "sacred object" among Lebanese Shi'is. Four months into revolution, the symbolic trespasses against the Sayyed worked to demobilize Shii and Hezbollah-aligned communities. At the same time the insults mobilized bands of Shi'i thugs, who violently attacked women, secular, and queer demonstrators—the alleged perpetrators of the blasphemies.<sup>219</sup> In doing so, neighborhood thug violence censored political critique, and, in the eyes of these thugs, restituted the symbolic and political standing of the Shi'i sect.

Similar to the Mashrou` Leila Controversy, the attacks in Martyrs' Square capture how trespasses against the "sacred objects" of sectarian communities mobilize popular and violent

---

<sup>217</sup> Younes, R. (2020, May 7). "If not now, when?" queer and trans people reclaim their power in lebanon's revolution. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2020/05/07/if-not-now-when-queer-and-trans-people-reclaim-their-power>.

<sup>218</sup> Raya. (2021, October 28). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>219</sup> Revolution Interviews. Field Notes. October 2020 – September 2022. Beirut; see also Dima Sadeq's television report on thug violence in the Lebanon Revolution (Sadeq, D. "Ghaddab al Khanda." February 9, 2020. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6gkVrLIs1A>))

ensorship against queer and secular citizens. Violence in the Lebanon Revolution further exposed how the injured feelings of religious groups—and their men—contributed to the unmaking of anti-sectarian solidarity and collective action. Following the violence, defeated demonstrators returned to their homes, while neighborhood thugs stood guard over their areas, effectively reinforcing the symbolic and territorial boundaries of sectarianism.

Amongst those who retreated were queer communities and activists. With the onset of financial collapse, the breakdown of the state, and the start of the COVID pandemic, queer politics and publicity were near non-existent. So too was public homophobic incitement. But in June of 2022—nearly two and a half years after the Lebanon Revolution—the public display of a rainbow flag in a Christian area in Beirut would ignite an unprecedented homophobic campaign, this time in explicit defense of sectarian territory.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Chapter 2 - Soldiers in the Land of God: Security, Territory, and Homophobic Militancy in**

### **Post-Revolution Lebanon**

In late June of 2022, a squad of local thugs broadcasted themselves in an act of anti-gay vandalism. Filmed in the middle of Ashrafieh—an A-list and predominantly Christian area in Beirut—the video shows the “Soldiers of God” (*Junood al-Rab*) dismantling a floral-constructed rainbow flag, an ad for queer Pride Month.<sup>220</sup> Furiously reciting Bible verses, the Soldiers attacked the sign and issued threats against the presence of queer symbols in Christian areas: “The symbols of homosexuals don’t work here in [our] areas” one Soldier shouts into the lens.

“This is the law of the Devil.”

“Don’t come close to Ashrafieh, or to any point in the land of God!” another furiously warns. “We will not accept one rainbow or one flag!”

Making his way into the frame, a third Soldier howls “this is a campaign for Satan... It will not pass in our areas, especially in areas that have churches!”<sup>221</sup>

Sporting long beards, bulging muscles, and large rosaries, the Soldiers of God appeared to national audiences like a rag-tag militia. Claiming to resist queer presence in Ashrafieh, the group has engaged in an array of territorial practices: they occupy and parade in neighborhood streets, erect informal checkpoints, and, in some instances, raid queer venues.

In a context marked by escalating state breakdown and factional street violence, the discourse of the Soldiers of God had initially conjured the ghost of civil war and provoked the anxiety of national audiences. Emphasizing the territoriality (*manati`iya*) of the group, commentators described the return of “self-security” (*amn zati*), or militant and wartime modes

---

<sup>220</sup> Achrafieh News. (2022, June 24). *Ba'id ta'lik a'lam lil-mithliyeen fi al-Ashrafieh junood al rab yantafidun did hatha al thahira.* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-zQsZSSCMg>

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

of community policing. They also warned against the fragmentation of urban and national territory.<sup>222</sup>

By 2023, however, the territorial and homophobic practices of the Soldiers of God were emulated in other parts of Lebanon as well. In Tripoli, the country's second and Sunni-majoritarian city, the Soldiers of Fayha` (*Junood al Fayha`*) appeared on the scene.<sup>223</sup> Comprised of ordinary men, these Soldiers function like public morality police: they clear public areas of queer signs and bodies. The advent of Pride Month in 2023 also gave rise to the "Soldiers of Eggs" (*Junood al Bayd*).<sup>224</sup> Operating mostly in Beirut, these Soldiers are informal squads of neighborhood youth. They ride on their motorbikes and police their areas by hurling eggs at queer-appearing individuals. In fact, and since the re-appearance of the Soldiers of God in 2022, homophobic territoriality has become an organized and ordinary phenomenon in Lebanon.

Taking these scenes of anti-gay action as its starting point, this chapter asks the following questions: what are the material, political, and affective conditions behind homophobic mobilization in Lebanon? What threat does queer publicity pose to the territories of sectarian groups? How does homophobic mobilization respond to this threat? Finally, what can the case of the Soldiers of God reveal about the intersecting roles that territory and sexuality play in the reproduction of sectarianism?

### Argument

In the following chapter, I show how the queer threat to territory—as well as the homophobic mobilization that responds to it—is articulated through conditions of economic and state collapse; factional street warfare; the partial de-sectarianization of Lebanon's Parliament;

---

<sup>222</sup> Yousef, I. (2023, January 7). *Junood al rab... jama'a yaminiya masihiya tantah hizibullah w tajur lubnan nahu harb ahliyah*. Al-Estiklal. <https://www.alestiklal.net/ar/article/dep-news-1672908448>. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>223</sup> Abid, M. (2023, August 30). *Junood al fayha`...dikanah amniya jadeedah*. Nida` Al-Watan. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>224</sup> Dada, S. (2024, January 24). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

and shifting settlement patterns across the boundaries of sectarian areas in Beirut. In this context, increasing queer settlement and publicity in Ashrafieh signal the building of a “gayborhood” on Christian-majority territory. This threatens to globalize, de-sectarianize, and transform the communal identity and dominion of sectarian space.

Though I take this threat seriously, I also analyze the discourses through which the Soldiers of God frame the threat of queer settlement and publicity: as a contagious and colonizing force that seeks to coercively convert the identity of Christian land and its inhabitants. Indeed, this framing informs the homophobic strategy of the Soldiers. Deploying three territorial practices—anti-gay parades, checkpoints, and raids—the Soldiers mobilize to regulate the public circulation of queer signs and bodies and to contain the spread of queer culture, settlement, and identification. By securitizing Christian-majority areas against queer settlement and publicity, the Soldiers’ further aim to preserve the dominion that sectarian communities, families, and men exercise over public space in Lebanon. While they incited sectarian anxieties upon first appearing, in 2023, the Soldiers’ homophobic strategy was taken up by other factions across Lebanon. By orienting street gangs to police in-group areas and by keeping them away from inter-group boundaries, homophobic mobilization has even affected sectarian street violence. In some cases, it has served as a site for solidarity between warring street factions. Organizing masculine violence, I argue that homophobia has worked to re-inscribe the territorial and sexual boundaries of Lebanon’s sectarian order.

#### On Violent Homophobic Mobilization

In the chapter, I theorize the queer threat to territory and homophobic mobilization by drawing on sociological literatures on violent collective action; radical geography literatures on urbanization; and Lebanon-specific literatures on masculine violence and territory.



First I think with literatures on violent collective action to understand the homophobic strategy of the Soldiers of God. Not quite a social movement, groups like the Soldiers operate in the manner of organized squads, gangs, and thugs. In this respect, sociological literatures on group violence more accurately captures the dynamics behind the Soldiers' mobilization than, for instance, depictions of homophobic action as an "anti-gender" social movement.<sup>225</sup> By treating organized violence as a sociological phenomenon, however, these accounts leave the political specificity of gender and sexuality untreated. That is, and in the case of homophobia, sociological literatures cannot explain why the threat of a public queer identity comes to mobilize local men in the ways that it does. These accounts further abstract violent action from its specific political context. In other words, sociologists construct typologies of violent action that allegedly work similarly across different contexts. Adding to these accounts, I show how the political uses and effects of violent anti-gay action depend on context-specific contests and histories.<sup>226</sup>

In Lebanon, I show how homophobic mobilization specifically depends on the occupying presence of ordinary men in public space and on the role they play in sectarian politics.<sup>227</sup> While accounts of sectarianism have theorized violent escalation, they have largely overlooked the gendered, sexual, and territorial aspects of popular violence in Lebanon.<sup>228</sup> In that light, the Soldiers of God insatiate this intersection of sectarianism and sexuality: through their

---

<sup>225</sup> Scholars like Charles Tilly and Randal Collins, for instance, posit typologies of violent groups and granular analyses of confrontational violence. See Collins, R. (2008). *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*; Gould, R. (2003). *Collision of Wills*; and Tilly, C. (2014). *The Politics of Collective Violence*.

<sup>226</sup> Here, I follow Christopher Chitty, who describes how the homophobic politicization of sodomy in 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence depended upon factional, demographic, and economic contests. Chitty, C. (2020). *Sexual hegemony: Statecraft, sodomy, and capital in the rise of the world system*. Duke University Press.

<sup>227</sup> Here, I follow Maya Mikdash, who understands sectarianism as a religious and gendered order.

<sup>228</sup> In *War is Coming*, scholar Sami Hermez, for instance, theorizes how affects like tension, anticipation, and escalation structure Lebanon's political order. Though ethnographically detailing violent brawls between men, Hermez's analysis of masculinity remains insufficient. More, he figures ordinary political violence as an epiphenomenon of a warlord class and its political machinations, rather than a function of gender and engenderment. Hermez, S. (2017). *War is coming between past and future violence in lebanon*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

homophobia, they secure urban areas for their hetero-sectarian proprietors. More generally, anti-gay territoriality allows ordinary men to exercise power and authority over urban publics. It also exposes how everyday male violence underwrites the (re)production of sectarian space. Working alone or in groups, anti-gay actors are local neighborhood men. In their claims, they purport to defend their areas apart from—and often, against—sectarian elites. Especially in conditions of post-revolutionary fiscal collapse, homophobia figures as a bottom-up and anti-elite form of sectarian action, one that has allowed marginalized men to partake in sectarian politics. Seen as such, homophobia clarifies how the territorial policing of gender and sexuality contributes to the re-entrenchment of sectarianism, not as an elite settlement but as a popular and masculine one.<sup>229</sup>

Indeed, Lebanon-specific literatures have dealt with the sectarian production of urban space; they have not, however, explicitly engaged how gender and sexuality mediate territorial struggles.<sup>230</sup> Nor have they theorized the political import of territory in Lebanese sectarianism. In the case of the Soldiers of God, homophobic discourse articulates relations between territory, sexuality, and communal identity. Indeed, the mobilizing power of the Soldiers' discourse relates to how it activates territorial sensitivities. Christening urban areas as “the Land of God,” the group invests land with sacred meaning and stokes religious attachments to space. Their action also responds to territorial quagmires in political sectarianism. Without the capacity to safeguard the land of any group, sectarianism encourages ordinary men to guard their own territories. Seen from this angle, homophobic action is also territorial: it takes land as its principal object. And in

---

<sup>229</sup> Here, I think with Max Weiss, who details popular and bottom-up processes of sectarian activation among Mandata-era Shi'i communities.

Weiss, M. (2010). *In the shadow of sectarianism: Law, shi'ism, and the making of modern lebanon*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>230</sup> For scholarship on territory in sectarianism, see Deeb, L., & Harb, M. (2013). *Leisurely islam: Negotiating geography and morality in shi'ite south beirut*. Princeton University Press; Nucho, J. R. (2016). *Everyday sectarianism in urban lebanon: Infrastructures, public services*. Princeton University Press; Khayyat, M. (2022). *A landscape of war : Ecologies of resistance and survival in south lebanon*. University of California Press.

the wake of Revolution, homophobic action uses land to articulate new and populist versions of sectarian identity and belonging.

### Part I: Masculine Violence, Territory, and the Conditions for Homophobic Mobilization

Since October of 2019, the outbreak of the Lebanon Revolution and the onset of Lebanon's financial and state collapse have contributed to the weakening of the sectarian establishment, as well as the influence sectarian bosses exercise over their communal bases. During the initial years of collapse, the erosion of state infrastructures—including the electricity sector and state security apparatuses—further added to a general condition of ordinary precarity and public insecurity. It was in this harrowing context that a warehouse in the Beirut Port caught fire and ignited 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate. On August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the atomic-sized explosion at the Port killed 218 people and caused 8 billion dollars in infrastructural damage.<sup>231</sup> With a third of the city destroyed and the Lebanese pound in free-fall, outraged citizens took to the streets once again in protests that pit demonstrators against the state's dwindling security forces. But demonstrators were also up against the local neighborhood thugs—*zi`ran* and *shabiha*—who remained loyal to their sectarian parties.

Since the 2019 Revolution, this class of actors—neighborhood men, mostly hailing from the urban working class—has played an increasingly significant role in Lebanese street politics. Not perfect agents of their sectarian bosses (*zu'ama*), these male audiences (*jamaheer*) often take to the streets of their own accord, mirroring—but also elaborating—the battles that take place between elites. On October 14, 2021, for instance, the outbreak of an armed clash between the male audiences of Hezbollah and the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces brought the country

---

<sup>231</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2021, August 3). “*They killed us from the inside*” an investigation into the august 4 beirut blast. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/03/they-killed-us-inside/investigation-august-4-beirut-blast>

to the edge of a veritable civil war.<sup>232</sup> And in 2022, the outbreak of street clashes in the center of Christian-majority East Beirut has worked to generate feelings of territorial insecurity among Christian communities (see later). Coupled with the breakdown of the state's securitarian infrastructures, the ever-present possibility of violent confrontations work to mobilize ordinary men to the defense of their areas.

In addition to the threat of sectarian street violence, the visibly rising territoriality—or *manati`iya*—of East Beirut's local men has also, in part, responded to xenophobic concerns around the settlement of out-group “strangers”—Syrian refugees, migrants, and queers—in Christian majority neighborhoods. This has spurred the creation of neighborhood patrol squads—like the Eyes of Ashrafieh—who are comprised of young male locals.<sup>233</sup> But the particular threat of queer presence mobilized the Soldiers of God, whose violent action specifically targets signs of queer settlement and publicity—rainbow flags, non-normative bodies, queer spaces. Indeed, and by the summer of 2022, the increasing visibility of queer life in Ashrafieh, Mar Mikhael, and Gemmeize (see later) has provided the Soldiers with an opportunity to re-assert the sectarian and sexual criteria of membership and belonging in Christian-majority areas.

### Territory in Sectarianism

In order to understand the specific threat that queer settlement poses to sectarian territory—as well as how homophobia responds to it—we must grasp two things: 1) the ways in

---

<sup>232</sup> Ironically, it was the leaders of both parties who coordinated to contain the violent effervescence of their respective street factions. What is pertinent for the purposes of this chapter is that street violence was a response to Hezbollah-affiliated men trespassing into Christian-marked territory.

<sup>233</sup> Responding to the Sassine Clash in December of 2022, the “Eyes of Ashrafieh” was formed. Comprised of 220 area men and funded by MP Nadim Gmeyel, the “Eyes” function as a local patrol squad. In a news report on the group, we see Tony, an Ashrafieh local. Tony, the reporter describes, “uses his experience as a former militant to return security to areas that have lost it.”<sup>233</sup> In lieu of a kalishnikov, he carries a baton, walks and guards his area against thieves and other trespassers. See Al-Arabiya. "Jadal fi Lubnan bisabab 'Youn al-Ashrafieh... w Hizubllah yuhajem al Tajruba." *YouTube*. December 10, 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1\\_yBJPF-nw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1_yBJPF-nw).

which territory is constituted in Lebanon's sectarian system and 2) the specific state of Christian demographics after the civil war.

Sectarianism is not only a power-sharing agreement between the country's elites; is also a territorial arrangement between the country's sectarian communities. While there are certainly mixed-sect areas in Lebanon, the success of power-sharing depends on each group having a portion of land that is properly their "own." In Lebanon, national territory is divided into geographic enclaves—provinces, towns, villages, and cities—that are inhabited by sectarian demographic majorities. Beirut functions as a microcosm of this territorial arrangement: though it contains mixed-sect neighborhoods, the capital is comprised of urban areas defined by Christian, Sunni, and Shi' majorities. Furthermore, the existence of communal majorities in given areas matters: it gives neighborhoods their sectarian character and identity. In turn, the visual, architectural, and human phenotypes of urban areas act as indicators for who belongs in that area and, perhaps more importantly, of who the area belongs to. Put another way, communal signs and symbols—like crosses, minarets, martyrs' posters, churches, but also bodies like hijabi or uncovered women, bearded men, etc.—signal the dominion communities have in their areas and the privileges they enjoy in them.

The problem, however, is that the sectarian settlement neither recognizes nor formally safeguards the majoritarian presence or landed dominion of any sect. It also does not regulate human traffic or settlement across the boundaries of subnational territory. This is why the state cannot maintain the communal identities of sectarian-majority areas or prevent their transformation.<sup>234</sup> Put another way, sectarianism cannot protect the "right to the city" of sectarian groups. The latter is the term that sociologists like Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey theorize as

---

<sup>234</sup> Unlike Lebanese sectarianism, Israeli sectarianism legally maintains the demographic majority and territorial dominance of Jewish populations. The state's "Basic Law" works to guard against (the potential of) Palestinian demographic expansionism.

the power communities exercise over processes of urbanization, as well as the freedom to make, re-make, or maintain the human, infrastructural, and aesthetic character of urban space.<sup>235</sup>

Owing to this territorial quagmire in sectarianism, the reproduction of a neighborhood's communal identity—and the protection of the sectarian right to the city—depends on sectarian communities maintaining a demographic majority in a given area. More specifically, the identity of territory depends upon the inter-generational presence of sectarian families on land, as well as the production and rearing of sectarian children.<sup>236</sup> Indeed, the inter-generational transmission of physical land and property is central to how specific land in Lebanon gains its identity. But families with little wealth also transmit territorial attachments and allegiances to their children, which contribute to the perpetuation of sectarian settlement patterns in specific areas.

Beyond biological reproduction, the maintenance of an area's communal identity, in part, owes itself to the presence of neighborhood men. Because subnational territorial boundaries are not policed by the state, concerns over out-group settlement or boundary-crossings marshal local men into defending the borders of their areas. Idling on street corners, at cafes, or at their friends' shops, these mostly young men enjoy an unbridled presence in their neighborhood streets.<sup>237</sup>

They also keep an eye out for threatening strangers and situations. I argue that street presence of

---

<sup>235</sup>While Harvey specifically focuses on the threat of neoliberal gentrification to local communities, his emphasis on urban aesthetics, freedom, and mobility sheds light on how sectarian in-groups in Lebanon practice belonging on territory and how they resist processes of urban change. See Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel Cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*. Verso. See also: Lefebvre, H. (1968). *Le droit a la ville*. Anthropos.

<sup>236</sup> Here, the example of Israeli settlement is helpful. Indeed, the Israeli state encourages Jewish-Israeli families to settle in the West Bank in order to alter the demographic and aesthetic character of Palestinian territory. Given their reproductive function, it is families—and not single people—who are the primary agents of this inter-generational and demographic re-engineering project.

<sup>237</sup> Across Beirut's neighborhoods, men inhabit the street. Some are bored shopkeepers. They sit in white plastic chairs or converse with their friends on the pavement. Others are delivery or ride-share drivers. They idle on their motorbikes and tinker with their phones as they wait for their next job.<sup>237</sup> In between deliveries or Bolt rides,<sup>237</sup> drivers congregate on specific street corners or outside particular venues, hanging out with their friends. Still others occupy the street as formal security guards, night watchmen, or attendants for parking lots, residential buildings, and commercial spaces. In Mar Mikhael and Hamra, for instance, (what are referred to as) valet parking “mafias” patrol the streets and guard spaces without a formal license.<sup>237</sup> The majority of the men in Beirut's streets, however, are not formally employed security personnel. They are the area's male occupants and its informal watchmen. [Ethnographic Field Notes, September 2020 – December 2022]

these ordinary guards constitutes cultures of public male occupation in Lebanon; these cultures also serve as a key condition for the mobilization of sectarian and anti-gay patrol squads like the Soldiers of God. Seen in this light, the territorial vulnerability that is built into Lebanese sectarianism and the public presence of men in urban space serve as conditions for the activation of communal, masculinist, and homophobic forms of security.

While all sectarian territory is vulnerable to out-group settlement, the threat that queer settlement poses to Christian territory relates to the particular demographic situation of Lebanese Christianity since the Civil War (1975-1990). Relative to other sects, the demographic contraction of Christian populations since the war has meant that Christian majority areas in the capital have been more vulnerable to demographic and aesthetic transformation.<sup>238</sup> During and after the war, the loss of Christian political power, the mass exodus of large numbers of Lebanese Christian citizens, and the brain-drain of Christian-identified youth from the country have also contributed to the relative decrease of Christian presence in Lebanon. Given that the Lebanese state has not conducted a census since 1932, these demographic shifts are not reflected in the state's official statistics.<sup>239</sup> Neither do they affect Christian representation in state institutions. Nevertheless, the relative demographic weakness of Christian populations has subjected Christian land to the designs of Lebanon's more demographically dominant sects.

Historically, the most notable examples of demographic transformation are Harek Hreik and Hadat—neighborhoods that, before the war, were defined by a Christian majority and character (*tabi'*). In the course of the civil war, the 1982 Israeli Invasion displaced Shi'i

---

<sup>238</sup> During the war, anti-Christian massacres, forced displacement, and voluntary exodus decreased the population of Lebanese Christians. Since then, their low birthrate has also contributed to the sect's demographic contraction. While there are no formal statistics that reflect these changes, informal polls put Sunni and Shi'i Lebanese at about 70-75% of today's population. In terms of political and territorial dominance, it is the Shi'i sect that rules Lebanon.

<sup>239</sup> See also Maya Mikdashi's discussion on Lebanon's 1932 census. While she discusses the country's frozen statistics, she does not address its territorial implications. Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism*.

populations from the Lebanese South and into Beirut, where many families and militants resettled in Haret Hreik and Hadath. While the former became the de facto headquarters of the Hezbollah Party, Hadat's transformation continued well into the 1990s, transforming the proprietorship and identity of the area. By the early 2000s, 60% of the private property in Hadat belonged to Shi'is, while 40% belonged to Maronite Christians. It was at this point that the Hadat municipality stepped in. In 2000, it drew a line down the area's middle, froze out-group property acquisition on the Christian side, and worked to guard what remained of Hadat's Christian character.

Circulating as an oral history of ethnic cleansing among Christian populations, the story of Hadat illustrates how ethnic cleansing is also a coercive process of aesthetic transformation. Indeed, out-group Shi'i settlers brought with them new aesthetics, customs, and mores—in short, a new public habitus—that was alien to the way of life of Hadat's Christian inhabitants.<sup>240</sup> This transformation made the area aesthetically unrecognizable to its former inhabitants and produced a state of alienation that, in turn, convinced many of those who remained to also leave.<sup>241</sup>

Interestingly, the story of Hadat has appeared in conversations and interviews with Christian-identified interlocutors and activists, who cite Hadat as a historic example of the Hezbollah Party's present-day policies of Christian land acquisition and Shi'i resettlement

---

<sup>240</sup> Mark. (2020, November 11). *Ethnographic Interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>241</sup> One documentary film – *Lemon Flowers* – tells the story of a Christian family who was displaced from Haret Hreik, an area that now serves as the territorial headquarters of Hezbollah. A protagonist in the film describes scenes that evoke the ghost of the Palestinian Nakba: “No one left Haret Hreik voluntarily. [Lebanese Shi'i and Palestinian militants] took our sewing warehouse. They stole everything. They took everything. They kidnapped my husband four times. We left Haret Hreik, my mom was fine. But many people got sick. They got fevers. And some of them died from it. The forced alienation (*ghurbeh*). There is pain (*qaher*). My house is not there. Everything changed in the area; the only relation I have to the neighborhood is the graveyard, where my father is buried.” But Shi'i led settlement did not only uproot Christian populations, it also transformed the area into something its native inhabitants could not recognize. In that regard, displacement comes to be a double death: “It's like you're killing someone twice,” one character explains. “The first time, its like you've pulled someone out of the ground. And then its like you're destroying the world from which you've pulled this person.” Today, Haret Hreik is unrecognizable to those Christian populations who were expelled from their ancestral homes. [Lemon Flowers. Directed by Pamela Ghanimeh. 2011. Beirut: Vimeo, 2011. Film].



throughout Lebanon. For instance, H, former socialist militant in the 1975-1990 civil war, an activist in the Lebanon Revolution, and an interlocutor compared Hezbollah's land-grabbing to that of the Jewish Palestine Company's territorial acquisitions in historic Palestine: "Hezbollah is buying lands in Maronite areas... and doing demographic change. Between Khaldeh and Saida, [the organization] bought all the Christian land above and below the Old Saida Highway."<sup>242</sup> Supported by Shi'i economic imperialism in West Africa, most of these acquisitions serve as security corridors for Hezbollah's military operations. But the organization also occupies and resettles Shi'i families on Christian land. H continues: "In Lasa, in Kisirwan (Christian-majority areas), there was a violent clash. Hezbollah let [his] men off the leash and took the lands of the Church and occupied them... they build houses, Shi'i religious centers."<sup>243</sup> When I asked H if anxieties over Christian cleansing (*tahjir*) were inflated, he replied:

There's deportation. There's ethnic cleansing. There's oppression. Frustration. Exploitation. There are all kinds of culture wars against the Christians... in the Levant mostly – in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine Jordan, and Iraq. [In Lebanon] there is a gigantic financial offensive – if you want to compare it historically, it's like the buying up of land in Palestine by Jewish institutions.<sup>244</sup>

Pointing to Palestine, H casts Hezbollah's project as one of ethnic cleansing. In fact, his reference figures Hezbollah as effectively engaged in a settler colonial project. Throughout my fieldwork many anti-sectarian activists echoed H's appraisal, figuring Hezbollah's power as nothing less than a political occupation of Lebanon.

In figuring Hezbollah as akin to Zionist settlers, H also points to the endangered status of Christianity in the Levant. In places like Iraq and Syria, Christian populations have been the targets of ISIS-led genocide and cleansing. For H, Christian vulnerability in the region frames

---

<sup>242</sup> H. (2020, October 26). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

Hezbollah's territorial and demographic re-engineering in Lebanon. Indeed, his reference to Palestine emphasizes the stakes of the changing identity of land and the social and political conditions behind it. The historic example of Palestine's ethnic cleansing further helps clarify why Christian communities and Christian men would be more guarded over Christian-marked areas in Lebanon. More generally, both the Lebanese and Palestinian examples underscore how the reproduction of the collective identity of land depends upon the presence of communal majorities, the reproduction of sectarian families, and the violent mobilization of local men.

## Part II: The Queer Threat to Sectarian Territory

While the settlement of sectarian out-group populations threatens to displace local communities and to convert in-group territory from one sectarian identity to another, the queer settlement of sectarian areas poses a different kind of threat. Not converting land between different religious identities, the building of a gay-majority neighborhood—or a “gayborhood”—in East Beirut threatens to globalize, de-sectarianize, and de-“familial”-ize Christian-marked space. By opening Christian areas to the settlement of non-familial and non-sectarian demographics—namely, secular-identified queers and non-queers, single women from all sectarian groups, and foreigners—queer settlement challenges the membership criteria of sectarian areas; it also risks displacing Christian families—and Christian men—as the principal subjects of public urban space.

### The Building of a Gayborhood in Ashrafieh

In Ashrafieh, the de-sectarianizing threat that queer settlement poses relates to the exceptional character of the area as both sectarian *and* cosmopolitan. Sitting on Beirut's highest hill, Ashrafieh has been the emblem of Christian political and economic presence in the capital. Ashrafieh is also located along the historic Green Line—the boundary that divided (Christian) East and (Muslim) West Beirut during the 1975-1990 civil war. During the war, the

neighborhood was the site of sectarian massacres and intense militia violence. That history continues in the present: since the Lebanon Revolution of 2019, Ashrafieh has been the most acute victim of the Beirut Port Blast and the witness to two major sectarian street clashes. Despite this violence, the area is also global in character. It hosts shopping malls and theaters; its narrow streets are lined with luxury boutiques, restaurants, and cafes; and its quaint aesthetics attract domestic and foreign visitors alike. Consequently, and though it is inhabited by a Christian-majority, Ashrafieh is a space of inter-sectarian liminality, leisure, and traffic.

These characteristics have led Ashrafieh to become a laboratory for the building of a collective queer identity in the decade preceding the Lebanon Revolution. Indeed, the area's liberality—and, to put it frankly, its Christian identity—had provided a relatively safe space for public gender and sexual expression. In that sense, the area is exceptional compared to Beirut's other sectarian parts. Samer Dada—the Programs Manager at Helem, a Sunni by birth, and a newcomer to Ashrafieh—elaborates on this point:

Samer: It's easier to be flamboyant and walking in Ashrafieh than to be flamboyant and walking in Dahiyeh (Shi'a majority) or Tarik Jdeideh (Sunni-majority) ... in Christian areas, there's more freedom. Like, there's a daring (*jir'a*) for someone to make a rainbow flag out of flowers in Ashrafieh. Whereas in Tarik Jdeideh, Hamra, or in Dahiyeh, there's not a daring for anyone to do this.

Omar: Because there will be violence? Is this why the Soldiers of God and others say that these homosexuals would not dare to do this in Muslim areas?

Samer: There's more violence [in Muslim parts]. The family institution [among Muslims] is very aggressive. And [Muslim] religious institutions are stronger and less lenient than the Church. Maximum you go to confession. But in the Shari'a, you can punish gays.<sup>245</sup>

For Samer, the relative weakness of religious institutions and family values in Ashrafieh made the area more hospitable for queer, single, and non-familial forms of life. That is why most queers

---

<sup>245</sup> Dada, S. (2022, December 14). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

who have left or been expelled from their family homes make a life for themselves in the city's Christian parts. This was the case with F, a 21-year-old architecture student, and a queer Shi'i from Hula—a now-destroyed village on the Lebanese-Israeli border. Upon arrival in Beirut, F decided to live in Furn el-Chebbak because it was more hospitable than the adjacent Shi'i area of Dahiyeh. In the aftermath of Hezbollah (Shi'i)-led incitement against queers, he jokes, "Look, if the situation is going to get worse, and [homophobic] violence may spill [into Furn el Chebbak from Dahiyeh], where would I go as a Shi'i? Maybe I apply for asylum in Ashrafieh."<sup>246</sup> Like many Lebanese queers, F figures Ashrafieh as a safe-haven where queer refugees of all sects can escape homophobic violence. Given his Shi'i identity, however, F jokes that he would have to apply for "asylum." Indeed, his reference to asylum figures Ashrafieh as a country of its own, with membership criteria of its own, and where Lebanese queers could live a viable existence.

The attractiveness of Ashrafieh for queers further owes itself to the existence of queer and queer-friendly venues—cafes, restaurants, bars, and, and other "third spaces."<sup>247</sup> They are decorated with rainbow flags and frequented by visibly queer bodies—that is to say, bodies that appear non-normative in their gender and sexual comportment, as well as in their aesthetic expression. Commercial corridors in Gemmeize and Mar Mikhael—areas adjacent to the Port—also serve as public sites for queer congregation.<sup>248</sup> More, the vast majority of queer and queer-adjacent nightclubs are located in the Port-adjacent Qarantina district. It thus makes sense that a

---

<sup>246</sup> F. (2022, December 17). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

<sup>247</sup> This term was made popular by Ray Oldenburg. In his *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg describes third places in the following manner: "Several factors contribute to the characteristic homeliness of third places. First, and recalling Emerson's observation, there are no temples built to friendship. Third places, that is, are not constructed as such. Rather, establishments build for other purposes are commandeered by those seeking a place where they can linger in good company. Usually, it is the older places that invites this kind of takeover" (36). Oldenburg, R. (1999). *The great good place: Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. Da Capo Press.

<sup>248</sup> Here, see Sofian Merabet's discussion of public queer congregation in Beirut. But whereas Merabet describes the city's non-sectarian downtown district as the site for queer presence in the early 2000s, I show how queer presence has shifted to Christian-majority areas. Merabet, S. (2015). *Queer Beirut*. University Of Texas Press.

large and public rainbow flag would appear in Ashrafieh over Beirut's Muslim-majority parts. Not only is the area perceived to be less punitive. Ashrafieh already hosts a relatively significant number of queer inhabitants and queer spaces. That queer presence is already established further attracts queers from around the city to settle in the area.

In addition to hosting spaces of queer sociality and pleasure, Ashrafieh has also been home to Helem—the first queer advocacy group in the Middle East—and later, other queer advocacy groups, like the Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality (AFE). In 2017, Helem, the AFE, and other civil society organizations hosted the country's first Beirut Pride, which was comprised of a series of events, performances, and workshops in the Mar Mikhael district.<sup>249</sup> Though not boasting a public parade, Beirut Pride was nevertheless raided and shut down by the state's Internal Security Forces (see introduction). Despite these raids, Ashrafieh has continued to be the center of queer residence and sociality, as well as an incubator of political organizing.

With the outbreak of the 2019 Lebanon Revolution, Beirut's queer communities mobilized and came out as a political collective.<sup>250</sup> And though the breakdown of revolution and the onset of fiscal collapse extinguished the momentum of queer politics, Ashrafieh continued to be a privileged site of queer settlement. In fact, and in August of 2020, the devastation that the Beirut Port Explosion wrought in Ashrafieh worked to depress rents and open the area to a visibly increasing flow of queer residents. Paradoxically, Lebanon's financial collapse had also aided queer settlement in Ashrafieh. With the rapid deprecation of the Lebanese pound, those receiving their salaries in American dollars found themselves at a steep advantage to those

---

<sup>249</sup> Qiblawi, T. "Beirut gay pride event a first for Lebanon." *CNN*. May 16, 2017.

<https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/16/middleeast/beirut-gay-pride/index.html>; Issa, A. "In Lebanon, gay activism is fueling a new conversation about democracy and civil rights." *Middle East Institute*. May 22, 2017.

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/lebanon-gay-activism-fueling-new-conversation-about-democracy-and-civil-rights>.

<sup>250</sup> Younes, R. *Human Rights Watch*. May 7, 2020. "If Not Now, When?: Queer and Trans People Reclaim their Power in Lebanon's Revolution." <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2020/05/07/if-not-now-when-queer-and-trans-people-reclaim-their-power>.

getting paid in Lebanese pounds. In fact, the existence of an externally financed civil society meant that many queers, women, and single youth who work for NGOs and companies based outside Lebanon had found themselves with new spending power since the financial collapse. This has allowed them the freedom to live independently and apart from their families and communities.<sup>251</sup>

Returning to Samer's claims (from above), the relative leniency of religious institutions and the "weakness" of the hetero-religious family form in Ashrafieh—relative to other Muslim parts of the city—make the area more hospitable for establishing viable queer, single and non-familial forms of life.<sup>252</sup> This further encourages queer settlement, which in turn, contributes to the "de-familialization" of the area. That is, and since the Revolution, the rising and visible presence of queer bodies, the opening of queer venues, and the publicity of queer flags in Ashrafieh has meant that traditional Christian families are no longer the primary subjects—and proprietors—of this historically Christian area.

By the spring of 2022, electoral transformation in Christian-majority districts further contributed to anxieties over the transformation of Ashrafieh's identity. In May of 2022, 13 independent MPs were elected to Lebanon's Parliament, including two from Christian-majority East Beirut (Beirut's "first district").<sup>253</sup> While sectarian political parties—like the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces—also garnered significant votes, the electoral victories of staunchly anti-sectarian MPs in Ashrafieh figured as a proto-threat to the status of Christian power in the state. This threat relates to the fact that victory of the independent MPs was figured by anti-

---

<sup>251</sup> Since the 1990 Taif Accords, the Lebanese pound and the American dollar have been used interchangeably.

<sup>252</sup> Dada, S. (2022, December 14). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>253</sup> Reuters. (2022, May 17). What is the make-up of Lebanon's new parliament? *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-make-up-lebanons-new-parliament-2022-05-17/>

sectarian publics and media as a continuation of the Lebanon Revolution in the ballot box.<sup>254</sup>

Indeed, the 2022 elections signaled a partial political transition, one that renewed the promise of a democratized and de-sectarianized Lebanon. Though promising for some, the independent victories were threatening for those populations who are invested in the preservation of communal rights and representation in the state.

One month later, and in June of 2022, the appearance of a rainbow flag in Ashrafieh—and the national controversy it provoked—further revealed the shifting, and now, pro-queer stances of some Christian establishment parties like the Kataeb and the Free Patriotic Movement.<sup>255</sup> Responding to the activity of the Soldiers of God, the official discourse of these parties emphasized the importance personal liberties and individual rights for all people, including queers. Not drawing themselves on the side of communal rights and religious freedoms, these parties figured themselves, at least formally, as protective of the rights of the Lebanese citizen over and above sectarian, sexual, or territorial affiliations. In that regard, the 2022 elections also threatened Christian dominion over national and urban territory. For their conservative and sectarian audiences, the lack of a homophobic hard line from the Christian establishment—posed a challenge to the political and territorial presence of Christianity from within the sect itself. By bringing to office in-group candidates who wanted to unmake sectarianism, and by shifting the orientations of Christian establishment parties on the question of queer publicity and normalization, the May elections thus threatened to secularize and de-territorialize the sectarian order from the inside out.<sup>256</sup>

---

<sup>254</sup> Al-Haj Ali, M. (2022). *Al-intikhabat al-niyabiya al-libnaniya 2022: Tahawulat siyasiyah w istihqaqat mu'talah*. Markaz Al-Jazeera. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/5374>

<sup>255</sup> See chapter 3.

<sup>256</sup> Indeed, a de-sectarianized Lebanon would not only eliminate sectarian political distinctions; a transition out of sectarianism would also threaten to secularize Christian establishment parties and to even dissolve the territorial boundaries and dominions of sectarian communities.

## The Threat of “Passing” and the Queer Right to the City

In part, the secularizing, de-sectarianizing and de-territorializing effects of queer settlement in Ashrafieh relate to the capacity of queers—especially non-Christian ones—to conceal their sexual and sectarian identities. Because neither religion nor sexuality correlate with visible or obvious phenotypic markers, the appearance of religious and sexual identities relies on the display of signs and insignia—like crosses, earrings, hijabs, etc—and the aesthetic presentation of bodies in space—clothing, hairstyles, etc (see introduction). In Lebanon, classed modes of comportment and styles of performance also function as proxies for sectarian identity. For instance, the knowledge and ordinary usage of French words and expressions—like “bonjour,” and “ca va”—is usually associated with middle, upper-middle, and upper-class Christian families who hail from specific areas. Accents also function as indicators of sect and class, with certain styles of speech associated with Shi’is from the South, Christians from Mount Lebanon or Beirut Sunnis. So too does clothing: the majoritarian and public presence of uncovered and liberally-dressed women versus conservatively dressed women signals a Christian-majority area. As such, the phenotypic invisibility of sect is materialized not just by the visibility of sectarian symbols but also by the visibility and audibility of class markers and performances.

By performing the classed habitus of Ashrafieh’s Christian proprietors, queers—especially non-Christian ones—can conceal their out-group origins and perform their belonging to an area that is at once defined by sectarian and classed membership criteria. Similarly, and by performing gender normativity—that is, by performing adherence to the appearance of two distinct genders—the sexual non-normativity of queer men and women can “pass” as aesthetic eccentricity with little disruption to the sectarian status quo. Indeed, Ashrafieh’s queers—with



their global aesthetics and cultural capital—have succeeded in blending into an area that figures itself as the most global in all Beirut. For some of Ashrafieh’s Europhile residents, the presence of queers even gives the area an added “progressive” value. According to Samer, “[some of] the fancy women of Ashrafieh consider homosexuals as expressions of modern aesthetics, that this is the new European civilization. You see that when queer individuals pass by, these women admire their aesthetics, they smile, not because they are not homophobes, but because they think they are being progressive, their area is becoming progressive.”<sup>257</sup> Here, fashionable queers appear not as threats but as metrics of progress that gives some of Ashrafieh’s residents a sense of exception and satisfaction vis-à-vis the conservatism of Muslim areas. Paradoxically, the capacity of queerness to appear as an aesthetic phenomenon allows queerness as a non-normative sexual identity to “go under the radar.” This allows queers to blend into the classed/sectarian majority around them, which in turn, works to uphold sectarianism’s spatial order—or at least, the appearance of sectarian majorities within demarcated territory.<sup>258</sup>

However, the capacity for individual queers to settle and move largely undetected becomes a threat with the public display of queer signs—specifically rainbow flags—on sectarian territory.<sup>259</sup> As the globally recognized totem of queer identity, the rainbow flag signals

---

<sup>257</sup> Dada, S. (2024, January 24). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

<sup>258</sup> Seen through this aspect, that non-Christian queers in Ashrafieh could pass as Christian exposes how the legibility of sectarian identity in urban space is inextricably related to the performance of class membership. Put another way, the passing presence of queer settlers in Ashrafieh shows how class performance figures as a way for non-Christian members to disappear their sect and to negotiate their membership in Christian territory. Ironically, the success of their class performance in Ashrafieh has made it such that non-Christian queers appear to belong more in Ashrafieh than middle and lower class Christians. Especially in the aftermath of the Beirut Port Explosion, queer settlement has extended to the peripheries of Ashrafieh—neighborhoods like Geitawi, Furn el-Chebbak, and others—the settlement of dollar-earning, Christian and non-Christian queers has also displaced lower-income Christian families outside the city-proper. Aided by conditions of fiscal collapse and electoral transition, queer settlement has thus worked to increase the saliency of class over sectarian identification in Ashrafieh, and in doing so, to subtly alter the membership criteria in Beirut’s Christian areas.

<sup>259</sup> Paradoxically, that queers have been largely undetectable as a community and that they have been successfully settling and passing in Ashrafieh over the past decade has allowed homophobic discourse to frame queers as covertly dispossessing Christians of their land. In this respect, the threat of queerness resembles the threat of Jewish presence in Christian-majority European societies: like queers, the capacity for Jewish people to hide their origins—

the organized, globalized, and territorialized presence of a queer political community in Lebanon. In June of 2022, the public display of a queer flag in Ashrafieh’s Sassine Square meant that Ashrafieh’s queers were no longer individual guests, visitors, or “foreign” residents who were blending in with the majority around them. They now appeared as a group that was settling and making a public claim of belonging to an area that is not properly “their own.” Indeed, the public display of rainbow flags in Ashrafieh—an area that is already populated by queers and their spaces—indicates the nascent presence of a formal “gayborhood” in Beirut. Contesting the sectarian “right to the city,” then, the public display of a queer flag articulates a queer “right to the city,” a right David Harvey theorizes in the following manner:

The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be, what kinds of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of daily life we desire, what kinds of technologies we deem appropriate, what aesthetic values we hold... The right to the city, is therefore, far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart’s desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the process of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake ourselves our cities is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.<sup>260</sup>

Seen through Harvey’s theorization, queer flags are public expressions of collective belonging and membership in an urban area. Queer flags emblemize a queer “right” to equally access and appear in public space; to inhabit and occupy it with queer forms of comportment; and to aesthetically make and re-make space according to queer aesthetic values.

---

as well as the capacity of their communities to remain under the radar—led fascistic governments to devise methods for discerning Jewish identity and policing Jewish bodies in urban space.

<sup>260</sup> Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel Cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*. Verso. pp 1-2.

Furthermore, the display of a rainbow flag in Ashrafieh publicly discloses the existence of a new identity and viable alternative to communal and familial forms of living and belonging. In this way, the public rainbow flag works to not only attract queers from across Lebanon's sects to settle in Christian space; it also discloses—that is, makes known—the existence of queer forms of identity to Christians—young and old—who do not yet identify as queer, but may experience queer desire. This is why queer publicity could be such a problem: with the knowledge of queer sexuality, identity and culture in open view, some in-group members—in this case, young, queer and proto-queer Lebanese Christians—might take up queer forms of identity and kinship and deviate from the reproduction of sectarian families, communities, and settlement patterns.

However, and given the (de facto) dominion that sects exercise over territory in Lebanon, the public expression of a queer right to belong in Ashrafieh directly challenges that of Christian families and communities, who see their claim to the area as exclusive and God-given. From this vantage point, the controversy over the queer flag in Ashrafieh represented a symbolic clash between the sectarian and the queer “rights to the city,” between the old proprietors and the newcomers. And while the Christian inhabitants of Ashrafieh could perhaps accept out-group visitors—even tolerate out-group residents—from across Lebanon, the public settlement of a non-Christian and non-sectarian collective would, from the sectarian vantage point, threaten the identity of Christian territory and the exclusive privileges that in-group members enjoy within it.

### Part III: Homophobic Territoriality and the Soldiers of God

Acting against the public articulation of queer “right” to Ashrafieh, the homophobic parades, raids, and checkpoints of the Soldiers of God worked to identify queer bodies, contain queer publicity, and re-assert sectarian identity as the primary marker of urban territorial

belonging. Headed by anti-establishment priests like Tony Rizk and Josef Mansour, the group is comprised of nearly 300 young, mostly working class youth from East Beirut and its Christian environs. Though many of them are formally employed as security guards in Ashrafieh, the Soldiers figure themselves as an autonomous and politically neutral group of preachers. Rizk explains:

The *Junood* are not a party or an organization. We are not affiliated with any actor. We do not have any connection with anything earthly. And we have no activity that is securitarian or financial. We are the protectors of the teachings of God and believers over his mandates. This is our message: first and foremost, preaching (*bsharra*).<sup>261</sup>

Despite these assertions of political neutrality, the group also describes its mission as protecting Christian majority areas from the legalization of 1) homosexuality, 2) abortion, and 3) non-sectarian civil marriage.<sup>262</sup> Together, these three projects directly threaten the inter-generational reproduction of sectarian families, populations and territory. Signifying Ashrafieh as “the Land of God” (*ard al rab*), the Soldiers’ discourse articulates a God-given and Christian birthright to urban sectarian space in Beirut. Politically, the invocation of this divine right to land allows the Soldiers to enter, occupy, and police areas where they neither reside nor belong.

By claiming a shared sectarian identity with Ashrafieh’s locals and by purporting to protect “Ashrafieh’s families” (*ahali Ashrafieh*) from public queerness and feminism, the Soldiers further attempt to justify their securitarian presence in the area. Together, invocations of a shared sectarian identity and the articulation of a mandate to protect sectarian families and children have enabled these working-class Soldiers to claim belonging in an area whose classed boundaries exclude them. Indeed, the combination of the Soldiers’ sectarian activity and their

---

<sup>261</sup> "Official Website of the Soldiers of God." الموقع الرسمي لمجموعة جنود الرب. <https://www.jnoudelrab.com/about-us/>. See Figure 2.1 “About Us Page” in “Appendix 2: Soldiers in the Land of God.”

<sup>262</sup> Their website articulates their commitment to enforcing God’s prohibitions: “It is not permitted to break the mandate that God has given,” the Soldier write, “and to permit the passage of a Constitution against God and against the teachings of the Church, and against the Christian family...” Ibid.

working class and masculinist comportment are largely foreign to this commercial, classed, and cosmopolitan area. In that sense, the conspicuousness of the Soldiers' presence markedly contrasts with the hitherto passing presence of queers in Ashrafieh. But that is part of the point: through their aggressive performances of sectarian masculinity, the Soldiers use their Christian identity to contest the capacity of out-groups to live and belong in Ashrafieh. In doing so, the group more generally contests the classed membership criteria and shifting demographic patterns of the area.

Purporting to protect Christian presence (*wujood*) in Lebanon, the Soldiers also contrast their communal commitments with the classed interests of elites in the Christian establishment, on the one hand, and the pro-reform investments of the new Independent MPs, on the other. As we have seen, the Soldiers' mobilization was set against the reality and potentialities of partial democratization. Indeed, their attacks on the Pride flag in June of 2022 worked to signify political transition as an elite-led conspiracy: "They come with shi'arat about [political] flourishing (*izdihar*)," one Soldier vociferates into the lens. "They are lying. This is a campaign for the Devil (*Iblis*). They are kidnapping the kids. This is a lethal prohibition. Body and soul it kills."<sup>263</sup> Using an indeterminate "they," this Soldier refers to the new MPs (as well as civil society actors) whose electoral campaigns had emphasized the "flourishing" that would result from anti-sectarian transformation. Exposing these promises as lies, the Soldiers figured the public queer flag as a conspiracy that seeks to dispossess Christian families of their children. Against the conspiratorial action of anti-sectarian factions, the group avows to "make people conscious of the real danger of the Devil that is confusing the minds and ideas of our

---

<sup>263</sup> Achrafieh News. (2022, June 24). "Ba'id Ta'lik A'lam Lil-Mithliyeen Fi al-Ashrafieh Junood al Rab Yantafidun Did Hatha al Thahira." *YouTube*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-zQsZSSCMg>.

children.”<sup>264</sup> By inciting sectarian discourses on homosexuality, then, the Soldiers indeed fulfill their mission: to raise awareness of queer presence in the area.

While the Soldiers of God move in the area with little apparent interference from local communities or witnesses, the group does not enjoy the popular support of Ashrafieh’s populations, but their ambivalence.<sup>265</sup> On the one hand, pro-queer elites like Ashrafieh MP Paula Yacoubian, as well as Christian political commentators like As’ad Shar, have publicly decried the Soldiers on national media.<sup>266</sup> On the other hand, the lack of local resistance and the aid of municipal authorities largely facilitate the group’s actions. In June of 2022, for instance, the Ashrafieh Fire Station lent the Soldiers equipment that aided in their removal of the Pride Flag in Sassine. All the while local shopkeepers watched on. Likewise, the group’s sporadic parades, raids, and checkpoints in Ashrafieh, Mar Mikhael and Furn el-Chebbak are viewed with the silent complicity of local residents. Even the state’s formal security apparatuses have taken a backseat to the Soldiers’ homophobic initiatives (see later).

Street violence in and around East Beirut has also contributed to bottom-up demands for community policing, which, in turn provide vigilante groups like the Soldiers with an alibi to occupy and police Ashrafieh. The Internal Security Forces has even deployed the group to work as a local and para-state police force.<sup>267</sup> In a time of escalating factional street violence, patrol

---

<sup>264</sup> See Figure 2.1 “About Us Page” in “Appendix 2: Soldiers in the Land of God.”

<sup>265</sup> See “‘Voluntary Support’ and Rebel Rule: Lessons from the Islamic State,” a seminar paper I wrote that complicates typologies of civilian-combatant relations and argues for how popular ambivalence facilitates rebel strategy in civil war.

<sup>266</sup> In a television interview with As’ad Shar, a self-described Christian political commentator, he too describes the Soldiers as “religious extremists” whose presence in a “one of the most elegant neighborhoods in Beirut” is refused. “That a group of youth would call themselves this... with beards and crosses... they act as if God has given them a mandate to protect ethics (*akhlaq*) and decide what’s permissible or not. There is definitely no cradling ecology (*bi`a hadna*) for this appearance,” Shar asserts. See Sky News Arabia. (2022, December 21). *Manasat junood al rab... majmu`at amn-zati tuthir makhawef al-mughradin al-Lubnaniyeen*. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1\\_FBt9Ry00I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_FBt9Ry00I)

<sup>267</sup> MP Paula Yacoubian recounts to a reporter an episode in which a constituent “called the police. After a little while the Solders of God come to her. She told them, ‘I called the police, how did you know. The Soldiers replied, “the police told us.” Ibid.

groups like the Soldiers of God or the Eyes of Ashrafieh have allowed the state to economize on local urban security. Seen in this light, the Soldiers figure as a homophobic instantiation of a more general and de-centralized mode of urban communal securitization, one that has emerged in the wake of Lebanon's 2019 Revolution and financial collapse.

### Framing the Queer Threat to Territory

In order to understand how and why the homophobic strategy of the Soldiers of God responds to the threat of queer settlement, it is necessary to first grasp how the group signifies the threats associated with queer presence in Ashrafieh. In their claims, the Soldiers articulate the queer threat to territory through a combination of homophobic and sectarian discourses that, together, figure queer identity as a contagious, compulsive, and colonizing phenomenon. Infecting vulnerable targets like children and youth, queer identification, according to this discourse, spreads largely through sight and sound: through queer signs, symbols, and bodies that manipulate, seduce, and transform vulnerable Christian subjects into deviants.

The threat that public queer symbols, bodies, and culture poses to sectarian identity thus appears in homophobic discourse as a threat of forced conversion. In this register, queer desires that youth may have or the desire to take up queer identification are framed as coerced, un-free, and a product of forceful "grooming" and/or "promotion" (*tarweej*). As such, queer identification could never emerge as an autonomous or a free act. Conversely, and from within this discourse, there could be no viable possibility for queer youth to freely abandon sectarian or heterosexual identities, families, and/or forms of life. Instead, homophobic and sectarian discourses signify the threat of queer abandonment—that is, of young people choosing to identify as queer and perhaps leave their religions—as a threat of seduction and abduction from families and communities.

I argue that the homophobic and territorial practices of the Soldiers directly respond to

---

the ways in which they frame the queer threat. Because visible queer signs and bodies are signified with the capacity to compel and abduct those whose desire is vulnerable, homophobic parades, raids, and checkpoints work against these powers by removing queer signs and bodies from public circulation and enclosing them in private or semi-private spaces. In turn, enclosure aims to prevent the exposure and transmission of knowledge about queer sexuality, identity, and culture to those who are un-initiated—that is, to those who do not yet know about the existence of non-heterosexual forms of life. Seen as such, the homophobic strategy of the Soldiers of God functions to uphold queer non-disclosure by quarantining and containing anything that may expose the inhabitants of Christian-majority areas to the knowledge and promises of queer identity.

On their official website, the Soldiers of God prolifically document their homophobic activity. Their reports follow a simple script in which they cast vulnerable subjects—families, children, youth of local areas—as well as hyper-aggressive agents—queers, trans women, and drag queens—who are also trespassers on sectarian and *familial* territory. For instance, and in one emblematic report entitled “Gemmezye Rises in the Face of Ethical Decadence and Ejects the Devil from its Streets” the Soldiers describe a high-profile raid on a lesbian bar in the following terms:

What happened last night? A number of families from the area of Gemmezye gathered in Beirut in front of a cafe in the area, where a number of youth from the area of Dawrah and Burj Hammoud supported them and from Antelias, and they went to the cafe, and demanded its closure because it organized a party for deviants and activities contrary to decency and the mockery of the civil dignity (al 3izah al ahliya). And because it is the land of God, there is no place for you among us, you children of Satan. The area witnessed a gathering of men and women who expressed their denial at what happened. The men present inside the cafe were dressed in clothes that were unfamiliar and were decorated with womanly fashion, with fans, and make-up that is exaggerated. This elicited the discontent of the families; especially because present are a lot of children in



these neighborhoods, and they are fed up with these activities; and the promotion of deviant scriptures/doctrines in activities that do not suit their areas. It is imperative that the security apparatuses intervene in investigating this, and after the violent attack of the owners of the bar and those in it (against the families), the families insisted on the closure of the cafe and the prohibition of any such event that maligns the ethics and values of religion.<sup>268</sup>

The report begins by identifying Gemmeyze families as the first responders and Christian male youth—who hail from the surrounding areas as their supporters. The drag show is figured as a “party of deviants” whose presence on Christian land contradicts both decency and what they call “the civil dignity.” More interestingly is that queers appear in this discourse as a violently heretic sect; the boundary violations of queers—of men who dress in “womanly fashion” and who have “unfamiliar” and “exaggerated” appearances—are the products of a “deviant scripture” whose “promotion” in areas with Christian families and children is antithetical to Christianity and “unsuitable” to the identity and inhabitants of Christian land.

While the report is replete with false facts it nevertheless emblemizes how the Soldiers’ discourse frames queer sexuality: as a heretic sect whose threat lies in its capacity to occupy familial/communal space, convert vulnerable subjects, and aggress against the proper proprietors of Christian territory. According to eyewitness reports from the scene, it was the Soldiers who first responded to the drag show, and not local families (see later). Neither did the drag queens in Madam Oum violently attack anyone. Despite the lies, the Soldiers insist on framing queer culture and identity as an aggressive force: queers attack children by seducing them through their activity and they appropriate familial and communal space that is not properly their own. Here, the figuration of queers as an aggressively heretic sect is further informed by anti-gay Abrahamic mythology—namely, the myths of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible and the Prophet Lot in the

---

<sup>268</sup> Junood al Rab. (2023, August 24). “Al-gemmeyze tantafid bi-wajih al-inhitat al-akhlaqi w tatrud al-shaytan min shawaru`uha.” See “Figure 2.2: Report on Gemmeyze Drag Show” in Appendix 2.

Qur'an—that represent queer groups as violent trespassers. Indeed, both stories imagine the crime of sodomy as a violation not only of sexual boundaries but also as trespasses on the territorial boundaries of specific communities. These Abrahamic and territorial dimensions of the queer threat appear in the Soldiers' discourse when they frame queers as a destructive and proselytizing force on Christian land.

In another report entitled “Homosexual Prostitution in Front of the Church in the Port District,” the Soldiers deploy a similar narrative structure:

The families of the Port and Jiwar and all who come across the Sea Road noticed a gathering of a number of transgenders and prostitutes who spread in the area; and the spread of drugs and prostitution, and with the knowledge that the area is filled with families and children. And anyone who comes near them with a phone, immediately the insults and attacks began, and physical attacks in some cases. We received a number of calls from the families of the area who demanded us to intervene to stop this appearance.<sup>269</sup>

Once again, the story begins with local-area families who encounter violent queer trespassers (queer prostitutes) in Christian-marked areas (the Port district). Compounded by the presence of other mal-influences (drugs), so the narrative goes, the “spread” (*intishar*) of public queer bodies in Christian areas threaten to expose Christian space (churches) and Christian children to the “mal”-transformative effects of queer identification.

In both reports, we see how the threat of queer presence is articulated through an intersection of homophobic and sectarian discourses. Queer bodies are violent and violating. And queer culture is aggressive, possessing an influence that compels and coerces—rather than influences and attracts—vulnerable subjects into queer identification. Indeed, this discourse imagines that the very possibility of children seeing queer bodies in public puts them at risk of *becoming* queer themselves. And because children are imagined to not have the proper immunity

---

<sup>269</sup> Junood al Rab. (2023, August 27). “Da`aret mithliyeen amam knise fi al-bor – al tarik al bahri.” See “Figure 2.3: Report on Homosexual Prostitution in Port District” in “Appendix 2.”

to queer influence(s), they are also imagined to be more vulnerable to the purportedly contagious presence of queer bodies.

Here, Soldiers' framing symptomizes anxieties around queer identity's formation and transmission; that is, and like global homophobic discourses around "grooming," the Soldiers' dispatches register a morbid terror about how queer desire arises, how queer identity crystallizes and how both queer desire and identity move across people and space. What I argue, however, is that anxiety over queer transmission leans upon a distinct quality that pertains to queer identity: not inherited through the family, the process of queer or gay identification depends on initiation. In other words, those who experience same-sex desire are not automatically queer in identity, but must have a series of encounters with queer people and culture, with queer signs and spaces, in order to gain queer knowledge and understand themselves in terms of queer identity. Indeed, it is the identitarian signification of queer desire—the expression and organization of queer desire as a public, political, and collective form of identity and belonging—that is central to the problem of queer publicity in Lebanon. Responding to the threat of a public queer identity, then, homophobic discourse works to resist the identitarian signification of queer desire with counter-significations and metaphors that figure queerness as a highly transmittable and lethal phenomenon, one that operates akin to a poisons, viruses, and other substances that knowingly and unknowingly penetrate bodies and cause lethal harm.<sup>270</sup>

On the eve of the 2023-2024 academic school year, the Soldiers published a report that further illustrates this anxiety over queer transmissibility. Alerting local families to the subversive presence of queer symbols in seemingly benign places, they write:

We are beginning a new academic year, and the units of the Devil are prepared this year more than before

---

<sup>270</sup> Here, see Susan Sontag's lucid essay on how metaphors of illness, diseases, and viruses signify populations as deviants and mobilize state and societal power against them. Sontag, S. (2005). *Illness as Metaphor and AIDs and Its Metaphors*. Picador. (Original work published 1978).

to spread (*bath*) their lethal poison among our children to split them (*harfahum*) from our religion and ethics and values of Christianity, and to render them tools for the destruction of our society. However, we and you are able—with the help of the God of the Soldiers, the King of kings, and the God of gods—to block (*sadh*) this ferocious and malignant attack (*al hajmah al sharsa*). And we can limit (*nuhid*) this attack, or be on guard. “They come to you in sheep’s clothing. They are ravening wolves” (Matthew 15-8). Please be careful before you buy notebooks, backpacks, clothes, wallets, shoes, or any necessities. The lack of presence of a rainbow flag. (Of course, it is not only one flag, but you can see the different flags if you research). Or pictures of the Korean pop band BTS that supports homosexuality; their pictures are all over notebooks, etc. The presence of pictures that (*tuwahi*) alludes to deviancy. Like two boys or two girls and between them a heart. Pictures of electronic characters that support homosexuality (Pepa pig, Barbie, SpongeBob, and anime characters). And we emphasize that all who buy these things are supporters of them, and in our turn we aid them.<sup>271</sup>

According to this dispatch, the threat of queer sexuality pertains to the “spread” (*bath*) of queer culture and identification, especially among schoolchildren. Indeed, the Arabic term they use—“*bath*” which means to broadcast—attributes to queer identity the capacity to travel and infect through airwaves. While it is explicitly figured as a “poison,” queerness is lethal to Christian subjects—not by physical death—but by manipulating them into queer identification and forcefully “splitting” (*harafahum/tahrif*) them from their communities of origin. Uncontained, public queer signs could even transform Christian children into “tools” who can then be used to destroy Christian society from the inside out.

For the Soldiers, resisting the spread of queer identification requires parents to identify queer signs and to censor them, thereby preserving the sectarian and heterosexual constitutions of their Christian youth. Which is why the Soldiers spread homophobic knowledge, raise homophobic awareness, and advocate for a homophobic version of a boycott, divest, and

---

<sup>271</sup> Junood al Rab. (2023, August 15). “Tanbih ham lil-ahali ma’ bida’ al-‘am al-dirasi al-jadid.” See “Figure 2.4: Warning to Parents and Call to Boycott” in “Appendix 2.”

sanction (BDS) strategy: they create and circulate a list of products to boycott in an effort to divest from and stop the power and influence of queers, their identity and their culture. Though the queer rainbow flag is at the top of the list, the Soldiers also enumerate different cartoon characters, K-Pop stars, and other symbols that could even suggest the possibility of queer sexuality. Remarkably, this discourse imagines that the mere suggestion of queerness—let alone its explicit disclosure in public signs and speech acts—induces a process of sexual and subjective transformation among those who receive it. Which is why, for the Soldiers, queer symbols must be censored and why queer and queer-adjacent products must be boycotted. Put in the terms of the virus metaphor, the Soldiers’ call to boycott queer products works as a kind of quarantining strategy: boycotting identifies queer signs that are hidden in plain sight, prevents their public circulation, and, in doing so, hampers their capacity to “infect” subjects who are figured as vulnerable to transformative influences.

The “viral” power of queer signs, images, and culture appears in yet another dispatch on the Soldiers’ website. In “A German Attempt to Transmit a Lethal Virus to Beirut,” the Soldiers describe how a Christian judge prohibited the filming of a queer-friendly German talk-show program in the capital:

The conservative Judge Marwan Aboud forbade the filming of a talk show program for the German television that promotes deviancy in the Sanaye’ Garden; and the judge called for the elimination of all plans that have happened without the permission of the municipal powers; now, we are told that the directors of the show are looking for a place to film in Baabda. And this is one among the hundreds of daily attempts at the transmission of this lethal virus to Lebanon by way of imaginary organizations and tv news channels that are funded by the virus-ed/infested West that is aimed at the targeting of Lebanese society and the spreading/broadcasting (*bath*) of extremist ideas that targets the foundation of the family and the church by facilitating some of the internal agents who are known in their deviance and those who are compassionate with them and their reception of funds from global sources that supports this satanic

project.<sup>272</sup>

Similar to the previous dispatch, queerness appears here as a “lethal virus,” one that is “broadcast” (*bath*) by way of foreign and foreign-funded local television channels. In the latter two dispatches, their use of terms like “virus” or “poison” allows the Soldiers to signify queer identification as a process in which a foreign agent of harm is undetectably transmitted across bodies. That queer identity spreads like a virus further appears in how the Soldiers invest queer signs and symbols with the power to “infect” subjects who are figured as immunologically vulnerable to the transmission of queer knowledge and identity. While their reports focus on Christian areas, the metaphor of the virus—its indiscriminate movement across human boundaries—allows the Soldiers to frame the spread of public queer identification as a universal threat to all sectarian groups, their territories, and their most vulnerable subjects. But what the metaphor of the virus more precisely connotes is a process of replication: the viral agent does not harm the host by merely killing them; rather, it hijacks the host’s internal cells and transforms the host into a copy of itself. Transformed into the agent of harm, the original host can now do the virus’s work. Pointing to their “Western” funding, the Soldiers figure local queers and their advocates as hijacked agents who are as culpable in the spread of queer identity as their Western counterparts.<sup>273</sup>

Through a mixture of metaphors, the homophobic and sectarian discourse of the Soldiers of God signify queer bodies and signs as contagious and capable of transmitting queer identity across spatial and territorial boundaries. By using metaphors of viruses, poison, and other undetectable, lethal and transmittable forces, the Soldiers are also able to signify public queer

---

<sup>272</sup> Junood al Rab. (2023, September 16). “Muhawala almaniya li naql waba` qatel ela beirut.” See “Figure 2.5: Report on German Television Show” in “Appendix 2.”

<sup>273</sup> Seen in this light, the virus metaphor in homophobic discourse finds echoes in the activity of the vampire—a literary figure that has condensed anxieties about the local infiltration of foreign, seductive, and lethally transformative forces. Unlike the figuration of a threat from Eastern Europe, as in Bram Stokers’ *Dracula*, the Soldiers in Lebanon figure the West as the source of queer plague.

settlement as a specific kind of colonization. Like a virus in the body of its host, queers are imagined to appropriate in-group land and to transform that land by transforming its most vulnerable inhabitants into queers.

Homophobic anxieties about the sexual transformation of sectarian subjects, however, lean upon a reality: though not coercive in how it spreads, the publicity of queer identity—whether in the visibility of signs, bodies, and spaces—could very well influence Christian youth to pursue and take up non-heterosexual, non-familial, and non-sectarian forms of life. Indeed, public queer presence in Christian-majority areas not only bears the potential of attracting out-group queers to settle on Christian land. By disclosing the existence of an alternative identity and by promoting knowledge of gender and sexual plurality—as well as spaces to experience that knowledge—queer publicity could contribute to the free and uncoerced conversion of (some) Christian insiders into queer subjects. In that way, homophobic anxieties about the effects of exposure to queer signs and bodies gets something right: the publicity of queer culture in sectarian space has the potential to spread sexual knowledge that could initiate some sectarian subjects into queerness and out of their communities. Understanding the potentials associated with the spread of queer identity thus allows us to grasp how homophobic action signifies and securitizes sectarian territory and sectarian subjects.

### Part III: Homophobic Territoriality—Parades, Checkpoints, and Raids

By framing queer publicity as a phenomenon of contagion, the Soldiers of God respond to queer settlement on Christian land through a strategy of containment and quarantine: not capable of eliminating queer desire, homophobic squads like the Soldiers of God attempt to enclose, isolate, and immobilize publicly circulating queer signs and bodies lest they “mal” transform the identities of sectarian subjects and sectarian land. They do so through three territorial practices: parades, checkpoints, and raids. These practices work in three ways: 1)

parades cleanse public space of public queer signs and symbols; 2) checkpoints regulate the circulation of queer bodies within Christian-marked territory; and 3) raids enclose queer associations in private and semi-private spaces. Together, these practices allow the Soldiers to maintain the state of public queer non-disclosure and the semblance of a heterosexual-only world that reigns in Lebanon. The Soldiers' territoriality also works to dissuade out-group queers from moving into the area and to minimize the influence that queer culture exerts on the identities of Ashrafieh's inhabitants as well as the identity of the area itself. By applying itself to signs of queer settlement, this strategy thus works to contain the spread of queer, non-familial, and non-reproductive forms of life that threaten the demographic and cultural perpetuation of sectarian families, communities, and territories. Ultimately, and by preemptively mobilizing against the building of a "gayborhood" in Ashrafieh, homophobia has allowed the Soldiers of God to uphold the right that sectarian families, communities and men have over Lebanon's urban publics.

#### A. Sectarian / Anti-Gay Parades

Since their re-appearance in 2022, the Soldiers have sporadically staged sectarian parades in which they attack queer signs—like publicly displayed rainbow flags, Pride and Drag advertisements—and chant sectarian slogans—like "Ashrafieh is the land of God!" While these anti-gay parades exhibit functional similarities to more traditional sectarian parades, they also diverge in important ways. Not mobilizing on the territorial boundaries *between* out-group neighborhoods, the Soldiers move from the periphery to the center of in-group territory, where they police largely commercial districts. Indeed, sectarian parades manage the presence and circulation of queer signs and bodies within—rather than across—in-group areas. Aided by municipal authorities and local inhabitants, the Soldiers' parades thus work to govern the aesthetic boundaries of communal territory: they censor the signs of queer residents, maintain a



state of public queer non-disclosure in Ashrafieh, and work to reclaim the area's public spaces for sectarian families, communities, and the men who protect them.

As we saw in the opening vignette, the Soldiers of God framed the presence of a public rainbow flag in Ashrafieh as a trespass on Christian territory. According to one Soldier, this has to do with the presence of the flag in “areas with Churches.”<sup>274</sup> The problematization of this kind of proximity—between religious symbols and queer ones—relates to the rainbow flag's signification in homophobic/sectarian discourse. As the symbol—or in the words of Emile Durkheim, the totem—of a collective queer identity, the queer flag represents a form of group identity that does not take biological reproduction as its organizing principle. Neither is queer identity inherited nor transmitted through the patrilineal family. These two characteristics of queer identity contrast and are even antithetical to the patrilineal and heterosexual family structure that is central to the reproduction of sectarian groups and identities.

From the homophobic and sectarian perspective, the rainbow flag symbolizes an enemy group, one that threatens the biological reproduction of sectarian groups, and one that all Abrahamic religions condemn as universally abject (see chapter 1). And as we saw in the previous section, homophobic and sectarian discourses confer the rainbow flag with the power to coerce, compel, and convert young sectarian subjects to queerness. Invested with these capacities, the flag's presence in a space characterized by “sacred” signs—churches, crosses, and icons—symbolically violates the public heterosexuality that sectarian space requires; indeed, claims around the defiling presence of queer signs shows how the integrity of sacred sectarian signs requires space that is free from *other* signs that may contradict, falsify, or symbolically violate the inter-sectarian doctrine of heterosexual absolutism—that there is no sexuality but

---

<sup>274</sup> Achrafieh News. (2022, June 24). *Ba'id ta'lik a'lam lil-mithliyeen fi al-Ashrafieh junood al rab yantafidun did hatha al thahira* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-zQsZSSCMg>.

heterosexuality. By attacking and censoring queer flags, homophobic parades thus work to purify space from symbols that publicly challenge the heterosexual absolutism that underwrites the capacity for sectarian signs to appear as sacred in the first place.

In addition to emptying space of queer signs, the Soldiers' parades also saturate space with sectarian aesthetics. This symbolically re-asserts the sectarian identity of Ashrafieh over its cosmopolitan and liberal one. Describing these aesthetics, one commentator writes:

[The Soldiers] display their activities, exercises, and muscles. The core of the group depends upon the bulk of the body and the beauty of its presentation. The long beard and the big cross that hangs from the neck. Accompanying [this exhibitionism] are religious hymns.<sup>275</sup>

Not incidental, these hyper-sectarian and hyper-masculine aesthetics are central to the Soldiers' functions: they model a form of gender and religious identity that challenges the globalized and classed aesthetics of Ashrafieh. Moving in packs of 20 to 30, these parades enable the Soldiers to enact their sectarian masculinities and to overwrite the potentials of a gay neighborhood in Ashrafieh. And by targeting queers, the Soldiers' parades remind all out-group members who the area belongs to, and in doing so, work to correct the queer perception of Ashrafieh's liberality and hospitality.<sup>276</sup>

In *Formations of Violence*, Allen Feldman's discussion of sectarian parades in the Northern Irish context helps clarify the convergences and divergences between traditional sectarian and anti-gay parades. Occurring mostly on the "interface"—the territorial boundary that separates ethnic communities in Belfast—Feldman describes how the movement of Loyalist (Protestant) and Catholic parades works to sectarianize urban space:

The typical spatial pattern of these parades is the movement from the center of the community, where the

---

<sup>275</sup> Khashoush, I. (2022, December 14). "Al-Tataturf marfoud masihiyan... la bi'a hadna la 'junood al-rab'" Annahar.com.

<sup>276</sup> See my discussion of Ashrafieh's liberality and my interlocutor Samer's view on this matter.

parade audience is ethnically homogenous, to a march along the boundaries demarcating an adjacent community composed of the opposed ethnic grouping. Marching along the boundaries transforms the adjacent community into an involuntary audience and an object of defilement through the aggressive display of political symbols and music.<sup>277</sup>

Here, Feldman's analysis of Belfast's "interface" illustrates dynamics of sectarian mobilization on Beirut's Green Line. In both the Tayouneh and Sassine Clashes of 2021 and 2022, out-group (Shi'a and Sunni) parades began in their home-areas and moved out. Marching along the interface, they shouted sectarian slogans, and saturated space with their political symbols. Not only did they force Christian populations to witness their enthusiasm; these parades crossed into Christian territory and provoked retaliatory violence from the area's enraged men.

However, the homophobic parades of the Soldiers of God exemplify markedly different territorial dynamics from the ones Feldman describes. These differences owe themselves to how a specifically queer threat mobilizes and organizes sectarian territoriality. Rather than move from the center to the borders of the community, the Soldiers do the opposite. They begin in Karm el Zaiton—their working-class neighborhood on the edge of Ashrafieh—and move toward the center. In fact, they avoid inter-sectarian boundaries altogether. Not instigating confrontations with sectarian out-groups, the Soldiers' focus has been on the aesthetic governance of Ashrafieh's commercial corridors. Commanding in-group space, the Soldiers of God force the area's Christian, Syrian, and queer residents to bear witness to their spectacles of sectarian belonging. In these ways, the spatial logics behind the Soldiers' movement reveal how their sectarian parades work—not to incur into out-group areas—but to govern in-group territory.

Their concentration in the center of Christian areas also shows how Soldiers respond to

---

<sup>277</sup> Feldman, A. (2000). *Formations of violence the narrative of the body and political terror in northern ireland*. Chicago, Ill. [U.A.] Univ. Of Chicago Press. 29.

the threats associated with queer settlement and publicity in Ashrafieh. Not stationed at the borders to deflect out-of-place sectarian bodies, the Soldiers of God work to intimidate queer and de-sectarianized bodies that have already infiltrated the boundaries of the area and who, in some cases, pass undetected among local Christian populations. Given the demographic changes and the ongoing globalization of the area, the aggressive exhibition of Christian political signs and sounds is especially important in Ashrafieh. In that sense, the Soldiers' parades respond—not to a threat of out-group sectarian take-over—but to a threat of their area's de-sectarianization.

### Checkpoints and Checkpointing

In addition to sectarian parades, another key mechanism that the Soldiers employ to police Christian-marked space is the informal checkpoint (*hajiz*). Popping up in queer and commercial zones, anti-gay checkpoints work to regulate the movement of queer bodies by identifying certain aesthetic markers (feminine earrings on men, piercings, faded haircuts, sexualized or gender “inappropriate” clothing, etc.) and styles of comportment (ways of walking, talking) as signs of queerness. In this way, the Soldiers' checkpoints respond to the problem of queer “passage”—that is, the capacity for queers in Ashrafieh to perform class membership and gender normativity, and in doing so, to conceal both their sectarian origins and their sexualities. By signifying signs that have hitherto been publicly unrecognizable—or at least ignorable—as queer, the Soldiers are able to materialize queer bodies in an effort to remove them from the public.

What is important, however, is that these checkpoints do not apprehend *all* queer bodies but only those who are visibly non-normative in their gender expression. This means that skinny effeminate queer men and trans women—and not cis-gay muscle queens—have been the primary targets of this kind of regulation. This relates to the general conditions of queer publicity

in Lebanon: though the explicit disclosure of queer identity is publicly prohibited, queer men and women in Lebanon enjoy a wide margin of freedom to aesthetically experiment with their appearance *so long* as they appear like men and women in public (see introduction). Indeed, the checkpoints of the Soldiers of God arrest queer bodies as trespassers only when they do not adhere to the appearances mandated by Lebanon’s heterosexual contract.

These logics were on display in May of 2023, when the exposure of a draft bill to decriminalize sodomy intensified the Soldiers’ territorial practices.<sup>278</sup> In East Beirut, their checkpoints proliferated, appearing around queer bars and other spaces. That summer, the streets of Mar Mikhael became a particular hotspot for the Soldiers’ homophobic activity.<sup>279</sup> Since the closure of Bardo<sup>280</sup> in October 2021, most of Beirut’s queers have migrated to Tota, a lesbian-owned venue on the east side of the city. Hidden in the backstreets of Mar Mikhael, Tota is a small and intimate space. On the weekends, its boisterous crowds spill out onto the front terrace where they smoke and continue the party. Around the 2023 Pride Month, the Soldiers of God installed themselves in the streets parallel to Tota where they intimidated queer subjects and arrested their passage.

On leaving Tota one night, Samer—the Helem employee we met above, and a slender and soft-spoken gay man who likes to accessorize—encountered a Soldier-manned checkpoint. He describes an ominous scene:<sup>281</sup> in the unlit darkness of Mar Mikhael’s narrow lanes, Samer is hailed by a muscled silhouette on a motorbike. “Hey, you. Why are you wearing that?” the Soldier points to Samer’s earring. “*Ma khassak*”—“it doesn’t concern you”—Samer answers and

---

<sup>278</sup> In May of 2023, members of the sectarian establishment exposed a draft law that would remove the anti-sodomy statute from the Lebanese Penal Code. Unlike the previous year’s rumor, this accusation was indeed true: 13 MPs, mostly independent and anti-sectarian, had already signed on. That summer, the exposure of a pro-gay “plot” served as a site for novel forms of sectarian alliance making (see chapter 3).

<sup>279</sup> F. Ethnographic Conversation. Field Notes. August 2023.

<sup>280</sup> Located in Hamra, Bardo was the first queer bar in Beirut and a site of queer collective joy.

<sup>281</sup> Dada, S. (2024, January 24). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

walks on. “What does it mean?” he menacingly insists. Anticipating a violent confrontation, Samer bolts. Here, the Soldier shouts for back up. Out of the shadows, two other motorbikes emerge and the three Soldiers chase Samer up the Ashrafieh hill and all the way home. By the late summer of 2023, had become an ordinary peril that queer subjects anticipate and attempt to avoid.

As the Soldiers’ favored method, the anti-gay checkpoint illustrates how sectarian practices are deployed to interpellate some queer subjects as trespassers and to regulate their movement across sectarian space. They operationalize what Allen Feldman in the Northern Irish context describes as a practice of “telling,” or “the sensory identification of an ethnic Other through the reception of the body as an ideological text.”<sup>282</sup> “Telling,” Feldman continues, “constructs an ideological conjuncture of clothing, linguistic dialect, facial appearance, corporal comportment, political religious insignia, generalized spatial movements, and inferred residential linkages.”<sup>283</sup> As homologs of the sectarian checkpoint, anti-gay checkpoints look for ordinary and stylistic markers—like earrings, haircuts, sexually suggestive and gender-defying clothing—as signs that indicate queer identified people. Indeed, both kinds of checkpoints reveal a deeper analogy between sectarian and sexual identity: given that both are phenotypically invisible—that is, they are not expressed in physical attributes—sectarian and sexual identities must be inferred from aesthetics (signs and symbols), from styles of bodily comportment, and from modes of speech. In Samer’s account, his male-worn earring and his “gay voice” served as indicators of queerness and provided sufficient reasons for the Soldiers to arrest his movement, to antagonize him, and to treat him like a trespasser. And while Samer’s Sunni origins had not been apparent to

---

<sup>282</sup> Feldman, A. (2000). *Formations of violence the narrative of the body and political terror in northern ireland*. Chicago, Ill. [U.A.] Univ. Of Chicago Press. 56.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

the Soldiers, he was nevertheless made to feel like a trespasser in the place that he resides.<sup>284</sup>

However, and whereas the logics of sectarian and homophobic “telling” are sometimes similar, they also diverge: unlike out-group sectarian bodies, queer bodies—especially out-group ones—trespass both on the boundaries of sectarian territory and on the boundaries of gender and heterosexual normativity. Unlike out-group sectarian bodies, queer bodies in Ashrafieh mostly appear with no sectarian or explicit territorial affiliation. Indeed, the queer residents of Ashrafieh come from all sects, comprising a collective that cuts diagonally across the boundaries of sectarian membership groups.<sup>285</sup> As we have seen, the fact that queer appearances largely overwrite markers of sectarian affiliation has allowed most of them to blend into an area characterized by a Christian but nevertheless cosmopolitan liberality. However, the inability to detect the sectarian origins of queer bodies figures as a problem for a political order that relies on its members to appear as part of a religious group and to reside within the borders of their own areas. Though their checkpoints cannot specify sectarian identity, the Soldiers use queer markers as more general proxies for detecting those who do not belong in Christian-marked space.<sup>286</sup>

This arrives us at another difference between sectarian and homophobic checkpoints: while the sectarian checkpoint works to transfer bodies to their proper sectarian space, anti-gay checkpoints work to deflect and disappear queer bodies—and signs—from public view. That is because, without an area of their own—that is, an area in which they are a majority—queers have

---

<sup>284</sup> Dada, S. (2024, January 24). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

<sup>285</sup> Here, I think with Michel Foucault’s seminal essay “Friendship is a Way of Life,” where he relates the relational potential—and social disruptiveness—of homosexuality to its unique position in the social fabric. He writes, “homosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the ‘slantwise’ position of the latter, as it were, the *diagonal lines* he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light.” Foucault, M. (2000). “*Friendship as a way of life*” in *ethics: Subjectivity and truth* (p. 138). Penguin Books.

<sup>286</sup> Interestingly, the Soldiers can mistake and Christian queers with not belonging in Ashrafieh as well. This seems to expose the precarity of membership criteria for land. That is, if you can mistake someone who is “actually” native to an area as not being from that area, what does that reveal about territorial identifications? It means that there is nothing “natural”—or indigenous—about any group’s relation or belonging to any plot of land on this Earth.

nowhere to be relocated. In fact, this problem—of queers being a numerical minority everywhere and of having no land of their own—underwrites the desire for queers around the world to build separate neighborhoods in which they are majorities and in which they can be safe, whether in Beirut’s Ashrafieh or in Chicago’s Boystown.

By 2023, however, the proliferation of homophobic checkpoints in Ashrafieh has worked to unmake its status as a queer sanctuary in Beirut. By generating feelings of threat and insecurity among queer people, the Soldiers’ checkpoints have also worked in potential. That is, the possibility of arrest and abuse has inhibited public queer expression and cajoled queers into appearing gender normative. Likewise, the impossibility of anticipating checkpoints discourages queers from publicly gathering.<sup>287</sup> And given Beirut’s post-Collapse electrical outages, the difficulty in seeing the idling Soldiers increases the risk of venturing out at night. For those queers whose gender and sexual presentation cannot pass as straight, homophobic checkpoints enclose them in their homes.

Beyond the Soldiers’ formal checkpoints, the practice of homophobic “checkpointing” has become an ordinary method through which everyday men guard, at once, the boundaries of their sectarian territories and the boundaries of public heteronormativity—or the “heterosexual contract.” By acting as the public guards of their areas, men also secure their dominion over public sectarian space. Thanks to the Soldiers’ activity and their “consciousness-raising” campaigns around homosexuality, men across Beirut’s areas have used queer aesthetic markers—earrings, feminized clothing, and slender physiques—to detect and deflect queer-appearing bodies from sectarian land. During a walk in Ain al Rummaneh, for instance, the men

---

<sup>287</sup> F. (2023, August). *Ethnographic conversation* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].



on the pavement identified me as a queer stranger.<sup>288</sup> Their suspicious gazes traced my every move. Before turning the corner, I was hailed by a younger man, who eyed my earring with contempt. He demanded to know what I was doing and where I was going. “*Fil*,” he threatened.<sup>289</sup> “Leave.” F, a visibly queer interlocutor (piercings, tattoos, mesh shirts and accessories) recounts a similar tale. In Furn el-Shebbak, the majority-Christian neighborhood where he resides, F was standing outside of his friend’s apartment building. He recounts:

Some man comes from out of nowhere. He holds his phone up to my face and takes a photo of me. I tell him, “Is there something wrong with you. Why are you taking pictures?” And he begins yelling, ‘You are not from here! You are not from this neighborhood! No one knows you, you are a stranger (*ghareeb*)! And you’re standing in the middle of the street, looking at the cars and looking at the buildings. If anything happens in the neighborhood, if anything gets stolen, I will report you to the police. I live here, this area is mine!’<sup>290</sup>

In Sunni-occupied Basta, N—a native to the area—attempted to park his car in front of a grocer. Slim, pierced, and clad in revealing clothing, he was harassed by two men sitting outside the shop. Claiming that the spot was reserved, they menacingly ordered him to remove the vehicle. When he refused, the men escalated their tone and signaled their bellicosity.<sup>291</sup> And in Zuqaq l-Blat—a mixed Shi’i and Sunni neighborhood in West Beirut—two informal guards sat at the gates of Sanaye’ Park and barred entry to a friend and I. Refusing to tell us their reasons, their hostile gazes glided over our queer appearances. Our insistence on entering soon roused them into a state of belligerence. Rising from their chairs, they threatened to “smash [our] faces in” if we did not vacate.<sup>292</sup>

---

<sup>288</sup> A Christian neighborhood on the East side of the Green Line and the site of the dramatic Tayouneh street clash in 2021.

<sup>289</sup> Ethnographic Field Notes. December 2022.

<sup>290</sup> F. (2022, December 17). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

<sup>291</sup> N. (2022, May). *Ethnographic conversation* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Field Notes May 2022.

<sup>292</sup> Ethnographic Field Notes June-July 2022.

These scenes illustrate the everyday and masculinist aspects of anti-gay checkpointing. Here, local men deploy the same logics as the Soldiers of God: they signify gender-defying queer bodies as trespassers and they figure themselves as the area's security guards. Through these scenes, we see that checkpointing does not only reproduce the boundaries of sectarian areas. The public appearance of queer men—"lesser men"—allows straight men to posture war, threaten violence, and enforce the presence and privilege they exercise over public urban space, all without getting imbricated with equally bellicose straight male others.<sup>293</sup>

### Raids and other Attacks

Third, the homophobic raids of the Soldiers of God target queer venues that are exposed to public view. This leads to the enclosure of queer sociality and association in private, semi-private and other clandestine spaces. In turn, the enclosure of queer life makes it difficult to come upon spaces of queer sociality if one does not already know about them. Indeed, raids work to curb the publicity of queer culture; to hamper the circulation of queer knowledge; and to prevent the spread of queer identification to those who may not yet be initiated into queerness. In short, and by enclosing queer associations in private spaces, raids work against the public practice of a collective queer identity on Christian-marked land.

One prominent raid that exemplifies these uses and effects of homophobic raids happened on the night of August 23, 2023, when the Soldiers of God raided Madam Oum—a lesbian-owned venue that sits on Gemmeze's main street.<sup>294</sup> On their way home to Karm al-Zeitoun, a patrol of three or four Soldiers passed by the bar's glass facade, where they glimpsed a drag

---

<sup>293</sup> In other words, and as is the case historically, the publicity of queer men—what heterosexuality considers to be "lesser" men—has provided straight males with an authorized object of public violence who they can abuse with little fear of retaliation and consequences. Unlike women, who are objects of private violence for men, violence against homosexuals is publicly and socially authorized. By dominating "inferior" men, this kind of homophobic violence enables men to re-affirm relations of masculine equality with each other.

<sup>294</sup> A lesbian-owned venue named after the legendary Egyptian singer Oum Kulthum.

performance inside. Hopping off their motorbikes, the Soldiers beat the door attendant, called for backup, and unleashed their fury.<sup>295</sup> In a video that captures the attack, a Soldier is heard howling: “This is the place of IBLIS (the devil). They are promoting homosexuals, in the Land of God. IT IS PROHIBITED!”<sup>296</sup> Within minutes, fifteen enraged Soldiers surrounded the premises, producing pandemonium among the performers and the audience who were trapped inside.

A half hour into the rampage, officers from the state’s Internal Security Forces (ISF) arrived. Remarkably, they did not arrest the Soldiers but regarded them as friendly collaborators. Dumit, a Lebanese queer activist elaborates:

The ISF saw people being hit. And they didn’t do anything. They related to the Soldiers as if they were a fraternal group and [not as a group] with weapons, trying to attack a private space and individuals. [The ISF] was trying to find something on us [the queers], to hold against us. Against the café. They opened an on-the-spot investigation. They were transforming victims into perpetrators.<sup>297</sup>

Remaining in the background, the ISF provided a perimeter for the escalating homophobic action. Vulnerable and abandoned, the drag queens were left to fend for themselves.<sup>298</sup> Even the lesbian owner of Madam Oum collaborated with the Soldiers and the ISF. She advised everyone—performers and audience—to do the same. The situation did not de-escalate until about an hour later. According to one rumor, someone had contacted local MP Paula Yacoubian, who had gotten a hold of Antoine Sahnawi, (the banker and alleged employer of the Soldiers), and who, in turn, ordered the Soldiers to vacate.<sup>299</sup> Though impossible to determine its veracity,

---

<sup>295</sup> Dada, S. (2024, January 24). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

<sup>296</sup> DW Ja'far Tuwk. (2023, August 25). *Aqifu junood al-rab... ma yahsal fi lubnan mur'eb*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTP2hcl6iL4>

<sup>297</sup> Megaphone News. "I am not afraid": Testimonies from the 'Soldiers of God' Raid." *YouTube*. August 24, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=id6TG7ADSLw>.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Dada, S. (2024, January 11). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

the rumor imagines the Soldiers as under the influence and management of elites; indeed, the rumor expresses the queer-secular reception of the Soldiers of God as a proxy group whose action can be contained by one phone call to an elite. Whether or not the rumor was true, the ten to fifteen Soldiers hopped on their motorbikes and sped off. Meanwhile the ISF units loitered around and maintained appearances for the state.

And just like that, the scene ended as quickly as it began. Parasitic on the sodomy drama in Parliament, the Madam Oum Invasion represented an escalation of organized anti-gay violence in Lebanon. The episode also cast the state in a crucial supporting role. Not directly engaging the action, state security provided the Soldiers with coverage. While the group did not brandish weapons, the violence the Soldiers meted out and the bedlam they caused temporarily closed down Madame Oum and cleared Gemmeyze of publicly appearing drag queens.

#### Part IV: Conclusion—On the Generalization of Homophobic Territoriality

In the first months of their re-appearance, the Soldiers of God confused national audiences and provoked the anxiety of sectarian and anti-sectarian voices. This was especially true around December of 2022, when the Sassine Street Clash had mobilized the Soldiers and intensified their securitarian activity and presence in Christian-majority areas. Together, the group's militant aesthetics and their sectarian discourse generated concerns across Lebanon around the return of "self security" (*amn zati*), a term that harkens back to the Lebanese Civil Wars and that refers to a time in which national territory was fragmented along sectarian lines, barricaded by checkpoints, and guarded by neighborhood militias.

Especially to opponent sectarian factions, the Soldiers had initially represented a threat of civil war. Take for instance, the commentary of Sheikh Hassan Mur'eb—a Sunni cleric and the leader of Dar al Fatwa, who begins by comparing the Soldiers of God to Hezbollah:

Today, I critique Hezbollah. Why? Because Hezbollah has weapons outside the power of the state. And

Hezbollah governs its territories and the state does not. Can the state go into Hezbollah lands? No. Today there is a fear that the same would happen in Christian lands. That they would have control in their areas. And that *all* areas would start having borders. We would need a visa (*ta`shira*) to go into Ashrafieh or into another area. Can we say that [the Soldiers] are making a Christian state? A Crusader state?... Today there is a fear... that they would have control in their areas. And that all areas would start having borders. Can we say that [the Soldiers] are making a Christian state? A Crusader state? Either we all commit to the [Lebanese] state, or just tell us, there is no state, and we [Sunnis] can take care of ourselves. If we're going toward dividing up, we [Sunnis] also want to divide! [Even if] there will be demographic changes, there will be *tahjir* (ethnic cleansing) because our neighborhoods are mixed.<sup>300</sup>

Comparing the local securitization of Christian areas to Hezbollah's state-within-a-state, Mur'eb prophesied the (continued) fragmentation of national territory. Indeed, and at the time, the Sassine Clash—which had broken out between Sunni and Christian street factions—had provoked territorial discourse across the board and generated inter-sectarian antagonism between Sunni and Christian areas specifically.

But six months later, in May of 2023, the advent of Global Pride Month, the mobilization of some of the new independent MPs around the removal of Lebanon's anti-sodomy statute, and several controversies over the censorship of pro-queer films created the conditions for inter-sectarian coordination and homophobic alliances in Lebanon's Parliament (see chapter 3). Inter-sectarian solidarity around homophobia was also reflected in the discourse and activity of Sunni and Christian street factions. Even Hassan Mur'eb—the Sunni cleric from above—changed his discourse, no longer viewing the Soldiers of God as a threat, but as an ally. Speaking in the aftermath of the August 2023 Madam Oum attacks, Mur'eb expressed his area's total solidarity with the Soldiers and their mission:

---

<sup>300</sup>Spot Shot Video. (2022, December 19). *Rajul din sunni yuhaded "junood al rab" w yudiq naqush al-khatar: Na7nu 'ala musharf harb ahliyah*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSTPtpA6Sy0>

A congratulations (*tahiya*) from the heart to the Soldiers of God for what they did in prohibiting a party for sexual deviancy (*shuzooz*). I've said this before and I will repeat it. I am by the side of any who works against this deviancy and immorality (*fujur*) and the violation of nature (*fitra*). I put my hand in their hand, for the defense of our family and our society in the face of this decaying and destructive force.<sup>301</sup>

A week later, a video appeared on the Soldiers' website that shows Hassan Mur'eb framed by crowds of young men from Sunni-majority Tarik Jdeideh.<sup>302</sup> All were expressing their solidarity with the Soldiers of God. In this instance, homophobia provided a site for inter-sectarian solidarity and an avenue for indirect collaboration between two previously brawling areas. And given the recent history of Sunni-Christian street violence, the cleric's discourse also shows how shared commitments to public heteronormativity work to smooth over inter-group antagonism.

By the summer of 2023, the territorial strategy of the Soldiers of God became a model for homophobic vigilantes and sectarian factions across Lebanon. On the eve of the 2023 Pride Month, for instance, anti-gay patrol squads emerged in the capital's sectarian areas. Comprised of local area youth, they dub themselves the "Soldiers of Eggs" (*Junood al Bayd*).<sup>303</sup> Operating across Beirut, these gangs monitor the streets for queer-appearing subjects and hurl eggs at them from their passing motorbikes. In his account, Samer relates the rise of these gangs to the escalating territorial action of ordinary men:

[The Soldiers of Eggs] could be a group of people, straight people, homophobes. They sit in the café together. They smoke hookah and play cards. Because there's been an encouragement to play the role of the police against queers. They ride on their motorbikes and they circulate in their areas like a gang. They see a trans or queer individual, they hit them with eggs. You could be walking in the street and suddenly get an

---

<sup>301</sup> `Arabi 21. (2023, August 24). *Jadal fi lubnan ba'id hujoom junood al-Rab al-masihyah 'ala malha yurawej lil-mithliya (shuthuth)*.". <https://arabi21.com/story/1533130>

<sup>302</sup> Junood al-Rab. (2023, August 27). *La lil-shuzooz al-jinsi fi Beirut, mawqef hazem lil-sheikh al-doktor hasan mur'eb*. See "Figure 2.6: Report on Sunni Sheikh's Homophobic Stance" in "Appendix 2."

<sup>303</sup> Dada, S. (2024, January 24). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

egg thrown at you. Three maybe four eggs. And you have to go back home and shower.<sup>304</sup>

On Samer's account, egg-throwing forces queers to return to their homes. Like practices of raiding and checkpointing, egg-throwing functions to aesthetically govern and securitize space. It works to censor queers, clear them from the public, and enclose them in their homes. By attacking from their motorbikes, the Soldiers of Eggs avoid face-to-face confrontation. They also avoid their own potential arrest. This makes this form of anti-gay action both attractive and dangerous. Hopping on their motorbikes, these Soldiers zoom around the city and practice their anti-gay hooliganism with near-total impunity.

As a form of ordinary territorial action, the Soldiers of Eggs represent the democratization or massification of homophobic violence. Anyone with a motorbike could partake. In fact, these squads are not exclusive to any area. They operate throughout Beirut. And they adhere to the boundaries of their sectarian neighborhoods. In keeping them within their own boundaries, queer publicity provides in-group motorbike riders with an area-specific object of antagonistic effervescence and impunity. Indeed, homophobia frames queer sexuality as a mutual threat to all sects and areas. In doing so, it moves masculine aggression away from inter-group boundaries (the "interface") and toward the policing of in-group territories. Seen as such, the area-specific raiding of queer bodies mobilizes men while also governing their violence and circumscribing it within in-group territories.

The territorial and anti-gay practices of the Soldiers of God also inspired the "Soldiers of Fayha" in Tripoli.<sup>305</sup> Similar to their Christian counterparts, the Sunni Soldiers emerged out of conditions of post-revolutionary street violence, fiscal collapse, and electoral transition. In an interview with the group's leader, Abdel Aziz al-Tartousi, he explains how the rising publicity of

---

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Lebanon's second largest and Sunni-majoritarian city.

queer sexuality symptomizes the intersections of moral, fiscal and political collapse.<sup>306</sup> Working with his neighborhood contacts, Tartousi founded the “Soldiers of Fayha” in order to battle the “corruption, chaos, and *takhrīb*” (subversions) of deviancy and its parliamentary supporters. In function, the group operates like a public morality police: they patrol neighborhoods, apprehend queer bodies, and force them to return home. In the late summer of 2023, the group also raided queer-friendly cafes in the city, as well as the Marsa sexual health clinic.<sup>307</sup> Like their Christian equivalent, the homophobia of the Tripolitan squad works to enclose queers. It inhibits their expression, clears them from public view and restricts their access to sexual health. Seen in this light, the Soldiers of God and the Soldiers of Fayha indirectly collaborated to secure their areas against a mutual enemy.

Especially after the 2019 Lebanon Revolution, homophobic mobilization reveals how territory and sexuality have served as an intersecting site for the popular remaking of sectarianism across the country. But homophobia has worked not only to differentiate sects; in some instances, it has explicitly allied out-group street factions around a hyper-masculine assertion of public heterosexual normativity. Evidence of sectarian street alliances appeared in September of 2023, when squads of men raided a pro-queer demonstration in downtown Beirut. Following the Madam Oum attacks, factions from Lebanese civil society organized *Muthaheret*

---

<sup>306</sup> While Tartousi critiques the political and militant expansionism of Hezbollah, he accuses the Sunni Prime Minister Najib Miqati of forsaking Tripoli and accelerating its deterioration. Even before 2019, Tripoli’s history of economic and social marginalization within the country has made the city the most dire victim of economic collapse. Post-collapse, most of the city’s populations live below the poverty line, state infrastructures have nearly disappeared, and inner-city violence has intensified. The appearance of deviancy, Tartousi explains, relates directly these conditions: the corruption of politicians and the breakdown of the state has provided homosexuality with a nourishing ecology. Against critics that figure them as a symptom of state breakdown, the group claims to be operating *in lieu* of the state: “If Dar al-Fatwa or the ISF was doing its work, we would not need to be here” Tartousi indignantly exclaims. [Dahhabi, J. (2023, September 2). *Junood al-Fayha` : Fuqa`a did al-Mithliya w saraya al muqawama w miqati*. Al-Modn. Beirut, Lebanon.]

<sup>307</sup> Marsa offers affordable STI testing, contraceptives and other services.



*al Hurriyat*—a march in support of free expression.<sup>308</sup> These organizations notified the state’s Internal Security Forces, who were present in the vicinity. Soon after the commencement of the march, the state’s army trucks blocked both sides of Amir Bachir Street and effectively trapped the demonstrators.<sup>309</sup> Ambushing the demonstrators were Shi’i and Sunni youth from Khanda` (Shi’i) and Tarik Jdeideh (Sunni), areas adjacent to downtown. Present at the demonstration, Samer recounts the violence: “After they were trapped, the thugs (*zi’ran*) came down and started hitting the protestors... they hit anyone who they suspected was part of the LGBT community. My colleague went to the hospital for one week, bones in his face were broken, ribs broken. He’s traumatized till now.”<sup>310</sup>

While state forces watched on, the Shi’i and Sunni thugs worked together and attacked queer and women protestors. According to Samer, they even beat a hijabi woman: “She works in a rights organization and they attacked her, trying to take off her hijab, telling her that she’s a ‘shame (*ar*) on Islam,’ and yelling, ‘Take your hijab off! You’re talking about civil marriage and the protection of the sodomites (*liwat*)!”<sup>311</sup> Here, anti-gay violence worked to not only disappear queers, but to re-territorialize covered Muslim women who are figured to be out-of-place in their support for homosexuality.

Importantly, the Soldiers of God were not present at the march. Given that downtown was on the west side of the Green Line, they refrained from crossing territorial boundaries. “The *manati`iyeh* (sectarian logics of territory) come out here,” Samer elucidates. “Downtown is counted as the West (Muslim) side, so [the Soldiers] won’t go down there.”<sup>312</sup> Amidst the violent

---

<sup>308</sup> Annahar. (2023, September 30). “*Istibahat al-hurriyat wasat beirut w i`tida` `ala al-nashiteen tahit a`youn al-amm.*” Annahar News. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>309</sup> Orient News. (2023, October 1). *Sidam bein masirat al mithliyeen w ukhra munahada laha wasat beirut.* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWao14qzAHM>

<sup>310</sup> Dada, S. (2024, January 24). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

effervescence of Shi'i and Sunni street squads, the presence of the Soldiers of God may have very well produced an inter-sectarian street clash. That they abstained from crossing into West Beirut shows how anti-gay raiding does not only regulate the movement of queers. It also bears on the movement of out-group men across sectarian boundaries. Keeping the Christian Soldiers in their areas, the Free Expression march allied Sunni and Shi'i squads in mutual violence.

These scenes illustrate how anti-gay collective action engenders modes of indirect masculinist coordination. Homophobia also reveals a new role for the state. Like their response to the Madam Oum Attacks, state security personnel took a backseat to the action. Instead, they worked to draw the parameters of confrontational violence and contain it lest it get out of hand. The anti-gay violence at the Free Expression March also demonstrates how homophobic action re-inscribes some territorial boundaries while also enabling points of commonality across conventional sectarian divisions. These forms of anti-gay coordination, however, do not exactly unify opposing factions. On the contrary, homophobic violence has allowed opponents to fight the same war from their separate areas and apart from each other.

#### Part IV: Conclusion

That summer, the homophobic delirium of the Soldiers had chilling effects on queer politics. Despite its appeals to queer communities, Helem—a local queer advocacy group—failed to convince a single victim to take formal action against the Soldiers or the ISF.<sup>313</sup> Samer from Helem explains: “Our work regressed. [The Soldiers] cut our cooperation between us and the [queer] community. The community felt that [documentation] would make them vulnerable. They thought that if [they] press charges, the state and the Soldiers will know where they live. They’ll come to their homes.” Given the collaboration between the ISF and the Soldiers, this outcome would not be too far from reality. Samer also described how, on Twitter, a few

---

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

prominent drag queens even blamed Helem for putting queer sexuality on the public radar. Still others expressed nostalgia for a time when queer life was clandestine.

Not producing solidarity, the Soldiers' territorial practices fractured relations between queer political actors and communities. Like their checkpoints, the Soldiers' raid of Madam Oum also produced self-enclosing effects: it limited queer gatherings to private spaces and it minimized the public expression of queer sexuality in East Beirut. Lamenting the situation, Samer explains how these raids could have become flashpoints for queer resistance. Like Stonewall in 1969. But according to Samer, "[raids in Lebanon] don't have collectivizing effects." Rather, they atomize queers. "People don't want to confront," Samer explains, "they got scared. They don't think properly. They think emotionally. When you see the majority doing this, you think, what am I going to be alone [in resisting]?" Seeing a majority capitulate to the homophobic status quo, according to Samer, works like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rather than mobilize a queer struggle, homophobia has instead induced queer paralysis.

More generally, violence at the Free Expression March put queer and secular communities in a state of pessimism. It materialized the obstacle that anti-sectarian demonstrators had confronted in the 2019 Lebanon Revolution – namely, the violence of ordinary men. In the wake of the Revolution, the outbreak of sectarian street clashes had made the prospect of anti-sectarian transformation all but impossible. In 2022, the victory of anti-sectarian MPs brought new hope. With that hope, however, came homophobic resistance. At first, the Soldiers of God – their territoriality and their sectarianism – had induced prophecies of civil war. By 2023, however, those who had opposed the Soldiers of God were now commending them. Indeed, groups all over Lebanon have adopted the Soldiers' territorial practices. And by late 2023, homophobic violence no longer posed the threat it did to Lebanon's Civil Peace.

Instead, homophobia has organized male violence and re-inscribed the territorial boundaries of sectarian groups. No longer fighting each other, sectarian factions could now ally against a mutual and queer enemy.

### **Chapter 3: Redefining Nature: Homophobia, Heterosexuality, and the Legal Ground of Sectarian Pluralism**

In June of 2022, advertisements for Beirut Gay Pride and IDAHOT<sup>314</sup> began circulating. Happening just one month after the historic electoral wins of anti-sectarian MPs, both events held the promise of renewed queer publicity and activism in Lebanon. Just a week before festivities were set to begin, a group of Tripolitan lawyers and sheikhs came across an online Pride schedule. Immediately, they alerted state and religious authorities to what they figured as the “promotion of sexual deviancy” (*tarweej al-shuzooz al-jinsi*). That same week, an organized group of thugs known as “The Soldiers of God,” attacked a rainbow-themed Pride advertisement, and militantly warned against queer publicity in Beirut’s Christian areas.<sup>315</sup> In response to this anti-gay backlash, Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi issued the following security directive:

In regard to this topic, and after the spread of invitations on social media and Internet websites for the holding of celebrations and parties for the promotion of deviant sexuality in Lebanon; and after the Ministry received calls from religious sources/authorities (maraje’) refusing the spread of this phenomenon (thahira); and in view of what negative effects this appearance has on society and the individual; and that it is not possible to invoke personal freedoms to express these activities, and the abuse of these liberties, insofar as this topic is in violation (mukhalef) of the customs and traditions (‘adat w taqalid) of our society and contradicts the principles of the heavenly religions (adyan al-samawiya); As such, it is commanded that the [General Security forces] take the necessary measures to refuse the holding of these celebrations, meetings, or gatherings aimed at the promotion of this phenomenon...”<sup>316</sup>

Not casting the threat in nationalist terms, the Interior Minister depicted homosexuality as opposed to the “cultures,” “traditions” and “heavenly religions” of Lebanon. Admittedly acting at the behest of the country’s religious authorities, Mawlawi’s memo activated Lebanon’s

---

<sup>314</sup> International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT).

<sup>315</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>316</sup> See “Figure 3.1: Mawlawi’s Memo,” in “Appendix 3: Redefining Nature.”

religious courts and triggered a cascade of anti-gay clerical positions against the “legalization of homosexuality” (or “*tashri’ al-shuzooz*”), as well as the passage of a civil marriage bill.

Surprisingly, and though religious actors figured homosexual decriminalization and secular civil marriage as shared threats to “all sects,” shared opposition to homosexuality and civil marriage did not unify Lebanon’s religious authorities or its factions, as we might expect. Instead, and during the 2022 Pride Month, anti-gay incitement worked upon political contests and divisions within and across sects, producing variegated trajectories of homophobic and sectarian activation. Homophobic incitement also triggered counter and pro-queer political mobilization and advocacy efforts.

Considering these observations, I ask the following questions: What are the legal, political, and material conditions through which the queer threat is articulated and through which homophobia is produced in Lebanon? What specific threat does the decriminalization of homosexuality—or the legalization (*tashri’*) of homosexuality—pose to Lebanon’s pluralist legal order? How does homophobic discourse respond to this threat? (In other words, what are the political uses and effects of homophobic and religious discourse(s)?) Finally, and in the wake of historic electoral transformation, how does homophobic mobilization around the law contribute to the reproduction of political sectarianism?

### Argument

In the following chapter, I track how the queer threat to sectarian law(s) is politicized in conditions of revolution, economic collapse, and partial electoral transition. I also show how the threat of homosexual decriminalization relates to the central role of heterosexual marriage in Lebanon’s legal structure. Through their governance of heterosexual marriage, sects share power with each other, but also with the state, whose security apparatuses police heterosexual

absolutism and ensure that it is reflected in the public order. The removal of Article 534— Lebanon’s anti-homosexuality law— would thus remove the only constitutional safeguard for public heterosexuality; its removal would also open the religious courts to reform that may perhaps end in the eradication of their monopoly on (straight) marriage. This is precisely why the decriminalization of homosexuality and the passage of a civil marriage act are twin threats to Lebanon’s legal order: they both threaten to re-define naturalized relations of gender and sexual hierarchy and subordination; to divest (hetero)sexuality of its public and political significance; and, in doing so, to unmake the common legal and naturalized ground on which sectarian pluralism stands.

Responding to this threat, the heterogenous discourses of religious authorities invoke heterosexuality as the common, inter-sectarian, and extra-political ground of Lebanese society and state. Not producing unity between factions, this discursive incitement re-instantiated sectarian differences and gave rise to different political outcomes across sects and within them: it consolidated religious authority in the Sunni sect; it contained religious authority in the Shi’i sect; and it divided clerical authorities in the Christian sect. While homophobia worked differently, I argue that those differences mattered in generating a homophobic commonsense that explicitly articulated the sectarian settlement as a heterosexual one. And though homophobic mobilization spawned a counter, pro-queer resistance, that resistance worked to factionalize the newly elected and anti-sectarian MPs and to figure Lebanon’s Judiciary as partial to “deviant” interests. By the summer of 2023, resistance to homosexual decriminalization became more organized, generating alliances across sectarian institutional divides. Ultimately, mobilization around homosexual decriminalization had counter-revolutionary outcomes: it pushed against the gender and sexual reform of Lebanon’s legal system, it figured the religious courts as an

institutional safeguard for public heterosexuality, and it reproduced the legal sexual ground of religious pluralism in Lebanon.

### Part I: The Heterosexual Foundation of Sectarian Pluralism

In order to understand how the decriminalization of homosexuality threatens sectarian pluralism in Lebanon, we must understand two things: 1) the position of heterosexuality in the legal architecture of the sectarian state; and 2) the conditions of revolution, collapse, and (partial) transition that make the threat of pro-queer legal reform a credible reality.

In its legal, social, and political foundation, sectarianism establishes itself on a universal conception of heterosexuality that all sectarian communities share. Elaborating feminist analyses of Lebanese sectarianism,<sup>317</sup> I contend that the marital man-woman relation serves as the elementary metric through which the state gives equal form to Lebanon's different religious communities. More precisely, the state provides an architecture in which the country's 15 officially recognized sects appear structurally the same. That sameness is secured by the consensus on sexual nature—man, woman and nothing but the hierarchical relation between them—that all groups hold to be extra-political, universally valid and absolutely mandated. By instituting 15 religious courts, Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution also institutes 15 ways to marry, to divorce, to be born, to die, and to inherit—in other words, 15 different ways to govern what amounts to the same thing: heterosexuality.<sup>318</sup> Indeed, the capacity to be born or to die, to inherit or to divorce all depends upon the products of heterosexual marriage and reproduction:

---

<sup>317</sup> In *Sextarianism*, Maya Mikdashi argues for how the Lebanese state produces its sovereignty through the (purportedly) equal and impartial management of Lebanese religious difference. Through this management, the state, Mikdashi goes on, produces both sectarian *and* gendered difference, making it at once a sectarian and gendered order. While I lean heavily upon Mikdashi's account, I place my emphasis on how sectarianism is a heterosexual order in addition to its being a gendered order. [Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism and the State in Lebanon*. Stanford University Press]. My analysis of heterosexual marriage also compliments Lara Deeb's analysis in her recent book, where she tracks the oftentimes subversive strategies Lebanese citizens employ to marry across sects and how mixed sect marriages divest sectarian identification of its salience. [Deeb, L. (2024). *Love across difference: Mixed marriage in Lebanon*. Stanford University Press.]

<sup>318</sup> Here, I elaborate Mikdashi's analysis of how sectarianism produces fifteen different kinds of female and male citizens to show how the legal system also produces fifteen different kinds of heterosexualities.



children, families, inter-generational capital accumulation, etc. Even the capacity to be properly buried in Lebanon depends on one's being born to a Lebanese father and a family within a religious community.<sup>319</sup> Given the commonality of heterosexual marriage across forms of religious difference, sectarianism takes the marital man-woman relation as its object of governance and makes it the absolute metric through which to produce the legal sameness of different religious doctrines and communities. And given the heterogeneity of religious doctrines, beliefs, and practices, the marital man-woman relation provides the common ground upon which to found the legal architecture of the sectarian pluralist state.

Politically, heterosexuality serves not as an “empty signifier”<sup>320</sup> but as the only shared belief—the only natural fact—across forms of religious and factional difference that are incompatible in the truths that they hold. As such, the inter-sectarian validity of heterosexuality allows the Lebanese state to organize and secure the possibility of political relations between adversarial groups. That is because the fact of an inter-sectarian heterosexuality—of man, woman and the hierarchical marital relation between them—allows adversaries to conceive of each other's existence as just and war between them as valid.<sup>321</sup> In fact, the presence of a fact beyond political dispute between factions limits the possibility that sectarian adversaries could regard each other as totally abject and threatening. Seen as such, the heterosexual contract that precedes the sectarian settlement works to make sectarian factions recognizable and tolerable to

---

<sup>319</sup> Rawi Hage's novel *Beirut Hellfire Society* tackles this exact problem-space by telling a story about a coroner who buries those anti-religious, gender and sexual dissidents who are rejected from the traditional sectarian cemeteries in Beirut. [Rawi Hage. (2020). *Beirut Hellfire Society*. W.W. Norton & Company].

<sup>320</sup> Here, I am referring to how literatures on “anti-Gender” mobilization in East Europe figure “gender” as an empty signifier that unites factions. My claim is that heterosexuality is not empty but extremely *full*: it signifies the very *ground* that all these groups have taken for granted and want to keep taking for granted. Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2021). *Anti-Gender politics in the populist moment*. Routledge.

<sup>321</sup> In this way, the existence of a shared sexuality between them allows sectarian adversaries to be what Carl Schmitt in *Nomos of the Earth* terms “just enemies:” In doing so, it limits the possibility of what he calls “total civil war” between different groups. [Schmitt, C., & Ulmen, G. L. (2006). *The Nomos of the earth in the international law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*. Telos Press.]

each other (rather than necessarily eliminable infidel-enemies). In this way, inter-sectarian heterosexuality provides a common and a-factional ground, thereby underwriting the possibility of inter-sectarian politics and multi-religious tolerance in Lebanon.

### Feminist Threats to the Heterosexual Legal Order

In the two decades leading up to the Lebanon Revolution, feminist political movements have contested the state and its legal sexual grounds by mobilizing against the religious court system's monopoly on heterosexual marriage. As Maya Mikdashi details in *Sextarianism*, some activists proposed the addition of a secular personal status court to the 15 personal statuses already on the books.<sup>322</sup> By effectively creating a “secular sect,” Mikdashi explains, a secular personal status would have allowed secularized Lebanese to marry outside the religious court system. Nevertheless, adding a 16<sup>th</sup> “personal status” would also reinforce the sectarian system. More radically, Mikdashi writes of feminists who pushed for a “unified” civil marriage law.<sup>323</sup> The latter would deprive religious marriage of its public significance and compel all Lebanese to marry in the same way, at least before the eyes of the state. In other words, a unified civil marriage bill would eradicate sectarian distinctions between marriages and would remove the need for the religious court system altogether.

Not seeking the wholesale abolition of the religious court system, some feminist movements have specifically mobilized around the reform of the Sunni and Shi'i religious courts. This was the case with the “National Campaign for the Removal of the Age of Custody,” or “*al-Hamla al-Watanniya li-Rafi' Sin al-Hadaneh*,” which had been gaining momentum in the years leading up to the 2019 Revolution. During my fieldwork, I interviewed Suha, the Shi'i born and secular-identified woman who is an active part of the movement. Married in the Shi'i Ja'fari

---

<sup>322</sup> Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism*. 129.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

courts, Suha could not demand divorce from her abusive husband without losing the custody of her two children.<sup>324</sup> Upon her decision to separate, Suha's children were legally abducted by her husband and his family. Which was why Suha turned to politics:

The campaign began in 2013, we had a base, and we stood for the first time in front of the Shi'i Council (*Majlis al Islami al-Shi'i*) and we [made demands] to remove the age of custody in the Shi'i sect. We are not demanding civil marriage... because there are women who are being oppressed and who are being meted injustice alongside their kids [based] on this religious understanding.<sup>325</sup>

It was the religious understanding of paternal dominion over children—and the effect of holding women hostage in marriages lest they lose their kids—that Suha was taking issue with, and not religious marriage tout-court. In a show of political ingenuity, Suha invoked Shi'i universals—like the battle against “injustice” (*zulim*)—and pressed her case with the Ja'fari Courts, while implicitly threatening to publicize the case to international human rights audiences.<sup>326</sup> This and other maneuvers allowed her to achieve shared custody with her ex-husband, a feat only achieved one other time in the history of the Ja'fari Courts.<sup>327</sup>

Importantly, Suha did not want to antagonize the religious courts. “The orientation,” she tells me, “is not [to go] against the religious institutions, but to reform them. We are demanding a change in the laws... because the door for interpretation is open and this reform can realistically happen.” And while Suha concedes that she herself would want to get married in a civil court, if it were a possibility, she also concedes that:

---

<sup>324</sup> That is because Ja'fari law, like Sunni law, grants the father custody of male children ages 2 and higher and female children 7 and higher.

<sup>325</sup> Suha. (2020, November 28). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

[there are] women who are religiously committed (*miltizmeen*) and who want to get married in the [Ja'afari courts]. And they have the religious freedom of belief (*haq al mu'taqad*). But that doesn't mean that you pay the price for your freedom of belief with your children.<sup>328</sup>

Seen as such, the movement to “Remove the Age of Custody” is one that threatened to reform the religious courts by threatening 1) the dominion husbands exercise over their children and 2) the entrapment of women who want to divorce but risk being dispossessed of their kids. By threatening the “natural” rights that men exercise over women and children, reform thus threatens the reproduction of the patrilineal sectarian family and the naturalized relations of subordination and dominion that underwrite it.

From this vantage point, the threat of reforming the religious courts is similar to the threat of civil marriage insofar as both endanger the perpetuation of sectarian kinship and the religious authorities that safeguard it. However, and though radical in its aims, the feminist reform of marriage would not necessarily alter the naturalized “fact” of heterosexuality—that is, of man and woman—but reform it, such that the two genders could be more equally related in marriage. But this is precisely where the queer threat to the religious court system diverges from the feminist one: not directly abolishing the religious courts, the legal decriminalization of homosexuality and the social normalization of gender and sexual pluralism threaten to transform the naturalized and absolutist status of the man-woman relation in Lebanese law and society.

## Part II: The Threat of Homosexual Decriminalization

Though heterosexuality mostly functions as a “goes without saying” consensus in Lebanese society, its status as a universal, absolute, and “natural” in sectarianism is secured by the state’s formal prohibition on homosexuality. By criminalizing “all intercourse against the order of nature,” Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code silently signifies heterosexuality as

---

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

“nature” and renders non-heterosexual sexual acts as violations of nature’s boundaries.<sup>329</sup>

Remarkably, Article 534 is the only law in both the Lebanese Constitution and the Penal Code that makes mention of an “order of nature.” And given its place in the Penal Code, the deployment of the Article falls under the jurisdiction of the state’s Interior Ministry, rendering homosexuality—and heterosexual “nature”—a matter of public order and security. Seen through this lens, Article 534 does not only police homosexuality; it also implicitly names heterosexuality as “nature” and upholds its significance as the legal and societal ground of inter-sectarian order and equality.

Here, we also see the relationship between Article 9 and Article 534. In the Constitution, Article 9 gives each religious community political recognition and jurisdiction over “family law”; this allows sectarian courts to govern heterosexuality by monopolistically governing marriage. And in the Penal Code, Article 534 grants state security a mandate to uphold the inviolable and absolute status of heterosexuality in the public order. In effect, both Articles allow for different parts of the state—religious courts and state security bureaus—to share power through their co-governance of heterosexuality.

The problem, as we shall see, is that the vagueness of Article 534 renders the heterosexual definition of “nature” vulnerable to redefinition. While Article 534 formally names a natural ground to sectarianism, it does not explicitly name “nature” as heterosexual. Neither does it explicitly name homosexuality or sodomy as violations. Rather, the heterosexuality of “nature” went without saying for the French-Mandate era architects of the Lebanese state, and with it, the need for precision. The built-in vagueness of Article 534 has had two paradoxical effects: on the one hand, it has allowed the state flexibility to police homosexuality with license

---

<sup>329</sup> In Arabic, the Article states: “kil mujama’a ‘ala khilaf al-tabi’a yu’aqab ‘aleya bil-habs hata sanah wahida”—“all intercourse against nature will be punished by up to one year in prison.” *Lebanese penal code*. (1943). [https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/lebanon-penal-code\\_html/Lebanon\\_Penal\\_Code\\_1943.pdf](https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/lebanon-penal-code_html/Lebanon_Penal_Code_1943.pdf)

and in a haphazard fashion. On the other hand, it has allowed pro-queer legal advocates to contest the heterosexual definition of “nature” in Article 534 and to garner court rulings that have reformulated “nature” as inclusive of gender and sexual pluralism (see later). In this way, pro-queer actors did not work to eradicate Article 534 but to redefine its terms, effectively neutralizing the state’s capacity to criminalize private gay sex.

But the redefinition of Article 534’s “order of nature” is not inconsequential for the sectarian courts: in divesting nature of its hetero-only meaning, pro-queer advocates also threatened the legal significance of sectarian pluralism’s founding metric. Indeed, and as I have explained, the status of heterosexuality as a “natural,” universal, and absolute fact in sectarianism grants sects equal legal form and underwrites the capacity of sectarian religious authorities and elites to share power. That is because power-sharing depends upon the existence of an extra-political, absolute, and beyond-dispute fact that all factions could agree upon. By rendering “nature” inclusive, pro-queer actors threatened the public, absolutist and inter-sectarian value of heterosexuality and the “natural” ground of sectarian power sharing. In doing so, pro-queer legal reform also targeted the religious courts, whose authorities depend upon heterosexuality’s public significance in sectarian law and society.

#### “Like a Trojan Horse”: the Covert Decriminalization of Homosexuality

In June of 2022, inter-sectarian and anti-gay mobilization responded to circulating Pride Month advertisements *and* to circulating rumors about the decriminalization of homosexuality in the wake of anti-sectarian electoral victories. A month before the landmark Parliamentary elections of May 2022, Ibrahim Mneimeh—an independent candidate running for a Sunni seat in Beirut’s Second District—appeared on primetime television, where he announced his support for

the abolition of Article 534.<sup>330</sup> Almost immediately, Sunni rivals accused Mneimeh of his being a homosexual in order to discredit him. Despite these accusations, Mneimeh and 12 other independent candidates were successfully elected to office on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Constituting one/tenth of the Lebanese Parliament, the 13 “Changers” figured an anti-sectarian opposition whose election effectively symbolized a historic—albeit partial—political transition. Shortly after the elections, it was rumored that Mneimeh and Halima Qa’quor—another independently elected Sunni MP from Beirut’s Second District—were working to draft a law that would remove Article 534 from the Penal Code.<sup>331</sup> According to this rumor, news of the covertly circulating draft-law reached the Sunni Grand Mufti’s<sup>332</sup> ears and alerted him to the sexual challenges being mounted by MPs from within his own sect. It is in this context that Mufti Abdallatif Derian and Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi articulated homosexual decriminalization as a political problem and a threat to Lebanese religious pluralism.

However, and while the “legalization of deviancy”—or “*tashri’ al-shuzooz*”—was politicized in 2022, the process of homosexual decriminalization had been initiated nearly two decades before. In an interview with Nizar Saghieh—the lawyer at the head of the campaign against Article 534 in Lebanon—he explains:

We haven’t begun working on LGBT issues yesterday. From 2002, we had done something called *Hurriyat Khassa* (Private Rights) and the idea [was that] we were really tying [sexual rights] to sectarianism.

Because in sectarianism, there is one official model for both private and public life. In the private life, you have to have a man and a woman and they marry in the same sect and they live based on religious laws.

That’s what we name the “official model of private life”—that the lifestyle must be for everyone.<sup>333</sup>

---

<sup>330</sup> Zeidan, T. (2023, June 14). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> The Grand Mufti is a public office in Lebanon and the symbolic leader of the Sunni religious courts or “Dar al-Fatwa.”

<sup>333</sup> Saghieh, N. (2022, December 16). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

Indeed, and in 2002, queer legal advocates and activists first posed the question of homosexual decriminalization in the Lebanese Penal Code by proposing a model of private life that is different to the one sectarianism advances—that is, man, woman, and intra-sectarian religious marriage. According to Nizar, this “official model of private life” in sectarianism is precisely the “order of nature” that Article 534 upholds.<sup>334</sup> By challenging this official model of nature, Nizar and his colleagues in *Hurriyat Khassa* aimed to provide a livable alternative to those citizens who do not want to live by sectarianism’s heterosexual and religious mandates:

Anyone who wants to come out of the [sectarian model of private life] loses something. Like, if you want to do a civil marriage, you will lose something. Or [if you want to do] a marriage to a person from another sect, you cannot inherit. Or if someone practices homosexuality, they can be subject to blackmail. All of this is present... if you don’t respect the authority of the model that’s placed on you, you’re out, just like what happens when you want a civil service job, you need to be part of the model, associated with a sect, otherwise you will not be in. So you have these [sectarian] models that are imposed, and they are becoming the condition for the enjoyment of rights, so if you want to get out of this model, there are possibilities, but there are also costs: it could be punishment and jail or being deprived of inheritance.<sup>335</sup>

Here, Nizar compares sectarianism’s official “model of private life” and to the sectarian apportionment of representation in state bureaucracies. One must adhere to the sectarian system—that is, to be a member of a sectarian group—in order to enjoy the benefits of either formal marriage or a job in the public sector. And though one can build a life outside the official models of sectarianism, that involves costs. For instance, not practicing the heterosexuality that sectarianism mandates could lead to blackmail or jail-time. And not marrying in Lebanon’s court system could deprive one of their family inheritances. As Saghieh explains, adherence to sectarianism’s model of (hetero)sexuality becomes a condition for the enjoyment of other rights.

---

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.



Importantly, *Hurriyat Khassa* did not propose the eradication of the sectarian system; rather, it aimed to disentangle sectarianism’s imbrication of the private and public sphere(s) and to create a legal space in which non-sectarian and non-heterosexual citizens have the right to practice their sexualities without legal and social costs. As Saghieh explains, the starting point of the *Hurriyat* project is that “as a citizen, you should have some kind of autonomy in choosing your way of life.”<sup>336</sup> Which was why, in 2002, Nizar organized a group of lawyers and activists in a project that aimed to deconstruct “how the public and private are tied together” in the Lebanese Penal Code, as well as how the state comes to “impose restrictions on private life in order to garner popularity” and “govern the public sphere.”<sup>337</sup> In that vein, lawyer, activists, and researchers wrote and published articles that opened a judicial debate on the topic of sexual privacy, sectarianism and the Penal Code. This culminated in a two-day conference that was publicly attended.

According to Saghieh, *Hurriyat’s* approach to the general reform of the Penal Code allowed the lawyers to articulate a question—homosexual marginalization—that had never before been publicly discussed:

We didn’t know how we were going to open the discussion [around homosexuality] so our provocation/challenge (tahhadi) was to open the conversation... without being labeled as an outcast, that we [the queer advocates] are disgusting, that we are defending disgusting people.<sup>338</sup>

Indeed, the abjectness of homosexuality in Lebanese society risked discrediting the lawyers before their work even began. This is why the more general focus on publicity, privacy, and the reform of the Penal Code—as well as the judicial audiences that they addressed— enabled

---

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

Saghieh and his comrades to package the topic of homosexual oppression as a more general battle against multiple forms of marginalization:

We used [the Penal Code] and placed homosexuality under its umbrella [in order] to penetrate (*khari*) the social taboo. The reform of the Penal Code became a kind of Trojan horse, like people have this idea of marginalization in their heads, and they are against it. So you group homosexual marginalization with other, accepted (not taboo) forms of marginalization such that it can open and penetrate public debate.<sup>339</sup>

By figuring homosexual criminalization as one kind of marginalization among others, like the abuse of domestic workers in Lebanon, the oppression of women in the religious courts, and the rights of migrants and noncitizens, Saghieh and his colleagues were able to covertly breach the boundaries of heterosexual acceptability and to sow the seeds for homosexual decriminalization, at least among progressive Lebanese judges. Seen in that light, Saghieh's strategy depended upon depriving homosexuality of its specificity and coding it as a part of a more general matter of public concern (marginalization).

Though *Hurriyat* had succeeded in publicly posing the question of homosexual marginalization, some in the campaign decided that a more direct approach to homosexual decriminalization was necessary. In 2005, and around the time of the Cedar Revolution, some of the activists in *Hurriyat* founded Helem—the first queer advocacy group in the Middle East. They produced a book on the Penal Code, wrote articles against the word “deviancy” (*shuzooz*), and lobbied the syndicate of journalists, as well as the syndicate of psychiatrists, to re-define homosexuality in public debate and in medicine. But even then, activists were cautious when it came to the reform of Article 534 itself. “To eliminate Article 534 through Parliament,” Saghieh explains, “is very difficult” given that homosexual decriminalization is an unpopular cause and MPs are concerned with the support of their homophobic electorate. From Saghieh's perspective,

---

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

effectively opening the debate on homosexual decriminalization required a public platform that was nevertheless insulated from popular homophobic opinion. This is why he and others saw the Lebanese Judiciary as the perfect arena for legal change.

In 2008, Saghieh and his colleagues founded Legal Agenda—a research and advocacy group focused on judicial reform—and worked closely with Helem to produce a report on Article 534 and its invocation in past cases of homosexual criminalization.<sup>340</sup> Rather than lobby to abolish the law tout court, the lawyers at Legal Agenda instead contested the definition of “nature” in the Article’s language. “It was an opportunity,” Saghieh explains, “because Article 534 is very vague. Its vagueness allows for us to ask, ‘well what is natural?’”<sup>341</sup> Lobbying Lebanese jurists on this question, Saghieh was met with surprising curiosity:

I remember, there was a jurist who I had a four-hour conversation with—all of the jurists I spoke with were invested in the discussion, actually—so I asked this jurist, have you ever thought about what is natural and what is unnatural? And he said, well no actually. To which I replied, ‘well there is no criteria for nature, so what is your evidence [when prosecuting cases of homosexuality]?’ He said, ‘well you know, it’s been this way for all time.’ You see [speaking to me], that’s because no one had posed the question before, so everyone accepts what is taken for granted.<sup>342</sup>

By posing the question to jurists for the first time, pro-queer advocates strategically pushed against the legal and commonsense status of homosexuality as unnatural *and* heterosexuality as natural. Both understandings are so taken-for-granted that the architects of the Lebanese Penal code did not find it necessary to name neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality in the law at all. This means that the lawyers did not only take advantage of Article 534’s vague definition of nature. They also exploited the presumption that “nature” signified heterosexuality.

---

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

Over the next years, Saghieh’s strategy would open the door for judicial rulings and interpretations that re-defined the boundaries of Article 534’s “order of nature.”<sup>343</sup> In 2009, Judge Mounir Sleiman issued the first ruling that considered homosexuality to *not* be a violation (*khilaf*) against nature.<sup>344</sup> Following Sleiman’s precedent, judges in the lower courts issued similar rulings that slowly unmade the judicial consensus on nature being definitively heterosexual.<sup>345</sup> In the lead up to this ruling, Saghieh’s team had successfully lobbied the Lebanese Order of Physicians, which removed homosexuality as a mental illness in 2012. Also in 2012, the lawyers of Legal Agenda fought against the Internal Security Forces’ forced anal examinations for arrested gay men.<sup>346</sup> Culminating in a prime-time special on national television, Legal Agenda’s campaign reframed state abuse in terms of torture and the violation of human rights.<sup>347</sup> Through those terms, Legal Agenda pressured the Lebanese state to honor the international human rights covenants onto which it had signed.<sup>348</sup> Together, the judicial victories and the legal reform around homosexuality culminated in a landmark case in 2017, when judge Rabi’ Ma’louf ruled the practice of homosexuality to be a “natural right” (*haq tabi’i*) and that the exercise of a natural right cannot be punished.<sup>349</sup> Consequently, and by working toward the re-definition of sexual nature, pro-queer lawyers did not eliminate Article 534, but neutralized its capacity to formally prosecute homosexuality in Lebanon. And by opening the bounds of nature

---

<sup>343</sup> Legal Agenda. (2018, July 12). *Ba’ed 4 ahkam ibtida’iya isti’naf jabal lubnan tu’len en al-mithliya laysat jirman*. Legal Agenda.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Makhlof, Y. (2019, August 3). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

<sup>346</sup> Al-Watan. (2012). “The Tests of Shame.” <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2012/05/29/282495.html>;

BBC. (2012). “Outraged Lebanese demand end to anal exams.” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19166156>;

Sky News Arabia. (2012). “The Minister of Justice eliminates tests of shame.”

<https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/42801>

<sup>347</sup> Makhlof, Y. Ethnographic Interview. August 4, 2019.

<sup>348</sup> Wansa, S. (2014). “The Tests of Shame.” <https://www.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=788&lang=ar>

<sup>349</sup> Al-Modn. (2017, January 26). *Al-mithliya haq tabi’i*. Al-Modn. Beirut, Lebanon; Ghida Frangieh. (2019, May 27). *Beirut Court of Appeal: Sexual Orientation is Not Punishable*. Legal Agenda. <https://english.legal-agenda.com/beirut-court-of-appeal-sexual-orientation-is-not-punishable/>

to include gender and sexual minorities, these reforms attacked the legal ground of heterosexual absolutism—as well as the common ground of religious pluralism—in Lebanese society.

While the re-definition of nature in the 2017 ruling generated backlash from religious authorities and institutions, that backlash, Saghieh clarifies, was not as organized as the campaign of homophobic incitement in 2022. Neither did the homophobic reactions before 2022 have societal publicity or political backing from elites. Before 2022, Saghieh explains, religious authorities would “intervene as a reaction to pro-queer rulings, but only after the fact.”<sup>350</sup> That is because, “usually, cases around homosexuality are unknown and marginal.”<sup>351</sup> Furthermore, and because they are not publicized, reactions to pro-queer rulings would often occur in the courtrooms themselves and be largely experienced as a “conflict of generations”—that is, as a conflict between younger, trendy, and more “human rights-oriented” lawyers and older more traditional ones.<sup>352</sup> The conflict, according to Saghieh, was neither framed in terms of ‘deviance’ nor was it talked about in the official media. Indeed, this general lack of publicity around pro-queer legal reform in 2017 owed itself to Saghieh’s original intent: to contain the debate to the judicial sphere and to prevent the politicization of popular homophobic opinion.

However, the lack of public knowledge around homosexual decriminalization would be corrected in June of 2022, when religious authorities and institutions across Lebanon’s sects would mobilize and demand the state to criminalize the Pride-related publicity of queer identity. This is also when Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi published the memo whose discourse, according to Saghieh, “took us back twenty years.”<sup>353</sup> Not heeding the relatively new term for homosexuality in Arabic—*al-mithliya al-jinsiya*—Mawlawi instead uses the term “deviancy”

---

<sup>350</sup> Saghieh, N. (2022, December 16). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

(*shuzooz*) while also invoking the authority of Abrahamic religion(s) in the Lebanese state.<sup>354</sup>

Not only did Mawlawi's language ignore two decades of legal progress around homosexuality. The memo—as well as the cascade of clerical and political positions that followed it—worked to expose to the general public the hitherto under-the-radar successes of pro-queer legal reform. In this way, the general covert strategy of pro-queer legal reform had backfired: it aided the homophobic framing of a queer conspiracy whose aim is to unmake the heterosexual, inter-sectarian, and “natural” ground of Lebanese state and society (see “Part III”).

But as we have seen, the notion of a conspiracy against nature is not falsely imagined; the unmaking of nature *as* heterosexual was precisely what legal advocates aimed to do. Over two decades of political and legal organizing around the question of homosexual decriminalization had generated formal rulings that transformed nature from one taken for granted as absolutely heterosexual to one that is pluralist and inclusive. And as I have argued, the transformation of nature—that is, the reform of Article 534—is not unrelated to the political authority of the religious courts and to the instituted religious pluralism of the Lebanese state. Indeed, heterosexuality provides an extra-political and inter-sectarian legal “fact” that is held up by *all* of Lebanon's religious authorities. This is also why heterosexual marriage serves as the elementary and legal metric of the Lebanese state: organizing religious difference(s) around heterosexual marriage gives each sect an identical form and it allows different religious groups to govern the sexuality of its members in common. In that way, the capacity for religious pluralism to legally exist in Lebanon depends on the existence of a shared legal thing—an “inter-est,”<sup>355</sup> to use Hannah Arendt's formulation—that exists between religious difference(s) puts them into relations of lawful equality. By re-defining nature such that it is no longer heterosexual, pro-

---

<sup>354</sup> See “Figure 3.1: Mawlawi's Memo” in “Appendix 3: Redefining Nature.”

<sup>355</sup> See Arendt's discussion of what constitutes a “common world” in Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1958).

queer legal reform threatens the “thing” that allows different religious communities and their authorities to exist and share power within the same legal framework. At stake in the public definition of nature-as-heterosexual, then, is the loss of the public power that religious authorities exercise over citizens and the loss of the power that they share with each other and the state.

### Part III: Homophobic Discoursing on Heterosexual “Nature”

While pro-queer legal reform threatened the heterosexual definition of nature—and the common ground of inter-sectarian religious authority—in 2022, it also provided an opportunity for religious and state authorities to re-assert heterosexuality as the inter-sectarian ground of the Lebanese state. Invoking heterosexuality under different signifiers, homophobic discourse worked against two decades of pro-queer legal change and allowed religious and state elites to publicly articulate a homophobic commonsense, one that held heterosexuality to be a natural, inter-sectarian, and beyond dispute fact. In the face of secular and sexual threats, state clerics, in particular, cast themselves as the indispensable political guardians of heterosexuality in the state.

I argue that homophobic discourse(s) do three things: 1) they politicize heterosexuality as the common foundation of sectarian pluralism and renders Lebanon’s religious courts a site of anti-gay mobilization from above and from below; 2) they figure pro-queer and feminist reformers as conspirators while also casting the new and pro-reform MPs as a partisan faction that is unrepresentative of the Lebanese people and in doing so, 3) they portray the Lebanese Judiciary—the last remaining “neutral” institution in Lebanon—as partial toward queer interests and therefore unjust. In these ways, homophobia works to re-instantiate relations of sectarian difference; to generate a new need for the sectarian settlement; and to oppose the partial democratization of Lebanon’s political system.

### Homophobia for Sectarian Plurality

In casting heterosexuality as a “natural” fact and the common ground of sectarian

pluralism, homophobic discourses draw upon what historian Ussama Makdisi calls “the ecumenical frame,” or the frame of an age-old, religious, and properly Levantine pluralism.<sup>356</sup> In his book *Age of Coexistence*, Makdisi recovers late 19<sup>th</sup> century Lebanese political and social visions. Multi-sectarian accommodation and religious freedom became the starting points for imagining forms of national belonging that transcended sectarian difference. As Makdisi elucidates, the success of religious coexistence depended upon an unstated consensus—an “absolute commitment to not transgress the religious beliefs and dogmas of each religious community.”<sup>357</sup> In 2022, sectarian actors claimed a violation of this unstated consensus. But it was not sectarian in-groups who transgressed each other’s boundaries. Rather, actors accused an extra-sectarian enemy of simultaneously trespassing on *all* religious doctrines and boundaries. By figuring a sexual enemy to all sects, homophobic discourse re-articulated “the ecumenical frame” by also grounding sectarian pluralism on the “natural” fact of a common and inter-sectarian heterosexuality.

Importantly, the politicization of sectarianism’s heterosexual ground—and the anti-gay politicization of “the ecumenical frame”—did not purport to transcend sectarian differences. Nor did signifiers for this shared heterosexuality—like “nature” (*tabi’a*), “customs and traditions,” (*adat w taqalid*), “the natural regime,” (*al-nizam al tabi’i*)—work like “gender” does in “anti-gender” movements in the global north. That is, heterosexuality did not provide an “empty signifier” that mobilized disparate political actors and “unified” them.<sup>358</sup> Neither did it work

---

<sup>356</sup> Makdisi, U. (2021). *Age of coexistence: The ecumenical frame and the making of the modern arab world*. University of California Press.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid 96.

<sup>358</sup> In *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, scholars Agnieszka Graff and Elzbieta Korolczuk explore the “growing visibility of anti-gender movements, discourses, and campaigns” in contemporary Poland and Eastern Europe. Drawing from Laclau and Mouffe’s account of hegemony, Graff conceptualizes gender as an “empty signifier” that relates issues concerning “the family, kinship, sexuality, and the nation” in a single chain of equivalence. By generating a chain of equivalence between disparate causes, anti-gender ideologies work to politically constitute a homogenous and anti-pluralist version of “the people.” According to Graff, shared opposition



toward imagining a unified, supra-sectarian, national, or “secular” political community in Lebanon at all, as the term “Gender” does in homophobic mobilization in Eastern European, African or Latin American contexts.<sup>359</sup> Especially in the wake of the electoral victories of anti-sectarian MPs, discourses on an inter-sectarian heterosexuality asserted sectarian identification as the primary category of political belonging and worked to prevent a secular political settlement from taking shape in Lebanon. Across divides, and in different ways, religious and political elites, as well as everyday people, held up their particular identities, doctrines, symbols, and institutions as safeguards against what they termed the “legalization of deviancy” (*tashri’ al shuzooz*) and the secularization of heterosexual marriage. Their discourse paradoxically depicted religious differences as both the vulnerable victim of gay and feminist harm and the bulwark against it. Standing firm in their differences, they mounted a plurality of homophobic resistances, while also referencing the Abrahamic ubiquity of heterosexual nature and the anti-gay prohibitions that guard it.

Indeed, and while the jurisdictions of Lebanon’s personal status courts are constitutionally circumscribed,<sup>360</sup> the politicization of a shared and inter-sectarian heterosexuality allowed state and popular clerics to overstep their legal boundaries and to

---

to “gender” has enabled conservative elites and bases to ally against gender and sexual equality. It has also worked to halt the extension of rights to other excluded factions in society (immigrants, refugees). As such, and for Graff, shared opposition to “gender” politically unifies by transcending differences among gender-conservative actors. In the East European context, anti-gender mobilization has worked to construct an ultraconservative hegemony and effect reactionary institutional change. Consequently, Graff argues for viewing anti-gender mobilization as a phenomenon of right-wing populism and a symptom of democratic backsliding. Graff, A., and E. Korolczuk. (2021). *Anti-gender politics in the populist moment*. 2.

<sup>359</sup> Here, we glean another important difference: while scholars figure anti-sexuality and anti-gender mobilization as a symptom of democratic backsliding, the Lebanese case shows how sexuality is politicized to halt, oppose, or stymie processes of democratization. In this way, my account about the relationship between homophobia and democratic politics is informed by scholars Nancy Bermeo and Dan Slater’s understandings of democratic erosion as a dynamic process of careening and stalemate, rather than “backsliding.”

<sup>360</sup> As lawyer Youmna Makhlof pointed out in an interview, Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution grants each religious court jurisdiction over matters pertaining to marriage, death, birth, and inheritance, or “family law.” Makhlof, Y. (2019, August 3). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

renegotiate their authorities and positions in the sectarian state.<sup>361</sup> As we shall see, religious leaders like the Sunni Grand Mufti, the Shi'i Ja'fari Sheikh, and the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan held up their different personal status laws as bulwarks against the twin projects of “homosexual legalization” (*tashri' al shuzooz*) and the institution of heterosexual “civil marriage” (*zawaj madani*). Speaking in the name of their personal statuses, religious leaders across Lebanon worked to figure their authorities as political safeguards against sexual democratization while at the same time occluding the fact that the battle over sexuality is a political one at all.

#### A. Politicizing Heterosexual Nature

In the following section, I cast homophobia as a set of sectarian discourses about nature and track how the threat of queer publicity—and the advent of homosexual legalization—allowed clerics and priests across Lebanon’s personal status courts to politicize heterosexuality as a natural and inter-sectarian fact and, and in doing so, to explicitly name heterosexuality as the common ground of Lebanese sectarianism.

Beginning with Interior Minister Bassam al-Mawlawi’s memo, we see how state actors articulated heterosexuality as a matter of public concern and queer publicity as a threat to the public order. I quote his memo in full once more:

In regard to this topic, and after the spread of invitations on social media and Internet websites for the holding of celebrations and parties for the promotion of deviant sexuality in Lebanon; And after the Ministry received calls from religious sources/authorities (*maraje'*) refusing the spread of this phenomenon (*thahira*); And in view of what negative effects this appearance has on society and the individual; And that it is not possible to invoke personal freedoms to express these

---

<sup>361</sup> See also Mikdashi’s *Sextarianism*. Again, and while Mikdashi argues for viewing the Lebanese State as a secular one—in the ways that it governs and produces religious difference—I instead point to the ways in which Lebanon is *not* a secular state, one of them being the formal representation of religious authorities and their capacity to act politically through the religious court system.

activities, and the abuse of these liberties, insofar as this topic is in violation (mukhalef) of the customs and traditions ('adat w taqalid) in our society and contradicts the principles of the heavenly religions (adyan al samawiya); As such, it is commanded that the [General Security forces] take the necessary measures to refuse the holding of these celebrations, meetings, or gatherings aimed at the promotion of this phenomenon...”<sup>362</sup>

While Mawlawi does not explicitly name it, heterosexuality nevertheless appears as the thing that all of Lebanon’s religions share, as well as the thing that homosexuality violates. Through expressions like “customs and traditions” and “the principles of the heavenly religions” (adyan al-samawiya), Mawlawi’s discourse signifies heterosexuality as both the common cultural ground of Lebanese society and as the set of shared principles that all of Lebanon’s monotheistic religions uphold and upon which the state is founded.

Importantly, it is not that Mawlawi’s discourse names heterosexuality where it did not already exist.<sup>363</sup> As I have argued, heterosexuality—and heterosexual marriage in particular—constitutes the metric of the sectarian state and the common and shared fact that exists between different religious beliefs and doctrines. Before homophobic mobilization, the consensus on heterosexuality was presumed to be so totalizing that there was not a need to explicitly name it at all. However, and with the advent of queer publicity, Mawlawi and others put into discourse what had until then, went without saying. But what Mawlawi’s discourse emphasizes is that the securitization of heterosexuality is a matter for the “public order”—that is, the policing of heterosexuality falls under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry and the Internal Security

---

<sup>362</sup> See “Figure 3.1: Mawlawi’s Memo” in “Appendix 3: Redefining Nature.”

<sup>363</sup> I refer here to Joseph Massad’s article “Re-orienting Desire” in which he argues that both heterosexuality and homosexuality did not “exist” in Arab societies because they were not spoken about before the advent of Western empire. Such a claim hinges on a (vulgar) understanding of Foucault’s repressive hypothesis in which discourse creates a thing where it did not previously exist. Of course, such a reading occludes how silence—and “not naming”—is an act of power in and of itself. Indeed, the “not naming” of heterosexuality is precisely what is at stake for homophobic mobilization in the Middle East: homophobia desires to eliminate queer publicity to maintain heterosexuality as the universal thing that “goes without saying.”

Forces that Mawlawi heads. In doing so, Mawlawi's memo articulated the hetero-religious foundation of the Lebanese state, while also securitizing that foundation against the threats of public queer associations (gatherings and parties) and the normalization of homosexuality in society. In this way, his discourse cites a new need for state security: the censorship of queer publicity and the protection of public heterosexual absolutism.

Following the circulation of Mawlawi's memo, the heads of Lebanon's personal status courts issued their own positions that converged with and diverged from that of the Interior Minister. While they invoked heterosexuality as the inter-sectarian ground of Lebanese state and society, clerical discourse specifically emphasized heterosexuality as a pre-condition for the political authority of sectarian pluralism. They also figured the religious courts as the primary means through which to safeguard this authority against the twin threats of homosexual decriminalization and the passage of a unified civil marriage bill.

The first to issue a position was the Sunni Grand Mufti Abdallatif Derian. On June 24, 2022, and at a children's competition for Quranic memorization, the Mufti stood before an audience of Sunni parents and children. In his officiating speech, Derian conspiratorially framed a threat to the Quran, to the sect, and to religious difference itself:

The Quran is the first constitution, and the principal source of legitimacy in Islam...Dar al Fatwa is confident of the presence and history of the 'aqidah (the comprehensive doctrine of Islam). Its position is stable and [we] will not let any provocations (tahadiyat) shake it. And [Dar al Fatwa] will orient in strength and commitment. No one is capable of marginalizing Sunni Muslims or ravaging any of their rights. I trust that the ahl al Sunnah are in good stead, despite all that they are subject to (yat'aradun). Their role shall remain and their place and their popular position (mawqe' al sha'bi) and their constitutional position as principle in the Parliament and in the Government and in the Lebanese State. Dar al Fatwa will not allow the legitimation (tashri') of homosexuality (al mithliya al jinsiya) nor in the passage of the project for civil marriage, both of which are in violation (mukhaelf) of the religion of Islam and all the doctrines ('aqayed).

[Homosexuality and civil marriage] are also against the Lebanese Constitution, in relation to the obligation of respecting personal statuses in Article 9.<sup>364</sup>

Derian begins by signifying the Quran's authority with the status of law. Blurring categories of religion, sect, and personal status, he goes on to relate the Quran's authority to the presence of the Sunni religious court. According to Derian, Dar al Fatwa stands as a bulwark against not-yet-named but nevertheless anti-Muslim provocations. Finally, Derian arrives to the matter at hand. Dar al Fatwa, Derian declares, will allow neither the "legitimation of homosexuality" nor the passage of (heterosexual) civil marriage. Both projects, he proclaims, violate Islamic doctrine, as well as the doctrines of every other Lebanese sect. By synchronically violating Lebanon's religious constitutions, Derian argues, homosexuality and civil marriage also violate the national constitution. Invoking Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution—that which gives religious pluralism its legal form—he casts both projects as attacking the absolutely heterosexual ground that underwrites Lebanese religious pluralism and the 15 religious courts that institutionalize it.

In doing so, Derian's discourse also figures heterosexuality as the shared principle of legal religious pluralism and a condition for the existence of religious differences in society and the state. This further allows the Mufti to politicize both homosexuality and civil marriage as constitutional violations to inter-sectarian equality, insofar as they violate the naturalized gender and sexual hierarchies that heterosexual religious marriage—sectarianism's metric of equality—institutes. Speaking in the name of all religious difference, Derian's discourse relates the threats of civil marriage and homosexuality, and imagines a secular future, one without hetero-religious safeguards on marriage and without the political presence of religious authorities in the state.

---

<sup>364</sup> Asfahani, J. (2022, June 24). *Samahat al-mufti yar'a hafl tawzi' jawa'ez musabaqat nizar w siham shqeir al-qur'aniya*. Darelfatwa.gov.lb. See "Figure 3.2: Dar al-Fatwa Press Release" in "Appendix 3: Redefining Nature."

Using similar but different terms, the Shi'i Mufti and head of the Ja'fari Courts Ahmad Qiblan figured the legalization of homosexuality and civil marriage in Lebanon as shared threats to the heterosexual identity of the Lebanese nation:

To all those who desire to change the ethical identity (al-hawiya al-akhlaqiya) of Lebanon: ethics (akhlaq) are existential (wujudiya) for Lebanon... There are perverted butchers who desire to blast the human structure (binya al bashariya) and [who desire] the changing of the natural regime (al nizam al tabi'i) for the worst kinds of human deviance.<sup>365</sup>

Again, heterosexuality does not appear under its own name. Rather Qiblan signifies heterosexuality as the “ethical identity,” the “human structure” and the “natural regime” that constitute the ground of the Lebanese nation. In conspiratorial tenors, Qiblan frames heterosexuality as existentially threatened by actors—“perverted butchers”—and projects—“worst kinds of human deviance”—that seek to transform it.

Importantly, and while Qiblan's framing is conspiratorial in tone, it gets something right: the political actors behind homosexual decriminalization have, as we have seen, targeted the implicitly heterosexual definition of “nature” in Article 534 and worked to change it. So too have feminist projects—like civil marriage reform movements or the reform of the personal status courts—which have aimed to change the naturalized and legal hierarchies and relations of subordination that exist between Lebanese men and women.<sup>366</sup> In this light, Qiblan's discourse apprehends a real threat: both homosexual decriminalization and in the passage of a civil marriage bill would interfere with the implicit definition of heterosexual nature in Lebanese law. Indeed, and if enacted, both projects would threaten the transformation of Lebanon's heterosexual legal ground—the ground that the religious courts need for their political existence.

---

<sup>365</sup> Al-Manar. (2022, June 26). *Al-mufti qiblan: Al-shuzooz marfood bi-shidah w lan yatahakak fi lubnan*. Al-Manar TV. <https://almanar.com.lb/9709801>. See “Figure 3.3: Qiblan's Position” in “Appendix 3: Redefining Nature.”

<sup>366</sup> See discussion in “Part II: The Threat” as well as Mikdashi's *Sextarianism*.

Which is why Qiblan addresses both queer and feminist politics, avows heterosexuality as the “natural regime” of sectarianism and, warns his audiences of sexual regime change:

I speak to the feminism (al-nassawiya) and gay masculinity (al-thukuriya al-mithliya) that is drowned in deviance (shuzooz): despite all that Lebanon has experienced in tragedies, Lebanon will not be a gay bar... and those who consider Gilbert Baker the symbol of their orientation, then go to San Francisco, because that's closer than Beirut. And personal liberties, when they collide with the natural constitution (al-dastur al-tabi'i), those liberties become an enemy to nature and the human... we will never accept the changing of the natural order (al-nizam al tabi'i); and this case is a case of identity and constitution and natural ethics that are eternal (abadiya) and are far from the coffins of the rainbow flag, from which emanate stench of rot and destruction, of self and affective madness. Leave the personal statuses away from the political coffins; because the case is a case of human creation (khaleq insani) and it's not a case of trend (moda), or a commercial, that writes the constitution of the family with the wine of the pubs.<sup>367</sup>

Characterizing both homosexuality and feminism as “drowned in deviance,” Qiblan figures both queers and feminists as agents of American cultural empire and sexual colonization. Invoking Massadian logics of a Gay International,<sup>368</sup> the Ja'fari sheikh calls out the not-well-known Gilbert Baker, the designer of the rainbow flag and casts him as a *za'im* (traditional sectarian leader) of the gays. Qiblan further names San Francisco as the source of gay insurgency and refuses Beirut's transformation into a site of gay liberation (“a gay bar”). In this way, Qiblan's occidentalism locates the source of homosexuality in America and attempts to contain it there.<sup>369</sup>

---

<sup>367</sup> Al-Manar. (2022, June 26). *Al-mufti qiblan: Al-shuzooz marfood bi-shidah w lan yatahakak fi lubnan*. Al-Manar TV. <https://almanar.com.lb/9709801>. See “Figure 3.3: Qiblan's Position” in “Appendix 3: Redefining Nature.”

<sup>368</sup> See Massad. J. (2002). “Re-orienting Desire: the Gay International and the Arab World.”

<sup>369</sup> Interestingly, the relationship between homosexuality and empire has had a long political history. And ironically, Qiblan's anti-gay discourse bears strong family resemblances to America's Cold War-era homophobia. According to scholar John D'Emilio, the American state politicized homosexuality as a phenomenon of Soviet cultural imperialism. Throughout the “Lavender Scare,” anti-Soviet homophobia related communism and homosexuality, figuring the latter as the vehicle of the former. During Senator Joseph McCarthy's reign of terror, homosexuality was also tried as a crime of conspiracy. In both the American and Lebanese cases, anti-imperial homophobia frames homosexuality as an agent of national unmaking. While American state officials propped up the family as a bulwark against sexual subversion, Lebanese ecclesiastics cast the religious courts as their first line of defense. In both cases, actors mobilized logics of homosexual containment.

Warning against the Western-style emancipation of gays and women, Qiblan further refutes homosexuality to be a personal liberty. Given its non-reproductive aims, homosexuality is figured instead as a phenomenon of contagion and corruption, and an agent of humanity's extinction. By articulating homosexuality and feminism as threats to human survival, Qiblan's discourse works upon collapse-era genres of catastrophe and figures a need for the sectarian courts in times of state breakdown and (partial) electoral transition. And like the Sunni Mufti, Qiblan invokes Lebanon's religious courts as, at once, vulnerable to the lethal effects of homosexual legalization and a bulwark against them. Similarly, Qiblan's discourse signifies homosexuality as an enemy to the heterosexually-grounded and religiously-plural structure of Lebanese state and society.

Unlike both the Sunni and Shi'i representatives of Lebanon's religious courts, the Maronite Patriarch remained silent on queer publicity and the threatening potentials of homosexual legalization in 2022. This silence, however, incited a host of Christian clerical positions whose discourse invoked public heterosexuality as a precondition for interreligious freedom and coexistence. Eager to stand in the Patriarch's stead was Father Abdo Abu Kassem—the director of the Catholic Media Center and a main actor in the Mashrou' Leila controversy—who declared:

To support homosexuals is a personal matter, but it can't be possible to promote/advertise (*tarweej*) homosexuality in a society of plural sects. [Queer promotion] ends up being a trespass against the [religious] freedom of the other.<sup>370</sup>

Like the others, Kassem does not explicitly name heterosexuality. Yet it nevertheless appears in his claims about why the publicity and “promotion” of homosexuality should be a problem for a “society of plural sects.” Not echoing the anti-gay bellicosity of the Shi'i and Sunni Muftis,

---

<sup>370</sup> Maharat Foundation. (2022, July). *Bayan al-dakhiliya yaqsam al-mujtama' libnani bein mu'yed w mu'ared*. Maharat Foundation. [https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ\\_Report](https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ_Report).



Kassem contends that “support” for homosexuality is a matter of private choice. However, homosexual promotion—in the form of gay pride month—interferes, Kassem implies, with the public heterosexuality that provides different sects in Lebanon with a common and shared ground.

Indeed, and as we saw in chapter 1, Abu Kassem’s discourse on homosexuality has figured queers as a heretic sect. And he is correct. The deviance of queers from the common heterosexual scripture of Lebanon’s other sects makes it impossible to incorporate them into a political system that uses heterosexual marriage as a metric to relate its factions and organize its citizens. That Kassem could frame homosexuality as an enemy to the religious freedom of all of Lebanon’s sects indicates that religious freedom, for Kassem, requires society to be—or at least to appear—absolutely and publicly heterosexual. Interestingly, and by distinguishing between the private exercise of homosexuality and its publicity, Kassem’s position models a moderate homophobia: he acknowledges Pope Francis’s policy-shift on homosexuality<sup>371</sup> while also departing from it. In this manner, Kassem’s moderation placed him between the silence of the Patriarch and the fierce homophobia of the Soldiers of God, which neither Kassem nor the Maronite Patriarch desired to support. In fact, his perspective also presented a way to uphold homophobia without opposing the Pope or licensing sectarian extremism.

While the terms of Abu Kassem’s moderate position were not taken up by others, state and informal clerics across Lebanon’s Christian sects re-asserted heterosexual marriage as the foundation of Lebanese society. Second in prominence to the Maronite Patriarch, Elias Aoude—the Metropolitan Bishop of the Greek Orthodox Church—delivered a hostile anti-gay sermon, where he explicitly emphasized the sanctity of heterosexual marriage against the possibility of

---

<sup>371</sup> That is—that Pope Francis re-coded homosexuality from a crime to a sin among others in Catholic doctrine.

homosexual decriminalization, and even gay marriage.<sup>372</sup> He also warned his congregation against the dangers of queer publicity, or what he called “marketing” (*tasweeq*), which according to him would provide the conditions for the full normalization—or “naturalization” (*tatbi'*)—of homosexuality in society. Parroting Aoude was a parochial Orthodox priest from Zahlé, who contested the Catholic Pope’s change of heart on homosexuality. Standing upon his pulpit, he declared “delusional” those who “think that the Bible forgives deviancy.”<sup>373</sup>

In these ways, clerics from across Lebanon’s sects employed converging and diverging terms to signify heterosexuality as the shared ground of sectarian society. In doing so, they stood against queer publicity and the promise it held for the full decriminalization of homosexuality in Lebanese law and society. By invoking heterosexual religious marriage as a shared and inter-sectarian foundation, clerical actors also resisted the secularizing potentials of a unified civil marriage bill in Lebanon—a law, that if passed, could eliminate the religious courts altogether. Relating homosexual decriminalization and civil marriage as twin threats to Lebanon’s heterosexual foundations, clerical discourse did not only disclose that which had gone without saying—heterosexuality— but also figured the religious courts as the means through which to secure the ground of sectarian society against its reform and its unmaking.

## B: The Variegated Trajectories of Homophobia

Though clerical discourse politicized heterosexuality as the common ground of Lebanon’s pluralist society, the homophobic mobilization of the state’s religious courts produced variegated political effects. I argue that these variations owe themselves to the specific political contexts and the contests that exist within each sect. Indeed, I contend that the politicization of homophobia depends upon the situation that each sect occupies in Lebanon’s power-sharing

---

<sup>372</sup> Maharat Foundation. (2022, July). *Bayan al-dakhiliya yaqsam al-mujtama' libnani bein mu'yed w mu'ared*. Maharat Foundation. [https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ\\_Report](https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ_Report).

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

settlement as well as the differential effects of revolution, collapse, and electoral transition on intra and inter-sectarian politics. The following section tracks these trajectories, ultimately showing how homophobia is not a transposable or “modular”<sup>374</sup> category whose uses and effects are everywhere similar, but a phenomenon whose meaning depends upon its use in specific political regimes.

### Making the Sunni Sect Great Again

Beginning in the Sunni sect, the homophobic mobilization of Tripolitan religious institutions, the Interior Minister, and the Grand Mufti worked as a counter-revolutionary strategy: it generated popular authority for the Mufti, cohered religious and political elites around a common cause and worked to mend relations between insurgent Sunni populations and Sunni religious and political leaders. This work fundamentally related to the role that Tripoli’s Sunni-majority populations played in the 2019 Lebanon Revolution. More than Beirut, Tripoli was figured as the capital of the Revolution with its working- and middle-class residents at the forefront of anti-regime demonstrations.<sup>375</sup> Though mass mobilization withered within months, Tripolitans continued to protest throughout the first years of Lebanon’s fiscal collapse (2019-). During collapse, conditions of relative deprivation only intensified, provoking anti-elite rioting in January 2021, where demonstrators set fire to Tripoli’s Ottoman-era city hall.<sup>376</sup> Two months later, the value of the dollar plummeted to 15,000 Lebanese pounds, and rioting escalated. By the

---

<sup>374</sup> Here, I reference Michael Bosia’s characterization of homophobia as a “modular” political phenomenon across contexts in *Global Homophobia* [see introduction]. Bosia, M. J., & Weiss, M. L. (2013). *Global homophobia : states, movements, and the politics of oppression*. University Of Illinois Press.

<sup>375</sup> Known for being the country’s Sunni center, Tripoli is also lamented for its poverty relative to other parts of the country.

<sup>376</sup> Dahhabi, J. (2022, February 2). *'am ala ahdath trablus w hara `quha: khaniq al-i`tirad w in`ash al-irhab*. Al-Modn. Beirut, Lebanon.

second year of collapse, it was no secret that the Tripolitan “Sunni street” was in a precarious relation with its leaders and representatives.<sup>377</sup>

By 2022, the Sunni sect was suffering a more general crisis of leadership which contributed to anxieties about the position of the sect in the state. In the months leading up to the 2022 parliamentary elections, for instance, former Prime Minister Sa’ed al-Hariri—and the de facto *za’im* (or political boss) of Sunni Lebanese—abdicated the leadership of his Future Party, shocking in-group and out-group members alike.<sup>378</sup> While one political commentator described Hariri’s exit as having “orphaned” the Sunni sect, another prophesied Sunni division akin to the postwar fracturing of political Christianity.<sup>379</sup> Just months away from a historic election, Hariri’s withdrawal from politics created a void of leadership within the sect and it provided opportunities for elite power-grabbing. And given the candidacy of anti-sectarian MPs in Beirut’s traditional Sunni districts, forecasts of division in the Sunni sectarian establishment were not unfounded. Conditions of economic collapse and elite corruption further added to the popular disillusionment with the establishment, contributing to the threat of the anti-sectarian victories in the upcoming elections. On May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022, thirteen independent candidates—two of whom came from Beirut’s Sunni-majority Second District—were successfully elected to Lebanon’s Parliament. Constituting one/tenth of the 128 seat Parliament, the election of “the Changers” (al-taghyiriyeen) birthed an anti-sectarian opposition and effectively symbolized a historic—albeit partial—political transition.

While the Changers had primarily promised economic and political reform in their

---

<sup>377</sup> Dahhabi, J. (2021, February 3). *Inhiyar w 'inf w corona: Trablus akbar “hizam bu`is” fi lubnan*. Al-Modn. See Chapter 3 Appendix.

<sup>378</sup> Al-Rabi’, M. (2022, January 26). *Inhiyar al-haririya: 'la-markaziya sunniya w fawdawiya... w al-'asifah tuqtarab*. Al-Modn.

<sup>379</sup> Al-Modn. (2022, January 24). *Al-Hariri kharij al siyasa: la firsah li-lubnan bi-thul al-nufuth al-iraniya*. Al-Modn.

campaigns, they also brought with them the potential for the gender and sexual reform of Lebanon's legal system. Shortly after the elections, it was rumored that MPs Ibrahim Mneimeh and Halima Qa'qour—both from Beirut's Second District—worked to draft a law to abolish Article 534 and fully decriminalizing homosexuality.<sup>380</sup> It is in this context that the Grand Mufti Abdallatif Derian and the Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi received calls from Tripoli's Sunni Muslim Scholars Council and Syndicate of Lawyers about circulating advertisements for Gay Pride Month. With the loss of the sect's traditional leader and the insurgency of Tripoli's populations, queer publicity in 2022 offered the Mufti a fortunate chance to project his authority across the sect's nascent divides. It was here that Derian delivered his Sunni-specific position against the threats of both homosexual legalization and the passage of a heterosexual civil marriage bill, rallying Sunni clerics from Tripoli, Saida, Ba'albak, and the Beqaa' to his cause.<sup>381</sup>

Importantly, it was not only clerics who backed the Mufti's position; in the following weeks, anti-gay mobilization involved Sunni-based NGOs, municipalities, elites, and popular bases throughout the country. The Saida municipality, for instance, launched a campaign that lined the Beirut-Saida highway with billboards “for the family” and “against deviancy.”<sup>382</sup> Likewise, the mayors of Majdal and Anjar announced similar plans to “confront deviancy.”<sup>383</sup> Finally, in Tripoli, Pride month homophobia brought together religious civil society actors, political coalitions, local sheikhs, and *ahali Trablos* (the families/people of Tripoli) in an anti-

---

<sup>380</sup> Zeidan, T. (2023, June 14). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

<sup>381</sup> See the Maharat Foundation's report for a full display of clerical positions. Maharat Foundation. (2022, July). *Bayan al-dakhiliya yaqsam al-mujtama' libnani bein mu'yed w mu'ared*. Maharat Foundation. [https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ\\_Report](https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ_Report).

<sup>382</sup> Dada, S. (2024, January 12). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>383</sup> Maharat Foundation. (2022, July). *Bayan al-dakhiliya yaqsam al-mujtama' libnani bein mu'yed w mu'ared*. Maharat Foundation. [https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ\\_Report](https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ_Report).

gay demonstration attended by thousands of men.<sup>384</sup> Here, demonstrators echoed the Mufti's position and related the "legitimation of homosexuality" to the passage of a unified civil marriage bill.<sup>385</sup> Warning against the "touching of our personal statuses," Sunni demonstrators mobilized not only around the Sunni courts but around the entire religious court system, figuring it as a safeguard against homosexual decriminalization and other projects of gender and sexual reform. From above and below, homophobia politicized the religious court system as a shared site of popular, cross-sectarian, and anti-gay resistance. In these ways, the Mufti's initial position against the "legalization of deviancy" worked to align popular bases with Sunni religious leaders and redirect formerly insurgent populations back to the Sunni sect. It also worked to politically cohere Sunni clerics, leaders, and bases behind a resolute and representative leader.

#### Maintaining the State of Political Shi'ism

While it worked to cohere Sunni men and clerics behind a religious leader, homophobic discursing did not bring the same luck to the head of the Shi'i Ja'fari Courts Sheikh Ahmad Qiblan. Attempting to follow Derian's precedent, Qiblan issued his incendiary position against the queer and feminist transformation of Lebanon's identity. But before his homophobia could get off the ground, the Hezbollah Party released its own position. Not inciting against homosexuality in 2022, the discourse of the Party spokesperson ambivalently figured both homosexuality and homophobia as dangerous distractions. Seeking to maintain its dominance over the Lebanese state, the Hezbollah Party instead attempted to figure itself as the proper political representative of Shi'i interests in Lebanon.

---

<sup>384</sup>A full-length journalistic recording of the demonstration shows packs of men pouring into Tripoli's al-Nur square after the conclusion of Friday prayers. The journalist, who does not appear in the video, informs us that Khaled Mnajed – a local Tripolitan sheikh, and the executive director of Rahimun, a faith-based organization that promotes Islamic family values – organized the assembly. Before commencing audience interviews, the journalist reminds us of the purpose of mobilization: "to assemble against the issa'a of the prophet, and [to refuse] homosexuality in Tripoli and in Lebanon generally." See "Figure 3.4: Anti-Gay Demo in Tripoli" in "Appendix 3."

<sup>385</sup> Ibid.

The uses and effects of homophobia in the Shi'i sect in part relates to the waning popularity and waxing criticism of the Hezbollah Party during and after the 2019 Lebanon Revolution. While demonstrators had demanded the fall of the entire sectarian regime, many of them specifically contested Hezbollah's unchecked political power in the country. And since the 2019 Revolution, opposition to Hezbollah's rule had only intensified. With the explosion of the Beirut Port in August of 2020 and the assassination of Shi'i intellectual Lukman Slim, many Lebanese held the Party responsible. Though the culprits remain unknown, these two events worked to incite anti-Hezbollah enmity across Lebanon's anti-sectarian *and* sectarian publics. In May of 2022, the election of 13 independent candidates lost Hezbollah its majority coalition in the Parliament, spelling yet another challenge to the Party's rule in Lebanon. More than that, the defeat of Hezbollah incumbents in key Shi'i majority districts publicized contestation between Shi'i parties and their popular bases.

In response to these challenges, the Shi'i Duo—the Hezbollah and Amal Parties—sought to contain intra-group division and to rebuild their power in the forthcoming government. Given the then concurrent maritime border talks between Lebanon and Israel, Shi'i control of the government was vital for Hezbollah. Led by Amos Hochstein, the maritime border negotiations sought to definitively draw the line between the two enemies and their underwater treasures (oil and natural gas).<sup>386</sup> Though the talks had commenced in 2020, they were in stalemate for nearly two years. In May of 2022, a series of developments put the negotiations back on (a highly sensitive) course.<sup>387</sup> During and after the elections, the Shi'i Duo sought to curtail domestic contestation, pilot the talks, and maintain their monopoly over the Lebanese-Israeli border.

---

<sup>386</sup> Noe, N. (2022, April 12). *Sea border talks between Israel and Lebanon on verge of imminent collapse*. Responsible Statecraft. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/04/12/us-should-prevent-collapse-of-sea-border-talks-between-israel-and-lebanon/>.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

Amidst high-stakes border negotiations and government deadlock, Sunni-led homophobia in June of 2022 was inopportune for the Amal and Hezbollah Parties. Reluctant to stoke the anti-gay energies of his masculine audiences—which could potentially spark inter-sectarian street violence—Hassan Nasrallah, the late General Secretary of Hezbollah, and Nabih Berri, the leader of the Amal Party, both abstained from announcing a position. It was in this silence that Shi'i Mufti Ahmad Qiblan issued his position against homosexuality and feminism. Not sparking a cascade of clerical positions, as it did in the Sunni sect, Qiblan's homophobia instead alerted the President of the Executive Council of Hezbollah, Sheikh Ali Da'moush who cast a conspiracy against government-formation:

There is a political power (quwah siyasiya) that relates to [economic] problems with belittlement (istikhaf), because it doesn't feel the enormity of the pain that the Lebanese nation suffers, and it distracts itself with contentions/conflicts and expressions, and it doesn't want to do any operation for the interests of Lebanese currently, and this is the case with the political blocs that opposed in partaking in the government and it doesn't want to form a government in Lebanon, but it wants Lebanon to remain under the blockade and pressure of crises, and aligns with what America wants in this point in time.<sup>388</sup>

Indirectly, Da'moush figures homosexual controversy as belittling to atmospheres of national suffering and pain. He begins by figuring Hezbollah's opponents as working together and against the interests of the Lebanese people. From there, Da'moush accuses the Party's opponents of alignment with American interests and complicity in the US-led sanctions against Lebanese officials ("the blockade"). Implicitly, Da'moush portrays queer publicity—as well as the homophobia it generated—as mechanisms of American-supporting distraction and manipulation. Distinguishing Hezbollah from the rest, Da'moush depicts the Party as "guarded over the country" and committed to "musalaha" (reform).

---

<sup>388</sup> *Kayf'alaq hizbillah 'ala "zawaj al-mithliyeen."* (2022, July 1). Lebanon Debate. <https://www.lebanondebate.com/news/566649>



Though pointing to a conspiracy, Da'moush does not deny that homosexuality is a problem. He concedes that homosexuality is a "deviant relationship outside of nature" and he casts it as the "most dangerous threat to the family."<sup>389</sup> Nevertheless Da'moush figures homosexuality as a social ill and announces the initiation of Hezbollah-run campaigns, like "a hotline for parents," educational guides, and conferences. In these ways, the threat of queer publicity and pro-queer legal change prompted a centralized, institutionalized, and Party-centric response. Not directed at national level consolidation, Hezbollah's anti-gay projects, Da'moush goes on to explain, aim to "prevent the spread of homosexuality within the communities of the Party." As such, and for Hezbollah, the solution to homosexuality lay in de-centralized, educational and community-centered initiatives.

Neutralizing the incendiary discourse of the Ja'afari sheikh, Da'moush's position worked to discourage the potential of popular and elite anti-gay mobilization, at least among Shi'i masculine bases. Amid precarious maritime border negotiations, the latter could pose an intra-sectarian security concern that could divert the Hezbollah Party energies. Indeed, and all throughout the 2022 elections, the violent collective action of Shi'i-identified thugs had generated turbulence throughout the country. Motorcades of Amal and Hezbollah-affiliated thugs tore through the streets of Beirut in the aftermath of the Shi'i Duo's electoral defeats; they vandalized the Changers' tents in Kfair Rumman and set fire the Revolutionary Fist in Beirut.<sup>390</sup> Though backing the Shi'i Duo, these masculinist performances of power were also sources of anxiety. Especially after the October 14<sup>th</sup> street clash between Shi'i and Christian factions,<sup>391</sup> Shi'i political actors appeared reluctant to pull on the homophobic nerves of its thug-armies. Furthermore, the autonomous action of the Soldiers of God had worked to model for all out-

---

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Ethnographic Field Notes May-June 2022.

<sup>391</sup> See chapter 2.

groups the dangers of homophobic militancy. Rather than risk the emergence of extremist elements from within their own communities, the Hezbollah Party's discourse and the Amal Party's silence worked to contain popular homophobia in 2022.

### C. Nightmares of Division: Homophobia and Political Christianity

Among Christian actors, homophobia neither consolidated clerical authority nor contained it. Instead, anti-gay incitement pronounced already-present divisions between political parties, religious leaders, and popular bases. Emerging out of these divisions were the Soldiers of God who, in the absence of an authoritative homophobic Christian voice, attempted to usurp the mantle of Christian religious representation. But while the Soldiers were busy policing Christian East Beirut, homophobia in 2022 worked to intensify Christian political factionalism.

The factionalizing effects of homophobic mobilization in the Christian sect relates to the fact that Lebanon's three largest Christian establishment parties—the Free Patriotic Movement, the Lebanese Forces, and the Kata'eb—are not properly allied, but have been on opposite sides of coalitional divides since the end of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). This state of intra-sectarian rivalry continued throughout the 2010s, escalating with the presidential election of Michel Aoun in 2016. Since then, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement has attempted to figure itself as the proper representative of Christian interests in the state. Thwarting that consolidation, however, were accelerating conditions of refugee-influx, corruption, infrastructural decay, and popular mobilization.

In 2019, the outbreak of the Lebanon Revolution and the onset of financial collapse led Aoun's presidency to be fiercely contested by sectarian and anti-sectarian opponents alike. And on August 4<sup>th</sup> 2020, the explosion of the Beirut Port spiked national contempt for sectarian elites, making Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement a punching bag for the country's anti-sectarian

and independent media outlets. What is more, attempts by the FPM to try sectarian elites for corruption had produced sectarian and anti-sectarian blowback.<sup>392</sup> Unproductively, revolutionary figurations of a sectarian, enemy-regime (“All of Them Means all of Them”) had worked to preempt possibilities of elite-led reform initiatives. All the while, the Lebanese pound continued to plummet. Given these already-present divisions with the Christian political establishment, the results of the May 2022 elections did not produce the same shocks that it did to the Sunni and Shi’i establishments. While the middle-right FPM and Kataeb lost nearly 31% of their popular votes, votes for Gaegae’s far right Lebanese Forces had surged, indexing rising popularity for the group’s militant politics.<sup>393</sup> Consequently, the 2022 elections re-calibrated the representative authorities of Christian-identified political parties and increased the distance between them.

One month after the elections, the appearance of a rainbow flag in Christian East Beirut and the mobilization of the Soldiers of God” further aggravated clerical and political contests over Christian representation in Lebanese state and society. As we saw already, the dangers of vigilante homophobia to the sectarian status quo may have contributed to the Maronite Patriarch’s silence. Following the silence of the Patriarch was the right-wing Lebanese Forces (LF)—the fiercest defender of Christian rights in Lebanon. Certainly, the LF and the Soldiers’ sectarian commitments largely overlap. However, the LF’s silence indexed an unwillingness to align with the unchecked sectarianism of an extra-institutional actor. Especially after the electoral victories and the October 14<sup>th</sup> street clash, the abstinence of the LF Party from a public anti-gay position also aimed at quelling the sectarian extremism of LF party members and communities.

---

<sup>392</sup> Mark. (2020, November 6). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>393</sup> UNDP. (2022, December 1). *2022 lebanese parliamentary elections: Key results*. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/lebanon/publications/2022-lebanese-parliamentary-elections-key-results>

In surprising moves, the Christian-identified Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and the Kataeb Party both deviated from their opponent establishments' homophobias. From one side, the FPM emphasized "its commitments to protecting individual rights and personal liberties as part of its broader commitment to human rights, and the foundation of a civil state that is built upon the respect and protection of individual liberties."<sup>394</sup> Echoing the FPM's terms, the Kataeb Party reminded national audiences that "individual liberties are protected by the Constitution and no group should be marginalized for its difference."<sup>395</sup> In this way, both parties used the liberal script of pro-queer factions (see next section); they also used queer publicity as an occasion to express their commitment to a civil state based not on sectarian identity but on the equality and liberty of all Lebanese citizens.<sup>396</sup> Rather than marshal the support of pro-gay and anti-sectarian actors, both parties were accused of pinkwashing and pandering to European donors. Pinkwashing notwithstanding, the fact that establishment parties disclosed pro-gay positions is significant: both signaled assent to processes of socio-political secularization in Lebanon.

Given the discordant homophobias of Christian clerics, the divergence of Lebanon's Christian parties further reinforced the image of a Christian house divided. From those cracks, the Soldiers of God had found a political opening. Bypassing the sectarian establishment, they claimed the mantle of Christian representation and enacted a militant genre of sectarianism. Indeed, divisions within the Christian establishment over homophobia aided the Soldier's cause insofar as it evidenced for devout audiences the moral corruption of Christian leaders. Not

---

<sup>394</sup> Maharat Foundation. (2022, July). *Bayan al-dakhiliya yaqsam al-mujtama' libnani bein mu`yed w mu`ared*. Maharat Foundation. [https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ\\_Report](https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ_Report).

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> According to Mark, the FPM-adjacent gay activist and the interlocutor we met in chapter 1, the cause of a civil state was the cause of Michel Aoun's FPM from the start. Speaking to Mark in 2020, he described the pro-gay political initiatives the FPM had undertaken, including a media campaign to abolish Article 534.<sup>396</sup> Likewise, and in 2018, the Kataeb Party – originally the Phalangist militia of warlord Bachir Gmeyel—had included LGBT rights and the abolition of Article 534 on their electoral platform.

leading to alliances among Christian leaders, homophobic mobilization among Christian actors effected more division and competition within the sect itself.

Ultimately, homophobia had varied trajectories and outcomes across Lebanon's three largest sects. Whereas homophobia contributed to synergistic action among ecclesiastics in the Sunni sect, it worked to incite contests of representation among Christian clerics. And while anti-gay incitement provided a political opening for Christian militant mobilization, Shi'i political actors preempted ecclesiastic usurpations and the arousal of popular homophobic militancy. Consequently, homophobia *consolidated* religious authority in the Sunni sect; it *contained* religious authority in the Shi'i sect; and it *divided* ecclesiastic power in the Christian sect.

Furthermore, and although most actors spoke in the name of "all sects," their universalist invocations did not transcend—or purport to transcend—sectarian difference, but to fortify it. Across sect, actors held up their different identities and institutions as the means through which to resist homosexuality's unmaking forces. Importantly, and in resisting homosexuality, sectarian actors did not only invoke the authority of their own sectarian perspective. They also pointed to out-group perspectives and authorities as evidence of their claim. In the words of an impassioned Tripolitan demonstrator, "there is no sect, no priest, no father, no sheikh, no mufti that will accept the idea [of homosexuality]."<sup>397</sup> Marshaling these differences, anti-gay actors pointed to what they took to be the universal validity of their homophobic judgments.

What I want to suggest here is that the plurality of sectarian perspectives and judgments on heterosexual nature and homosexual deviancy—as well as the plurality of homophobic resistances—worked to produce for heterosexuality what political theorist Linda Zerilli following Hannah Arendt describes as an "ordinary sense of objectivity."<sup>398</sup> That is, and through

---

<sup>397</sup> A claim emerging from anti-gay mobilization in Tripoli in July 2022. See "Figure 3.4" in Appendix 3.

<sup>398</sup> Zerilli, L. M. (2016). *A democratic theory of judgment*. University of Chicago Press. 30.

differently situated judgments and perspectives on the same object (heterosexuality, homosexuality), sectarian religious authorities “publicly generated and sustained” the worldly reality of a common and inter-sectarian heterosexuality. Crucially, these different perspectives were not subsumed by a supra-sectarian and anti-gay universal rule. Rather, the differences in sectarian perspectives were held up as evidence of a common, inter-sectarian, and homophobic foundation. Seen through this prism, homophobic discourse re-instantiates Makdisi’s “ecumenical frame” and bolsters it with the common-sense force of inter-sectarian heterosexuality. Again, homophobic mobilization did not imagine a supra-sectarian framework, or a homophobic version of Lebanese nationalism. Rather, and against the nascent unmaking of political sectarianism in June of 2022, anti-gay actors insisted on their different perspectives and engaged in practices of sectarian and heterosexual worldmaking.

#### D. Homophobia and the Factionalization of the Changers

In addition to naming heterosexuality as the common ground of sectarianism and politicizing state clerics, homophobic discourse in 2022 also incited a counter and pro-queer campaign that brought together anti-sectarian elites, civil society NGOs, and other progressive factions across Lebanon’s secular-liberal publics. This counter-mobilization, however, allowed homophobic actors to figure the interests of the new and pro-reform MPs as partial toward a “deviant” societal group. In doing so, homophobic mobilization cast the Changers as a faction (*fi`a*) whose interest in gender and sexual reform was unrepresentative and undermining of the majority of Lebanon’s hetero-only populations. By portraying the Changers as a coalition of conspirators, homophobic discourse thus worked to popularly discredit elite opposition to the sectarian establishment while figuring state clerics and elites as the true defenders of society.

Shortly after the circulation of Mawlawi’s memo, and amidst the homophobic incitement of Lebanon’s religious courts, 8 out of the 13 new independent MPs publicly opposed the ban on Pride-month gatherings. Furthermore, a coalition of 14 civil society organizations created the “Coalition to Protect Freedom of Expression in Lebanon” (Tahaluf lil-Difa’ ‘an Hurriyat al-Ta’bir Fi Lubnan). Explicitly endorsing neither queer publicity nor homosexual legalization, most pro-queer actors articulated their solidarity through a liberal grammar that condemned the state’s violation of personal liberties of speech and expression. For instance, and in a press release on Legal Agenda’s website, the Coalition describes these violations:

The Lebanese authorities have prohibited assemblies of LGBT people in an unconstitutional way, violating constitutional rights of equality, freedoms of expression, and the right to assemble for LGBT people. [The ISF ban] also violates Lebanon’s commitments to international law.<sup>399</sup>

Similarly, Tarek Zeidan—the Executive Director of Helem, and a member of the Coalition—figures anti-gay incitement as indexing “the deterioration of rights and freedoms in Lebanon.”<sup>400</sup> Indeed, this liberal grammar was used by the vast majority of anti-homophobic positions, including those of pro-queer advocacy groups like Helem, Legal Agenda, and MADA (the university Secular Club network); parliamentary coalitions like the progressive “National Bloc,” “Taqaddum” (Progress) and Shimaluna (“Our North”); and grassroots political organizations like La Haki (For My right), Muwatinun w Muwatinat Fi Dawla (Citizens in a State), and Beirut Taqum (Beirut Rises).<sup>401</sup> On the one hand, these actors are correct: the security ban on Pride Month had technically violated Lebanon’s freedom of assembly laws. On the other hand, the

---

<sup>399</sup> Legal Agenda. (2022, July 4). *Bayan li-tahaluf al-difa’ ‘an hurriyat al-ta’bir fi lubnan: Li-himayat afrad mujtama’ al meem min al-hijmat.*

<sup>400</sup> Maharat Foundation. (2022, July). *Bayan al-dakhiliya yaqsam al-mujtama’ libnani bein mu`yed w mu`ared.* Maharat Foundation. [https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ\\_Report](https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ_Report).

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

liberalism of these pro-queer positions acted as if sexuality in Lebanon's sectarian society is a matter of private concern, rather than a matter of public and foundational importance.

In 2022, the liberal grammar of anti-homophobic actors further displaced the problem of homophobia onto corrupt state elites while remaining silent on the question of popularly entrenched homophobia in Lebanese society. For instance, independent MP Paula Yacoubian ridiculed the sectarian establishment's "theatrical play of preserving national ethics... while the mafia that robbed the country and people's money is now waging a war against queers to protect religious difference."<sup>402</sup> Echoing this position, Najah Iytani—the organizer of the Coalition on Free Expression—condemned the scapegoating of queers, claiming that "rather than sacrifice the rights of the LGBT community, Lebanese authorities must redirect their interests to lightening the load of economic collapse."<sup>403</sup> And in a televised interview, Changer MP Elias Jrede responds to a question on his support for civil marriage and homosexuality in the following way:

The homosexual question... umm.. well the sufferings/tragedies of Lebanon, I don't know why we would compound (*nzid*) on the citizen, why are they (the establishment) interested in it? If I'm talking personally, I don't have a position on the [private] lives of people, but I have a position in [why there is] interest in this topic now... They [the establishment] are trying to fragment (*tashtit*) of the public opinion...<sup>404</sup>

Like Yacoubian and Iytani, Jrede figures homophobia as a tool for sectarian elites to divide popular opinion and to divert it from the real economic problems of which the establishment is responsible. Queers in this discourse appear as only a scapegoat—a marginalized group that is politically harmless and wrongfully condemned. The positions of pro-queer actors also split elite and societal homophobia, focusing largely on the former while minimizing the latter. In doing

---

<sup>402</sup> Sky News Arabia. "Manasat Junood al Rab... Majmu'at Amn-Zati Tuthir Makhawef Al-Mughradin al-Lubnaniyeen." *YouTube*. December 21, 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1\\_FBt9RyO0I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_FBt9RyO0I).

<sup>403</sup> Maharat Foundation. (2022, July). *Bayan al-dakhiliya yaqsam al-mujtama' libnani bein mu'yed w mu'ared*. Maharat Foundation. [https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ\\_Report](https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ_Report).

<sup>404</sup> AL Jadeed News. (2022, July 6). *Al-hadath 7-6-2022 elias jrede*. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liuiI9C8Fxc>



so, these voices deny the threat that queers pose to Lebanese *society*—namely, the transformation of the “natural” and heterosexual ground upon which sectarian societies stand. By displacing homophobia onto “bad” elites and a “bad” state, pro-queer actors thus evade the fact that the establishment of a “civil state”—the purported goal of anti-sectarian political change—would also involve the gender and sexual reform of Lebanese law *and* society.<sup>405</sup>

Paradoxically, the liberal emphasis on privacy in pro-gay positions and the evasion of directly addressing the public implications of gender and sexual reform contributed to the sectarian figuration of Lebanon’s progressive factions—including the new MPs—as evasive, manipulative and conspiratorial. On social media, for instance, a picture of the pro-gay independent MPs circulated under the headline “the Ministers of Sexual Deviance” (Nuwwab al Shuzooz) and evidenced the “exposure of [the MPs] true projects and agendas.”<sup>406</sup> Speaking from northeast Lebanon, the Beq’ai Sheikh Khaled Abdel Fattah echoes this claim:

We were suspicious of the Changers, who were voted in by the kinds of people who hold these views, and who carry similar agendas, and its not possible in this time where people cannot find bread, that the conversation is on this *fi`a`’s* (group) rights, which is refused in all Eastern and Western customs.<sup>407</sup>

Voted in by specific “kinds of people,”—assumedly secular and homosexual-loving—Abdel Fattah’s discourse casts doubt on the intentions and representativeness of the Changer candidates

---

<sup>405</sup> Importantly, this split has its analog in scholarly approaches that take homophobia to largely be a tool of elite diversion and distraction. For instance, political scientist Michael Bosia argues that “there is no necessary and fixed relationship between political homophobia and extant private homophobia or even local sexual discourse” (Bosia 5). Rather, and for Bosia, homophobia represents a “conscious political strategy” that elites use to divert populations “from larger crises and threats to existing authorities” (4). In a similar vein, political scientist Ashley Courrier depicts homophobia as a conscious “strategy,” and draws clear distinctions between its political, societal, and familial variants (14). And in a different register, scholars of moral panics like Roger Lancaster, Gayle Rubin, and Stanley Cohen similarly frame affective incitement over queer sexuality as unrelated; a mechanism of elite or media-led diversion. Though these scholars analyze dynamics of popular escalation, they nevertheless fall back upon notions of cynical and elite causality.

<sup>406</sup> Maharat Foundation. (2022, July). *Bayan al-dakhiliya yaqsam al-mujtama’ libnani bein mu`yed w mu`ared*. Maharat Foundation. [https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ\\_Report](https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ_Report).

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

and figures them as agents of breakdown rather than as a solution to it.

In these ways, their mobilization around homosexuality and their denial of it as a public and foundational political issue—rather than as an issue of private rights—made the Changer MPs appear to homophobic populations as deceitful and out of touch. By invoking the pains of Lebanon’s financial collapse, sectarian clerics and elites also accused pro-queer actors of elitism and disconnectedness from the economic suffering of the Lebanese nation.<sup>408</sup> Indeed, homophobic discourses depicted the Changers as representing a privileged sliver of Lebanese citizens who were associated with a secularized civil society, international NGOs and business interests, and foreign sponsors and patrons. By framing “the Changers” as a kind of class enemy to the 80% of Lebanese below the poverty line, sectarian actors thus used homophobia to unmake the democratic representativeness of the 2022 independent electoral victories.

### C. The Partialization of the Judiciary

In addition to figuring the Changers as a subversive enemy, homophobic mobilization around queer publicity also politicized the Lebanese Judiciary as a site of struggle between pro-queer and anti-queer factions. Responding to the Interior Minister’s anti-gay ban, advocacy groups Helem and Legal Agenda filed a joint plea with Lebanon’s Court of Cassation.<sup>409</sup> In their plea, lawyers Karim Nammour, Ghida Frangieh, and Nizar Saghigh primarily argued for how the ban violated personal freedoms guaranteed by the Lebanese Constitution. They also pointed to the precedent rulings that worked to decriminalize homosexuality since 2009 (see earlier). On August 25, 2022, the Court of Cassation enacted a temporary restriction on the Interior Minister’s directive until a final decision was reached. Three months later, pro-gay factions declared a victory, when the Court of Cassation’s presiding judges—Fadi Elias, Patricia Fares,

---

<sup>408</sup> See the position of the Sunni Baalbek cleric above.

<sup>409</sup> Lebanon’s Supreme Court.

and Karl ‘irani—issued a final ruling that overturned Mawlawi’s Pride-time ban on gay gatherings.<sup>410</sup> This anti-homophobic judicial victory became the latest instantiation of more than a decade of pro-gay legal rulings led by the lawyers of Legal Agenda.

Unlike the preceding pro-gay rulings, however, the Court of Cassation’s 2022 decision was a high profile case—one that had stakes for anti-queer political actors. Indeed, the decision was taken as a defeat for Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi, who in the wake of the court’s ruling, mobilized in a renewed bout of homophobic alliance-making. Days after the decision, Mawlawi paid a visit to Metropolitan Elias Aoude, the head of the Greek Orthodox religious courts. “It was a meeting that was nationalist, spiritual... a meeting of love and coexistence,” Mawlawi recounts to a journalist:

We talked about all the matters that concern the Lebanese nation and the Lebanese family (al usra al-libnaniya). And I made certain to Aoude the importance of committing to the foundations (qawa’ed) of the family, which is the capital (ra`esmal) of Lebanon and its mercy (barakatuha); we want the mercy of God, not his punishment... It is on the people to distance themselves from all the activities and the claims of freedoms that are in fact attacks against the nation and its security, as well as on the family; all things that people should hold onto because they are principle (asasiya).<sup>411</sup>

Echoing the discourse of Christian clerics—as well as his own original position—Mawlawi articulates heterosexuality as the shared principle, foundation, and condition for religious pluralism and coexistence in Lebanon. However, Mawlawi also upgrades his homophobic discourse by signifying heterosexuality as the “foundations” of the “Lebanese family”—the institution that is shared across Lebanon’s divides. In times of fiscal inflation and collapse, he hails the family as a common source of human and spiritual value for the country.

---

<sup>410</sup> See Figure 3.1: Mawlawi’s Memo” in “Appendix 3: Redefining Nature.”

<sup>411</sup> Next Lebanon. (2022, November 19). *Qarar majlis al-shura al-mu`yed lil-mithliyeen harraq al ra`i al-'am*. Next LB. <https://nextlb.com/people/61755>.

In late 2022, and in the aftermath of the Court of Cassation's decision, sectarian elites and clerics elaborated their summertime homophobic discourse and standardized it. Rallying around the "Lebanese family," they formed alliances, coalitions, and delegations that cut across institutional and sectarian divides. A few days after his visit to Aoude, Mawlawi hosted a delegation from Dar al Fatwa that comprised the President of the Sunni religious courts Sheikh Mohammad Assaf, as well as the Sunni religious judges Khaldun Arimit, Wael Shabaro, Ziad al-Saheb, and Bilal Malla.<sup>412</sup> In a press release from Dar al Fatwa, Assaf thanked the Interior Minister on behalf of the Grand Mufti Abdallatif Derian, while also supporting him in his protection of the family and its "ethical" (read: heterosexual) foundations.<sup>413</sup>

Following the visit of the Sunni delegation to Mawlawi was the formation of "The Foundational Council Against the Provocations of the Family" (al-hay'a al ta'sisiya l-tahadiyat al-usra).<sup>414</sup> The cross-sectarian and first-of-its-kind coalition included Sheikh Amir Ra'ed from Dar al Fatwa; Sheikh Mohammad Hejazi from the Shi'i Higher Council; Sheikh Ali Khatib from the Druze sect; Director Khoder al Agha from Al-Irshad, a Sunni-identified religious NGO; and Father Abdo Abu Kassem from the Catholic Media Center. "We have been working together for a while for the fortification (tahsin) of the family and its protection against those who transmogrify (yushaweh) its image," Abu Kassem explains. Speaking in the name of the coalition, he expressed solidarity with the Interior Minister and encouraged him to "continue with his campaign because we are in need of strengthening the family after we have been hit

---

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Speaking in the name of Dar al Fatwa, Assaf asserted his refusal of the court ruling: "we do not recognize (*nastanker*) the decision about the sexual deviants and the abominable parties (*hafalat mubaha*)." Though the Court purports to uphold freedom, Assaf reminded that freedom has its limits: "for there is no unrestricted right, and freedom stops at the trespassing of ethics." Distinguishing between freedom and license, Assaf admonishes against "any freedoms that touch religious rituals" and in doing so, "attack" the religious freedoms of others. Standing in solidarity with Dar al Fatwa and Mawlawi, the Islamic Media Council in Lebanon - a religious non-state organization - expressed its resistance to campaigns that promote homosexuality "under the guise of personal liberties," as well as its refusal "of the Shura Council who legitimizes the activities of deviants."

<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

with political and economic afflictions... we are in a state of chaos. We hope that the family remains cohered and we are always beside him in his decisions.”<sup>415</sup>

In contradistinction to the heterogenous claims of anti-gay actors in the summer, the discourse of the Foundational Council uses the “Lebanese family” as a political lynchpin for cross-sectarian collective action.<sup>416</sup> By expressing his unwavering support for the Minister’s anti-gay decisions, Assaf, Abu Kassem, and others refused the legally-binding ruling of Lebanon’s Court of Cassation, figuring it as partial to particular (queer) societal interests. Consequently, and in their concerted refusals, anti-gay actors figured the family as a bulwark against what they framed as a politicized and pro-gay judiciary.

In the aftermath of the Court of Cassation’s decision, the anti-gay depiction of the judiciary as a politicized body leaned upon an already established and cross-sectarian campaign against what lawyers described as Lebanon’s “last remaining independent institution.”<sup>417</sup> Throughout the years of collapse, for instance, accusations of judicial partiality by sectarian elites have stalemated the course of the still-ongoing Port Blast investigation, as well as cases related to elite corruption and money-laundering. However, and in an interview with lawyer Nizar Saghieh, he expands upon the specific difference between the Port Blast investigation and the case for homosexual decriminalization:

Homosexuality, you know very well that it’s an unpopular case; whereas with the Port Blast, it’s a very popular case, everyone is with accountability; so in principle it should be a popular case. And we knew, because we worked on the case of the disappeared in the civil war. And we knew two things: the first is that the establishment has the power to transform any legal case into a political case; and as such, once it gets

---

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

<sup>416</sup> But what is important here is that unlike the family-centric discourse of homophobic mobilization in the global North, the invocation of the Lebanese family depends upon sectarian difference(s) for its articulation. Indeed, there is not one sectarian family but fifteen different family structures that are produced by Lebanon’s fifteen religious courts.

<sup>417</sup> Makhlouf, Y. (2019, August 3). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

political, it goes into accounting - am I going to win or lose this case. [This] creates competition [such that] you no longer think of [the case] as a justice case. It becomes about victory and defeat.<sup>418</sup>

According to Nizar, the case of disappeared victims in the 1975-1990 civil war is similar to the Port Blast investigation insofar as both enjoy(ed) societal popularity. And though sectarian elites attempted to sway the opinion of their bases against the judicial actors involved in these “popular” cases, they failed in changing public opinion against the cases themselves. As Saghieh acknowledges, however, the case for homosexual decriminalization was always already an unpopular cause in Lebanese society. As we saw, it was this popular homophobic consensus that had led Saghieh and his comrades to initially tackle homosexual reform through the socially insulated judiciary in the first place.

In 2022, and after the achievement of two decades’ worth of pro-gay rulings, the legally focused campaign against homophobia had backfired. With the anti-gay incitement in the summer and the Court of Cassation’s November decision, the mostly covert and pro-gay judicial victories of the previous two decades were exposed to homophobic elites and a homophobic public. Because they did not represent the popular homophobic consensus, these rulings, once revealed, worked to undermine the image of the judiciary as a democratic institution that represented the Lebanese people. Figuring the courts as instruments for secular elite interests, sectarian elites coded sexual justice as a factional project and boomeranged claims of corruption against progressive actors themselves. According to Saghieh:

There’s a conversion of the debate, from one about social/economic rights toward a debate about homosexuality. And in this debate, we lose a lot, because rather than being us (progressive, opposition lawyers) and society against the Sultah (sectarian establishment), we are now against both the Sultah and society. Before, there was a consideration that the Sultah was harmful and corrupt. And now, the Sultah

---

<sup>418</sup> Saghieh, N. (2022, December 16). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

comes out as protecting society against you (the opposition). It's this image of the political actor being the savior and the law being corrupt. You're destroying the judiciary and a possibility for its intervention... we go back to the idea of groups conflicted with each other, and then it becomes a problem of bargaining, negotiation, and compromise. No justice, but only compromise and consensus. Instead of building a common state, it is becoming fractured.<sup>419</sup>

But while Saghieh laments the homophobic manipulations of the sectarian establishment, his discourse elides how, in pushing for homosexual decriminalization in law and society, pro-gay lawyers are indeed *against* Lebanon's plural and homophobic societies. In other words, Saghieh voices the liberal terms of other anti-homophobic actors and frames homophobic resistance to sexual justice as a product of elite manipulation and popular naivety. This is understandable, given the overwhelming societal consensus that actors like Saghieh are going up against. But what is implicit in Saghieh's discourse, as well as the discourse of other lawyers and activists, is a resignation to the possibility that homophobia could be socially abolished or even unmade.

Saghieh's emphasis on cynical sectarian politicking further occludes how anti-gay elites could be as authentically invested in anti-gay judicial reform as progressive factions are invested in homosexual decriminalization. In other words, the maintenance of heterosexual absolutism is as much a matter of justice for homophobic actors as gender and sexual pluralism is for anti-homophobic ones. Consequently, and in the discourse of pro-gay actors was a refusal to acknowledge the validity of popular homophobic commitments, as well as the authenticity of the political action it spawned. In this way, queer publicity in 2022—as well as its criminalization—generated a stalemate between pro-queer and anti-queer factions, one that was ultimately fought in the Lebanese courts. And though the November 2022 decision figured as one more victory for

---

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

homosexual decriminalization in Lebanon, that victory worked to mobilize a growing and more organized anti-gay resistance.

#### Part IV: Conclusion—A More Organized Homophobic Resistance

By the summer of 2023, the stalemate over the question of queer publicity and homosexual decriminalization shifted once more and mobilized homophobic and homophilic actors and coalitions in a higher stakes round of political contestation. This time, it was not the courts that served as the arena for the battle, but the Lebanese Parliament. In mid-June of 2023, a draft bill to abolish Article 534 circulated in Parliament and shocked the Lebanese public, including the country's queer communities and advocacy groups, who had no idea of the project. According to Samer Dada—the Programs Manager at Helem—the bill was a “mistake” that was pushed by a single person, who according to Dada, represents a “one-man NGO” in Lebanon's secular civil society.<sup>420</sup> Having relations with the new and civil society-allied MPs, the project was adopted by a progressive coalition that comprised some of the “Changer” MPs as well as progressive MPs from the Kataeb Party.<sup>421</sup> Remarkably, this coalition began lobbying MPs from across sectarian blocs, who, according to Dada, pointed to the positive “economic and social impact” of homosexual decriminalization on Lebanon: “[The MPs] started talking in the language of interests, of capitalism, trade, economy... they told [traditional MPs] that there would be so many tourists when we're counted as liberal and open,” Dada recounts to me. Indeed, it was the potential persuasiveness of sexual and political liberalization that struck terror in the heart of those sectarian factions—specifically the Amal and Hezbollah Parties, or the “Shi'i Duo” (*thuna`i al Shi'i*)—who wanted to maintain the hetero-sectarian status quo.

---

<sup>420</sup> Dada, S. (2024, January 12). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer). [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.



Not taking a backseat to homophobic incitement as they did the previous summer, the Amal and Hezbollah Parties mobilized their coalitional allies in 2023 and drafted multiple legal projects that would more explicitly criminalize private and public homosexuality. At the helm of this campaign were Amal Party MP Ashraf al-Rifi and Amal Party Leader and the Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri who sponsored the United Center for Research and Progress (Markaz al-Etihad lil-Abhath wal-Tatwir) to generate a proposal for a new and comprehensive anti-homosexuality law. On July 31, 2023, the United Center published a report—“A Legal Project To Battle Sexual Deviancy in Lebanon” or “Mashrou` Qanun li-Munahadat al-Shuzooz al-Jinsi fi Lubnan”—that drafted a law containing 16 articles against the public and private exercise of homosexuality.<sup>422</sup> More radical than Article 534, this law would criminalize not only private gay sex with a ten year sentence; it would give those suspected of being gay or queer a three year prison sentence. “This is a legal proposal,” Samer tells me, “That has returned us to the Middle Ages. Now, if you put any post on Instagram, you might be followed/pursued. It even gives a mandate for ordinary people to be informants... it encourages people to police each other.”<sup>423</sup> As such, this upgraded anti-homosexuality law proved to be the very nightmare that queer activists and advocates had attempted to avoid by working solely to neutralize Article 534 through the courts rather than eliminating it through Parliament.

Indeed, the new legal proposal upgraded Article 534 not only by expanding what could be criminalized but also by explicitly defining sexual nature and deviancy. Entitled “The Definition of the Term Sexual Deviancy” (*Tahdid al-Mustalah al-Shuzooz al-Jinsi*), Article 1 of the draft law proclaims:

---

<sup>422</sup>*Mashrou` li-Munahadat al-Shuzooz al-Jinsi fi lubnan*. (2023, July 31).

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/sexualorientation/cfi-report-hrc-56-49/subm-ahrc5649-protection-against-cso-seeds-legal-initiatives-input-2.pdf>.

<sup>423</sup> Dada, S. (2024, January 12). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

Sexual deviancy is the practice of an abominable act (*fi'l fahish*), and it is an assault (*ta'adi*) on religious values (*qiyam al diniyah*), legal values (*shar'iyah*), ethical values and could also be considered a criminal danger (*khutura ijramiyah*) and renders it a felony in the Penal Code. It has grave societal effects, the most important of which is the destruction of humankind (*tadmir al jins al-bashari*) as a result of a lack of procreation, and it encourages the movement of atheism and the transgression of legal familial boundaries (*al-hudood al shar'iyah al ahliya*) and the destruction of all the prohibitions (*al-muharamat*) and the destruction of the ethical regime of society (*al-nitham al qiyami lil-mujutama*).<sup>424</sup>

By providing an explicit and legal definition of “sexual deviancy,” this proposal corrects the vagueness of Article 534’s references to “acts” and an “order of nature. As we have seen, it was the Article’s very vagueness that allowed queer advocates and activists to redefine deviancy as homosexuality and to re-interpret “nature” as inclusive of gender and sexual pluralism. In this way, the new homophobic law responds to the historic method of decriminalizing queerness in Lebanon while also preempting it by securing the definition of both homosexual deviancy and heterosexual human nature.

Furthermore, and while homophobic incitement in the summer of 2022 incited heterogenous discourses on heterosexuality, the new legal proposal worked to standardize heterosexuality’s signifiers. Again, the term heterosexuality does not appear in the text of the law nor does it presently exist as a legible or ordinary term in Arabic. Nevertheless, the legal proposal uses the signifiers for heterosexuality that Lebanon’s religious authorities have invoked in their discourse—“religious values,” “ethical values,” the “ethical regime of society,” the “human race”— and aims to codify them in the state’s Penal Code. The new proposal also explicitly figures homosexuality as a crime against religious law and the shared legal ground that exists between Lebanon’s sects. Article 3 declares:

---

<sup>424</sup>*Mashrou` li-Munahadat al-Shuzooz al-Jinsi fi lubnan*. (2023, July 31). <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/sexualorientation/cfi-report-hrc-56-49/subm-ahrc5649-protection-against-cso-seeds-legal-initiatives-input-2.pdf>.

Sexual deviancy will be considered an act that violates the religious jurisdictions (*al-ahkam al-diyaniyah*) of all of Lebanon's sects and the social customs that are shared (*al-sawiyah*). It is not permitted to ignore this jurisdiction by figuring sexual deviancy as a personal liberty that is protected under Article 183.<sup>425</sup>

In this way, the new anti-homosexuality law would formally institutionalize the homophobic commonsense and “objectivity” on heterosexuality that religious authorities had articulated in 2022. By elevating religious prohibitions to the status of criminal state law, the new anti-homosexuality proposal would also formally expand the jurisdiction of religious authorities in the state beyond the limits that Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution sets on them. Rather, the new anti-gay law would render religious authorities the formal guardians of the common heterosexual and inter-sectarian interest.

With the outbreak of the Israel/Gaza War just two months after its proposal, the anti-gay law was not voted on in Parliament. Nevertheless, the success of homophobic coalition-building and the precision of the law's language reflects an unsettling conclusion: the increased power and publicity of queer actors and allies were met with a more organized homophobic resistance. In the summer of 2022, queer publicity during Pride Month had incited heterogenous discourses on heterosexuality and homosexuality and asynchronously activated Lebanon's religious authorities and some political elites. In November 2022, however, the Court of Cassation's decision to overturn the ban on queer publicity effected the creation of formal coalitions and federations between different religious authorities, state institutions and elites. By 2023, the organizational capacity of homophobic actors had increased as parliamentary coalitions, religious civil society campaigns, and ministerial alliances worked to combat the threat of total homosexual decriminalization in Lebanese law and society.<sup>426</sup>

---

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> While the Shi'i establishment worked on the anti-deviancy bill, Sunni Prime Minister Najib Miqati also mobilized his cross-sectarian cabinet of ministers toward more radical homophobic action. That summer, for

By August of 2023, the intensity of homophobic resistance succeeded in stalemating the abolition of Article 534: scared of the effects on their future reelection, many of the pro-queer MPs withdrew their signatures from the draft bill and ceased any talk about the rights of Lebanon's queer minority. And with the outbreak of war and genocide in Israel/Palestine, the question of queer criminalization and decriminalization was quickly forgotten. But what is significant is that homophobic and homophilic mobilization had worked to induct the new reformist MPs as a bloc that opposed not only the sectarian establishment but one that opposed the majority of the Lebanese people as well. This allowed homophobic actors to cast the new MPs and the secular civil society that they represent as a popular enemy. It also enabled homophobic actors to figure the reform and transformation of the sectarian system as a conspiratorial project, one that purported to battle corruption only to institutionalize an even worse form of it. The homophobic frame of an internal and pro-queer enemy bloc was further taken up by the Hezbollah Party, whose anticolonial rhetoric in the summer of 2023 related the threat of "sexual deviancy" to the foreign colonization of Lebanese society. As we shall see in the next chapter, Hezbollah's proposal was not merely to secure the definition of sexual deviancy in the law. The Party's late leader also sought to secure the consciousnesses of youth and children against the seductions of queer identification and the promises of gender and sexual self-determination.

---

instance, Miqati allied with the Shi'i Minister of Culture Mohammad Mortada to oppose the screening of Barbie and Spiderman—two films that were accused of promoting (*tarweej*) homosexuality and feminism. And in Sunni Tarik Jdeideh, Samer Dada describes a protest by a religious civil society organization "The Call for Islamic Culture" (Du'at al Thaqafeh al Islamiya) where some Sunni MPs, in preparation for the 2024-2025 Parliamentary elections, spoke to the area's devout populations against the legalization of homosexuality.

## **Chapter 4: “The War on Consciousness”: Empire, Resistance, and the Threat of Queer**

### **Education**

On July 22, 2023, the late General Secretary of the Hezbollah Party Hassan Nasrallah delivered the first in a weeklong series of nationally televised addresses. While their principal aim was to inaugurate the start of ‘ashoura,<sup>427</sup> Nasrallah’s speeches were also political in nature, honoring the sacrifices and victories of the Hezbollah Party in the face of its enemies (Israel and America). What was surprising about Nasrallah’s rhetoric, however, was its emphasis on homosexuality or “sexual deviancy” (*shuzooz jinsi*). In fact, the General Secretary took the occasion of ‘ashoura to respond to the then recent controversy over queer-friendly textbooks that were circulating in some of the country’s schools. Framing queer education as a part of a colonial “war on consciousness,” Nasrallah explains:

In the past few months, the United States has announced a project (Mashrou’) that is clear, scandalous, and it has adopted it and recruited for it, and it will work toward it... day and night. This relates to the rumor of sexual deviancy in the world and the call (da’wa) to unnatural and deviant relations... There is a document that is [has been] circulated from the US State Department to all of America’s embassies in the world, that are demanding their communication with the governments of those countries, asking them to implement a variety of steps and programs that are put into the service of this project of deviancy, that they name homosexuality... Which means that America has created a program (birnamej) that it works in politically, and in the media, and that it will work in through children’s cartoons, and it will work in it in advertising and it will use all of the resources/platforms for the success of this project. The pressure has begun... they want to bring in this topic into the Ministry of Education, to the educational curriculums, and to schools, and the most dangerous thing is in schools.<sup>428</sup>

---

<sup>427</sup> Ashoura is a Shi’a Muslim commemoration marking the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. It is observed as a day of mourning and reflection on sacrifice, justice, and resistance against oppression.

<sup>428</sup> Nasrallah, H. (2023, July 22). [Al-manar tv]. ‘Ashoura. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeVr71jtgIQ>. Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.

Speaking with the passionate resolve of a war general, Nasrallah's discourse figured queer education as a threat to anti-colonial resistance and a critical front in the battle against American and Israeli empire. Across a week of televised addresses, Hezbollah's General Secretary elaborated the dangers of publicly circulating queer knowledge and educated his audiences in methods of anti-gay resistance.

In 2023, Nasrallah's homophobic speeches occurred in a context of escalating anti-gay mobilization in Lebanon. But they also responded to internal and external threats to Hezbollah's rule. On the domestic front, opposition came from Lebanese civil society, which had been growing in power and influence since the 2019 Lebanon Revolution. In 2022, the election of 13 independent MPs ousted several Hezbollah incumbents and became a source of institutionalized and anti-sectarian opposition. Externally, Hezbollah's incitement against queer education coincided with growing Arab-Israeli rapprochement in the region. Under the Abraham Accords, states like the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco had established diplomatic relations with Israel, with Saudi Arabia then on its way. In Lebanon, Arab-Israeli rapprochement took the form of historic and American-led negotiations to define Lebanese-Israeli land and sea borders. This culminated in the signing of the Maritime Border Accords in November 2022, which in turn, inspired the pursuit of territorial border drawing in the summer of 2023. That summer was also a time of violent border-skirmishes between Hezbollah and IDF units. Seen in this light, Nasrallah's anti-queer rhetoric intervened in a time of geopolitical tension and transformation. Homophobic incitement also came just months before the outbreak of the Israel/Gaza War which concluded with the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah himself and the near total-demise of the Hezbollah Party's military capacities.

Despite the end of Hezbollah's dominance over Lebanon, this chapter investigates the relationship between homophobic incitement and the reproduction of Hezbollah's rule in times of geopolitical crisis. It asks the following questions: what threat does queer education pose to Hezbollah's geopolitical power and influence? How does homophobic discourse frame the threat of public queer knowledge? In what ways does anti-gay rhetoric respond to this threat? Finally, and given internal and external challenges to the Hezbollah Party, what does homophobia reveal about the role of sexual threat in the reproduction of geopolitical causes and solidarities?

### Argument

In the following chapter, I define queer education as discourses, representations, and practices that publicize knowledge about the existence of LGBTQ identities, societies, and cultures. Defined as such, queer education encompasses formal initiatives—like the controversy this chapter opens with—as well as knowledge about queerness gained from the Internet, television, and other cultural media. I argue that the threat of queer education lies in its capacity to publicize knowledge about the existence of gender and sexual pluralism in Lebanese society and to encourage queer self-disclosure and self-definition among queer and proto-queer children and youth.<sup>429</sup> While queer self-definition itself threatens the reproduction of the hetero-religious families—the kernel of Hezbollah's power—it also bears the potential to generate forms of transnational solidarity that interfere with Hezbollah's monopolization of anticolonial resistance in Lebanon.

Responding to this threat, Hezbollah's late General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah frames queer education as an American plot that seeks to colonize the minds, ideas, and identities of youth. Delivering a series of speeches on the issue, he deploys four anti-gay rhetorical strategies:

---

<sup>429</sup> I use “proto-queer” as an adaptation of Eve Sedgwick's formulation of “proto-gay” children to name those children who may experience queer desire but who neither identify as LGBTQ nor relate to themselves as queer subjects, mostly owing to the secrecy in which homophobic societies shroud knowledge of queerness.

first, Nasrallah provides a genealogy of queer colonization in the West; second, he attributes hyper-agentive capacities to queer and imperial adversaries; third, he emphasizes the deceptive character of the queer enemy; and fourth, he makes use of religious allegories to incite the antagonism and resolve of his bases. Together, these rhetorical tactics comprise a kind of anti-gay education whose function is to intellectually immunize families and communities against the transformative effects of public queer education and advocacy.

I also show how Nasrallah's rhetoric occasioned anti-homophobic discourses among queers and secular-liberal factions in Lebanon. But with the escalation of anti-gay street violence in the late summer of 2023, and with the outbreak of the Israel/Palestine War in the Fall of 2023, both homophobic and anti-homophobic mobilization disappeared almost overnight; in fact, some circulating discourses among queers even called for solidarity with the Hezbollah Party's anti-Israel war effort. Finally, I conclude with how the defeat of Hezbollah—the most powerful homophobic actor in Lebanon—did not produce liberating effects on Lebanese queers. Instead, the war generated ambivalence over the possibility of a queer future in Lebanon.

#### A Note on Hezbollah's Status in Post-Revolution Lebanon

Despite enjoying loyalty among its Shi'i bases, Hezbollah had faced increasing domestic challenges, particularly between the onset of the 2019 Lebanon Revolution and the Party's military defeat in late 2024. In 2019, the Lebanon Revolution was a world-historic event in which Lebanese across sect demanded the wholesale abolition of the sectarian regime. This directly threatened the Hezbollah Party, whose geopolitical power in the region depends on sectarian representation in the Lebanese state.<sup>430</sup> But it was not only non-Shi'i critics and demonstrators who challenged Hezbollah's power. The 2019 Revolution also galvanized in-

---

<sup>430</sup> Indeed, Hezbollah's militant Resistance is existentially dependent on the existence of political sectarianism. Which is why, in the Revolution, a critical focal point for demonstrators was Hezbollah's military arsenal, which many viewed as a liability to national sovereignty and an obstacle to building a civil state.



group opposition to the Party and exposed political fissures within Shi'i communities themselves.<sup>431</sup> These fissures widened during the 2022 Parliamentary Elections, when several independent candidates displaced Hezbollah incumbents in key Shi'i-majority districts in the country. Together, the 2019 Revolution and the 2022 Elections signaled a growing domestic challenge to Hezbollah's cause, as in-group and out-group voices demanded alternatives to the Party's hold on the country.

Between 2020 and 2023, American-backed efforts at Arab-Israeli normalization in the Middle East further threatened Hezbollah's regional military power. In 2020, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan signed peace treaties with Israel. This did not only signal the regional abandonment of the Palestine/anti-Israel cause. By re-drawing lines of regional enmity, the Abraham Accords also worked to contain the imperial influence of Iran and to isolate its Syrian, Lebanese, and Yemeni proxies. Amidst conditions of geopolitical re-alignment, an American-led delegation arrived to Lebanon in late 2020 to initiate historic negotiations that would formally define Lebanon and Israel's maritime borders, allowing both states to extract oil and gas from the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>432</sup>

Though the full normalization of Lebanese-Israeli diplomatic relations remained out of the question, the drawing of maritime borders in the course of Lebanon's fiscal collapse nevertheless promised a detente between the two enemies. For Hezbollah specifically, the easing of hostilities would threaten the organization's *raison d'être*, which required ongoing war with

---

<sup>431</sup> Anti-government protests in Nabatiye – a Hezbollah stronghold in the South – mobilized the violence of Hezbollah-aligned thugs who were also their own neighbors or family members. As captured in “*The 23<sup>rd</sup>*” a documentary about the Nabatiye protests (which is now no longer available), the experience of community-led violence led many to reconsider their political allegiances. One protester declares, “Why do you want to liberate our land and enslave us?” while others more explicitly described the Party's domination as a form of internal occupation. The protest and its aftermath exposed generational divisions within Shi'i communities and threatened Hezbollah's narrative of undying allegiances. [Field Notes January 2021].

<sup>432</sup> Annahar. (2022, May 6). *Bain muraja'at 1559 w al-mu'arada al-dakhiliya lil-hizib*. Annahar. <https://www.annahar.com/arabic/authors/05052022050752532>. Beirut, Lebanon.

Israel. Border-drawing further involved the American and Lebanese governments in the negotiations, which also hit up against the Party's de facto monopoly on conducting war relations with Israel.<sup>433</sup> Finally, border-drawing risked signaling Hezbollah's assent to eventual normalization with its enemy. Nevertheless, and across a period of two tumultuous years, the negotiations generated a historic outcome: on October 27, 2022, an Israeli and Lebanese delegation signed the final border agreement in Naqqoura—a coastal town that hosts the UNIFIL headquarters and sits between the two countries.<sup>434</sup>

Inspired by the success of the maritime-border negotiations, the American-delegation sought to formally define Israel and Lebanon's territorial borders. More explosive than the sea-border initiative, these negotiations directly implicated Hezbollah's military operations: land border-drawing would chafe against the question of Israel's ongoing occupation of several Lebanese border-towns and Hezbollah's ongoing incursions into Israeli territory.<sup>435</sup> In the summer of 2023, the arrival of US diplomat Amos Hochstein in Lebanon also coincided with increased tensions between IDF and Hezbollah forces on the southern border.<sup>436</sup> Against a backdrop of border skirmishes and negotiations, and on the eve of the October 7th War, Hezbollah's General Secretary found a political use for mobilizing against the threat of queer education in Lebanon.

---

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> *Israel, lebanon sign us-brokered maritime border deal*. (2022, October 27). Al-Jazeera.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/27/israel-lebanon-sign-us-brokered-maritime-border-deal>

<sup>435</sup> France24. (2023, October 3). *Hizbullah yu'taber tarseem al-hudood al barriyah mas `ouliyat al dawla al-libnaniya*. France24.

<sup>436</sup> *Ma ba'ed nasb al-khiyam: Furas tarseem al-hudood al-barriya bein lubnan w israel w 'awaq'iha*. (2023, October 5). Emirates Policy Center. <https://www.epc.ae/ar/details/brief/ma-baed-nasb-alkhiam-furas-tarsim-alhudud-albariya-bayn-lubnan-wa-israel-wa-awayiquh>.

## A Note on Queerness in Postcolonial Literatures

To theorize the threat of queer education in Lebanon, I engage debates in postcolonial literatures that figure queer advocacy and politics in the Middle East as forms of neo-colonialism.

The first—and perhaps most influential—piece that articulates public queer advocacy as a problem of empire in the Arab World is Joseph Massad’s 2002 article entitled “Re-Orienting Desire: the Gay International.”<sup>437</sup> For Massad, the threat of the “Gay International”—what he terms the conglomerate of “Western” NGOs, queer advocacy groups, and human rights organizations—is in its global promotion of a public, political, and collective LGBT identity. Indeed, this is the pivotal distinction for Massad: it is not private sex between men that is the problem but “the *sociopolitical identification* of these practices with the Western identity of gayness and the *publicness* that [local] gay-identified men seek”<sup>438</sup> (my emphasis in italics). Locating queer identity, politics, and culture in the West, Massad argues that the promotion and spread of LGBT rights and identities is an imposition on the Arab world, one that leads to the erasure of local sexual cultures and to the incitement of homophobic violence in Arab states and societies. On Massad’s account, then, the harm of public queer identities is in the coercive way they spread (via empire), the epistemic violence they commit, and the societal mal-transformation they effect.

The postcolonial critique of queer identity continues in Jasbir Puar’s 2007 *Terrorist Assemblages*.<sup>439</sup> Focusing on the discourses of the post 9/11 American state, Puar tracks how the normalization of queer identity in the US intersected with the racialization of Muslim minorities

---

<sup>437</sup> Massad, J. (2002). Re-Orienting desire: The gay international and the arab world. *Public Culture*, 14(2), 361–386. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-2-361>

<sup>438</sup> Ibid 382.

<sup>439</sup> Puar, J. K. (2007). *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press.

in the US. She argues for how discourses of American exceptionalism convert queerness from a liberatory ideal into a regulatory norm that facilitates US imperial violence: while some queers—mostly white gay men (in Puar’s estimation)—are welcomed into the folds of national life, entire populations—mostly Muslims in the Middle East—are “queered”<sup>440</sup> and condemned to death. Echoing Massad’s approach, Puar takes up Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis” in order to 1] refute the “liberatory telos” of queer equality and visibility struggles<sup>441</sup>; 2] to expose those struggles as “assimilationist” in nature; and to 3] show how this “homonationalist” project bears a deep complicity—even culpability—with projects of US Empire in the Middle East.<sup>442</sup> In short, and from Puar’s perspective, the threat of queer publicity, identity, and politics is in their ideological collusion with imperial violence against ethnic minorities.

The relationship between queer identity politics and imperial violence was again reinforced in Jasbir Puar and Maya Mikdashi’s 2012 *Jadaliyya* article entitled “Pinkwashing and Pinkwatching: Interpenetration and its Discontents.”<sup>443</sup> Here, Mikdashi and Puar criticize the Israeli state’s ideological use of its gay rights record—as well as Israel’s framing of Palestinian homophobia—to legitimate its occupation of the Palestinian territories. But alongside the critique of Israeli and American pinkwashing, the authors also criticize “pinkwatching,” or the practice by which Arab queer advocacy groups counter pinkwashing efforts and generate global queer solidarity for Palestine by pointing to the existence of Palestinian queers. For Puar and Mikdashi, pinkwatchers end up reproducing Western and “homonationalist” terms of queer identity politics.

---

<sup>440</sup> Rendered abject, perverse, and criminal.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid 16.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid 3.

<sup>443</sup> جدلية, J. -. (2012, August 12). *Pinkwatching and pinkwashing: Interpenetration and its discontents*. *Jadaliyya - جدلية*. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26818>

While this critique is similar to Massad's, Puar and Mikdashi do not deny the existence of Arab queers but argue that Arab queers do not exist in the *same* way as "gays internationally."<sup>444</sup> As such, and in this piece, the threat of queer publicity not only pertains to the imperial abuses of LGBT rights and the legitimation of military occupation(s), but also to the allegedly harmful efforts of queer Arab advocacy groups, whose Western-originating politics<sup>445</sup> and focus on "homophobia"—a term that the authors put in scare quotes—serves to further American and Israeli power in the region.<sup>446</sup> From this vantage point, queer publicity and politics threatens to "divert" attention from proper and non-identitarian forms of political solidarity and organizing around Palestine. Finally, political mobilization around Arab homophobia indexes a "homonationalist" agenda, rendering local attempts at anti-homophobic critique within Arab societies as smokescreens for Western empire.

Though accounts that relate queer identity to the threat of liberal empire remain highly influential in the Western academy, Middle Eastern scholars have also challenged the reigning gay=colonialism equation. For instance, Evren Savcı has argued for how American queer theory's preoccupation with a critique of liberalism has left few tools for analyzing the politicization of sexuality outside the so-called "West."<sup>447</sup> Focusing on the Turkish case, Savcı

---

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Another instance of this kind of theorizing is Lebanese scholar Ghassan Moussawi's *Disruptive Situations*. In one chapter, Moussawi argues for how queer visibility politics, emblemized by the central metaphors of "the closet" and "coming out," are "Western" in origin and thus not applicable – and even alienating – to Lebanese and Arab queers. Like Puar, Mikdashi, and Massad's, Moussawi's analysis works to reinforce the relationship between a politics of queer publicity and Westernism, while simultaneously providing intellectual ground for normalizing the state of gay non-disclosure in Arab societies, a state that reinforces what Monique Wittig would describe as the silent, natural, and "it goes without saying" quality of heterosexuality.

<sup>446</sup> The authors critique the critique of homophobia, writing: "This globalizing of the term homophobia and its attendant assumptions works, therefore (to) suture, rather than disrupt the hetero-homo binary and the gender binary upon which it rests/is intertwined."

<sup>447</sup> Savcı, E. (2021). *Queer in translation: Sexual politics under neoliberal islam*. Duke University Press.

shows how the Erdogan regime has used sexuality/homophobia in order to cast pious citizens as moral and authentic and queer and secular citizens as immoral and traitorous.<sup>448</sup>

Similarly, and in his ethnography on the queer Palestine global solidarity movement, Palestinian scholar and activist Sa'ed Atshan has directly critiqued Massad, Puar, and Mikdashi, describing them as “radical purists.”<sup>449</sup> Atshan further shows how their frameworks—namely Massad’s “Gay International” and Puar’s “homonationalism”—have had deleterious effects on queer movement building in Palestine and the broader Arab World. More specifically, Atshan points to how scholarly accusations of complicity with empire figure as a form of “discursive disenfranchisement,” robbing Arab and Palestinian queers of the power to name themselves and their sexually oppressive realities.<sup>450</sup>

Indeed, Atshan’s argument was reflected in the accounts of several gay Lebanese activists who I interviewed. While working at Helem, Georges Azzi—the organization’s co-founder—recounted the hostile criticism he received after the publication of Joseph Massad’s 2002 article. He also described how Jasbir Puar organized a conference at the American University in Beirut, where she was “talking about homonationalism and the relationship of gays to Israel.”<sup>451</sup> This mobilized Azzi to stop the publication of an article that risked relating Lebanese queer advocacy to a Zionist agenda.<sup>452</sup> Similarly, and for Tarek Zeidan—the former

---

<sup>448</sup>As Savci illustrates, queer sexuality has come to mediate the question of who authentically belongs to the nation, not only in Turkey, but across authoritarian states in the Global South.

<sup>449</sup> Sa'ed Atshan. (2020). *Queer palestine and the empire of critique*. Stanford University Press.

<sup>450</sup> Targeted by critiques from the Zionist right and the academic left, queer Palestinians face not only demoralization and de-authentication, but accusations of imperial and Zionist complicity from within their own societies.

<sup>451</sup> Azzi, G. (2019, August 16). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>452</sup> Azzi recounts: “People started sending me a lot of criticism, especially from Arab academics who are studying in America. The analyses they’re doing on Helem. And then Jasbir Puar came to Lebanon and made a conference on homonationalism. I mean, 90% of the people who were coming to Helem were trans and from the suburbs of Beirut, they didn’t understand what Jasbir was saying. So [Puar] made this conference in Beirut talking about homonationalism and the relationship of gays to Israel. At this point, I had to stop the article that was going to come

director of Helem—the problem with postcolonial critique is that it is “primarily geared towards western audiences in order to debunk orientalist viewpoints.”<sup>453</sup> While he understands the challenges of structural orientalism in the academy, Zeidan also takes issue with how voices like Puar and Massad “completely erase the voices of the subaltern” and figure those queers who are fighting oppressive homophobic societies and states as imperial “co-conspirators.”<sup>454</sup>

From a feminist angle, political scientist Rochelle Terman has analyzed how accusations of complicity in postcolonial academic critique have naturalized the “double bind” between Islamophobia and gender injustice in the Middle East.<sup>455</sup> According to Terman, “the subliminal normativity operating under the term ‘complicity’ is especially problematic given the fact that scholars who deploy this kind of critique rarely admit to making a normative critique, but rather maintain that their project is strictly analytic or empirical.”<sup>456</sup> But beneath these disavowals, Terman reveals a *political* project that prioritizes resistance to “Western” imperialism above all else and that disparages local voices that attempt to name or critique sexual and gender violence in the region. Indeed, Terman’s critique of academic critique extends to Massad, Puar, and Mikdashi’s treatment of queer publicity, identity, and politics in the Middle East. Masked

---

out because it would have ruined us. Imagine an article saying that the gays of Lebanon had a relationship to Israel and a Zionist Agenda!”

<sup>453</sup> [Zeidan, T. (2019, August 8). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.]

<sup>454</sup> Impassionedly and astutely, Zeidan goes on: “[Postcolonialists] completely demonize the people who are trying desperately every single day to survive and navigate this horrendously oppressive system by labeling us as co-conspirators. And not just native informants, this gay international [concept], and targeting organizations like Helem which is a grassroots organization with a minimal budget, and comparing it with the HRC or other multi-billion dollar organizations that play the political game and try to influence politics through lobbying, when all we’re trying to do is get people out of jail and provide homes for them, so I am done with the postcolonialists.. Yes, the French came and gave us this law [Article 534], and yes it sucks, but I can’t use this in any way today in my activism, it makes zero sense, and even if you utilize it in public discourse, no one gives a ##. I can yell myself hoarse about how before colonialism, [homosexuality] was never criminalized... okay, but the problem isn’t just criminalization by the state, it’s also rampant [societal] homophobia, the problem is that there’s nobody in the Arab world doing research on LGBT population in Arabic, if you’re just gonna come here and publish for Western audiences, you’re not doing us any favors.” Ibid.

<sup>455</sup> Terman, R. (2015). Islamophobia, feminism and the politics of critique. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33(2), 77–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276415590236>

<sup>456</sup> Ibid 17.

beneath a veneer of purely epistemological concerns is a commitment to figuring secularist, liberal, or non-religious feminist and queer Middle Eastern voices as inescapably imperialist.

Situating myself amidst these animated debates, I argue that queer education in Lebanon is a threat, not because it is an imperial discourse that invents gays where none existed before—as Massad would have it—but because it publicizes the existence of queers in the Arab world and gives that existence a, public, identitarian and political form. And unlike Massad and Puar’s critiques of LGBT identity politics, I contend that queer identities do not commit epistemic liberal violence. Rather, the publicity of queer identities and knowledge(s) existentially challenges the state of public queer non-disclosure that reigns supreme in Arab societies and states, including in Lebanon. At stake in the struggle for queer education, then, is not a threat of Western colonization but a threat to societies, states, and causes that are built upon public heterosexual absolutism and queer silence.

#### Part I: Causes and Education in Lebanese Sectarianism

Since 1866, the modern sectarian settlement has not only operated as a power-sharing agreement between Lebanon’s domestic factions. Sectarianism is also a political order in which different groups battle for different political causes. Those causes often transcend local and national contexts, connecting sectarian communities to global political struggles. Indeed, this aspect of sectarianism has rendered Lebanon an arena for variety of regional and global causes to be fought, often at violent costs.<sup>457</sup> But despite their often-enduring presence in Lebanon’s history, political causes face a fundamental challenge: their survival depends on their ability to

---

<sup>457</sup> In the wake of Lebanon’s independence, for instance, Arab Nationalism was one such historic cause; it connected internal socialist and Sunni factions to Arab regimes like Gamal Abdel-Nasser in Egypt and Hafez al-Assad in Syria. So too was Christian nationalism, a cause that has related Maronite factions to Western imperial powers since Lebanon’s inception in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, and probably the most consequential for Lebanon is the cause of Palestine, which has been taken up by a number of Lebanese actors since the foundation of the Israeli state in 1948. See Fadi Bardawil. (2020). *Revolution and disenchantment: Arab marxism and the binds of emancipation*. Duke University Press; and Zeina Maasri. (2020). *Cosmopolitan radicalism: The visual politics of beirut’s global sixties*. Cambridge University Press.



secure the political allegiance of future generations. The ideological production of allegiance is all the more urgent given that Lebanon's regime is not authoritarian. This means that political actors do not have the capacity to generate allegiance to a cause through repressive means alone. Instead, the inter-generational production of allegiance—of loyalty, attachment, and conviction in a cause—largely depends on formal and informal education.

In Lebanon, formal education is comprised of plural and insulated educational systems that are heavily influenced by the political identity of a given sectarian community. Despite the existence of a national—albeit broken—curriculum, differently situated schools and universities teach different political histories and transmit different political allegiances.<sup>458</sup> Schools and universities are also sites for recruitment by sectarian political parties. In Christian areas, for instance, local chapters of the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb Parties actively recruit young Christian men to the cause.<sup>459</sup> Likewise, and in Shi'i-majority schools and universities, Hezbollah and Amal Party thugs attempt to recruit Shi'i youth to wars in Syria and Palestine (see later). Through this lens, education thus works as a site of political reproduction in Lebanon: it emerges from a specific sectarian ecology and works to recruit and regenerate the political loyalties of children and youth.

More intimate than schools are families; they serve as primary vehicles for the inter-generational production of political allegiances, solidarities, and enmities. Through everyday practices, narratives, and expectations, families transmit their convictions to their children and their loyalties to political causes that have defined their identities. This is especially true with

---

<sup>458</sup> Mark, who we met in the previous chapters, describes these differences as “civilizational” (*hadari*). Growing up in a right-wing Christian community, he attended a Catholic school administered by French nuns, who taught him French history, language and culture. He was shocked when he had to take the national exam in a Shi'a high school, the first moment he had left his area and was exposed to out-group others [Mark. (2020, November 12). Ethnographic Interview. Beirut, Lebanon.]

<sup>459</sup> Another interlocutor, R, recounts the pressures that the Kata'eb Party thugs had put on him to join their school “buta,” or clique. The school, R explains, was mostly comprised of these buwat (cliques), making it very difficult to remain politically independent. [R. (2021, April 25). Ethnographic Interview. Beirut, Lebanon.]

causes associated with the 1975-1990 civil war. Indeed, and because there is no official state narrative of the war, differently situated families and communities transmit different versions of the violence. While these processes of familial education are not totalizing, they nevertheless work to perpetuate political causes and loyalties across generations.

Among the causes that have defined Lebanon's history is the cause of anti-Israel Resistance, which until recently in Lebanon, has been monopolized by the Iran-backed Hezbollah Party. Founded in 1984, Hezbollah is a militant organization that emerged out of the violence of the 1975-1990 civil war and the 1982 Israeli invasion and occupation of the Shi'i-majority Lebanese South. Even with the end of the war in 1990 and the dissolution of most other militias, the postwar Ta'if Accords had allowed Hezbollah to maintain its military arsenal. For the next ten years, Hezbollah combatants would fight the IDF guerrilla style until the latter's withdrawal from Lebanese territory in 2000. At the same time, and in the 1990s, Hezbollah would also work to monopolize the cause of anti-Israel resistance by eliminating competition from non-Hezbollah affiliated militants and militant groups—mostly communists and socialists—who were informally fighting the IDF in the South.<sup>460</sup>

While the liberation of southern Lebanon was Hezbollah's main priority, the end of Israeli occupation meant that the principal reason for Hezbollah's maintaining a military arsenal no longer existed. Which is why the existence of Hezbollah as a military organization has depended upon its framing an imminent threat of Israeli invasion and why the cause of Palestinian liberation had become, after 2000, so integral to the group's mission. No longer focused solely on guarding Lebanon's borders, Hezbollah quickly re-branded itself as a geopolitical actor whose concern was both Israeli *and* American empire in the Middle East. And

---

<sup>460</sup> This includes Mehdi Amel, the Shi'i militant and scholar whose work appears in the introduction and chapter 3 of this dissertation.

though it has faced opposition from internal Lebanese factions, Hezbollah was able to deepen its alliance with Iran and to expand its resistance to fight wars in Syria and Yemen.

Because it does not institute a policy of conscription, the existence of Hezbollah as a military organization depends on securing the investment of Lebanon's Shi'i families, which in turn, would secure for the group a steady flow of fighters. In part, the organization's influence among Shi'i communities leans upon its own reputation of having successfully fought a foreign enemy. It also relies on an extensive educational apparatus designed to produce Resistance-committed men, women, and families. At the formal level, the group administers a series of schools where youth learn about the divine mandate of the Resistance, the illegitimacy of Israel, and the sacrifices of martyrs. Informally, Hezbollah's cultural institutions—ranging from scouting organizations to summer camps and mosques—work to foster a sense of communal loyalty and self-sacrifice.<sup>461</sup> Hezbollah's educational system is also transnational: students are instructed in the ideals of Iran's Islamic Revolution, a project that Hezbollah takes as its political model in Lebanon. Exchange programs between Beirut, Damascus, and Tehran further generated attachments between Shi'i communities in Lebanon and the Iranian state.<sup>462</sup> Seen as such, education—or *tarbiyeh*—is a vital mechanism for the militant and geopolitical reproduction of Hezbollah's power inside and outside of Lebanon.

## Part II: The Threat of Queer Education

By posing a threat to the hetero-religious family, queer education targets the very institution through which Hezbollah transmits political loyalties, recruits fighters, and perpetuates its cause across generations. My argument is twofold: first, I argue that the threat of

---

<sup>461</sup> The Party's late General Secretary would also lead discussions with youth on ethics, religion, and politics. Indeed, these discussions are similar to the style and content of Hassan Nasrallah's televised speeches [Maha. (2020, November 27). Ethnographic Interview. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>462</sup> Several of my Shi'i interlocutors' families had lived and been educated in Iran; one interlocutor was even sent to an educational training camp in Damascus, a former stronghold of Iranian empire. [D. (2022, December 22). Ethnographic Interview. Beirut, Lebanon.

queer education is in the potentialities that public knowledge of gender and sexual pluralism would have on queer self-definition, as well as on queer political organizing. By conveying knowledge about alternative identities and kinship structures and by encouraging gender and sexual autonomy—queer education possesses the capacity to invest queer and proto-queer youth in their self-determination and to divest them from the reproductive<sup>463</sup> obligations thrust upon them by their families and their communities.

Second, and though queer education threatens the inter-generational transmission of *all* sectarian political causes, I contend that it is especially dangerous for the Hezbollah Party. By expanding the horizon of social and political possibility for queer and proto-queer youth, publicly circulating queer knowledge could encourage a generational divestment from Hezbollah’s militant and global struggles. The transnational character of queer political organizing in the Middle East further threatens to generate forms of global solidarity that contest Hezbollah’s vision of anticolonial nationalism—a vision that takes the hetero-religious family as the principal subject of freedom and resistance. In short, the threat of queer education lies in its capacity to model alternative forms of political resistance, freedom, and identity that disrupt the reproduction of familial, communal, and national loyalties.

### The QITABI Controversy and the Problem of Queer Education

The problem of queer education was first posed in the late spring of 2023, when a number of concerned parents, teachers, and officials brought national attention to queer content in a set of publicly circulating primary school textbooks.<sup>464</sup> Produced in partnerships between

---

<sup>463</sup> Here, I use reproduction to not only mean biological/demographic reproduction, but also the reproduction of familial loyalties, allegiances, cultures, and commitments.

<sup>464</sup> Al-Manar TV. (2023, September 5). *Kitab “al-shuzuz” fi al-madares al rasmiya-- dareebet al musa’adat al amrikiya*. لبنان - المنار - موقع قناة المنار. <https://www.almanar.com.lb/10845980>

local civil society NGOs,<sup>465</sup> the Lebanese Ministry of Education, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the QITABI (Quality Instruction Towards Access and Basic Education Improvement) books contained illustrations that depicted queer children, parents, and families. The images and their captions further encourage children to identify non-normative gender and sexual feelings and to authenticate them. For instance, below (figure 3), the book’s text explains,

“Whatever your feelings are, they are real and important. You are the expert in being YOU.” Below this are illustrations of children disclosing their gender and sexual



Figure 3: Qitabi pro-queer books, 2023 (Screenshot by author)



identities in text bubbles: “I’m a girl”; “Today, I feel like a boy!”; “I’m an in-betweeners!”; “I’m trans.” Indeed, it was the books’ explicit affirmation of non-normative gender and sexual self-disclosure and definition of children that struck terror in the hearts of hetero-only families and communities.

Importantly, the production and circulation of the QITABI books had their conditions in Lebanon’s post-2019 financial crisis. Together, the onset of financial collapse, the breakdown of the state, and the COVID Pandemic left Lebanon’s public schools unable to provide basic learning materials. This vacuum invited collaborations between local civil society organizations, international actors, and Lebanon’s Ministry of Education including the USAID-backed QITABI

<sup>465</sup> Like Amideast, Ana Aqra, World Learning, and Management Systems International. And while the QITABI initiative was not directly linked to grassroots queer organizing in Lebanon, its commitment to queer equality and freedom was congruent with the political work of Lebanon’s queer movement.

initiative.<sup>466</sup> Indeed, and especially in the wake of the fiscal collapse, Lebanon’s secular-liberal civil society—and its foreign-sponsored NGOs—has been the primary entry-point for American cash-flow into the country. And with the election of 13 anti-sectarian and secular-leaning MPs in May of 2022, Lebanon’s civil society had now accrued influence in Parliament.<sup>467</sup> Together, the dependence of the Lebanese state on foreign aid and the rising power and influence of secular civil society made the threat of queer education a credible one for homophobic families, societies, and elites in Lebanon.

More than just an aid program, the QITABI project also puts into practice the Biden Administration’s formal commitment to queer equality and freedom. In early 2023, both the USAID and the State Department released detailed policy memos that expressed aims to promote LGBTQ+ rights through worldwide educational initiatives. USAID’s LGBTQI+ Inclusive Development Policy<sup>468</sup>, for instance, emphasizes equitable representation in programming, while the State Department’s 2023 Pride Month statements reaffirm support for LGBTQ+ visibility across U.S.-funded global projects.<sup>469</sup> In Lebanon, the US government’s pro-queer commitments translated into QITABI’s attempt to foster learning environments that respect and represent gender and sexual diversity. Seen as such, the inclusion of queer-affirming representations in QITABI’s textbooks is, indeed, an effect of a US foreign policy whose aim is to promote queer

---

<sup>466</sup> According to its official website of the US Embassy in Lebanon, QITABI – or Quality Instruction Towards Access and Basic Education Improvement – is a \$96.9 million education project funded by USAID to improve literacy and learning among Lebanese public school students. [Beirut, U. S. E. (2023, September 1). *USAID launches \$96.9 million project to improve learning outcomes for students in lebanon*. U.S. Embassy in Lebanon. <https://lb.usembassy.gov/usa-id-launches-96-9-million-project-to-improve-learning-outcomes-for-students-in-lebanon/>].

<sup>467</sup> In fact, the QITABI initiative was exposed in tandem with the exposure of the draft-law to abolish Article 534 (see chapter 3), itself an initiative spearheaded by the civil-society sponsored MPs.

<sup>468</sup> USAID. (2024). *2023 LGBTQI+ inclusive development policy | basic page*. U.S. Agency for International Development. <https://www.usaid.gov/policy/lgbtqi>

<sup>469</sup> *Interagency report on the implementation of the presidential memorandum on advancing the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons around the world (2022)*. (2022). <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Interagency-Report-on-the-Implementation-of-the-Presidential-Memorandum-on-Advancing-the-Human-Rights-of-Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer-and-Intersex-Persons-Around-the-World-2022.pdf>

equality and inclusion. Nevertheless, this initiative was supported by local civil society NGOs like Amideast and others.<sup>470</sup> And though Lebanon's queer advocacy groups were not a part of the initiative, QITABI's aims accorded with their goal of promoting queer freedom and equality in Lebanese society.

### Framing the Queer Threat

While the queerness of the QITABI books was controversial enough, their American sponsorship made them targets for the Hezbollah Party's anti-imperialist and homophobic rhetoric. In his 2023 televised speeches, Hezbollah's General Secretary framed queer education as a colonial "war against consciousness":

There are a number of wars. Military [whose] object is geography – mountains, oceans, land and air. And its tools are weapons. Its objective is to defeat the enemy and to control territory. There's an economic war. Its field are markets, its objective is to control markets, etc... But there's a more dangerous war. It is the cultural, intellectual and media war. This is the most dangerous war. What is its field? It's the mind of the human. The mind of the individual and the mind of the collective... Its objective is to control the mind of man, his convictions, ideas, and perspectives, and such, to control him... because the mind determines his actions and positions. If his convictions and ideas are of one kind, it takes him in the direction of resistance. If it is another, it takes him the direction of capitulation, surrender, humiliation, and such. Its tools are also different: media, internet, books, colleges, educational curricula.<sup>471</sup>

Aiming to manipulate and re-shape the minds of Arab and Lebanese youth, queer education, Nasrallah asserts, works to reshape postcolonial societies by psychologically attacking children and youth who are vulnerable, according to Nasrallah, because they "lack the intellectual and religious defenses that adults may possess."<sup>472</sup> More alarmingly for Nasrallah is his claim that

---

<sup>470</sup> *QITABI — lebanon | amideast*. (2025). Amideast.org. <https://www.amideast.org/our-work/advancing-development-goals/education/qitabi/qitabi-%E2%80%95-lebanon>

<sup>471</sup> Nasrallah, H. (2023, July 22). [Al-manar tv]. 'Ashoura. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeVr71jtgIQ..> Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

queer colonization occurs over epochs and generations, showing little effects in the short-term.<sup>473</sup> And though Nasrallah cites the queer threat to the family—that queerness “unmakes” (*tafakuk*) the family—he emphasizes how the veritable danger of queer education is on youth: “on young men and women who can possibly be implicated in this sickness.”<sup>474</sup>

While Nasrallah frames the publicity of queer knowledge—whether in the QITABI books or in other media—as a colonial enterprise, I contend that what he specifically problematizes is queer identification and politicization among youth. In other words, the threat for Nasrallah is in the potential for queer desire to no longer be considered a “sickness” and to become a locus of individual, collective, and political self-definition in Lebanon. In his discourse, the General Secretary emphatically refers to queerness as pathological condition of “deviancy” (*shuzooz*). For instance, and in one speech, he proclaims that “[America] has taken the decision to spread sexual deviancy—I don’t say ‘homosexuality’ (*mithliya*)—it will spread sexual deviancy to all societies, in America and outside of it.” Here, Nasrallah’s insistence on the term “deviancy” indirectly responds to the two decades of pro-queer advocacy in Lebanon around the re-definition of homosexuality (see chapter 3). Indeed, queer activism popularized the use of the non-derogatory Arabic term for homosexuality—“*mithliya*”—which derives from the term “same” (*mithl*). Rhetorically resisting these changes, Nasrallah—like Interior Minister Mawlawi in his 2022 memo—uses the term “deviancy” to reinforce queerness as pathological condition, and to disparage it as a ground for individual and collective identification. By insistently signifying queer desire as a pathological condition, Nasrallah’s discourse further refuses

---

<sup>473</sup> Nasrallah conspiratorially explains: “Of course, they will work in the long term. It’s not about one or two years.... No. This kind of battle, like the military battles that America is doing, each one is taking 10 or 20 years. This battle is longer. This is about epochs of history (*3uqood al zaman*). This is work on generations...” [Ibid].

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.



differences in human sexuality; it also silently rearticulates heterosexuality as the universal, absolute, and “healthy” human condition.

In this way, Nasrallah’s claims resist what queer theorist Eve Sedgwick refers to as “minoritizing” discourses of sexuality—discourses that assume the existence of a minority of people who are “really gay” and who identify as such.<sup>475</sup> And though Sedgwick remains agnostic on whether LGBTQ identities are constructed or not, she discusses how constructivist arguments about the formation of sexual identity—like the arguments of Michel Foucault in *History of Sexuality*—risk providing ammunition to homophobic delusions about the non-existence of queer people and homophobic fantasies about their eradication.<sup>476</sup> In fact, this is precisely how Foucault has been picked up by postcolonial scholars like Joseph Massad, who, as we saw, argues that colonial discourses on sexuality create homosexual identities where they did not previously exist in the Middle East. But more dangerous than their appearance in academic discourse is how arguments about the colonial construction of sexual identity surface in the discourse of homophobic actors, like the Hezbollah Party, who, like Massad, frames the self-definition of queers in Arab societies as an act of colonial domination. Which is why the insistence on the term “deviancy” works to resist the education of society about the existence of queer identities, cultures, and communities in Lebanon. And in resisting queer education, homophobic discourse guards the societal consensus on heterosexual absolutism—that is, that there is no sexuality but heterosexuality and that there is no queerness but deviancy.

Though the General Secretary’s discourse was largely polemical, Hezbollah’s media-machine *al-Manar* marshaled the perspectives of different educational experts and elaborated the

---

<sup>475</sup> In her book *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick shows how the universalist/minoritizing binary has been central to academic and political debates on what she calls “homo/hetero definition.” Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press. 41-45.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

threat of queer education on children and youth.<sup>477</sup> Among those experts was Ali Karam, the director of the Center for Research and Studies of Education, who spoke to *al-Manar* about the long-term dangers queer education could have on society.<sup>478</sup> Echoing Nasrallah's concerns, Karam explains that the threat of queer education relates to how easily children could accept understandings around the viable existence of non-normative gender and sexual identities.

According to Karam, the easy acceptance of queerness would further risk aligning youth with imperial values. This would not only fulfill the goal of imperial agencies like USAID; it could also render those who oppose queer identities as alien strangers in their own societies. From this angle, queer education is also a colonial threat insofar as it seeks to impose knowledge that homophobic societies do not want and actively resist. In fact, and according to this homophobic discourse, this is why queer education is so subversive: it aims to over-write the homophobic resistance of local cultures by first targeting the minds of children and youth, who are taken to be more vulnerable to transformation. This would arrive postcolonial societies to a state, Karam explains, in which new (and purportedly colonial) understandings of gender and sexual plurality replace older commitments to heterosexual absolutism, resulting in condition

---

<sup>477</sup> In the wake of Nasrallah's first speech, the framing of a colonial war was bolstered by the Hezbollah Party's media machine *Al-Manar*: "Bullets are no longer the only weapon of war," one editorial proclaimed, "but the book has also become a way to declare a cultural war that aims to invade our schools and control our children." At stake in queer education, the editorial argues, is the intellectual colonization of Lebanese youth and the demise of Lebanon's "natural" (familial and heterosexual) identity.<sup>477</sup> By gathering different sectarian voices, *Al-Manar*'s incitement also worked to bolster the sense of a cross-sectarian consensus on a foreign, queer, and imperialist conspiracy in Lebanon.<sup>477</sup>

<sup>478</sup> Karam: "In the long run, the culture that generations will form, where will it take them? This is the bigger danger. These understandings could be promoted or broadcasted on social media. But when you go down to the level of schools and education, we're talking about a threat that touches all sides of education. It will be obligated to adopt these understandings, creating an alignment with what these agencies (USAID) want, such that over time, these understandings will be taken as original culture within our societies. We know that the upcoming generation (al-jeel al nashi2), a big part of it, it's quite easy for them to accept these understandings, because they are coming packaged in educational curriculum, these understandings are coming through cartoons and drawings and pictures that seduce children, it makes them think that this is truly the culture, and all who oppose this culture (queer), becomes, with time, the stranger (ghareeb) to the original culture" [Al-Manar, *Kutub "al-Shudhūdh" fī al-Madāris al-Rasmiyya.. Darībat Musā'adāt al-Wakāla al-Amrīkiyya lil-Tanmiyya* ["Books on 'Deviance' in Public Schools: The Price of USAID Assistance"], August 9, 2023, <https://www.almanar.com.lb/10845980>].

where one can no longer distinguish between the foreign and the local, the natural and the unnatural, and the true and the false.

### The Threat of Queer Self-Disclosure and Queer Self-Definition

While the Hezbollah Party and other homophobic actors framed the QITABI initiative in terms of psychological colonization, indoctrination and coercion, the veritable threat of queer education, I argue, pertains to the politically transformative capacities of publicly circulating knowledge about queer identities on children and youth. Unlike the logic of homophobic discourse, I do not contend that mere exposure to queer knowledge “turns” or “converts” straight children into queer ones. Rather, publicly circulating knowledge about the existence of queer people, communities and cultures allows children who experience queer desire(s) to understand their desire through an identitarian framework. It also allows them accept their desire as valid and non-pathological. Indeed, queer representations—like those in the QITABI books—give identitarian meaning to queer desire and figure it as a viable and celebrated locus of individual and collective identity. In that sense, queer education threatens to encourage queer and proto-queer children to disclose and define themselves as queer, diverting them from the reproduction of their families and even collectively mobilizing them around gender and sexual freedom(s).

Building upon the work of queer theorists like Ramzi Fawaz and Joseph Fischel, I argue that the public circulation of queer knowledge, representations, and other cultural forms expand the horizon of possibility for youth; they relativize heterosexuality and provide young people with alternative models for gender and sexual autonomy. In *Queer Forms*, for instance, Ramzi Fawaz locates the power of queer cultural representations in their capacity to give form to gender and sexual pluralism, and in doing so, to expand the sexual horizons of queer and non-queer people. Fawaz describes queer forms as “aesthetic or creative figures that concretize aspects of

gender and sexual non-conforming life, so they become conceivable to the mind's eye."<sup>479</sup>

Whether they are depictions of queer families or queer slogans and expressions—queer forms, Fawaz tells us, translate abstract identities and desires into viable, thinkable and imaginable experiences. This function of queer forms was vital to the politics of 1970s gay liberation movements, where slogans like “gay is good” worked to positively revalue queer desire.<sup>480</sup> In turn, expressions and representations encouraged queer people to publicly come out and to political speak in the name of a collective gay identity. Indeed, the very possibility of a public queer identity relied upon representing a “ a love that dare not speak its name.”<sup>481</sup> As such, one power—and threat—of public queer knowledge is that it could give rise to possibilities for queer self-definition and collective mobilization.

Interestingly, the threat of queer education indexes a distinct feature of queer identification: to identify as queer requires initiation into queer knowledge and culture. Here, an important caveat is in order: it is not that queer forms have the power to create queer desire or queer people where they did not previously exist. Rather, queer representations, images, and slogans convey knowledge about the existence of queer identities and make viable their pursuit. As such, queer forms allow queer and proto-queer children—that is, children who experience queer desire but who do not yet know about either the viability of that desire or its expression in identity-form—to conceive of gender and sexual non-normativity as a worthy site for the fashioning of the self, as well as for identification with others. Until recently, that process of queer initiation relied on queer or proto-queer people discovering or experiencing, whether by intention or accident, knowledge about queer sexualities or encounters with other queer people.

---

<sup>479</sup> Fawaz, R. (2022). *Queer forms*. New York University Press. 6.

<sup>480</sup> Fawaz has also taught a related course: Ramzi Fawaz, “*Gay is Good: Queer Visions of Freedom Since the 1970s*” (course syllabus, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Fall 2016), accessed [insert date], [https://www.academia.edu/27717138/Gay\\_is\\_Good\\_Queer\\_Visions\\_of\\_Freedom\\_Since\\_the\\_1970s](https://www.academia.edu/27717138/Gay_is_Good_Queer_Visions_of_Freedom_Since_the_1970s)

<sup>481</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1905), line 670.

And because of the political and societal enforcement of queer secrecy and non-disclosure in most parts of the world, the discovery of queerness is, for most queers, a process of self-education: it is not standard across non-normative genders and sexualities, nor across cultural difference, but happens unevenly and depends upon the individual's courage and pursuit.

By providing knowledge about the existence of queer identities in schools, formal modes of queer education facilitate and authorize for queer and proto-queer children the process of queer identification. In other words, the representation of non-normative gender and sexual identities in educational textbooks and curricula would unmake conditions of queer non-disclosure and secrecy which in turn, will no longer require queer kids to rely on the Internet and other informal/ clandestine sources of information on queerness. Instead, formal education would make that knowledge publicly available and unavoidable to queer and non-queer children. More than that, the circulation of queer knowledge through formal education channels authorizes those who want to pursue queer identities and even celebrates them. In these ways, the formalization of queer education could decrease the emotional costs—secrecy, shame, guilt, estrangement, abandonment—that most queer individuals around the world incur to identify as queer, facilitating the process of queer self-disclosure and self-definition in society.

By publicly representing alternative genders and sexualities, formal queer education further relativizes heterosexuality, de-naturalizes its absolutist grounding, and renders the man-woman relation one among other kinds of sexual relations. In this regard, illustrations of queer families and children in schoolbooks attack the obviousness of heterosexuality, or what Stuart Hall, in a different context, calls society's "horizon of the taken for granted."<sup>482</sup> In attacking society's sexual commonsense, queer forms also disrupt what feminist theorist Monique Wittig refers to as the "heterosexual contract"—the silent consensus that enforces the man-woman

---

<sup>482</sup> Hall, S. (2021). *Selected writings on marxism*. Duke University Press. "The Toad in the Garden." 44.

relation as the timeless foundation of humanity.<sup>483</sup> Seen from that angle, the homophobic refusal to represent or to name non-normative genders and sexualities works to secure heterosexuality as the nameless, obvious, and absolutist ground of society. This, in turn, obscures heterosexuality's politically constructed and "compulsory" character.<sup>484</sup> Indeed, schools are principal sites for the reproduction of these founding (hetero)sexual myths in society. Which is why exposure to knowledge about gender and sexual pluralism in schools could be so threatening from a homophobic standpoint. Queer knowledge falsifies myths of heterosexual absolutism and supremacy; and they interfere with the heterosexual indoctrination of schoolchildren and youth.

In their capacity to disrupt the reproduction of heterosexual ideologies and subjects, education about queer sexuality in schools also calls into question the taken-for-granted relations of subordination that structure heterosexual families. Merely seeing illustrations of queer relations and queer kinship could open a pathway for queer youth and women to question the unjust secrecy and the performance of heterosexual normativity that their biological families demand of them. In that vein, exposure to queer knowledge would allow subordinated family members to imagine and desire freedom from their biological (and often homophobic) kin. This is another aspect of what makes queer education so dangerous: it represents ways for youth to determine their sexualities, their genders, and their lives independent of—and often against—the reproductive designs of their families and communities.<sup>485</sup> In this regard, the publicity of queer knowledge in schools interferes with the unbridled authority that homophobic parents, in particular, exercise over the sexual and gender identities of their queer or proto-queer children.

---

<sup>483</sup> Wittig, M. (1992). *The straight mind and other essays* (pp. 20–32). Beacon Press. "The Straight Mind."

<sup>484</sup> See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631–660.

<sup>485</sup> For a detailed discussion of familial homophobia, see Schulman, S. (2012). *Ties that bind: Familial homophobia and its consequences*. New Press.

By modeling alternatives to subordinated conditions, public education about non-normative gender and sexual identities, cultures, and life-forms thus work against what scholar Joseph Fischel terms the “peremption” of adolescent sexuality. Peremption, Fischel explains, names a condition in which possibilities are foreclosed, freedom is limited, and youth are “disabled not simply from achieving their interests but also from developing them.”<sup>486</sup> For Fischel, peremption usefully describe states of sexual injustice to which youth are subjected. Bringing his analysis to Lebanon, I argue that peremption accurately captures the ways in which Lebanon’s families and communities limit the horizons of sexual freedom for youth and children. By figuring heterosexuality as the only option, families and communities limit the capacity to imagine and pursue gender and sexual freedom. Seen as such, this kind of peremption guards against the potential for youth to abandon their heterosexual families and ensures that those families are perpetuated across time.

#### Queer Education and the Threat to Hezbollah’s Resistance Cause

While the increase in queer self-definition poses a more challenge to hetero-only families and communities in Lebanon, education about the existence of queer identities among children and youth would specifically threaten the Hezbollah Party in two ways: first, it would disrupt the reproduction of heterosexual and religiously-committed families who, for Hezbollah, are the material sources of fighters for its cause. Second, education about the existence of a queer identity and culture in Lebanon could publicize to youth forms of transnational queer solidarity politics that could, in turn, interfere with Hezbollah’s hetero-religious monopolization of anticolonial resistance in Lebanon.

---

<sup>486</sup> Fischel, J. J. (2016). *Sex and harm in the age of consent*. University of Minnesota Press. 132.

To begin, Hezbollah’s military power is rooted in ordinary Shi’i families and communities. Not only is the heterosexual family the material source of Hezbollah’s combatants and martyrs. It is also the vehicle for transmitting histories of violence, trauma and death across generations—histories that keep Shi’i families attached to the organization. Since the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, most Shi’i families in the Lebanese South have been intimately touched by Israeli state violence. More, stories of captured or killed kin are transmitted across generations, interpellating younger generations to the cause of anti-Israel resistance.

According to Maha—an interlocutor and a self-identified member of Hezbollah’s *bi`a* (community)—the death of kin renders resistance both a familial and religious obligation. In one interview, she recounted a story of her uncles’ imprisonment and death at the hands of the Israeli army, explaining to me that: “[Resistance] is not in our hands. If we don’t go do *jihad* (struggle), Allah [will] ask us why.”<sup>487</sup> For Maha and other survivors of Israeli occupation, wartime death cements a sense of accountability between martyrs and their surviving kin, and between surviving kin and God. These logics circulate among Shi’i communities and work to cement inter-generational loyalties—not merely to the cause of dead family members—but also to Hezbollah, the political actor that continues to embody the violent struggle. By rooting resistance in intimate legacies of loss, Hezbollah thus ensures that the allegiances of its bases are deeply personal, collectively shared, and individually binding.

Because it bears the potential to invest youth in their sexual self-determination, queer education threatens to divest young people from their obligations to their dead kin and from the reproduction of militant forms of political resistance. Indeed, circulating knowledge about queer identity, culture, and politics risks attaching queer and non-queer Shi’is to futures in which

---

<sup>487</sup> Maha. (2020, November 27). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi , Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.



violent struggle and war need not be the only means for politically resisting Israeli or American empire in the Middle East. Desires for alternatives to militant resistance could even touch future combatants, deviating them from their desire to fight and die for the anti-Israel war effort or for any war effort at all. The latter scenario would prove deleterious to Hezbollah—an organization whose existence depends on the constant and purportedly “voluntary” flow of young male blood, which it secures by cultivating a desire for self-sacrifice among Shi’i men.<sup>488</sup> Seen in this light, Hezbollah’s economy of martyrs requires a strategy of peremption in which alternatives to militant resistance are rendered out of the question. Consequently, one danger of queer education—of publicity circulating knowledge about the existence of gender and sexual pluralism—lies in how it could present to youth the opportunities to imagine, desire, and pursue forms of life and politics that are not defined by war.

Fears over the diversion of youth from the militant and religious cause further explain why the Hezbollah Party is so invested in shaping Shi’i youth culture in Lebanon and why it is committed to preventing queer, feminist, and secular influences from taking hold. In a conversation with F—the queer Shi’i interlocutor we met in chapter 2—he explains how the biggest threat to the Party is the loosening of religious and sexual morals among younger Shi’i generations. Having grown up in Hula and Kfeir Rumman—two villages in the Lebanese South that had been, until recently, dominated by Hezbollah—F describes the hostility that he and his friends had confronted for openly defying the religious codes of the Party:

After 2019, there has been a control (haymane) over topics that relate to morality (akhlaq). Like, if we go down to the river in the village (Kfeir Rumman) and we drink there, there’d be a problem. One time, my girlfriend was wearing a bikini top and shorts and drinking, and [Hezbollah-affiliated local thugs]

---

<sup>488</sup> In my interviews with Shi’i critics of Hezbollah, several interlocutors figure the desire for self-sacrifice as a form of political suicide. Indeed, Hezbollah’s power, one interlocutor tells me, is in their having made political suicide an attractive and desirable option. [Suha. Ethnographic Interview. Beirut, Lebanon, December 3, 2020].

circulated her photos everywhere online, saying that she defiled the blood of the martyrs because she was naked in these holy sites.<sup>489</sup>

While Hezbollah does not have an official morality police, the local and Party-affiliated youth act as moral guardians for the organization. As F notes, it was especially after the mobilization of Shi'i youth in the 2019 Revolution that Hezbollah's grip over the public expression of sexuality, at least in Southern Lebanon, tightened.<sup>490</sup> According to F, that is because the "biggest enemy for the Hizib are Shi'is that do not support the organization."<sup>491</sup> By mobilizing non-religious and anti-Hezbollah Shi'i youth in Southern Lebanon, the 2019 Revolution exposed the uneven ideological saturation of Hezbollah's authority within its own areas. Even after the Revolution, the public presence of non-religious and sexually-open Shi'i youth continued to challenge the political and societal uniformity that Hezbollah has engineered among its Shi'i bases.

From F's vantage point, queer and feminist publicity also disrupt Hezbollah's monopoly over what counts as political resistance more generally. As he explains:

The first nail (awal bismar) in the project of Hezbollah was the monopolization of the Resistance... Preserving this monopoly is a core aim of the Hizib—it cannot allow any other entity to practice resistance. But there is no doubt that political queerness (al-qweeriyeh al-siyasiyeh) is one of the biggest forms of political resistance. And feminism also. They are forms of internal resistance. So what you're doing as queer or feminist resisters is approaching, from the inside, the kernel of Hezbollah's existence.

And that is because queer and feminist youth refuse to reproduce what F calls the "ra`ismal"—or the capital—of Hezbollah's power: the politically-committed, hetero-religious Shi'i family and the source of Hezbollah's fighters:

---

<sup>489</sup> F. (2025, April 23). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Tele-interview.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid.

<sup>491</sup> F continues: "The strongest thing in the Hizib and its biggest weakest point, is its capacity to plant the 'aqideh (religious doctrine) among youth [which leads to] a huge capacity to recruit. That's why any type or form of life that can plant doubt toward this doctrine is a threat."

The model of the Shi'i family in the Hizib is very unified (mwahadeh), they're of the same color (sabgha wahde), they look like each other, they study in the same schools, they dress in the same clothes, so there's a militarization of the family (tajiish) that is crazy. You even look and see that the militarization isn't just a monopoly on men and their sexuality, but also on women. They [Hezbollah women] have the same thinking, the same discourse... 'bidna nrabbi' they tell you... "we need to raise" sons. You don't want a woman to go out and say 'my son is not gift to anyone' (ibni manno fida hada)."

Seen through the lens of F's critique, the perpetuation of Hezbollah's militant power relies on the uniformity of Shi'i men, women, and families. The organization is also invested in producing subservient mothers who reproduce and willingly sacrifice their sons to Hezbollah's military ventures. It is that model of religious and heterosexual reproduction that is threatened by the publicity of feminist, queer, and secular youth cultures that propagate individualism.

Hezbollah's power over Shi'i youth culture is further threatened by Lebanon's relative sexual liberality in the region. Indeed, Lebanon's liberal freedom of speech, press, and assembly laws, as well as the existence of a foreign-funded and largely secular civil society—have specifically rendered it a regional hub for queer political organizing in the Middle East. Especially in the late 2010s, Lebanon-based queer advocacy groups have hosted activists and organizations from across the region in workshops, conferences, and other solidarity-building events.<sup>492</sup> By publicly exposing information about the existence of queer identities, cultures, and politics, queer education has the power to lead Shi'i and non-Shi'i youth to these kinds of political associations and to invest them in explicitly political forms of queer belonging. In turn, the shift toward sexual politics could entail a shift away from familial, sectarian, and national

---

<sup>492</sup> In recent years, the increasing publicity of queer political initiatives has been met with rising anti-gay mobilization, both from above and from below. Placed in this context, the controversy around QITABI's queer educational materials responds to the threats associated with the building of a public queer identity (see introduction).

solidarities. In other words, publicly circulating knowledge about gender and sexual non-normativity could serve as the door to queer and feminist politicization.

### The Threat of a Politicized Queer Identity: V's Story

The story of V—a Palestinian-Syrian trans activist who I met in 2019—is a case in point of how knowledge about non-normative genders and sexualities catalyzes processes of individual self-definition and collective political mobilization.<sup>493</sup> Born in and raised mostly in Syria, V moved to Homs and later Damascus for her studies around 2011 and, with the outbreak of anti-regime demonstrations, became involved in feminist politics and organizing.<sup>494</sup> While V's initial foray into activism was confined to feminism, she was first introduced to matters of sexuality when she started going to Beirut.<sup>495</sup> There, she would access the Internet, accrue knowledge about sexuality, and transport that knowledge back to her activist-colleagues.<sup>496</sup>

Returning to Syria with new terms and new concepts, V was able to help herself and others understand the non-normative desires they were feeling and to expand the feminist politics that they were already doing. Soon, she was introduced to feminist and queer advocacy organizations in Lebanon, including Helem and began training other activists in Syria with the information she acquired. “We didn't know it was a training,” she explains, “it was just us learning from the information that was coming, and we were learning from each other.” And given Beirut's status as a regional site of exposure to new ideas, people, and commodities, it is

---

<sup>493</sup> V. (2019, July 30). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon. Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.

<sup>494</sup> V: “There was not really an LGBT movement (harake), maybe there was and we didn't know about it, but what happened is that we started the movement as part of the Syrian movement against the regime, and we formed a student council in Homs. Its goal was to stop forced marriages and child marriages in the area; we also demanded laws against harassment and rape—there was a lot of that in the movement.”

<sup>495</sup> V: “In the area in Syria, there was no Internet, so we didn't have access to social media. That is why I used to go to Beirut to gain knowledge about these topics. I would download articles and go to Syria with them.”

<sup>496</sup> V: “Before these trips, she tells me, “we didn't [even] know what the expression “feminism” (nasawiyah) meant, we didn't know that this existed in the Arab World.”

no surprise that the city also served as a regional hub for the circulation of queer and feminist knowledge, education, and politics.

Beyond deepening her feminist political practice, V's initiation into gender and sexual knowledge in Lebanon also impacted her own identity. Through traveling the Beirut-Damascus circuit, V explains, "I discovered that my sexual orientation (*myul jinsiyeh*) was appearing to me... it appeared in 2009, but then I repressed it because I thought it was a sickness or something, something not natural. But then in 2013, I was certain that there was nothing wrong with me and that queerness was part of human diversity (*tanawu' bashari*).” Indeed, the knowledge she gained about gender and sexual pluralism from her Lebanon trips allowed V to understand her sexual orientation not as a pathology but as a viable expression of human diversity. This enabled her to publicly come out in 2013 as a cis gay man to her fellow activists in Syria, which itself encouraged others in the movement to also disclose their queer sexualities. It was at this point that V and her colleagues began transforming the movement, from one based mostly on feminism to one revolving around sexual rights and freedoms.

Though their activism was mostly clandestine at first, V and others began pursuing “*inkhiraat*” or integration with larger attempts at feminist mobilization in the Syrian Revolution. At the beginning, and in the Homs countryside especially, V describes how there were no women organizers or demonstrators at all. This changed when the council V was in—which contained five women—entered the scene and organized a protest for women in 2013. After this victory, V and others began demanding the organization of mixed-gender protests and consciousness (*nwa'i*) raising around feminism and the rights and freedoms of gender and sexual minorities. “We started doing retreats and camps, and to talk about these issues and get to know the movements that were happening in these areas,” she recounts. In this way, V and other queer

and feminist activists in the movement began educating others about the injustice of gender and sexual subordination, the existence of queer identities, and the promises of sexual and feminist freedoms in a future Syria.

Activist efforts at queer and feminist education, however, were soon exposed to homophobic movement leaders who immediately intervened. “They realized we had an agenda for sexuality in the beginning of 2014,” V explains, “and after that they knew that there were several people who were queer (*muyul*) [and so] we were ejected from the movement and the council we had formed was ejected from the organizing of the protests. We were silent for a while, we didn’t do anything, for our personal security (*amana shakhsiya*), until after two months, we entered and said that even if these people gay, we [Syrians] are all in on this cause (*‘adiyé*) and we are all sitting at this table.” Despite this appeal to Syrian solidarity, V and the other queers in her Council were harassed out of the movement and out of the city itself. Here, V first moved to Damascus, and after being pursued by Syrian security apparatuses, sought asylum in Lebanon. It was there that she met trans people, learned about trans identities, and realized that she herself might be trans without having known it.<sup>497</sup> Seen in this light, knowledge and education about trans identities allowed V to not only unmake her transphobia but also to understand the negative effects of mis-gendering that she herself had experienced but had hitherto not grasped.

Coupled with her move to Lebanon, the self-understanding V begot from her self-education also politically re-oriented her from a movement and a cause that had rejected her—

---

<sup>497</sup> V: “I began accepting trans people, I started [realizing] that it is not a pathology but part of human diversity. I also started realizing that I don’t really accept my body, I don’t like when people referred to me in the masculine. I then began reading more and more, that I could be trans, that I don’t have to have an operation. Here, I started introducing myself as trans.”

Syria and opposition to the Assad regime—and toward organizing around a regional LGBT movement:

In mid-2015, I went to Beirut. I began connecting with people in Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt, a regional movement for LGBT. I left the Syrian movement and I stopped caring about it completely. I started caring more about the LGBT movement, I started securing safe spaces in Iraq in Jordan, Egypt... I used to have meetings, I made reports, until I got to Helem in 2016. Here, I began volunteering. I began my struggle for LGBT, it began growing.

In this way, V's queer self-education contributed to her self-definition as a trans woman. Her experiences with homophobia and misogyny in the Syrian movement further contributed to the transformation of her political interest. No longer focused on opposition to the Syrian regime, V diverted her energies to forming relations with queer activists across national lines and to the building of a transnational LGBT movement in the Middle East. Indeed, and since her move to Beirut in 2015, V has been at the forefront of anti-homophobic and anti-transphobic organizing in Lebanon.

For the purposes of this chapter, V's story evidences how exposure to knowledge about non-normative gender and sexual identities impacted not only one's sexual self-definition but also one's political orientation. In V's account, education and consciousness raising around feminist issues threatened the monopoly that male activists exercised on anti-regime organizing and resistance, at least in Homs. Following her and other queers' exile from the movement, V turned toward a cause that was more intimate to her and that was more transnational—perhaps even more universal—than the cause of Syrian liberation. And while V's turn away from Syrian opposition politics partly relates to conditions of exclusion, her story emblemizes how queer and feminist forms of political resistance threaten organizations whose causes are organized around heterosexual and religious visions of society and state.

## The Threat of Global Queer Solidarity

While queer education could pivot queers away from nationalist causes, queer politics could also put forth alternative models of transnational and anticolonial politics—models that directly compete with Hezbollah’s hetero-religious monopoly on anticolonial resistance in Lebanon. Indeed, the building of a transnational Arab and queer identity is challenging enough to nationalist and anticolonial political actors—like Hezbollah—who speak in the name of Arabness (‘uraba) tout court. But queerness also serves as a site for the building of a global political identity and for the building of political movements that cross regional boundaries. Take, for instance, the global queer Palestinian solidarity movement. Though spearheaded by Palestinian queers within Palestine and in the diaspora, the Queer Palestine Movement builds alliances between queer activists and organizations across the globe.<sup>498</sup> By rejecting violence and providing spaces for queer alliances across categories of nationality and religion within Palestine, the movement practices forms of non-militant political solidarity and resistance that challenge the Israeli state’s occupation of Palestine as well as Israeli discourses of Pinkwashing.<sup>499</sup> And by publicizing the existence of Arab queers who also mobilize against liberal empire, queer advocacy—whether it is the Queer Palestine Movement or the LGBT movement in Lebanon—shows the existence of alternative forms of anti-imperial resistance.

Indeed, the Queer Palestine Movement evidences the threatening potentials of a global anti-colonial politics whose locus is a transnational queer identity. The Movement proposes new forms and conceptions of political resistance to empire that do not take nationality or religion as

---

<sup>498</sup> See Sa’ed Atshan’s poignant critique of Western academia’s queer-phobic focus *Queer Palestine*. [Sa’ed Atshan. (2020). *Queer palestine and the empire of critique*. Stanford University Press.]

<sup>499</sup> By questioning forms of militant resistance and by engaging Israeli society, however, the Queer Palestine movement has been a target for homophobic attacks from both Israel and Palestine. The movement has even been disparaged by some Western Arab academics, who see its emphasis on a global queer identity as re-instantiating the liberal terms of Pinkwashing discourse.



the principal category of action or belonging. On that count, then, the Queer Palestine movement challenges projects like the Islamist Resistance of Hamas and Hezbollah—projects that are grounded upon hetero-religious visions of society and state. In this way, queer anti-colonial advocacy efforts like Queer Palestine resist not only liberal empire in the Middle East but hetero-religious imperial formations like the Iran-Hezbollah-Hamas federation. And while the queer Palestine movement is based in Israel/Palestine, queer advocacy groups that are part of the Movement—like Al-Qaws—enjoy relationships with queer activists in Lebanon and around the Arab World. Admittedly, the queer Palestine movement has not directly hit against Hezbollah. Nevertheless, the scope and inclusivity of transnational queer politics in the Middle East risk introducing and publicizing a form of anti-colonial resistance in Lebanese society that competes with Hezbollah’s model of transnational, religious, and heterosexual militancy.

Thus far, I have delineated the ways in which queer education—that is, publicly circulating knowledge about queer identities, cultures, and politics—disrupts the reproduction of the hetero-religious family and challenges the reproduction of Hezbollah Party’s militant and geopolitical project. I also showed how public knowledge about queer identities could transform political identities and popularize kinds of global solidarities that could orient youth to non-militant, non-religious, and non-heterosexual modes of domestic and geopolitical resistance.

### Part III: Homophobic Rhetoric and Anti-Colonial Resistance

In the following section, I cast homophobia as a set of four rhetorical strategies that are employed in discourse of Hezbollah’s late General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah. Across five speeches, Hassan Nasrallah addresses the families of the Resistance and provides them with the means to intellectually immunize themselves and their youth against the persuasive potentials of publicly circulating knowledge about the existence of queer identities, cultures, and politics.

Constituting a kind of anti-gay education in its own right, Nasrallah’s speeches do the following:

1) they provide a genealogy of queer and feminist liberation, figuring both as long-duree plots that have colonized the West and are now aimed toward the East; 2) they ascribe a hyper-agentive will to Hezbollah's pro-queer and imperial adversaries; 3) they attribute manipulative powers to pro-queer factions and encourage reason as a form of resistance; and 4) they figure the struggle against queerness (or "deviancy") as an instantiation, not only of anti-imperial resistance, but of a universal and religious battle against injustice.

I also show how Nasrallah's speeches provoked anti-homophobic discourses among Lebanon's queer communities that contested Hezbollah's anti-colonial claims-making. The arrival of the Israel/Palestine War to Lebanon in September 2024, however, produced discourses among Lebanon's queer communities that positioned them behind Hezbollah's militant resistance. Indeed, and while homophobic escalation in the summer of 2023 had generated a kind of anti-homophobic unity among queer and left-liberal factions in Lebanon, the war allowed some queers to express solidarity and support with the militant actor that was, just a year before, authorizing queer genocide. I conclude with how, in the course of the war, the demise of the Hezbollah Party's military capacity has had ambivalent effects on queer solidarity and has rendered a queer future in Lebanon murky and uncertain.

#### A. Genealogy of the Queer Plot

First, Nasrallah's anti-queer speeches deploy historic arguments that locate the origins of queer politics in the "West." This genealogy does not merely draw essentialist distinctions between Eastern and Western civilizations.<sup>500</sup> Rather, Nasrallah attempts to show how both the East and the West are—or at least, were—identical insofar as they both valorize(d) heterosexual

---

<sup>500</sup> In recent years, postcolonial queer scholars have pointed out how political actors use sexuality to draw essentialist distinctions between Eastern and Western civilizations. Here, Nasrallah's discourse does something new: it figures both the East and the West as originally identical in their commitment to heterosexual universalism. [See Evren Savcı, *Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Rahul Rao, *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020)].

marriage as the only authorized form of sexual relationality. Here, the General Secretary elaborates a direct relationship between the political ascendancy of queer sexuality and projects of women's liberation in the West. The latter, Nasrallah explains, was not organic to the Christian West, but depended upon the cultural normalization of "fornication" (*zina*):

[The normalization of fornication] has been worked on with time. Religiously and constitutionally, most of the West is Christian. Christianity prohibits fornication and takes marriage as sacred. Even in some Christian sects, it is not allowed to divorce. And fornication used to be an abomination (*qabih*) in the eyes of the people... But with time, they have done projects, they have done steps... They have begun making it normal, such that fornication now has laws, institutions and centers that protect it. Now it has become very natural. But that hasn't become natural in one or two years, but over decades. It's been worked on until all of this is natural.<sup>501</sup>

For Nasrallah, it is political conspiracy—rather than cultural essentialism – that explains the sexual divergence between Christian and Muslim civilizations. Indeed, a long-term and conspiratorial project succeeded in naturalizing what was once unnatural, repugnant and shameful—namely women's sexual emancipation. By beginning with feminism, Nasrallah sets up a historic precedent to what queer education in Lebanon seeks to do: to transform what had been considered abominable into something natural, celebrated, and legally protected. Like the "project" of *zina*, Nasrallah disgustedly informs his audiences, "they have made for deviancy (*shuzooz*) laws and projects. Now homosexual marriage is legal marriage. They get married in courts, they have a wedding, they open a house." For Nasrallah, however, queerness poses an even bigger threat than women's sexual liberation because of queer desire's distinctly abject status in religious doctrine:

---

<sup>501</sup> Nasrallah, H. (2023, July 22). [Al-manar tv]. 'Ashoura. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeVr71jtgIQ..> Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.

Today we are facing the denied, the ugly, the abominable, the dangerous and the destructive... Because in its nature, it is against nature, it is against the *fitrah*<sup>502</sup> of humanity. Maybe, the encouragement... don't blame me that I'm talking in such honesty – the encouragement of fornication, maybe you can find drives/motives (*dawafe3*) in the man or woman to it. But man with man, woman with woman, what is this ugly thing?<sup>503</sup>

While fornication finds its drives in human nature, queer desire contradicts it. Not only is queerness the incarnation of the abject, Nasrallah continues. The inability of homosexuals to biologically reproduce has put Western societies on the path to “*shaykhukha*”—sterility and civilizational death.<sup>504</sup> In registering this threat of sterility, Nasrallah also registers the veritable threat that queer education poses: if queerness is publicly normalized as a viable life-option in Lebanon, it could also normalize and promote non-reproductive life-forms among Shi'i queers and women. In legitimating the refusal to biologically reproduce, the publicity of queer and feminist cultures could ultimately endanger the reproduction of the hetero-religious and politically committed family which, as we saw, is the source of Hezbollah's fighters and the life-source of Hezbollah's military power.

Importantly, Nasrallah's diagnosis of feminist and queer normalization in the West—marriage out of wedlock, gay equality, etc.—serves not as an indictment of Western culture but as evidence for the queer and feminist colonization of Western societies themselves. Not emphasizing inherent civilizational differences, Nasrallah's discourse on colonialism allows him to transcend East/West binaries and figure Hezbollah's Resistance in sexual and universal terms:

---

<sup>502</sup> A term in Islamic scripture denoting authorized, marital, and hierarchical heterosexuality between man and woman.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

<sup>504</sup> Here, Nasrallah's logic echoes Ibn Khaldun's discussion of homosexuality. In the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun – a 14<sup>th</sup> century Arab political thinker – argues that homosexuality's appearance in the final stage of civilization – and the fact that homosexuals cannot produce – is a primary cause for the death of civilization and the return to the tribe. [Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, abridged and edited by N.J. Dawood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005)].

This is not just a battle of one Party, or a battle of a sect, or a battle of an area. It is a battle for all of our society, Christian and Muslim. We must confront this collectively. Without limits. And if America is supporting it and the European Union is supporting it, if all of the International Community is supporting it, we will confront [because] this confrontation is natural.<sup>505</sup>

Figured as a “natural” war, the fight against homosexuality allows Nasrallah to naturalize Hezbollah’s broader anti-US and anti-Israel struggle.

### B. Hyper-Agentive Adversaries

Second, Nasrallah’s rhetoric raises the stakes of queer education by attributing hyper-agentive capacities to Hezbollah’s pro-queer adversaries. Throughout his speeches, Nasrallah ambiguously names queer, feminist, and imperialist forces as a vague “they,” a collective adversary whose actions are driven by unified and orchestrated masterminds. This discursive strategy not only imagines feminist and queer actors as conspirators; it also eliminates the contingent nature of queer and feminist politics, casting them instead as part of a seamless and global queer conspiracy.<sup>506</sup>

In addition to emphasizing the vulnerability of children to this project of queer conversion, Nasrallah also accuses the queer/imperial conspirators (“they”) of leveraging Lebanon’s post-collapse economic vulnerability. According to the General Secretary, it is Lebanon’s dependence on foreign aid that renders the country susceptible to the advantage taking of American-sponsored educational programs.<sup>507</sup> This framing works not only to figure the US as a coercive power; it figures financially dependent Global South countries as exposed

---

<sup>505</sup> Ibid.

<sup>506</sup> “What is new is that this year, and in the past few months [is that] the United States has announced a project (*Mashrou’*) that is clear (*wadi7*), scandalous (*fadi7an*), and it has adopted it and recruited for it (*da3et elay*), and it will work toward it. And it will work for it day and night.” Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> The pressure has begun because [the American government] wants to bring this topic into the Ministry of Education, to the educational curriculums, and to schools... We will witness American pressures on world governments. We’ll witness a lot of seductions... countries that need loans, that have financial collapses – they have begun telling these countries, ‘no problem, we’ll give you help and loans, but we need this program of deviancy to be implemented in your schools, curricula, society.

to geopolitical blackmail. Here, Lebanon's need for aid positions it as a target for manipulation, with queer education functioning as the price demanded by American empire's material support.

Though he focuses on American empire, Nasrallah further casts Lebanon's secular civil society as conspiring collaborators. This allows him to conduct the anti-US, anti-Israel and anti-gay antagonism of his bases toward domestic, pro-queer and anti-sectarian factions. In his July 29th speech, for instance, Nasrallah acknowledges that his focus on homosexuality has generated anger within his own base. Nevertheless, he insists that such anger is "good" since it signals resistance to a greater evil. "What is demanded," the General Secretary asserts, "is to be angry against those who are working in the service of the Bigger Devil to promote human, ethical, and social deviancy in Lebanon."<sup>508</sup> By casting civil society actors as agents of the US ("the Bigger Devil), Nasrallah associates local and anti-sectarian movements with an American plot to change Lebanon's sexual and political regimes.<sup>509</sup>

By politicizing relations between internal civil society actors and external funding agencies, Nasrallah portrays a condition of geopolitical and queer infiltration. He also positions Hezbollah as the political force that can resist this infiltration and defend Lebanon's sexual sovereignty. In fact, Nasrallah's figuration of internal and external enemies—as well as a global plot—allows him to imply that families alone cannot withstand the powers behind queer education. Rather, they must rely on Hezbollah's military and geopolitical power to safeguard

---

<sup>508</sup> Nasrallah, H. (2023b, July 29). [Al-manar TV]. 'Ashoura. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gX\\_mLgRNzXw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gX_mLgRNzXw). Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.

<sup>509</sup> Indeed, accusations of treason are part of a longstanding strategy that Nasrallah has deployed against anti-government demonstrators in 2019 where he figured them as "the Embassies."<sup>509</sup> The term imagines demonstrators as spies and agents whose action has been (wittingly or unwittingly) hijacked by foreign interests. More than being an accusation, the "Embassies" names a structure of geopolitical infiltration in Lebanon, or a kind of "deep outside" that is akin to "deep state" discourses in the American populist context. Since the 2019 Revolution, the "Embassies" has even gained traction within Hezbollah's popular bases, becoming an ordinary societal discourse that marks certain bodies as traitors of national sovereignty. Used in a homophobic context, this discourse works to rally support for Hezbollah's anti-queer *and* anti-imperial agenda, framing the fight against queer education as part of Hezbollah's larger struggle against geopolitical domination.

their children's heterosexual futures. All the while, this rhetoric works to secure assent and allegiance to Hezbollah's exclusive role in managing Lebanon's geopolitical affairs.

### C. Reason, Deception, and Resistance

Third, Hassan Nasrallah appeals to truth and reason as principal defenses against what he takes to be the manipulative logics of pro-queer advocacy. In his July 24<sup>th</sup> speech, Nasrallah elaborates the importance of rationality in the “battle against consciousness” and emphasizes its role in the production of religio-political faith. He begins the speech with the Qur'anic imperative to “use the mind”—to think, question, and demand evidence for truth-claims that are presented.<sup>510</sup> The faith that Allah demands, Nasrallah reminds his audiences, is one based on persuasion, not unthinking acceptance or imitation (*taqlid*). This means that parents should not assume their youth will have faith in religion simply because their parents do. Rather, the inter-generational transmission of religious faith and identity depends on cultivating an evidence-based understanding of the religious cause. Families, Nasrallah advocates, should thus educate their children—and themselves—to understand rather than to submit.

By way of religious faith, Nasrallah sets himself up to tackle the threat of queer education. Unlike the past, where physical confrontations were the primary means of waging war, today's adversaries, Nasrallah assertively claims, manipulate minds through films, cartoons, and educational forms of cultural production—like the QITABI books.<sup>511</sup> By packaging queer

---

<sup>510</sup> Nasrallah expounds: “Allah, in the battle of consciousness, told the human, 'I gave you a mind,' the most important thing in you is your mind. It is on the basis of this mind that I judge. And Allah has requested us to use our minds. All are asked, including youth, to use their minds, to be convinced by the Scripture (3aqidah), to have evidence. This is not because his father is a believer in Allah. Allah does not accept this kind of faith. He is opposed to this kind of faith. In religion, you have to use your mind, you have to go ask for evidence (tastadil). Today, anyone of us, and I'm saying this so that Mothers and Fathers should not suffice in thinking that their sons and daughters are believers because the parents are. You have to explain, use evidence. Especially when he/she gets close to the age of maturity (15). You have to make him/her understand.” [Nasrallah, H. (2023b, July 24). [Al-manar TV]. 'Ashoura. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vtUfiaRoa0>. Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.]

<sup>511</sup> “The enemy today has more sophisticated resources. In history, there were no televisions, Internet, nor the revolution of communications. Nor the capacity to produce films, television series. And now AI is coming! This

identities in children's' "cartoons and drawings," queer factions educate society about the existence of gender and sexual pluralism in human society—something that Nasrallah and most homophobic discourse considers to be falsities that undermines the truth of heterosexual absolutism: of there being no other human sexuality but heterosexuality. Presented in terms of pluralism or human rights, queer sexuality, Nasrallah concedes, may sound convincing. But this is where the danger lies. By using the cultural resources at his disposal, the queer enemy can make queerness appear just and true<sup>512</sup> while making those who are on the side of justice appear false and unjust.

Here, the General Secretary introduces the example of Israel to further evidence how the enemy could invert truth and falsity, justice and injustice: "The resistor," Nasrallah claims:

...becomes a terrorist and the occupier becomes a symbol of democracy and human rights. The Palestinian nation becomes a killer and the occupiers—the actual terrorists and killers—are figured as the defenders of human rights and democracy in Palestine.<sup>513</sup>

Figuring the queer and Zionist enemies as analogous in their methods, Nasrallah's example illustrates how such an obviously unjust enemy can succeed in manipulating the understanding of most of the globe. Like the Israeli state, Nasrallah suggests, queer and pro-queer political actors also figure their cause in terms of human rights and democracy, when it is a cause for societal destruction. For Hezbollah's staunchly anti-Israel bases, the Israeli example works to conduct anti-Israel enmity toward a new enemy and a new cause of injustice.

---

means that today, what humans face in the battle on the mind is the most dangerous stage of human existence since the creation of Adam." [Ibid].

<sup>512</sup> In Arabic, the *al-haq* is the word that simultaneously denotes truth, justice, and right.

<sup>513</sup> Nasrallah, H. (2023b, July 24). [Al-manar TV]. 'Ashoura. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vtUfiaRoa0>. Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.]



In describing the manipulative capacities of the enemy, the General Secretary expounds on a final point: the seduction of false promises. Relating the normalization of queerness to the normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel, he asserts:

They say to Arab countries, if you normalize with Israel, you will become a paradise. And what has happened? Today, [they say] to Lebanese the same thing: ‘your problem is the weapons of the Resistance. Give up the Resistance and the weapons and your affairs will be resolved. Your debts will be repaid. Your economy will flourish. Your security.’ But I swear, if you forsook the Resistance, even those two or three sea reserves, Israel will come and take them. We will lose everything. These are false promises.<sup>514</sup>

Nasrallah's point here is that the visions of prosperity associated with Israeli-Lebanese peace and that are presented by Israel and the US are ruses designed to weaken Lebanese resistance to external domination. By seducing people into abandoning their political allegiances, Nasrallah's logic goes, the enemy paves the way for total colonization.<sup>515</sup> From this standpoint, the biggest threat against the truth is the potential for people—especially youth—to alter their convictions, give up resistance, and surrender to the enemy. The falsity of these appearances thus makes it paramount to “immunize” the consciousness of youth, children, and society at large:

[We must] immunize (*nhassen*) our people and our society through clarification, explanation, and evidence. Even our children, if they have questions, answer them. And if you don't have an answer, go get an answer. Don't push them away, because if you don't have an answer another will. If there's a place of uncertainty, we have to go ask and find someone who will answer, and not leave spaces of emptiness in our minds, in our doctrine, or convictions. We want people to have persuasion, clarity, and foresight. This is part of the war against consciousness... Because if the position is built on faith (*iman*), the people will not be shaken.<sup>516</sup>

---

<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

<sup>515</sup> Once again, he emphasizes the vulnerability of youth to this “submission”: Today, the minds of our men and women and our society and our youth and our children, they are targeted in their convictions, their consciousness, their ideas. People could get in despair, they surrender, they change their convictions, they start to consider defeat, they consider surrender. They start looking for evidence for it in the Quran, Sunnah, and history. And surrender becomes the [sound] judgment. And the resisters become a group of mad people. This is the battle on consciousness. Everyday, we are battling this.” [Ibid].

<sup>516</sup> The way to do so, Nasrallah expounds, is for families to engage with their children's doubts, to provide reasoned answers, and to fortify their minds against the ideological manipulation that threatens to alter their convictions:

Built upon a foundation of reason, Nasrallah claims, inter-generational faith in the cause will remain stable against the false persuasiveness of enemy logic, whether that logic is queer, Zionist, and/or American. By enumerating different tactics of enemy manipulation, Nasrallah's strategy instructs families on how to guard the consciousness of their youth. He also provides a more general guide on how to guard one's own and convictions against change. And though he mostly speaks in abstractions, Nasrallah's references to Israel work to frame the publicity of queer knowledge as an effect of broader colonial injustice in the region.

#### D. Religious Allegory and Affect

Finally, Nasrallah's use of religious allegories elevates the battle against publicly circulating queer knowledge beyond the realm of human affairs and casts it as a timeless and extra-political struggle. By invoking Abrahamic enemies like Satan and by referencing the self-sacrificial legacy of Shi'i history, Nasrallah's rhetoric conducts the religious affects and homophobic investments of his popular bases against the project of queer education. Reciprocally, and by exploiting homosexuality's abject position in religious doctrine, Nasrallah employs homophobia to sanctify Hezbollah's political cause and to conduct the hetero-religious allegiances of his audiences to the group's anti-Israel and anti-US mission.

In his July 27th speech, Nasrallah begins by ventriloquizing God and warns his audiences that they must overcome two enemies to reach heaven: the Devil and the self. According to Nasrallah, the Devil is no mere metaphor but a real enemy with a distinct mission: "to seduce you, to fool you, to lie to you, to deviate you, to transform your life to fire."<sup>517</sup> Though his

---

"Even our children, if they have questions, answer them. And if you don't have an answer, go get an answer. Don't push them away, because if you don't have an answer another will. If there's a place of uncertainty, we have to go ask and find someone who will answer, and not leave spaces of emptiness in our minds, in our doctrine, or convictions."

<sup>517</sup> Nasrallah, H. (2023c, July 27). [Al-manar TV]. 'Ashoura. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-js9XtF5F0>. Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.

influence may seem subtle, the General Secretary elaborates, the Devil succeeds by exploiting human desire. Because desires and appetites are beyond the full control of humans, Nasrallah continues, they render humans vulnerable to the Devil's infiltration.<sup>518</sup> The problem for Nasrallah, however, is not merely in the existence of the Devil, but in the capacity for humans to desire, to be seduced by external forces, and to be ruined by them. This is why desire constitutes a second and internal enemy that must be fought.

In his discourse, Nasrallah uses the allegory of the Devil to allegorize the question of queer knowledge in Abrahamic terms of desire, seduction and corruption. Like the Devil, Nasrallah suggests, the queer QITABI books entered Lebanon through its weakest points (civil society and the ailing Ministry of Education), reaching children and youth (society's weakest subjects) with material that could seduce them and corrupt their "natural" heterosexualities. But what is implied in the homophobic discourse of Nasrallah is that exposure to queer knowledge also risks reshaping the political identities of children and youth. Specifically, liberal-sponsored queer education could even divert youth away from anti-US and anti-Israel resistance and align them with liberal political values instead. Indeed, the veritable fear that youth will abandon the reproduction of Hezbollah's cause of resistance is at the heart of the General Secretary's discourse. And with his usage of the Devil, Nasrallah preempts that nightmare, portraying queer education as an especially diabolical—because seductive—tool of regime change.

Nasrallah continues in this religious register by framing queer education as a contemporary instantiation of Shi'i Islam's foundational battle. Here, he invokes the Battle of Karbala', where the Umayyad Caliph Yazid slaughters Hussein—Prophet Muhammad's grandson and the biological heir to the Caliphate. Given Yazid's power and Hussein's weaker

---

<sup>518</sup> "The Devil," he explains, "comes in and enters [humans] and their passions... the problem is in those people: in their appetites, in their weakness, in their desires. Even if they had logic and knowledge and consciousness, it is not enough." Ibid.

position, Nasrallah sermonizes, most Muslims had abandoned Hussein, fearing death and dispossession at the hands of the victor. At that time, Nasrallah explains, Muslims were confronted by a decision: to resist the victor or to submit to him. For Nasrallah, today's moment of American hegemony re-articulates this eternal question: "Placed in a difficult position," he asks his audiences, "will [you] privilege the world over the End, or the End over the world?"<sup>519</sup>

By invoking the founding tale of Karbala', Nasrallah thus frames the fight against imperially-sponsored queer education as an opportunity for redemption. By resisting capitulation to queer knowledge—and to America and Israel—Nasrallah suggests that Shi'is today can honor Hussein's sacrifice and reaffirm their allegiance to Hussein's cause.<sup>520</sup> Against the abominable desires of/for empire and against the possibility of subjugation, Shi'is, Nasrallah affirms, faced and will continue to face death.<sup>521</sup> Praising his audiences' steadfastness, he stirs the pride of his audiences and incites a collective effervescence among them. Responding to the General Secretary's final words, his (mostly male) audiences stand up, salute, and erupt in chants of "Labaika ya Hussein, Labaika ya Hussein" (we serve you, Oh Hussein). This closing scene captures the affective dynamic between leader and audience and evidences how Nasrallah's rhetoric transforms religious commitments and wartime trauma into shows of political fortitude.

In these four different registers, the homophobic rhetoric of Hezbollah's General Secretary incites the anti-gay vigilance of Shi'i families and instructs them on how to neutralize the effects of queer knowledge and persuasion on their youth. Indeed, and throughout his speeches, Nasrallah frames changing one's mind as submission to imperial brainwashing.

---

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Nasrallah: "What is demanded is the faith in God and his messenger and the spirit of jihad... They are ready to fight, even if they were a minority, they are ready to be martyred, and the mother is ready to send her son, and the father is ready to send his son... From the beginning of this struggle, the fathers, mothers, children... we have only seen patience [from them] and the readiness to present more [martyrs]. [Ibid]

<sup>521</sup>"The current Shi'i community in Lebanon, those men, these women, these youth, these children, if God, hypothetically, transferred them to [the year] 61, I would swear to God that they would have stood with Hussein and without hesitation." [Ibid].

Capitulation to the seductions or persuasions of queer logics, he tells us, will result in a state of political domination. Coding the sexual transformation of Lebanese society as a kind of regime change, Nasrallah's rhetorical maneuvers thus render persuasion by queer knowledge an act of submission. The immunizing work of Nasrallah's rhetoric further reveals how the capacity for queer representations to change society not only depends on exposure to queer knowledge, but on its reception—on society's willingness to receive queer forms and to be changed by them. This is why Nasrallah's rhetoric immunizes: it provides intellectual defenses against exposure to queer knowledge and it blocks the reception of gender and sexual truths that could transform the Lebanese body politic. Seen in this light, Nasrallah's speeches exemplify methods of discursive defense that fortify political consciousness against the rhetorical sway of competing ideas.

#### Part IV: Conclusion—Of Queer Reception and Resistance

While Nasrallah's 'ashoura-time speeches worked to provoke the homophobic guard of the Party's popular bases—and though his discourse reflected rising political homophobia in the country—Nasrallah's speeches were also contested by anti-homophobic voices in Lebanon. For instance, Shaden—a Lebanese lesbian comedian and a fierce critic of Hezbollah—published an Instagram video that creatively recast Nasrallah's queer threat-framing:

Hassan Nasrallah went up and was making speeches on Lebanon and the problem of Lebanon. And so the problem in Lebanon, it's not the banks, the financial elite, the ministers, nor the sea borders—that Hezbollah has sold to Israel—none of those. Lebanon's problem is sodomites (liwwat)... Hassan Nasrallah is worried about who licks my pussy, why?! Hassan Nasrallah is concerned with whose dick is in whose ass... what do you want from us? What are we doing to you?"<sup>522</sup>

By opening her anti-homophobic tirade with the crises that Lebanon had been experiencing for years—namely financial collapse, elite corruption, and national border-drawing—Shaden mocks

---

<sup>522</sup> Shaden. (2023, July 24). *Shaden speranza on instagram: "atlan ham meen yilhasli kissi"*. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CvFiKaGs3MY/?igshid=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng%3D%3D>.

Nasrallah's focus on an issue that she takes to be a matter of personal sexual taste. According to Shaden, it is not queers who threaten Lebanon but Hezbollah; indeed, the organization "sold" the sea borders to the enemy. She continues, demanding to know what queers are so threatening, especially in the face of religiously-justified violence and abuse:

We, what have we done to you, what have we done to any person, we sit at home and we love each other calmly, what do we do to you? [Nasrallah] tells me Allah. Habibi (addressing Nasrallah), if your Allah is the god that incites toward killing and that legitimizes girls to be married at nine years old, this God isn't good for me. My God is cute (lazeez), not homophobic, he doesn't like violence, he doesn't encourage pedophilia, so your God, if you can leave him for you and don't impose him on us.<sup>523</sup>

Though Shaden's rhetoric is admittedly funny, it is also underwritten by a liberal discourse that disavows how homosexuality could be a matter of public concern at all—let alone a potential threat to society. Shaden's normative presuppositions—that sexuality and religion should be private matters relative to the believer in question—further confuses Lebanon's sectarian system with a liberal one. Nevertheless, Shaden plays on Lebanon's religious pluralism: she holds up her kinder and more inclusive version of God and publicly contests—on her Instagram page—the reigning homophobic commonsense in Lebanon.

Alongside Shaden's indignant response, members of Beirut's queer community—including queer Shi'is—also refused and resisted Nasrallah's homophobic incitement. According to F—the queer Shi'i interlocutor we met above—Nasrallah's homophobic rhetoric did not initially shock Lebanese queers, given that they "weren't coming from nowhere." With the contests over Article 534 in Parliament and the increasing roguishness of the Soldiers of God in East Beirut, homophobia in Lebanon was at an all-time high. In that light, F explains how "the reaction at first was very unified in the community, and in civil society, and in the left more

---

<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

generally—there was a very clear refusal, of the discourse.”<sup>524</sup> Like past episodes of homophobic incitement, Nasrallah’s 2023 speeches galvanized an anti-homophobic response among Lebanon’s liberal-secular publics, civil-society, and alternative media organizations. In fact, this shared refusal gave rise to the Freedom Protest (or *Muthaharet al-Hurriyat*) on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023, which aimed to contest Nasrallah’s speeches; the violent raids of the Soldiers of God; the mobilization around Article 534; and the Minister of Culture Mohammad Mortada’s anti-gay censorship campaigns against the Barbie and Spiderman movies.<sup>525</sup> But the Freedom Protest ended in violence, when organized and cross-sectarian thugs converged on Beirut’s downtown to attack demonstrators and to disperse them (see chapter 2).

As the most traumatizing episode of homophobic violence that summer, thug violence at the Freedom Protest eroded the solidarity that Nasrallah’s speeches had initially inspired among Beirut’s queer communities. “There was fear and anxiety for a long time,” F recounts. “We were scared to go to the queer pubs, if we were in a queer pub and saw any movement that we see is strange, we would leave and run. We basically disappeared in our houses.” He continues:

The razor (shafra) was on our throats... we felt that there was this terrorizing oppression and there was no one defending you and holding you accountable. There was no social contract (‘a`ed ijtima’i). you feel as if the idea of a society fell, and we are now in a forest (ghabe). There is no one to defend me. I have to defend myself if I have the capacity, and if I don’t, this it I’m done.<sup>526</sup>

Especially after the experience of physical violence at the Freedom Protest, ordinary homophobic street violence incited feelings of queer vulnerability and helplessness. Indeed, queers had broken their non-disclosure agreement, violating the terms of the heterosexual contract, and rendering themselves authorized targets of public violence. Queers further felt

---

<sup>524</sup> F. (2025, April 23). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi , Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Tele-interview.

<sup>525</sup> *Al-murtada yushrah iqtirah qanun tashri’ al-shuzooz, w yufanid mawqefahu min film barbie*. (2023, August 13). Al-Manar. <https://www.almanar.com.lb/10865714>. Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

abandoned by broader Lebanese society which, for F, made clear it will not defend queers if they are publicly attacked. From F's point of view, growing violence toward queer people spoke to the absence of an egalitarian social contract in Lebanon—at least for queers. Thug violence also reinforced the sense of queer defenselessness and led F to realize that “there was no state, no regime—there is only a strong entity that has weapons and then there's you.” In F's estimation, the “you” includes pro-queer civil society advocates, who have neither weapons nor the militant capacity to defend queer people. That summer, F's realizations gave rise to a number of discussions between him and other members of Beirut's queer community about the possibility of violent resistance: “We used to say that we are in need of creating a queer resistance (muqawama musalaha qweeriyeh). We were talking about the topic in a very serious way, asking what we would do. We are present (mawjudin) and we don't want to leave.”<sup>527</sup>

One week later, however, conversations around an anti-homophobic and violent resistance were dropped, when on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, the Israel/Gaza War broke out. Almost overnight, national homophobia—including that of the Hezbollah Party—disappeared, as the entire country's attention turned toward Palestine and Lebanon's southern borders. Paradoxically, the diversion of war brought relief to F and other queers. It also (partially) recatalyzed queer publicity. According to F:

There wasn't this attention (on queers), but there was still this anxiety, like a ghost (shabah). Yes, the bars are open, people are going out, and it felt like we took a breath, but at the same time, it felt like at any moment, the homophobic incitement can return.”<sup>528</sup>

While war in Palestine provided queer publicity with a temporary cover, the fear of homophobic incitement was still present among Lebanese queers, especially given the military dominance that Hezbollah still enjoyed in Lebanon's domestic arena.

---

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid.



But the war in Palestine did not only quell homophobia; it also quelled anti-homophobic opposition to Hezbollah and provided the occasion for some Lebanese queers to express their support for the Party's anti-Israel war effort. "Once the war began," F recounts, "many queers decided to ignore homophobia. Many [queer] people said that the political priority [awlawiya] was with Gaza, and [that] it's not the time to talk about the homophobic incitement that Nasrallah did." Circulating among Shi'i and non-Shi'i queers, this discourse posited that "Anything outside of military resistance has no meaning and if you are not supporting this resistance that is fighting—which is Hezbollah and Hamas—then you are not supporting the Palestine Cause."<sup>529</sup> F admits that in discussions with other queers about the war, F resisted the queer towing of the Party-line; he refused to "overlook" Nasrallah's hate speech(es) and he continued to oppose Hezbollah. But what was shocking to F, was that there were many queers—"and not just Shi'a"—who were taking issue with anti-Hezbollah criticism, making claims like "Hassan Nasrallah and the Resistance are red lines." Some queers even mourned Nasrallah after his assassination and reproduced discourses that glorified Nasrallah and Hezbollah's militant resistance.

Though F found this outrageous "as a queer person," he also understood the political logic behind these positions. "There are two Lebanese sayings that are really apt here—'me and my brother against my cousin,' and 'me and my cousin against the stranger (ghareeb).'"<sup>530</sup> Originating in Lebanon's history of civil war, these sayings posit that shared kinship and a shared threat ultimately determines the prioritization of solidarities and enmities. With the outbreak of the Palestine War, Lebanese Shi'i and non-Shi'i queers now shared the same foreign enemy with the Hezbollah Party. And while Hezbollah may have been an enemy to queers before

---

<sup>529</sup> Ibid.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

the war, the presence of an external threat allows for alliances between those who are of the same national family. Put shortly, and from F's vantage point, this logic brackets domestic lines of antagonism in favor of a unified front against a "more dangerous" foreign enemy. In this way, the war in Palestine incited discourses that brought some Lebanese queers into the folds of Hezbollah resistance and war effort.

Nevertheless, F and his like-minded queer friends refused logics that identified the Hezbollah Party with anti-colonial resistance tout court:

I can critique the Party and be supportive of the Palestinian Cause at the same time. And I can critique Hezbollah *and* Israel *and* be against American Empire. This is a monopolization of the cause (istihkar al muqawameh) that Hezbollah had been working on since its formation. Now, in 2025, after I saw all of the catastrophes (masayeb) that the Hizib has done, I cannot go and support [him] as if he's the only resistor.

He monopolized the Resistance. That's why I can critique Israel and not be in solidarity with Hezbollah.<sup>531</sup>

Here, F implies how discourses that solicit queer solidarity for Hezbollah reproduce the organization's monopolization of the meaning of anti-colonial resistance. F further points to how Hezbollah itself is an instantiation of Iranian empire in the region, making its universalist claim on anti-colonial resistance a deceptive one.<sup>532</sup> By refusing to be in solidarity with Hezbollah and by refusing to abstain from critiquing it, F resisted Hezbollah's monopolization of anti-colonial politics. He also resisted the kind of politics that demands solidarity with domestic enemies in the face of an external one.

### Conclusion

Seen as such, the 2024 Israel-Lebanon had ambivalent effects on homophobic and anti-homophobic opposition: while Israeli violence destroyed Hezbollah—the actor that had been at

---

<sup>531</sup> Ibid.

<sup>532</sup> F explains, "Like, if I'm against the project of Western imperialism, Hezbollah is for the project of Iranian Empire (isti'mar farsi). Like, both kinds of empire are bad. But those queers that I'm telling you about, they refuse to see Iranian empire because they're familiarly close to the Party... they're refusing to see the Hizib as an expansion of Iranian empire, and they refuse to say that the Hizib's resistance is not resistance." Ibid.

the forefront of homophobic mobilization in the summer of 2023—the war also occasioned the articulation of queer solidarity with Hezbollah’s Resistance project, which at times discursively reproduced the monopoly that Hezbollah had exercised over anticolonial politics in Lebanon. But the demise of the Hezbollah Party did not liberate queers, as Israeli Pinkwashing discourses would have it, but generated confounding effects on queer political identities and allegiances, especially among queer Shi’is.

Finally, and while it may appear that the 2024 War had rendered the threat that queer education posed to the Hezbollah Party moot, the war presented an important lesson: while homophobic rhetoric against queer education had initially generated anti-Hezbollah resolve among queer and secular communities, the outbreak of geopolitical warfare fractured that sentiment, bracketed homophobia *and* anti-homophobia, and—to an extent—lent queer support to an organization that was in its death throes. More than that, the war led to massive structural changes in Lebanon’s political arena, generating both uncertainty and optimism about the future of the Lebanese political order. And until the full extent of the new political settlement takes shape, queer politics and publicity seem to be on an indefinite hold.

## Conclusion

In September of 2024, the arrival of the Palestine War to Lebanon resulted in the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah and the decimation of the Hezbollah Party's military capacities. And with the destruction of the most powerful anti-gay actor in Lebanon's arena, F explains, the fear of homophobia among Lebanese queers was quelled: "The fear fell (saqat al khawf) because the war arrived in a way that removed the Hizib from its roots. It was like a tsunami. It didn't come slow."<sup>533</sup> However and given the awesome horror of the Israeli campaign in Lebanon, F could not tell whether the "fall" of queer fear related to the demise of Hezbollah's power or to the presence of a scarier force. "At the beginning of the war in Lebanon and after the assassination," F asked himself, "did I feel that the ghost of homophobic incitement is gone or have I now started fearing Israel more? I became scared of the bombings—Beirut was being bombed everyday."<sup>534</sup> Indeed, the scale of Israeli violence seemed to re-calibrate F's sense of threat and (in)security. It also materialized the world-shattering effects of war for a younger generation that had not directly experienced the 1975-1990 civil war nor Israel's ruinous invasions of Lebanon.

Despite this, F remains cautiously optimistic: by removing the most powerful militant actor in the country, the 2024 war had produced seismic changes in the country's political ordering. On January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2025—less than six weeks after the ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israeli forces—the Lebanese Parliament elected Josef Aoun the new President of the country.<sup>535</sup> Coming after a two-year parliamentary deadlock in which Lebanon had no President, the news of Aoun's election generated widespread hope among Lebanese of all sects. So too did Aoun's

---

<sup>533</sup> F. (2025, April 25). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Remote.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid.

<sup>535</sup> *Al-barlaman al-libnani yantakheb josef aoun ra'isan lil-balad*. (2025, January 9). BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/c0mvmgmr1eo>

distance from the traditional sectarian establishment and its politics of “muhasasa” or apportionment.<sup>536</sup> Indeed, Aoun’s background as an esteemed general in the Lebanese Army figured him as a relatively neutral candidate whose interests lay in the strengthening of the country’s institutions over and above the interests of any one faction.<sup>537</sup>

In fact, the most consequential effect of Aoun’s presidency in the aftermath of the war has been to strengthen the capacities of Lebanon’s national army—an institution that had been weakened by histories of civil war politics and, more recently, by the deleterious impact of fiscal collapse, state breakdown, and inter-state war. Since the end of the war, Aoun has secured international and material support for the Army, enabling it to exert power over armed groups—namely Hezbollah—in historic ways.<sup>538</sup> For instance, and at the time of my conversation with F in April of 2025, the Lebanese Army had been erecting checkpoints in the Hezbollah-dominant Lebanese South, stopping and stripping Hezbollah-affiliated men of their weapons.<sup>539</sup> And despite sporadic altercations between Hezbollah militants and the Army, the latter’s (gradual) monopolization of weapons in the state seems to be succeeding. More importantly, the Army’s expanding power also appears to enjoy a popular consensus among Lebanese of all sects.<sup>540</sup> In this light, the erosion of Hezbollah’s military and symbolic power in the country opened a window of opportunity for nation-building that, as one commentator describes, was impossible to even imagine before the most recent war.<sup>541</sup>

---

<sup>536</sup> “Muhasassa” refers to a practice in Lebanon’s power-sharing arrangement in which factions compete to secure their “portions” or “hissas” of the state’s resources.

<sup>537</sup> Aoun *ya3lin istib3ad “al-ahzab w al-tawa2ef” min itikhath al-qarar fi lubnan*. (2025, March 6). Al-Aawsat.

<sup>538</sup> Yazbek, B. (2025, March 29). *Al-hukumah al-jadidah w al-tahidiyat: L-taghyir jathri fi islub idaret al-dawlah*. Al-Modn.

<sup>539</sup> F. (2025, April 25). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Remote.

<sup>540</sup> Yazbek, B. (2025, March 29). *Al-hukumah al-jadidah w al-tahidiyat: L-taghyir jathri fi islub idaret al-dawlah*. Al-Modn.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

Alongside the strengthening of the national army, Aoun also put into motion processes that are reforming and nationalizing Lebanese politics. Just four days after his election, for instance, Aoun named Nawaf Salam—the head of the International Court of Justice—as Lebanon’s Prime Minister.<sup>542</sup> Given his international credentials and his distance from factional politics, Salam’s nomination, like Aoun’s, was met by national audiences with promise and confidence.<sup>543</sup> One month later, and on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2025, Salam announced the formation of a new cabinet comprised of 24 reform-oriented and technocratic ministers whose commitments, for the most part, cannot be counted as sectarian or factional (at least for now).<sup>544</sup> Furthermore, and in his first session presiding over Parliament, Aoun emphasized that the “final decision is the Lebanese government’s alone and not the parties or the sects.”<sup>545</sup> Addressing those opponents peddling conspiracies of foreign-backed regime change, Aoun also insisted that reform is a “Lebanese demand before it is an external one.”<sup>546</sup> Though it is too early to tell, these assertions of sovereignty, as well as the processes of reform that Aoun has already initiated, signal that Lebanese politics may be on a path toward nationalization and de-sectarianization. Granted, the sectarian establishment—including the Hezbollah Party—continue to be politically present in the country. However, the war scrambled the Lebanese inside in seen and yet unforeseen ways.

The destruction of Hezbollah’s military power has also induced tectonic shifts in the region. On December 8, 2024—less than two weeks after the ceasefire in Lebanon—Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—a militant organization fighting the Assad regime from Idlib—embarked on a lightning-rod campaign that ended in the capture of Damascus and the exile of the Assads

---

<sup>542</sup> *Min 24 waziran alikum tashkilah al-kamilah lil-hukumah al-libnaniye al-jadidah.* (2025, February 28). Al-Araby News.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid.

<sup>545</sup> *Aoun ya3lin istib3ad “al-ahzab w al-tawa2ef” min itikhath al-qarar fi lubnan.* (2025, March 6). Al-Aawsat.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

to Moscow.<sup>547</sup> Together, the weakening of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, and the crippling of Hamas in Gaza has worked to isolate Iran and to sap the life out of the “Axis of Resistance.” And alongside Lebanon’s new leaders, the new Syrian President’s geopolitical virtuosity has led to the opening of diplomatic relations with the Gulf, the European Union and the United States. He even succeeded in ending the sanctions that had incapacitated Syrians since the start of the war.<sup>548</sup> These new developments have even made possibilities for Syrian-Israeli and Lebanese-Israeli normalization more plausible than ever before. Indeed, and with the demise of the Axis of Resistance in the Middle East, a new regional order is taking shape.

Whether or not this new order will translate into queer freedom and equality, however, is an altogether different story. In the month(s) following the fall of the Assad regime, for instance, and as Syrians around the world were celebrating their freedom, militias affiliated with the new HTS government targeted queer populations on Syria’s coast with torture and arrest before continuing on to massacre Alawite populations specifically.<sup>549</sup> And while political homophobia in Lebanon has not picked up since before the war began, the arrival of a new and ostensibly progressive government need not necessarily bring forth gender and sexual reforms. For instance, when I asked F about the possibility of queer politics in this new Lebanon, he cited how the destructiveness of the war and the shadowy prospect of Israeli-Lebanese normalization could actually spike homophobia in the country:

---

<sup>547</sup> Phillips, A. (2024, December 8). Syria: Rebels seize damascus as assad flees capital. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9vkmp11mrmo>

<sup>548</sup> Jazeera, A. (2025, May 20). *EU lifts economic sanctions on syria, following US move last week*. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/20/eu-agrees-to-lift-all-economic-sanctions-on-syria-diplomats>

<sup>549</sup> *Urgent statement on the campaign of violations of torture and arrest, against sexual and gender minorities in syria - GEM organization*. (2025, February 11). GEM Organization. <https://guardiansgem.org/urgent-statement-on-the-campaign-of-violations-of-torture-and-arrest-against-sexual-and-gender-minorities-in-syria/>

If we start talking about the queer topic (mawdu') now, you might get reactions that say, 'ah now that we're talking about Israeli normalization (tatbi'), we're now gonna talk about the normalization of queerness.'

[People might say] that homosexuality in Lebanon is an effect of normalization. There is a fear that homosexuality would again be tied to the Zionist or Imperialist project.<sup>550</sup>

Which is why F ultimately thinks that queer politics and publicity must wait until the country “wakes up from the last five years” of revolution, fiscal collapse, and regional war.<sup>551</sup> But more than that is the fact, that for F, the structure of the new regime in Lebanon is not yet known:

It's definitely an opportunity to create a movement and a political resistance that is queer and new. Akid.

But everything else is going to be new. So we need to know what the structure of it will be... how will you create a movement if you don't know the structure of the state?<sup>552</sup>

What F implies here is that the efficacy of queer or anti-homophobic resistance relies on knowing the architecture of the new regime, as well as its pressure points. And until that new regime takes a stable shape, queer publicity and politics might not only be ineffective, but could have counter-productive effects, including the incitement of an upgraded kind of political homophobia.

Even if Lebanon were to successfully transition to a nationalist—rather than a sectarian—political order, that transition need not translate into the eradication of the “heterosexual contract.” Nor does it necessarily mean the extension of formal equality to queers. Instead, transition could produce a new kind of (hetero)sexual contract and a new kind of queer enemy that works in mono-nationalist rather than in sectarian-pluralist registers. More likely is that, in the coming months and years, sectarian political actors could deploy homophobia to delay and deadlock transition(s) and to re-assert the power-sharing terms of the National Pact and the Ta'if

---

<sup>550</sup> F. (2025, April 25). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Remote.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid.



Accords. These forecasts aside, the Levant stands at an abyss of uncertainty, one that could plunge it into potential freedom(s), into newfound violence, or into both.

Despite this uncertainty, I contend that homophobia in the Lebanese case can provide us with important lessons that illuminate the political uses and effects of anti-gay and anti-Gender mobilization around the world. In the remainder of this conclusion, I will draw out these lessons by drawing on four comparative examples—mostly from the US—that correspond to the four dimensions of homophobia that the dissertation explores: the symbolic, the territorial, the legal, and the geopolitical. Given its legally and politically instituted communalism, I contend that the Lebanese case amplifies homophobia’s work in pluralist, federalist, and non-authoritarian states. Indeed, my wager is that the queer threat and homophobia in Lebanon can bring into view the religious, communalist, and power-sharing structures that organize politics in ostensibly democratic regimes and in times of global and national transition.

#### The Paris Olympics and the Symbolic Threat of Queer Art

In the opening ceremony of the 2024 Paris Olympics, a global controversy was ignited over a queer performance that appropriated Christian symbols and icons. Taken to be a parody of Leonardo da Vinci’s “The Last Supper,” the performance featured drag queens, a transgender model, and DJ Barbara Butch who wore a silver headdress resembling a halo. Seated at a long table, their postures satirically evoked the solemnity and gravity of Jesus’s final meal with his disciples. While the performance was intended to be a celebration of gender and sexual pluralism, its queer irreverence provoked Christians around the world who considered it to be a symbolic trespass of religious boundaries and an injurious act of anti-Christian blasphemy.<sup>553</sup>

---

<sup>553</sup> See Farkas, R. (2024, July 29). *Christian leaders speak out against mockery of the last supper at the olympics – stand for christians*. S4c.news. <https://s4c.news/2024/07/29/christian-leaders-speak-out-against-mockery-of-the-last-supper-at-the-olympics/>; Land, O., & Reslen, E. (2024, July 27). *French church leaders, chiefs’ harrison butker slam apparent drag “parody of last supper” at 2024 paris olympics: “Mockery.”* New York Post.

In eerie echoes of the 2019 Mashrou` Leila Controversy, the queer appropriation of Christian “sacred objects”—or *muqadasat*—in the 2024 Paris performance incited discourses that specifically problematized the queer identities of the performers. Like the Mashrou` Leila Controversy, I contend that the problem of the Paris performance pertained to the specific, abject, and “sacred impure” status of homosexuality in Abrahamic religions and societies. That abjection rendered the representative intermixture of queer and Christian icons in the tableau to be an act of symbolic defilement. While the claims of blasphemy and symbolic harm that were made by Christian commentators were dismissed as bogus by queer and secular critics,<sup>554</sup> I argue that the threat of the performance lies in the capacity of camp and parody to transform the meanings of purportedly immutable religious symbols and scenes. In other words, and in both controversies, the violation of the performances consisted in how the representative proximity of queers and queerness to religion de-elevates religious signs, divests them of their “sacred” force, and de-mystifies them for Christian and non-Christian audiences alike.

More than that, the Lebanese case brings into view how heterosexuality is itself institutionalized as a sacred and absolute sign in Abrahamic symbolic orders. In both the Mashrou` Leila and Paris controversies, it was the symbolic sanctity and absolutism of heterosexuality that was violated by the intermixed representation of queerness and religion. Through the Lebanese lens, we see how the institutionalization of laws that regulate religious and sexual representation(s) in sectarianism sheds light on how the absolutism of heterosexuality—and the representation of that absolutism—is invoked by anti-gay actors as a precondition for the inviolate representation of Abrahamic religions around the globe. In that

---

<https://nypost.com/2024/07/27/sports/french-church-leaders-harrison-butker-slam-drag-parody-of-last-supper-at-2024-paris-olympics/>.

<sup>554</sup> Rodriguez, M. (2024, July 29). *French Drag Queen Nicky Doll Responds to Olympics Backlash: “We Ain’t Going Nowhere.”* Them; Them. <https://www.them.us/story/nicky-doll-olympics-opening-ceremony-last-supper-criticism-response?>

vein, the Lebanese case brings into view how the “heterosexual contract” is also a symbolic contract. It institutes the man-woman relation as the absolute parameter of all things sacred. It precedes the consensus on respecting the sanctity of specific symbols. And it secures for religious symbols an aura of naturality, eternity and immutability. It was this aura that was threatened in both Paris and in Lebanon.

What the Lebanese lens further clarifies is how the queer appropriation of hetero-religious symbols incites anti-gay censorship discourses on religious injury, (in)tolerance, and inter-religious (in)equality. In the wake of the 2024 Paris performance, for instance, the Vatican expressed that it “deplores the offense” of the performance, adding that global events should avoid ridiculing religious convictions of “many people.”<sup>555</sup> The French Bishops’ Conference—as well as U.S. Catholic leaders like Bishop Robert Barron and US House Speaker Mike Johnson—similarly condemned the act as a “mockery” of Christianity.<sup>556</sup> Even Elon Musk commented on the performance, describing it as “extremely disrespectful to Christians.”<sup>557</sup> In the manner of Christian clerics and activists in Lebanon, Musk went on to imply a violation of sectarian parity, asking why such mockery is tolerated for Christianity but not for other faiths. Without naming them, Musk implicitly references the numerous Prophet Mohammad Cartoon Controversies and the value placed on the injured feelings of Muslims, (rightly) implying the presence of global double-standards when it comes to respect for religion(s).<sup>558</sup> In these different ways, the queer

---

<sup>555</sup> McKenna, J. (2024, August 4). *Vatican “deplores the offence” caused by last supper skit in paris olympics opening ceremony*. The Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/08/04/vatican-saddened-last-supper-ridiculed-olympics-ceremony/>

<sup>556</sup> Land, O., & Reslen, E. (2024, July 27). *French church leaders, chiefs’ harrison butker slam apparent drag “parody of last supper” at 2024 paris olympics: “Mockery.”* New York Post. <https://nypost.com/2024/07/27/sports/french-church-leaders-harrison-butker-slam-drag-parody-of-last-supper-at-2024-paris-olympics/>

<sup>557</sup> Penley, T. (2024, July 30). *Christian faith leaders react to alleged parody of last supper at paris olympics: “Grotesque mockery.”* Fox News. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/christians-react-apparent-mockery-last-supper-paris-olympics-grotesque-mockery?>

<sup>558</sup> Ibid.

appropriation of religious iconography occasioned homophobic discourses that figured Christianity as globally persecuted and unequally targeted vis-à-vis the world's other faiths. Articulated through grammars of religious insult, injury, and inequality, homophobic discourses on the Olympics activated Christian group feelings—or *asabiyat*—and allowed anti-gay actors to indirectly contest *other* religions while also speaking in the name of them all.

Unlike the 2019 Mashrou' Leila Controversy, the 2024 Paris performance did not violently mobilize Christian activists; it did however marshal clerical and populist voices who propounded cultural censorship as a means to protect Christian religious freedom. Indeed, anti-gay actors took queer publicity as an occasion to re-assert the limits of artistic freedom of expression and to reinforce the public cultural significance of Christian religious iconography on a global stage. In doing so, homophobic discourses figured censorship as a way to contain the threatening (semiotic) potentials of queer publicity and to protect those religious and sexual meanings that Abrahamic societies hold as true, self-evident, and immutable. By specifically targeting the queerness of the performance, reactions to the 2024 Paris performance also worked to re-affirm the inviolate representation of heterosexuality as a prerequisite for global inter-religious equality and coexistence. Invoking it as a silent-but-shared principle across religious difference, homophobic discourses used heterosexuality to articulate prohibitions on religious representation(s); to shore up the global supremacy of Abrahamic symbolism; and to resist global processes of queer cultural secularization.

### The Proud Boys and the Territorial Threat of Queer Publicity

By foregrounding the relationships between homophobia, masculinity, and territory, the case of the Soldiers of God in Lebanon brings into view how anti-gay militant groups in the US work against transitioning demographics to secure the dominion that racial and hetero-

supremacist communities exercise over public urban space. The case of the Proud Boys especially exposes how violent homophobic mobilization allows disenfranchised men to articulate a masculine birthright to land, to regulate human and symbolic traffic across territory, and to reinforce the gender, sexual and racial membership criteria of public urban space.

Founded in 2016 by Gavin McInnes, the Proud Boys are a far-right, male-only, and grassroots organization. Presenting itself as “Western chauvinist,” the group promotes what it takes to be traditional male values; opposition to political queer, feminist, and Black equality; and a commitment to defending Western civilization.<sup>559</sup> Like the Soldiers of God, the Proud Boys are mostly autonomous, hyper-local, and come from peripheral and disenfranchised parts of the country.<sup>560</sup> Their claim to guard the heterosexuality of public land allows the Proud Boys to lay claim to commercial and urban spaces whose classed membership boundaries often excludes them. In this regard, the Lebanese case sheds light on how homophobia serves as a way for men to assert and practice a “birthright” to public land. That is, the policing of queer and feminist publicity enables men to figure themselves as “natural” guardians of an equally “natural” territorial order and to re-claim their “goes without saying”<sup>561</sup> dominion over public space. In fact, the Proud Boys signify their activity as a natural re-conquest of rights that have been “taken” from them.<sup>562</sup> In that regard, Lebanon’s institutionalized sectarianism—its discourses of patrilineal birthright, inheritance, and territorial dominion—brings into view how territory is imagined to be a fundamental right for men and how the exercise of that right

---

<sup>559</sup> Anti-Defamation League. (2018). *Proud boys: Who are they?* ADL.  
<https://www.adl.org/resources/background/proud-boys>

<sup>560</sup> *Proud boys aid the right-wing assault on the LGBTQ community and reproductive justice.* (2024, December 3). Southern Poverty Law Center. <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/hatewatch/proud-boys-aid-right-wing-assault-lgbtq-community-and-reproductive-justice/>

<sup>561</sup> Monique Wittig’s formulation: see dissertation introduction.

<sup>562</sup> NBC. (2017). *Far-Right Proud Boys Cultivate Male Angst* | NBC Left Field [YouTube Video]. In *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGZ-rw1ZgJw>

depends upon 1) the appearance of public heteronormativity and 2) the position of men as the supreme subjects of public space.

Functionally, the group targets publicly-circulating queer bodies and symbols; feminists and socially non-conforming women; and racial and immigrant minorities—groups whose public presence threaten the aesthetic and demographic identity of White and hetero-majority spaces. Here, the Lebanese case gives us traction on the distinct threat that queer publicity poses to territory. While racial demographic patterns threaten to convert the identity of land from one racial/ethnic majority to another, queer publicity threatens to de-racialize and globalize public space such that race is no longer the primary marker of territorial membership. Furthermore, and by publicly targeting queer symbols, bodies, and spaces, the Proud Boys, like the Soldiers of God, signal to racial others to stay away from the boundaries of “White-only” territory. Indeed, and because queer are a materially and demographically weaker minority, and because markers of queer sexuality can be censored without eliminating individuals—unlike race—the targeting of queerness more easily allows the Proud Boys to re-engineer the phenotype of public space while also allowing them to deny that their project is eugenic in nature.

In that regard, the case of Soldiers of God in Lebanon also reveals how the maintenance of the “heterosexual contract” underwrites the homophobic maintenance of racial territorial boundaries in the United States. In the US, the Proud Boys target the publicity of queer and non-reproductive forms of life—of feminist pro-choice demonstrations and of gay equality marches, for example—in an effort to preserve the dominance of White racial demographics. They also attack spaces and events that promote and facilitate social mixture across racial and ethnic lines. Here, we can recall that, part of queer identity’s threat is in the fact that queers exist in all racial/ethnic/religious groups and form associations across categories of blood and kinship.

Those political, social and romantic associations—and the spaces in which they are formed—threaten racial and sectarian identities insofar as they decrease their sociopolitical salience. Relations and marriages across racial lines further obstruct the capacity for those identities to be transmitted across generations without being diluted in value—if they were to be transmitted at all. Seen as such, the Proud Boys respond to a crisis in waning White-racial demographics and attempt to publicly disappear any and all elements that promote forms of life that undermine the reproductive futurity of Whiteness.

In an almost perfect analog to the Soldiers of God, the Proud Boys deploy territorial practices like parades, raids, and occupations that work against the successes of queer publicity in the US. Specifically, the group mobilizes against libraries, schools, and queer advocacy centers; they have also repeatedly invaded Drag Queen Story Hour events in states like Oregon, California, and Texas, claiming to defend children against queer “groomers.” Here, another lesson can be taken from Lebanon: like the activity of Soldiers of God, the territorial practices of the Proud Boys are motivated by anxieties around the transmission of queer identification and imagination(s) of queer colonization and contamination. That is, the group imagines queerness as a contagious virus and attempts to obstruct the epidemic spread of queer identity among children and youth, whose immunity to mal-influences is figured to be weaker than adults. While metaphors of viruses are a key feature of homophobic discourse around the globe, these metaphors attempt to mobilize homophobic families and communities against the circulation of knowledge about queerness—knowledge that could contribute to the development of queer children into queer adults. By disappearing all signs of queerness in space, the censorship of queer publicity works to contain the spread and uptake of queer identity. In doing so, the Proud Boys, like the Soldiers of God, spatially enforce the terms of queer non-disclosure and reproduce

the semblance of a heterosexually absolutist—or at least in the US, supremacist—public order, which in turn, shores up the supremacy of hetero-White culture in public urban space(s).

Finally, the federating-functions of homophobic street violence in Lebanon allow us to see the distinct kinds of alliances that anti-gay militants in the US form. Hyper-local in their orientation, the Proud Boys collaborate with sheriffs, right-wing schoolboard members, and local militias.<sup>563</sup> They have also aligned with groups like the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters—two paramilitary organizations composed largely of ex-law enforcement officers and veterans.<sup>564</sup> If we recall, the Soldiers of God were also largely comprised of public and private security guards and other disenfranchised men from Beirut’s peripheries. But what is so analogous to the Lebanese case is the fact that these alliances guard the territorial boundaries in which each group operates. In fact, these collaborations often involve “force protection” roles, like perimeter defense and logistics—both of which secure the autonomous “jurisdictions” of each group.<sup>565</sup> Furthermore, and like in Lebanon, the Proud Boys and their allies do not have a strict top-down command but operate like a networked swarm. This flexibility allows them to disperse risk, adapt to censorship, and mobilize rapidly across different geographies and events. Viewed from the Lebanese vantage point, we see how homophobic militancy “from below” works not to unify violent male groups, but to federate them around a common hetero-racial political project.

#### The Natural Legal Order and the Battle for/against the Courts

In regard to the law, the Lebanese case sheds light on how homophobia politicizes pro-queer and pro-feminist legislation and court rulings in order to articulate hetero-religious conceptions of gender and sexual “nature” in the United States. Specifically, struggles over

---

<sup>563</sup> *Documenting hate: New american nazis.* (2020, February 4). FRONTLINE.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/documenting-hate-new-american-nazis/>

<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid.



Lebanon’s Article 534—the law that criminalizes “all acts against the order of nature”—bring into view how and why the legal re-definition of human sexual nature in American law mobilizes homophobic *and* anti-homophobic contestation. More, the explicit codification of a “natural order” in Lebanon illuminates how contestation over sexual legal ontology functions as a site of factional alliance-building in a federalist political system.

One fascinating aspect about the Lebanese and American cases is their opposite legal starting points. As we have seen, and in Lebanon, the Penal Code’s Article 534 already codifies the notion of a “natural order” and provides a legal safeguard for public heterosexuality in the state. As we have also seen, however, the “goes without saying” understanding that heterosexuality=nature allowed pro-queer legal advocates and judges to re-interpret nature as inclusive of gender and sexual pluralism rather than as a sign for heterosexual absolutism. As such, legal advocates and activists used the Lebanese courts to unmake the heterosexual monopoly on definitions of human nature. Responding to this process, homophobic actors mobilized *against* the court system to preserve laws that were *already* on the books.

In the American context, anti-gay, anti-abortion, and anti-gender mobilization works through—rather than against—the courts to unmake federal-level legislation that protects gender and sexual freedoms and equality. Unlike the Lebanese case, this mobilization does not seek to preserve already-codified conceptions of a natural order in American Law but to institute them. In 2022, for instance, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* overturned *Roe v. Wade*, removing the federal right to abortion and women’s reproductive health.<sup>566</sup> And while gay marriage continues to be legal on a federal-level, there have also been ongoing efforts by conservative coalitions to challenge and/or narrow the scope

---

<sup>566</sup> *Dobbs v. jackson women’s health organization* | constitution center. (2022). National Constitution Center – Constitutioncenter.org. <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/supreme-court-case-library/dobbs-v-jackson-womens-health-organization?>

of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the decision that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide. Indeed, both mobilizations are aimed at legally *restoring* and *explicitly* instituting a public and hetero-supremacist conception of a “natural” order in which women have no reproductive rights and in which queer relations are not legally recognized nor possess equal public standing. In that regard, Lebanon gives us traction on why arguments about sexual “nature” matter. Lebanon also underscores the political and popular investments behind the codification and the safeguarding of *public* conceptions of heterosexuality in American law.

Furthermore, and in both the Lebanese and the American cases, we see how gender and sexual reform through the courts backfires and lays the ground for successful anti-gay and anti-gender mobilization. As we saw, Lebanese lawyers chose the courts as the primary site for homosexual decriminalization precisely because they are insulated from public opinion. In other words, legal actors knew that the majoritarian societal consensus *against* homosexuality would obstruct progress on anti-homophobic reform in the law. Working under the radar for nearly two decades, however, queer advocates were confronted by the consequences of leaving that societal homophobic consensus untreated. Indeed, queer publicity in 2022 blew the lid off this covert reform, with anti-gay actors pointing to the pro-queer rulings as evidence of the Lebanese courts’ elitism, un-representativeness, and partiality.

To a lesser extent, gender and sexual reform in the US—particularly around abortion and marriage equality—faced a similar crisis of social legitimacy. That neither *Roe v. Wade* nor *Obergefell v. Hodges* were backed by a popular consensus enabled anti-gay and anti-Gender actors to figure both rulings as unrepresentative of most Americans. More, the US Supreme Court has become the primary avenue through which anti-gender and anti-sexual reform is occurring, which in turn, has figured the American courts as undemocratic and partisan for

progressive American factions. Here, we see how contestation over gender and sexuality has figured the US Supreme Court and the Lebanese Court of Cassation as mirror images of each other: while the former is held to be partisan by American progressives, the latter's neutrality is put into question by Lebanon's conservative and sectarian factions. In these similar-but-opposite-ways, contests over sexuality politicize national court systems and erode their inter-factional authority. The Lebanese case also casts into bold relief the precarity of pro-queer and feminist legal reform that is not supported by the creation of a cross-factional societal consensus.

Finally, mobilization against homosexual decriminalization in Lebanon illuminates how contests over gender and sexual equality work to reinforce relations of plurality rather than of unity among homophobic factions. As we have seen in Lebanon, homophobia allows heterogenous factions to politically articulate their different conceptions of heterosexual nature. In doing so, homophobic discourse does not homogenize groups around an "empty signifier,"<sup>567</sup> as anti-Gender literatures in the East European context would have it. Instead, homophobia emphasizes sectarian differences as evidence for the objective and universal validity of heterosexual absolutism. Not transcending differences, heterosexuality works as a common "inter-est" that relates heterogenous factions and accentuates their differences.

In the US, progressive discourses around anti-gender and anti-gay mobilization often figure homophobic factions as a homogenous conservative entity. While the bipartisan power-sharing structure of the American state diverges from Lebanon's pluralist form, the Lebanese case nevertheless foregrounds how heterosexuality relates a motley array of American religious factions and even opponents. A telling example is that of the 2023 document "Navigating Differences"—an open letter signed by hundreds of Muslim leaders, scholars, and religious

---

<sup>567</sup> See introduction and chapter 3 for detailed discussion of Graff, A., & Koroleczuk, E. (2021). *Anti-Gender politics in the populist moment*. Routledge.

groups in North America that opposed federal-level legislation on queer education in the US and insisted on the authority of “Islamic gender and sexual ethics” (ie: heterosexuality).<sup>568</sup> But the Muslim-American politicization of heterosexual human nature did not “unify” them with Christian conservative, Islamophobic, and White nationalist factions. It did however relate Muslims in a common homophobic project that Christian sects across the US are invested in. The latter also laid the ground for future Muslim-Christian collaborations. Seen through Lebanese case, pluralist homophobia politicizes heterosexuality as a *specific* signifier that re-instantiates religious differences by articulating a common and inter-religious sexual ground.

### Homophobia, “Gender and Sexual Imperialism,” and the Battle(s) Against Queer Education

As a hub of colonial and geopolitical influences, the Lebanese case sheds light on how homophobic discourses politicize international hierarchies and re-assert national sovereignty on a global stage. Beyond Lebanon, the geopolitical uses of homophobia have recently appeared in the diplomatic rhetoric of the UAE and Qatar. The most notable example was the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Here, the Qatari government explicitly banned the display of queer flags at the games and figured the ban as an exercise of sovereignty.<sup>569</sup> Indeed, Qatari officials framed public queer forms as violations of Qatar’s cultural and political autonomy. In doing so, they implicitly weaponized histories of empire against the global North and rendered queer publicity a red line for national self-determination. Functionally, these rhetorical maneuvers insulated Qatar’s reality of gender and sexual subjugation and rendered sexuality off limits to global

---

<sup>568</sup> Ali, W. (2023, June 23). Opinion | we muslims used to be the culture war scapegoats. why are some of us joining the L.G.B.T.Q. pile-on? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/23/opinion/lgbtq-muslims.html>

<sup>569</sup>Bull, J., & Younes, R. (2022, November 10). *Qatar world cup ambassador’s homophobic comments fuel discrimination*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/10/qatar-world-cup-ambassadors-homophobic-comments-fuel-discrimination>; Reuters. (2022, November 8). Qatar world cup ambassador says homosexuality is “damage in the mind.” *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/qatar-world-cup-ambassador-says-homosexuality-is-damage-mind-2022-11-08/>;

critique. Through their use of anticolonial rhetoric, states like Qatar use homophobia to assert their sovereignty while they pursue political and economic integration with pro-queer states.

Not only employed by postcolonial governments, anti-gay and anticolonial rhetoric has also worked as an ordinary strategy through which homophobic actors resist public queer education in the Global North. For instance, so-called “anti-Gender” movements in the US and Europe have framed queer education as project of “gender and sexual imperialism.”<sup>570</sup> This rhetoric allows homophobic activists and parents to signify Federal and EU-level legislation around queer education as acts of cultural violation and colonial imposition. In fact, both the American federal government and the European Union are figured as imperial forces that transgress on the rights and freedoms of hetero-only parents, families and communities. Take, for instance, Florida’s “Parental Rights in Education” law that was enacted in March of 2022.<sup>571</sup> Dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay” law by critics, it prohibits instruction on gender and sexual pluralism and queer identities from kindergarten through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>572</sup> Functionally, the law works to censor the circulation of knowledge about non-normative gender and sexual identification, and in doing so, obstructs for queer and proto-queer children paths for the development and disclosure of their queer identities. By censoring any knowledge, symbols, or representations (books, Pride flags, etc.) that point to the existence of gender and sexual pluralism, this law shores up the appearance of a heterosexual-only world and inhibits the

---

<sup>570</sup> See Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, eds., *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); "Global Anti-Gender and Anti-LGBTQ+ Politics: Historical Continuities and Transnational Connections," workshop at the University of Chicago, 2024; "The Coloniality of Anti-Gender Politics," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2023, ohchr.org; Anna Chalmers-Mmolai, "The Arm of Imperialism: The Church's Anti-Gender and Anti-SOGIE Rhetoric," *Washington Blade*, August 23, 2023; "Recognizing, Documenting, and Addressing Anti-Gender Opposition," GATE, 2024, gate.ng

<sup>571</sup> *The florida senate*. (2024). Flsenate.gov. <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557/BillText/er/PDF>

<sup>572</sup> National Education Association. (2023). *What you need to know about florida’s “don’t say gay” and “don’t say they” laws, book bans, and other curricula restrictions*. National Education Association. [https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/30424-know-your-rights\\_web\\_v4.pdf](https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/30424-know-your-rights_web_v4.pdf)

development and freedom of queer youth. Centrally, the law also fortifies parental rights over children, allowing parents to sue schools for perceived violations.

In that regard, what the Lebanese case highlights is how the gender and sexual education of children reinforces the autonomy of subnational political entities and the dominion they exercise over their vulnerable human-members. While in Lebanon, those entities are sects, in the United States, queer education stages the constitutive battle between Federalism and States' Rights. Like the question of Black slavery and emancipation in the 1860s, I contend that the question of queer education is a question about the emancipation of a caste of humans (children) from the dominion that another class of humans (homophobic parents and families) exercise over them. Put in these terms, we see how homophobic discourses about parental rights take for granted that children have the status of chattel in families—they are “owned” by their parents who have property in them. By insulating parents and families from federal intervention, state-level legislation like the “Don't Say Gay” law reproduces conceptions of children-as-property and preserves the relations of domination that structure *all* families. Ironically, and while this law purports to target the “grooming” of straight children by queer adults, it instead works to preserve the unbridled right of parents to “groom” their children. That is, and by preventing exposure to external queer influences, this law ensures that parents are able to monopolistically influence and reproduce “their” children in their own heterosexual image. And given the state of near-total domination that parents exercise over them, queer children can only be emancipated when it is too late—that is, at eighteen and after the homophobic damage of parents, religion, and conversion camps has already been done. Even then, queer adults who hail from anti-gay parts must free themselves from the external and internal structures that oppress them—a feat of self-decolonization that many do not have the privilege of undergoing.

In these ways, contests over queer education show how the autonomy of sects, states, and families is contingent upon the unfreedom and ownership of a caste of humans who are not even counted as full humans at all. The comparison between the Lebanese and the American cases, as well as between the case of queer and Black emancipation, also highlights the indispensability of children in the reproduction of sub-national entities. While slave-holding states and families needed slaves to reproduce their power, wealth and identities, homophobic families and states need children to perpetuate their cultural identities into the future. This is why the legal insulation of straight parental “grooming” is so essential: it aims to transmit heterosexual, ethnic, and religious identities uninterrupted and across generations.

#### Epilogue: The Power of Queer Desire

In closing a dissertation on the threat of queer publicity, I want to deviate by meditating on what I find so fascinating—and what homophobic audiences find so frightening—about queerness: despite the violence of numerous anti-gay “ideological state apparatuses”<sup>573</sup>—families, schools, states, churches, and mosques—and despite their attempts at preventing the development of queer people, homophobic power is helpless before queer desire itself. Homophobic families and communities can send queer children to conversion camps. They can instill in queer children the terrors of hell. They could make queer children desire straightness. They can even disappear signs of queerness and fascistically produce the semblance of a hetero-only world. But despite these drastic measures, homophobic authority cannot vanquish queer desire. In fact, queer desire appears and makes itself felt with an intensity that religious faith(s) could only dream of inspiring.

Indeed, this is where the real threat of queerness lies: at its heart, queerness is a desire that spontaneously appears in individuals the world over and whose presence can neither be

---

<sup>573</sup> Here, I borrow Louis Althusser’s formulation in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*.

doubted or denied by those who experience it, even among those who spend their entire lives in denial. Politically, the experience of this desire makes itself available for the creation of a counter-identity, one whose presence across time does not rely on the straightjacketing violence of heterosexual reproduction, but upon a desire that mysteriously appears from nowhere and discloses itself of its own accord. A desire whose authority exists over and above any earthly or divine power(s). A desire whose origin-less appearance in the world terrorizes mortals and contests Gods.

Perhaps this is why queerness—when it is not fought by homophobic political violence—is belittled and trivialized among the right and the left. For, this beauty of queerness—its appearance from nothing and its contestation of everything—must be made light of by those who cannot see the truth of what merely appears and the novelty of what simply presents itself. That queerness shows up over and above human and divine will is, indeed, terrifying: it reveals that no matter how much we try to adhere, no matter how much we *want* to adhere, humans—at least some of them—cannot but stray. But queer strays are not any minority: rather, queers show that the very possibility of freedom, newness, and distinction in the world depends upon trusting the stirrings—and the straying—of the human heart. Even, or rather especially, if that heart leads to an abyss. For it is in facing that abyss that we clearly see the contingency of the so called “straight path”—how that path is nothing more and nothing less than a violent end of human sovereignty and a false defense against the vulnerabilities of human unknowing.

Facing the abyss, I see nothing, and I know not what will come of my fall. I fall facing death. I fall not knowing where I will land. And yet, fall I must, for desire is a force that is more grounding than gravity itself. But unlike the ground that nature gives, it is up to me—to us—to build the ground that will save us, nurture us, and propel us to the heights of human freedom.



## Chapter Bibliographies

### INTRODUCTION

- Abu-Chakra, M. (2021, April 20). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Al-Jazeera. (2015, August 25). *Til'et rihitkon tuhiz jidran al-sultah bi-lubnan*. Aljazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2015/8/25/%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%83%D9%85-%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%B2%D9%91-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86>
- Al-Modn. (2017, January 26). *Al-mithliya haq tabi'i*. Al-Modn. <https://www.almodon.com/politics/2017/1/26/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AB%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%87%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%82-%D8%B7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%8A>. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Amar, P. (2013). *The security archipelago ; human-security states, sexuality politics, and the end of neoliberalism*. Duke University Press.
- Amel, M. (1984). *Fi al-Dawla al-Ta'ifiya* (pp. 1–50). (my translations).
- Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* (2nd ed.). University Of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1958)
- Beirut Madinati: Another Future Is Possible. (2025). *Beirut madinati: Another future is possible*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/beirut-madinati-another-future-possible>
- Bosia, M. J., & Weiss, M. L. (2013). *Global homophobia : states, movements, and the politics of oppression*. University Of Illinois Press.
- Cammett, M. (2014). *Compassionate communalism*. Cornell University Press.
- Chitty, C. (2020). *Sexual hegemony : Statecraft, sodomy, and capital in the rise of the world system*. Durham ; London Duke University Press.
- Cohen, S. (1972). *Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of the mods and rockers* (3rd ed.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. (Original work published 1972)
- Cory, D. W. (1975). *Homosexual in america : A subjective approach*. Arno Press.
- Currier, A. (2019). *Politicizing sex in contemporary africa : Homophobia in malawi*. Cambridge University Press.
- Deeb, L. (2024). *Love across difference: Mixed marriage in lebanon*. Stanford University Press.
- Deeb, L., & Harb, M. (2013). *Leisurely islam : Negotiating geography and morality in shi'ite south beirut*. Princeton University Press.
- "Difa'an "an al masihiya"... taharukat w tahdidat l-man" hafl "mashrou leila' fi lubnan. (2019, July 22). Raseef 22. <https://raseef22.net/article/1074477-%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B9-%D8%AD%D9%81%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9-%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86>

- Edelman, L. (2004). *No future: Queer theory and the death drive*. Duke University Press.
- Fischel, J. J. (2016). *Sex and harm in the age of consent*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of sexuality. Volume I: an Introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.; Vol. 1). Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1997). *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth (essential works of foucault, 1954-1988)* (P. Rabinow, Ed.). New Press. Friendship as a Way of Life.
- G. (2019, August 7). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Ghassan Moussawi. (2020). *Disruptive situations : Fractal orientalism and queer strategies in beirut*. Temple University Press.
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2021). *Anti-Gender politics in the populist moment*. Routledge.
- Hermez, S. (2017). *War is coming between past and future violence in lebanon*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Heydemann, S. (2007, October 15). *Upgrading authoritarianism in the arab world*. Brookings.  
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/upgrading-authoritarianism-in-the-arab-world/>
- I. (2020, November 3). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Köttig, M., Bitzan, R., & Petö, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43533-6>
- Lancaster, R. N. (2011). *Sex panic and the punitive state*. University of California Press.
- Lebanon: Entry ban follows gender, sexuality conference*. (2019, August 27). Human Rights Watch.  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/27/lebanon-entry-ban-follows-gender-sexuality-conference>
- Li, D. (2020). *The universal enemy : Jihad, empire, and the challenge of solidarity*. Stanford University Press.
- M. (2025, May 14). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].
- Makdisi, U. (2000). *The culture of sectarianism : Community, history, and violence in nineteenth-century ottoman lebanon*. University of California Press.
- Makdisi, U. (2019). *Age of coexistence : The ecumenical frame and the making of the modern arab world*. Univ Of California Press.
- Manel Mallat. (2019, July 4). *Manel mallat - kol al alwan [official music video] (2019)* . YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfYokXcyU5c>
- Marwan Kraidy. (2010). *Reality television and arab politics : Contention in public life*. Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, secularism, and the state in lebanon*. Stanford University Press.
- Nammour, K. (2013, December). *Dekwaneh's "no gay land" triggers debate on homophobia - legal agenda*. Legal Agenda. <https://english.legal-agenda.com/dekwanehs-no-gay-land-triggers-debate-on-homophobia/>
- Nucho, J. R. (2016). *Everyday sectarianism in urban lebanon: Infrastructures, public services.*. Princeton University Press.

- Peto, A. (2018, September). *Gender as a symbolic glue makes european freedom of education at stake*. Ssrn.com. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3898855](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3898855)
- Puar, J. K. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Duke University Press.
- Puri, J. (2016). *Sexual states : Governance and the struggle over the antisodomy law in india*. Duke University Press.
- Reuters. (2022, May 17). What is the make-up of Lebanon’s new parliament? *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-make-up-lebanons-new-parliament-2022-05-17/>
- Rubin, G. (2011). *Deviations: a gayle rubin reader*. Duke University Press.
- Saba Mahmood. (2016). *Religious difference in a secular age: a minority report*. Princeton University Press, Cop.
- Salloukh, B. F., Rabie Barakat, Al-Habbal, J. S., Khattab, L. W., & Shoghig Mikaelian. (2015). *Politics of sectarianism in postwar Lebanon*. Pluto Press.
- Schmitt, C. (1999). *The concept of the political* (p. 27). University Of Chicago Press.
- Schulman, S. (2009). *Ties that bind: Familial homophobia and its consequences*. The New Press.
- Schweiker, W., & Clairmont, D. A. (2020). *Religious ethics : Meaning and method*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.
- Shesterinina, A. (2016). Collective threat framing and mobilization in civil war. *American Political Science Review*, 110(3), 411–427. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055416000277>
- Staniland, P. (2021). *Ordering violence: Explaining armed group-state relations from conflict to cooperation*. Cornell University Press.
- Stevens, J. (1999). *Reproducing the state*. Princeton University Press.
- Toufoul Abou-Hodeib. (2017). *A taste for home*. Stanford University Press.
- Wansa, S. (2014, November 11). *Torture at every stage: The unofficial narrative of the hammam al-Agha raid - legal agenda*. Legal Agenda. <https://english.legal-agenda.com/torture-at-every-stage-the-unofficial-narrative-of-the-hammam-al-agma-raid/>
- Weiss, M. (2010). *In the shadow of sectarianism : Law, shi`ism, and the making of modern lebanon*. Harvard University Press.
- Wittig, M. (1992). *The straight mind and other essays*. Beacon Press.
- Younes, R. (2020, May 7). “If Not Now, When?: Queer and Trans People Reclaim their Power in Lebanon’s Revolution”. *Www.hrw.org*. <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2020/05/07/if-not-now-when-queer-and-trans-people-reclaim-their-power>

\*\*\*

## CHAPTER 1

- ‘abd Al-Rahmān B Muḥammad Ibn Ḳaldūn, Franz Rosenthal, Dawood, N. J., & Lawrence, B. (2015). *The Muqaddimah : an introduction to history*. Princeton University Press.

- A. (2020, November 29). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- AgoraLeaks. (2019a, July). Nad'u ahali jbeil lildaghit la yaqif haflet firqet Mashrou' leila al-shatha al jinsiyya. *AgoraLeaks*. Article saved on my drive.
- AgoraLeaks. (2019b). Naji Hayek: 'eib "OrientleJour" tu'taber al shatem bil massih w al haza` bil 'adra `amr 'adi. In *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2407984662786263>
- AgoraLeaks. (2019c, July 25). Shahidu fideo Mashrou' leila alati yuji`un bihi al mahrajan jbeil, tuskhar min al messih w tuhanahu b absha' alturek. *AgoraLeaks*. Article saved on my drive.
- AgoraLeaks . (2019, August 20). *Naji hayek yuqadem ikhbar bihak Mashrou' leila, 'ala alniyaba al'ama tataharak*. Facebook.com. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1049669132091090>
- Al Mufaqrata al Qanuniya. (2019, August 3). *Mu`tamar sahafati: mukafahat al la-tasamuh w al kirahiya*. Youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AE3PaczD\\_p0&list=PLNLJ3HH6SAbhDU0eKX\\_-XWANCaSIEPHRZ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AE3PaczD_p0&list=PLNLJ3HH6SAbhDU0eKX_-XWANCaSIEPHRZ)
- al-hizb al demokrati al massihi | Beirut*. (2025). Facebook.com. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100068344338677#>
- Amar, P. (2013). *The Security Archipelago Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism*. Duke University Press.
- Azzi, G. (2019, August 6). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Butler, J. (2015). *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Harvard University Press.
- Mark. (2020, November 6). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Durkheim, E. (2012). *Elementary forms of religious life* (pp. 412–416). (Original work published 1912)
- Edelman, L. (2004). *No Future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive*. Duke University Press.
- Human Rights Watch. (2020, October 1). *Egypt: Security forces abuse, torture LGBT people*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/01/egypt-security-forces-abuse-torture-lgbt-people>
- Imam, H. (2014). Wasfat libnaniye lil tha`r. *Samandal*, 7.
- Imam, H. (2019, August 14). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Jaeggi, R. (2018). *On the critique of forms of life*. Harvard University Press.
- Labakeh, N. (Director). (2011). *Hala' la wein (where do we go now)* [Film].
- LBC International. (2019, July 24). *Intiha` al tahqiqat ma' afrad firqat Mashrou' leila.. wa ikhla` sabiluhum*. LBC. <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon-security/458704/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A3%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9->

%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A1-  
%D8%B3/ar. Beirut, Lebanon.

*Lebanese penal code*. (1943). [https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/lebanon-penal-code\\_html/Lebanon\\_Penal\\_Code\\_1943.pdf](https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/lebanon-penal-code_html/Lebanon_Penal_Code_1943.pdf)

Leila, M. (2015). *Djinn* [Music]. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8H\\_HTyZGzU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8H_HTyZGzU)

Makhlouf, Y. (2019, August 4). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

*Mashrou` leila: akher dahiyet qami3 li-hurriyet al ta`bir fi lubnan*. (2019, July 26). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2019/07/26/332462>

Mazzarella, W. (2013). *Censorium*. Duke University Press.

Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism*. Stanford University Press.

OTV Lebanon. (2021, April 21). *Hiwar al yawm ma` al nashit al siyasi fi tayyar al watani al hurr d naji hayek*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nas6ZNRXaWA>

Papazian, H. (2020, July 16). Opinion | she waved a rainbow flag at our cairo show. tragedy followed. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/opinion/culture/mashrou-leila-fan-suicide.html>

Rao, R. (2014). The locations of homophobia. *London Review of International Law*, 2(2), 169–199. <https://doi.org/10.1093/lril/lru010>

Raya. (2021, October 28). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

Saghieh, N. (2016). *Censorship in Lebanon: Law and practice*.

Samandal v al sha`ib libnani, (Lebanese Court of Cassation April 27, 2015).

Sami Hermez. (2021). *War is coming: Between past and future violence in lebanon*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Talal Asad, Brown, W., Butler, J., & Saba Mahmood. (2013). *Is critique secular? : blasphemy, injury, and free speech*. Fordham University Press.

Thaqafa, A.-M. (2019, July 17). *Hamla massihiya did Mashrou` leila w hammed sinno yarud*. Al Modon; Al Modon. <https://www.almodon.com/culture/2019/7/22/%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9-%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%89>

*The lebanese constitution* . (1926). <https://www.presidency.gov.lb/English/LebaneseSystem/Documents/Lebanese%20Constitution.pdf>

Ussama Makdisi. (2021). *Age of coexistence: The ecumenical frame and the making of the modern arab world* (p. 96). University of California Press.

Wittig, M. (1992). *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Beacon Press.

Younes, R. (2020, May 7). “If not now, when?” queer and trans people reclaim their power in lebanon’s revolution. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2020/05/07/if-not-now-when-queer-and-trans-people-reclaim-their-power>

\*\*\*

## CHAPTER 2

أورينت نيوز - Orient. (2023, October 1). *Sidam bein masirat al mithliyeen w ukhra munahada laha wasat beirut*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWao14qzAHM>

Abid, M. (2023, August 30). *Junood al fayha`...dikanah amniya jadeedah*. Nida` Al-Watan. Beirut, Lebanon.

Achrafieh News. (2022, June 24). *Ba'id ta'lik a'lam lil-mithliyeen fi al-Ashrafieh junood al rab yantafidun did hatha al thahira."*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-zQsZSSCMg>

Al-Haj Ali, M. (2022). *Al-intikhabat al-niyabiya al-libnaniya 2022: Tahawulat siyasiyah w istihqaqat mu'talah*. Markaz Al-Jazeera. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/5374>

Annahar. (2023, September 30). *"Istibahat al-hurriyat wasat beirut w i'tida` 'ala al-nashiteen tahit a'youn al-amn*. Annahar. <https://www.annahar.com/arabic/section/77-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B9/278167/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B1--%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%AD-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%82%D9%88%D8%B7-3-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%89>. Beirut, Lebanon.

'Arabi 21. (2023, August 24). *Jadal fi lubnan ba'id hujoom junood al-Rab al-masihiyah 'ala malha yurawej lil-mithliya (shuthuth)*". <https://arabi21.com/story/1533130>

Bosia, M. J., & Weiss, M. L. (2013). *Global homophobia : states, movements, and the politics of oppression*. University Of Illinois Press.

Mark. (2020, November 11). *Ethnographic Interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

Chitty, C., Fox, M., & Nealon, C. S. (2020). *Sexual hegemony*. Duke University Press.

Collins, R. (2008). *Violence : a micro-sociological Theory*. Princeton University Press.

Dada, S. (2024, January 11). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

Dada, S. (2024, January 24). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].

Dahhabi, J. (2023, September 2). *'Junood al-Fayha` : Fuqa'a did al-Mithliya w saraya al muqawama w miqati*. Al-Modn. <https://www.almodon.com/society/2023/9/2/%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%81%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AB%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A>. Beirut, Lebanon.

Deeb, L., & Harb, M. (2013). *Leisurely islam : Negotiating geography and morality in shi'ite south beirut*. Princeton University Press.

- DW Ja'far Tuwk. (2023, August 25). *Aqifu junood al-rab... ma yahsal fi lubnan mur'eb*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTp2hcl6iL4>
- F. (2022, December 17). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].
- F. (2023, August). *Ethnographic conversation* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].
- Feldman, A. (2000). *Formations of violence the narrative of the body and political terror in northern ireland*. Chicago, Ill. [U.A.] Univ. Of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (2000). "Friendship as a way of life" in *ethics: Subjectivity and truth* (p. 138). Penguin Books.
- Ghanimeh, P. (Director). (2011). *Lemon flowers* [Vimeo].
- Gould, R. V. (2020). *Collision of Wills*. University of Chicago Press.
- H. (2020, October 26). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel Cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*. Verso.
- Hermez, S. (2017). *War is coming between past and future violence in lebanon*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Human Rights Watch. (2021, August 3). "They killed us from the inside" an investigation into the august 4 beirut blast. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/03/they-killed-us-inside/investigation-august-4-beirut-blast>
- Khashoush, I. (2022, December 14). "Al-Tataturf marfoud masihiyan... la bi`a hadna la 'junood al-rab'." . Annahar.com. <https://www.annahar.com/arabic/section/76-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/14122022051931907>
- Khayyat, M. (2022). *A landscape of war : Ecologies of resistance and survival in south lebanon*. University of California Press.
- Lebanon, I. (2018). *In Lebanon, gay activism is fueling a new conversation about democracy and civil rights*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/lebanon-gay-activism-fueling-new-conversation-about-democracy-and-civil-rights>
- Lefebvre, H. (1968). *Le droit a la ville*. Anthropos.
- Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism*. Stanford University Press.
- N. (2022, May). *Ethnographic conversation* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Field Notes May 2022.
- Nucho, J. R. (2016). *Everyday sectarianism in urban lebanon: Infrastructures, public services*. Princeton University Press.
- Oldenburg, R. (1999). *The great good place: Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. Da Capo Press.
- Qiblawi, T. (2017, May 16). *Beirut gay pride event a first for Lebanon*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/16/middleeast/beirut-gay-pride/index.html>
- Reuters. (2022, May 17). What is the make-up of Lebanon's new parliament? *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-make-up-lebanons-new-parliament-2022-05-17/>

- Sky News Arabia. (2022, December 21). *Manasat junood al rab... majmu'at amn-zati tuthir makhawef al-mughradin al-Lubnaniyeen*. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1\\_FBt9Ry00I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_FBt9Ry00I)
- Sofian Merabet. (2015). *Queer Beirut*. University Of Texas Press.
- Sontag, S. (2005). *Illness as Metaphor and AIDs and Its Metaphors*. Picador. (Original work published 1978)
- Spot Shot Video. (2022, December 19). *Rajul din sunni yuhaded "junood al rab" w yudiq naqush al-khatar: Na7nu 'ala musharf harb ahliyah*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSTPtpA6Sy0>
- Tilly, C. (2003). *The Politics of Collective Violence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Weiss, M. (2010). *In the shadow of sectarianism: Law, shi'ism, and the making of modern lebanon*. Harvard University Press.
- Younes, R. (2020, May 7). "If Not Now, When?: Queer and Trans People Reclaim their Power in Lebanon's Revolution". [www.hrw.org](https://www.hrw.org). <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2020/05/07/if-not-now-when-queer-and-trans-people-reclaim-their-power>
- Yousef, I. (2023, January 7). *Junood al rab... jama'a yaminiya masihiya tantah hizibullah w tajur lubnan nahu harb ahliyah*. Al-Estiklal. <https://www.alestiklal.net/ar/article/dep-news-1672908448>. Beirut, Lebanon.

\*\*\*

### CHAPTER 3

- AL Jadeed News. (2022, July 6). *Al-hadath 7-6-2022 elias jrede*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liuiI9C8Fxc>
- Al-Manar. (2022, June 26). *Al-mufti qiblan: Al-shuzooz marfood bi-shidah w lan yatahakak fi lubnan*. Al-Manar TV. <https://almanar.com.lb/9709801>. See Chapter 3 Appendix. Figure 5.
- Al-Modn. (2022, January 24). *Al-Hariri kharij al siyasah: la firsah li-lubnan bi-thul al-nufuth al-iraniya*. Al-Modn. <https://www.almodon.com/politics/2022/1/24/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A7-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%B5%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%B8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B0-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A>. See Chapter 3 Appendix.
- Al-Rabi', M. (2022, January 26). *Inhiyar al-haririya: 'la-markaziya sunniya w fawdawiya... w al-'asifah tuqtarab*. Al-Modn. <https://www.almodon.com/politics/2022/1/26/%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B6%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A8>. See Chapter 3 Appendix.
- Amel, M. (1984). *Fi al-Dawla al-Ta'ifia (in the sectarian state)* (pp. 1–50). my translations.
- Asfahani, J. (2022, June 24). *Samahat al-mufti yar'a hafl tawzi' jawa'ez musabaqat nizar w siham shqeir al-qur'aniya*. Darelfatwa.gov.lb; <https://www.darelfatwa.gov.lb/%d8%b3%bd9%85%bd8%a7%bd8%ad%bd8%a9-%d8%a7%bd9%84%bd9%85%bd9%81%bd8%aa%bd9%8a-%bd9%8a%bd8%b1%bd8%b9%bd9%89-%d8%ad%bd9%81%bd9%84-%d8%aa%bd9%88%bd8%b2%bd9%8a%bd8%b9->



%d8%ac%d9%88%d8%a7%d8%a6%d8%b2-%d9%85%d8%b3%d8%a7%d8%a8/. See Chapter 4 Appendix. Figure 3.

Bosia, M. J., & Weiss, M. L. (2013). *Global homophobia : states, movements, and the politics of oppression*. University Of Illinois Press.

Mark. (2020, November 6). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi , Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

Dada, S. (2024, January 12). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.

Dahhabi, J. (2021, February 3). *Inhiyar w 'inf w corona: Trablus akbar "hizam bu`is" fi lubnan*. Al-Modn. <https://www.almodon.com/society/2021/3/2/%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D9%88%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%A4%D8%B3-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86>. See Chapter 3 Appendix.

Dahhabi, J. (2022, February 2). *'am ala ahdath trablus w hara`quha: khaniq al-i`tirad w in`ash al-irhab*. Al-Modn. <https://www.almodon.com/politics/2022/2/2/%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AB-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%B3-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%82%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%AE%D9%86%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B6-%D9%88%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A8>. Beirut, Lebanon.

Deeb, L. (2024). *Love across difference: Mixed marriage in lebanon*. Stanford University Press.

Ghida Frangieh. (2019, May 27). *Beirut Court of Appeal: Sexual Orientation is Not Punishable*. Legal Agenda. <https://english.legal-agenda.com/beirut-court-of-appeal-sexual-orientation-is-not-punishable/>

Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2021). *Anti-Gender politics in the populist moment*. Routledge.

Kayf 'alaq hizbillah 'ala "zawaj al-mithliyeen." (2022, July 1). Lebanon Debate. <https://www.lebanondebate.com/news/566649>

*Lebanese penal code*. (1943). [https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/lebanon-penal-code\\_html/Lebanon\\_Penal\\_Code\\_1943.pdf](https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/lebanon-penal-code_html/Lebanon_Penal_Code_1943.pdf)

Legal Agenda. (2018, July 12). *Ba`ed 4 ahkam ibtida`iya isti`naf jabal lubnan tu`len en al-mithliya laysat jirman*. Legal Agenda. <https://legal-agenda.com/%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-4-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A9%D8%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A6%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86/>

Legal Agenda . (2022, July 4). *Bayan li-tahaluf al-difa' "an hurriyat al-ta`bir fi lubnan: Li-himayat afrad mujtama` al meem min al-hijmat*. Legal Agenda. <https://legal-agenda.com/%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%a7%d9%86-%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%ad%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%81-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%af%d9%81%d8%a7%d8%b9-%d8%b9%d9%86-%d8%ad%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b9%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d9%84/?>

- Maharat Foundation. (2022, July). *Bayan al-dakhiliya yaqsam al-mujtama' libnani bein mu'yed w mu'ared*. Maharat Foundation. [https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ\\_Report](https://maharatfoundation.org/LGBTQ_Report)
- Makdisi, U. (2021). *Age of coexistence: The ecumenical frame and the making of the modern arab world*. University of California Press.
- Makhlouf, Y. (2019, August 3). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].
- Mashrou' li-Munahadat al-Shuzooz al-Jinsi fi lubnan*. (2023, July 31). <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/sexualorientation/cfi-report-hrc-56-49/subm-ahrc5649-protection-against-cso-seeds-legal-initiatives-input-2.pdf>
- Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism and the State in Lebanon*. Stanford University Press.
- Next Lebanon. (2022, November 19). *Qarar majlis al-shura al-mu'yed lil-mithliyeen harraq al ra'i al-'am*. Next LB. <https://nextlb.com/people/61755>
- Noe, N. (2022, April 12). *Sea border talks between Israel and Lebanon on verge of imminent collapse*. Responsible Statecraft. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/04/12/us-should-prevent-collapse-of-sea-border-talks-between-israel-and-lebanon/>
- Rawi Hage. (2020). *Beirut Hellfire Society*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Saghieh, N. (2022, December 16). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Schmitt, C., & Ulmen, G. L. (2006). *The Nomos of the earth in the international law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*. Telos Press.
- Suha . (2020, November 28). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- UNDP. (2022, December 1). *2022 lebanese parliamentary elections: Key results*. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/lebanon/publications/2022-lebanese-parliamentary-elections-key-results>
- Wittig, M. (1992). *The straight mind and other essays*. Beacon Press.
- Zeidan, T. (2023, June 14). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication].
- Zerilli, L. M. G. (2016). *A democratic theory of judgment*. The University of Chicago Press.
- \*\*\*
- CHAPTER 4
- Al-Manar TV. (2023, September 5). *كتاب خاص إكتب "الشذوذ" في المدارس الرسمية..ضريبة مساعدات الوكالة الأميركية للتنمية "al-shuzuz" fi al-madares al rasmiya-- dareebet al musa'adat al amrikiya*. لبنان - موقع قناة المنار - لبنان. <https://www.almanar.com.lb/10845980>
- Al-murtada yushrah iqtirah qanun tashri' al-shuzooz, w yufanid mawqefahu min film barbie*. (2023, August 13). Al-Manar. <https://www.almanar.com.lb/10865714>. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Annahar. (2022, May 6). *Bain muraja'at 1559 w al-mu'arada al-dakhiliya lil-hizib*. Annahar. <https://www.annahar.com/arabic/authors/05052022050752532>. Beirut, Lebanon.

- Azzi, G. (2019, August 16). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Beirut, U. S. E. (2023, September 1). *USAID launches \$96.9 million project to improve learning outcomes for students in Lebanon*. U.S. Embassy in Lebanon. <https://lb.usembassy.gov/usa-id-launches-96-9-million-project-to-improve-learning-outcomes-for-students-in-lebanon/>
- F. (2025, April 23). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Tele-interview.
- Fadi Bardawil. (2020). *Revolution and disenchantment : Arab marxism and the binds of emancipation*. Duke University Press.
- Fawaz, R. (2022). *Queer forms*. New York University Press.
- Fischel, J. J. (2016). *Sex and harm in the age of consent*. University of Minnesota Press.
- France24. (2023, October 3). *Hizbullah yu'taber tarseem al-hudood al barriyah mas'ouliyat al dawla al-libnaniya*. France24. <https://www.france24.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7/20231003-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9>
- Hall, S. (2021). *Selected writings on marxism*. Duke University Press. "The Toad in the Garden." 44.
- Interagency report on the implementation of the presidential memorandum on advancing the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons around the world (2022)*. (2022). <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Interagency-Report-on-the-Implementation-of-the-Presidential-Memorandum-on-Advancing-the-Human-Rights-of-Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer-and-Intersex-Persons-Around-the-World-2022.pdf>
- Israel, Lebanon sign us-brokered maritime border deal*. (2022, October 27). [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/27/israel-lebanon-sign-us-brokered-maritime-border-deal>
- جدلية, J. -. (2012, August 12). *Pinkwashing and pinkwashing: Interpenetration and its discontents*. Jadaliyya - جدلية. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26818>
- Ma ba'ed nasb al-khiyam: Furas tarseem al-hudood al-barriya bein lubnan w israel w 'awaq'iha*. (2023, October 5). Emirates Policy Center. <https://www.epc.ae/ar/details/brief/ma-baed-nasb-alkhiyam-furas-tarsim-alhudud-albariya-bayn-lubnan-wa-israel-wa-awayiquh>
- Maha. (2020, November 27). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Massad, J. (2002). Re-Orienting desire: The gay international and the arab world. *Public Culture*, 14(2), 361–386. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-2-361>
- Nasrallah, H. (2023a, July 22). [Al-manar tv]. 'Ashoura. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeVr71jtgIQ..> Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.
- Nasrallah, H. (2023b, July 24). [Al-manar TV]. 'Ashoura. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vtUfiaRoa0.> Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.

- Nasrallah, H. (2023c, July 27). [Al-manar TV]. 'Ashoura. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-js9XtF5F0>.  
Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.
- Nasrallah, H. (2023d, July 29). [Al-manar TV]. 'Ashoura. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gX\\_mLgRNzXw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gX_mLgRNzXw).  
Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.
- Puar, J. K. (2007). *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press.
- QITABI — lebanon | amideast*. (2025). Amideast.org. <https://www.amideast.org/our-work/advancing-development-goals/education/qitabi/qitabi-%E2%80%95-lebanon>
- Rao, R. (2020). *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*. Oxford University Press.
- Sa'ed Atshan. (2020). *Queer palestine and the empire of critique*. Stanford University Press.
- Savcı, E. (2021). *Queer in translation : Sexual politics under neoliberal islam*. Duke University Press.
- Schulman, S. (2012). *Ties that bind : Familial homophobia and its consequences*. New Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.
- Shaden. (2023, July 24). *Shaden esperanza on instagram: "atlan ham meen yilhasli kissi"*. Instagram.  
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CvFiKaGs3MY/?igshid=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng%3D%3D>
- Terman, R. (2015). Islamophobia, feminism and the politics of critique. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33(2), 77–102.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276415590236>
- USAID. (2024). *2023 LGBTQI+ inclusive development policy | basic page*. U.S. Agency for International Development. <https://www.usaid.gov/policy/lgbtqi>
- V. (2019, July 30). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.  
Transcribed and translated by Omar Safadi.
- Wittig, M. (1992). *The straight mind and other essays* (pp. 20–32). Beacon Press. “The Straight Mind.”
- Zeidan, T. (2019, August 8). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Beirut, Lebanon.
- Zeina Maasri. (2020). *Cosmopolitan radicalism : The visual politics of Beirut's global sixties*. Cambridge University Press.

\*\*\*

## CONCLUSION

- Al-barlaman al-libnani yantakheb josef aoun ra`isan lil-balad [the lebanese parliament elects josef aoun the president of the country]*. (2025, January 9). BBC News.  
<https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/c0mvmgmr1eo>
- Ali, W. (2023, June 23). Opinion | we muslims used to be the culture war scapegoats. why are some of us joining the L.G.B.T.Q. pile-on? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/23/opinion/lgbtq-muslims.html>
- Anti-Defamation League. (2018). *Proud boys: Who are they?* ADL.  
<https://www.adl.org/resources/background/proud-boys>

- Aoun ya3lin istib3ad “al-ahzab w al-tawa2ef” min itikhath al-qarar fi lubnan. (2025, March 6). Al-Aawsat. <https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/5119194-%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%81-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B0-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86>
- Bull, J., & Younes, R. (2022, November 10). *Qatar world cup ambassador’s homophobic comments fuel discrimination*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/10/qatar-world-cup-ambassadors-homophobic-comments-fuel-discrimination>
- Dobbs v. jackson women’s health organization | constitution center*. (2022). National Constitution Center – Constitutioncenter.org. <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/supreme-court-case-library/dobbs-v-jackson-womens-health-organization?>
- Documenting hate: New american nazis*. (2020, February 4). FRONTLINE. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/documenting-hate-new-american-nazis/>
- F. (2025, April 25). *Ethnographic interview* (O. Safadi, Interviewer) [Personal communication]. Remote.
- Farkas, R. (2024, July 29). *Christian leaders speak out against mockery of the last supper at the olympics – stand for christians*. S4c.news. <https://s4c.news/2024/07/29/christian-leaders-speak-out-against-mockery-of-the-last-supper-at-the-olympics/>
- Jazeera, A. (2025, May 20). *EU lifts economic sanctions on syria, following US move last week*. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/20/eu-agrees-to-lift-all-economic-sanctions-on-syria-diplomats>
- Land, O., & Reslen, E. (2024, July 27). *French church leaders, chiefs’ harrison butker slam apparent drag “parody of last supper” at 2024 paris olympics: “Mockery.”* New York Post. <https://nypost.com/2024/07/27/sports/french-church-leaders-harrison-butker-slam-drag-parody-of-last-supper-at-2024-paris-olympics/>
- McKenna, J. (2024, August 4). *Vatican “deplores the offence” caused by last supper skit in paris olympics opening ceremony*. The Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/08/04/vatican-saddened-last-supper-ridiculed-olympics-ceremony/>
- Min 24 waziran.. alikum tashkilah al-kamilah lil-hukumah al-libnaniye al-jadidah*. (2025, February 28). Al-Araby News. <https://www.alaraby.com/news/%D9%85%D9%86-24-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%8B%D8%A7-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9>
- National Education Association. (2023). *What you need to know about florida’s “don’t say gay” and “don’t say they” laws, book bans, and other curricula restrictions*. National Education Association. [https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/30424-know-your-rights\\_web\\_v4.pdf](https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/30424-know-your-rights_web_v4.pdf)

- NBC. (2017). Far-Right Proud Boys Cultivate Male Angst | NBC Left Field [YouTube Video]. In *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGZ-rw1Zgfw>
- Penley, T. (2024, July 30). *Christian faith leaders react to alleged parody of last supper at paris olympics: "Grotesque mockery."* Fox News. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/christians-react-apparent-mockery-last-supper-paris-olympics-grotesque-mockery?>
- Phillips, A. (2024, December 8). Syria: Rebels seize damascus as assad flees capital. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9vkmpl1mrmo>
- Proud boys aid the right-wing assault on the LGBTQ community and reproductive justice.* (2024, December 3). Southern Poverty Law Center. <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/hatewatch/proud-boys-aid-right-wing-assault-lgbtq-community-and-reproductive-justice/>
- Reuters. (2022, November 8). Qatar world cup ambassador says homosexuality is "damage in the mind." *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/qatar-world-cup-ambassador-says-homosexuality-is-damage-mind-2022-11-08/>
- Rodriguez, M. (2024, July 29). *French Drag Queen Nicky Doll Responds to Olympics Backlash: "We Ain't Going Nowhere."* Them; Them. <https://www.them.us/story/nicky-doll-olympics-opening-ceremony-last-supper-criticism-response?>
- The florida senate.* (2024). Flsenate.gov. <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557/BillText/er/PDF>
- Urgent statement on the campaign of violations of torture and arrest, against sexual and gender minorities in syria - GEM organization.* (2025, February 11). GEM Organization. <https://guardiansgem.org/urgent-statement-on-the-campaign-of-violations-of-torture-and-arrest-against-sexual-and-gender-minorities-in-syria/>
- Yazbek, B. (2025, March 29). *Al-hukumah al-jadidah w al-tahidiyat: L-taghyir jathri fi islub idaret al-dawlah.* Al-Modn. <https://www.almodon.com/politics/2025/3/29/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ad%d9%83%d9%88%d9%85%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ac%d8%af%d9%8a%d8%af%d8%a9-%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%ad%d8%af%d9%8a%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%ba%d9%8a%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d8%ac%d8%b0%d8%b1%d9%8a-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%a3%d8%b3%d9%84%d9%88%d8%a8-%d8%a5%d8%af%d8%a7%d8%b1%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%af%d9%88%d9%84%d8%a9. Beirut, Lebanon.>

**Appendix 1: The Sacred and the Sodomite**

Figure 1.1: “Madonna and Fanboy,” (screenshot by author).

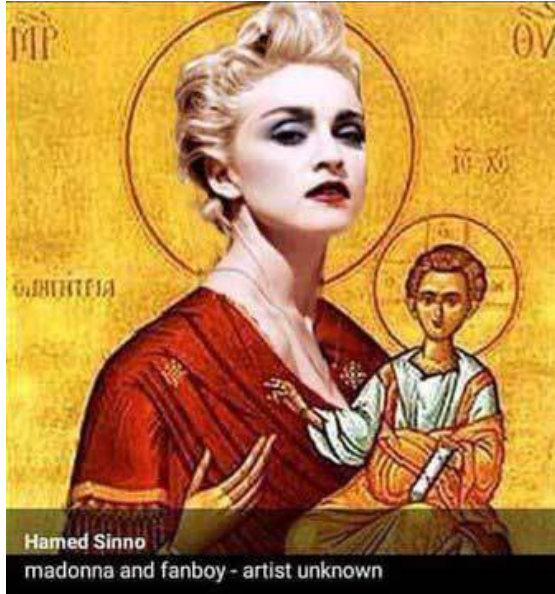


Figure 1.2: “Samandal Case File,” (courtesy of Lebanese Court of Cassation 2014).

<p>صدي قرار ٢٢٨٣٤ باسم الشعب اللبناني</p>	<p>هشام أسماعيل ٢٠١٥/٨٩ ٢٠١٥/٢</p>
<p>إن العروة التمييزية التاسعة الناظرة استئنفا في دعوى المطبوعات المولقة من الرئيس جان عبد والمستشارين جان-مارك عويس وبسام الحاج(مقنن) لدى التحقيق والمداكرة</p> <p>تبين أنه بتاريخ ٢٠١٤/٢/١٣ تقدم الاستاذ نزار صاغية بوكلفه عن كل من حاتم سعيد الإمام وقادي نجيب الباني وعمر خليل الخوري بوجه الحق العام باستئناف طعنا في القرار رقم ٢٠١٤/١٦١ الصادر بتاريخ ٢٠١٤/١/١٥ عن العروة الاستئنافية الثالثة عشرة في بيروت الناظرة في جرائم المطبوعات القاضي:</p> <p>"أولا- بإدانة كل من المدعى عليهم:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- حاتم أكرم سعيد الإمام، ولدته رقية من مواليد ١٩٧٨ - لبناني.</li> <li>- فادي محمد نجيب باقي، ولدته فاطمة من مواليد سنة ١٩٧٧ لبناني.</li> <li>- عمر خليل الخوري، ولدته ليلى من مواليد سنة ١٩٧٨ لبناني.</li> </ul> <p>سندا لأحكام المادة ٢٥ من المرسوم التشريعي رقم ١٩٧٧/١٠٤ المعدل معطوفة على الفقرة ٤ من المادة ٢٢٠ عقوبات، وتغريم كل منهم مبلغ عشرة ملايين ليرة لبنانية.</p> <p>ثانيا- إبطال التعاقبات بحق كل من المدعى عليهم... بالنسبة لبقية الجناح المدعى بها.</p> <p>ثالثا- رد سائر الأسباب والمطالب الزائدة وأو المخالفة"</p> <p>وورد بعدها استعراض وقائع النزاع أن القرار المذكور مستوجب الفسخ لأسباب التالية:</p> <p>١- لانتفاء صفة المستأنفين.</p> <p>٢- لانتفاء عناصر الجرائم المنصوص عنها بالمادة ٢٥ من المرسوم التشريعي رقم ١٩٧٧/١٠٤، أو لتعارضها مع مبدأ حرية التعبير المكرس في المادة ١٣ من الدستور اللبناني والمادة ١٩ من العهد الدولي للحقوق المدنية والسياسية، وللهامش الواسع المعطى للأعمال الكوميديّة.</p> <p>وطلب بالتبعية بعدا فصل الأسباب المشار إليها:</p> <p>١- قبول الاستئناف شكلا.</p>	

Figure 1.3: “Young Christian Man Incites Against Mashrou` Leila,” (screenshot by author).



Figure 1.4: “Father Abou Tadros Daoud Warning Against Mashrou` Leila,” (screenshot by author).



Figure 1.5: “Archdiocese Press Release Against Mashrou` Leila,” (screenshot by author).

بيان بخصوص «مشروع ليلي» والعرض الذي ستؤديه في جبيل

بعد الاطلاع على أهداف فرقة "مشروع ليلي" ومضمون الأغاني التي تؤدها والتي تمسّ بعالبيتها بالقيم الدينية والانسانية وتعرض للمقدّسات المسيحية، تشحب مطرانية جبيل المارونية شحياً قاطعاً إقامة الحفل المقرّر في ٩ آب ٢٠١٩ في مهرجانات بيبوس الدولية؛ فحبيب مدينة التعايش والثقافة لا يليق بما استقبل حفلات ممثلة على أرضها وخصوصاً أنّها تتعارض بشكل مباشر مع الإيمان المسيحي والحلقّيات الدينية والانسانية.

وتطالب باسمها وباسم كلّ من راجعها من الجبيليين، وغيرهم بكافة مشاركتهم، المرجعيّات المختصة وكلّ الفعاليّات الجبيلية وتحديداً لجنة مهرجانات بيبوس-جبيل السياحية، إيقاف عرض "مشروع ليلي" على أرض القداسة والحضارة والتاريخ، وتترك للمركز الكاثوليكي للإعلام القيام بالمتقتضى.

مطرانية جبيل المارونية





Figure 1.6: “Hayek Threatens Mashrou` Leila,” (screenshot by author).



## Appendix 2: Soldiers in the Land of God

Figure 2.1: “About Us Page” on Soldiers’ website, (screenshot by author).

بيان من جنود الرب  
حي هورب الجنود وببارك صخرتي  
اولا : جنود الرب هم ليسوا فقط بمجموعة هم اولاد الرب يسوع المحدثين باسم الاب والابن والروح القدس ونحن مجموعة تدعو للصلاة لا نتكلم بأي كلام غير الكتاب المقدس  
ثانيا: جنود الرب مش حزب ولا منظمة ولسنا تابعين لأي شخصية وليس لدينا اي صلة بأي شيء ارضي وليس لنا اي نشاط امني او مادي .. نحن فقط حاملين تعاليم الرب يسوع ومؤمنين على وصاياه بنعمة وقوة الروح القدس هذه هي رسالتنا وسنطبقها وهدفنا الاساسي : اولاً  
” البشارة ”  
فَأَذْهَبُوا وَتَلْمِذُوا جَمِيعَ الْأُمَمِ وَعَمِّدُوهُمْ بِاسْمِ الْآبِ وَالْإِبْنِ وَالرُّوحِ الْقُدُّوسِ مَت 28: 19  
وثانيا : طاعة الله : يَنْبَغِي أَنْ يُطَاعَ اللهُ أَكْثَرَ مِنْ النَّاسِ اِع 5: 29  
هيك الكتاب المقدس وكلام الرب يقول .. يعني ممنوع تكسر الوصايا الي عطانا اياها الرب او نسمح لتمرير قوانين ضد الرب وضد تعاليم الكنيسة وضد العيلة المسيحية العيلة لازم تتبنى عالصخر مش عالزلزل ، هدفنا توعية الناس للخطر الحقيقي ابليس الي عم يشوش افكار وعقول ولادنا ويضيعهم بدنا نرجع للرب ونقدم توية حقيقية لنخلص  
وَيُسِّسْ بِأَخْتَرِ غَيْرِهِ الْخَلَّاصَ اِع 4: 12  
مادي من احد .. ليس لنا تمويل من احد ولا نتلقى اموال ولا نستطيع المساعدة كباقي الجمعيات .. نحن هدفنا  
وصول الي الكهنة والاباء في الكنيسة لحل مشكلته . فقط لا غير

How can I help you?

Figure 2.2: “Report on Gemmeyze Drag Show,” (screenshot by author).

الجميزة تنتفض بوجه الانحطاط الاخلاقي وتطرد الشياطين من شوارعها « HOME  
LEBANON, NEWS  
الجميزة تنتفض بوجه الانحطاط الاخلاقي وتطرد الشياطين من شوارعها  
AUGUST 24, 2023

The image shows a woman in a black and white outfit performing on a stage in front of an audience. The background is a stone wall with a large archway.

Figure 2.3: “Report on Homosexual Prostitution in Port District,” (screenshot by author).

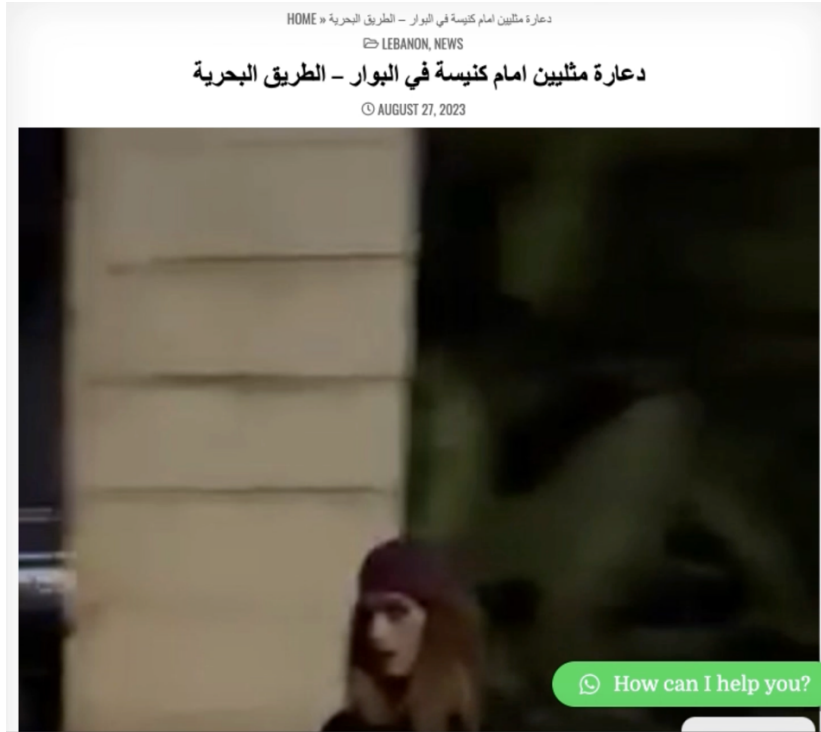


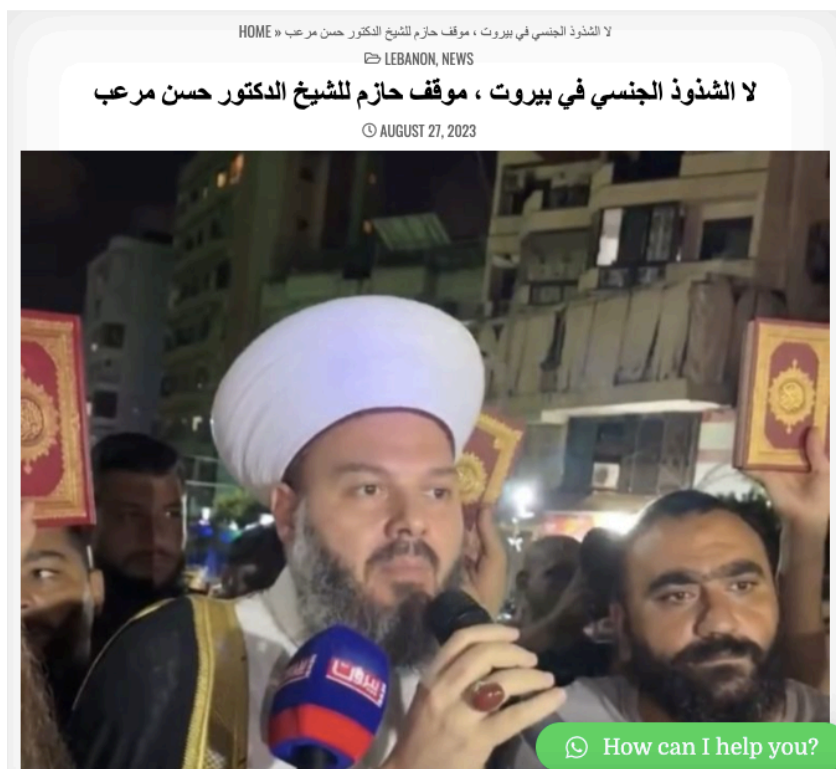
Figure 2.4: “Warning to Parents and Call to Boycott,” (screenshot by author).



Figure 2.5: “Report on German Television Show,” (screenshot by author).



Figure 2.6: “Report on Sunni Sheikh’s Homophobic Stance,” (screenshot by author).



### Appendix 3: Redefining Nature

Figure 3.1: “Mawlawi’s Memo,” (screenshot by author).



Figure 3.2: “Dar al Fatwa Press Release,” (screenshot by author).



Figure 3.3: “Qiblan’s Position,” (screenshot by author).



Figure 3.4: Anti-Gay Demo in Tripoli, (screenshot by author).

