The Postcolonial Legacy and LGBTQ+ Advocacy in Egypt and Lebanon

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Abstract

In recent years, increased crackdowns on and legal persecution of LGBTQ+ rights in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have occurred as a result of the renewed use of colonial laws against 'sexual deviance' and 'debauchery'. Sexual politics have emerged as a site of political domination in part as a result of financial and political crises in the region. This paper explores the various challenges faced by LGBTQ+ advocates in the MENA in the twenty-first century. The paper argues that advocates can overcome these challenges by separating their message from both International LGBTQ+ groups and domestic anti-LGBTQ+ dialogues, which converge in the view that LGBTQ+ identity and Arab cultural identity are permanently, inherently opposed. Using a Postcolonial International Relations framework and critical cultural theory, this paper will investigate the complex web of oppressions these advocates face. Two previously unexplored contemporary examples in Egypt and Lebanon will be investigated, focusing on advocates' alliance-building capabilities and creation of a *war of position*. Using a deductive approach, the paper will conclude that LGBTQ+ advocates are able to overcome these challenges. The theoretical framework is therefore a useful tool in the study of modern international relations and culture.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ advocacy, Middle East and North Africa LGBTQ+ rights, Postcolonial IR theory, critical cultural theory, underground LGBTQ+ activism, cultural hegemony, LGBTQ+ crackdowns.

Introduction

> We are caught between neo-colonial agendas on the one hand, and regressive, oppressive local governments on the other.
>
> — (Helem, 2006)

LGBTQ+ advocates in the Middle East and North Africa MENA ('the region', 'the Arab world') face challenges from both repressive domestic and international rights discourses. Domestic discourses construct LGBTQ+ identity as alien to regional cultural identity, justifying the legal and social repression of LGBTQ+ rights and people. Additionally, scholars such as Massad (2002) contribute to discourses presenting LGBTQ+ identity as a Western incursion in their critique of the cultural essentialism of International LGBTQ+ (ILGBTQ+) rights groups. These two discourses converge to present LGBTQ+ rights discourses and advocacy as inherently foreign to regional cultural identity. The strategies of some LGBTQ+ advocates in the region position their advocacy to oppose both of these discourses, constructing a counter-hegemonic movement through a *war of position*.

Methodology

This paper uses critical theoretical perspectives, Postcolonial International Relations (IR) theory and critical cultural theory, as its conceptual framework, explored in the literature review.

Primary news media and documentary sources are used for the analysis presented in the two *Strategies* sections below. They were chosen by purposive sampling – a sampling method wherein the author chooses their own sources, common in qualitative case research. This method provides insights into wider modern regional trends, analysed through the chosen theoretical framework.

An in-depth analysis of the complexities of individual national cultures, including analysing every country's laws and economic and cultural backgrounds, was beyond the scope of this research. Two example countries, Egypt and Lebanon, were chosen. Both countries have an existing but limited LGBTQ+ rights discourse and both have laws that are used to restrict the freedom of LGBTQ+ people (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2018: 65–66, 68). This paper cannot provide a comprehensive regional analysis, but rather offers a novel insight into the contemporary discourses in two similar regional States. The analysis supports the usefulness of the chosen theoretical framework in understanding modern events relating to culture and LGBTQ+ rights in the region, in its deductive approach.

Benefits of this approach

This post-structural, post-empiricist approach departs from mainstream rationalist and empiricist ontologies and quantitative research methods. The research is openly political, anti-colonial and favourable to pursuing justice in modern conflicts by drawing attention to marginalised subjects and scholarship.

Literature review

Mainstream approaches and their limitations

Mainstream IR approaches embrace structuralist views of cultural permanency. Realist theorists such as Huntington (2011) argue that anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes in the region are culturally permanent due to regional conservative 'political culture', based on the permanent values of discrete cultural and religious identities. Perspectives like these are critiqued by Postcolonial scholars for ignoring the interdependency of cultures and cultural change over time, and using essentialising perspectives (Saïd, 1978). Mainstream IR approaches that are rooted in the Western tradition include Realist theory, Liberal theory and the English School. These approaches subscribe to metaphysical notions of binaries between West and East or the notion of West-as-Subject. They adopt positivist, empiricist methodologies in their analysis (Saïd, 1978). Mainstream approaches are not used in this analysis and the use of a critical approach must be justified.

Chosen approach: Postcolonial theory and critical cultural theory

This paper uses a Postcolonial and critical cultural theoretical and epistemological framework to examine the legacy of colonialism on rights discourses in regional States.

The point of reference

Postcolonial scholars problematise mainstream, Western-centric discourses about the region. Inherent to these approaches is a metaphysical binary: the apparent epistemological and ontological distinction between 'West' and 'East', defined by Edward Saïd as 'Orientalism' (1978). Here, Eastern countries are presented as primitive and backwards; hence, the enlightened Western Subject and its perspective should constitute the universal point of reference. Challenging this, Postcolonial theory empowers the

'colonized subaltern subject' (Spivak, 1998: 79). The theory instead uses marginalised perspectives from the Eastern Subject as points of analysis.

National difference

The Postcolonial approach challenges traditional religion – and culture-rooted explanations of dominant anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes in the region; instead, linking these attitudes with the legacy of colonial domination (Abdulhadi, 2009). Chatterjee (1993) examines the formation of national difference in formerly colonised States in order to differentiate their 'inner domain' of national culture from that of their former-colonisers. This is linked to socio-economic insecurities – including financial crises, which have caused insecurity, creating a need for the States to reassert power over their citizens (Pratt, 2007). Parker (1992) identifies a link between heterosexual identity and the ability of States to maintain this cultural difference. Using this theory allows for the critical examination of the roots of cultural difference.

ILGBTQ+ rights and opposing scholarship

Discourses surrounding International LGBTQ+ (ILGBTQ+) rights groups should also be considered. These groups attempt to universalise the LGBTQ+ experience by reinforcing the universality of sexual identity groups. Critics of these groups, notably Puar and Rai (2002) and Massad (2002), challenge ILGBTQ+ groups, critiquing their internationalist and anti-Arab approaches. However, this academic discourse ultimately harms the work of indigenous LGBTQ+ advocates. It does this by, perhaps inadvertently, presenting LGBTQ+ identities as a Western cultural incursion. LGBTQ+ advocates, in turn, are presented as Western agents (Habib, 2009: xix), justifying their legal oppression and social ostracisation. This will be further explored in the analysis.

Critical cultural theory

In opposition to theories of political culture, cultural theorists Hall (2016), Gramsci (2007) and Hebdige (2003) offer critical analyses of the relationship between national culture and sexual politics. Hebdige argues that subculture is a challenge to cultural hegemony, confronting the status quo (the ideological domination of the ruling class) through breaking from the dominant culture (here, sexual identity and practices). Crucially, these hegemonic discourses are reproduced by cultural processes which appear 'permanent and 'natural' (Hebdige, 2003: 16). Hall (2016) argues that mainstream culture

is not static and must be constantly reproduced through social and cultural practices. Counter-hegemonic struggles can be understood as either a *war of manoeuvre* (a direct confrontation between the people and those in power, which will not necessarily dismantle hegemony) such as the Arab Spring, or a *war of position* (an ideological struggle against hegemonic ideas needed to create a counter-hegemony) such as the 1917 Russian revolution. The latter is described by Gramsci as a 'resistance to domination with culture… as its foundation' (2007: 168). The war of position is the most revolutionary, fundamentally undermining the political/economic fabric of society, uprooting the status quo, and revealing possibilities for 'new political subjects and subjectivities' against the dominant culture (Hall, 2016: 190).

Additionally, the role of globalisation in creating homogenised global sexual politics and identity must be acknowledged (Altman, 2004). This includes the advent of the internet by the late-1990s (Khan, 2009). However, this paper will attempt to reveal the less-explored critical colonial aspect in the formation of globalised sexual politics.

Challenges faced by LGBTQ+ advocates in the Arab world

LGBTQ+ advocates are challenged on multiple fronts by discourses that present the quest for LGBTQ+ rights as inherently foreign to regional cultural identity.

Challenges posed by domestic discourses

At the local level, States in the region create and reinforce discourses constructing LGBTQ+ identity as alien to regional cultural identity, legitimizing the legal and social repression of advocates. State crackdowns on LGBTQ+ advocacy and people have accelerated in recent years; this advocacy has recently entered mainstream public discourse in some regional States due to increased visibility (Khan, 2009: 30). These crackdowns are, in part, fuelled by political and socio-economic factors, legitimised by references to cultural identity and anti-colonial nationalism. In this way, they are 'a direct result of the colonial project' (Abdulhadi, 2009: 471).

National difference

Anti-LGBTQ+ crackdowns can, in part, be understood as a performance of sovereignty by formerly colonised States. This performance, through the production and reinforcement

of national difference from former-colonisers, has a long history within anti-colonial movements of producing the 'spiritual domain' of national culture (Chatterjee, 1993: 26). The need for a site of political domination exists in the contemporary context of 'socioeconomic insecurities and political processes,' including economic crises (Pratt, 2007: 130). The 2011 Arab Spring resulted in major uprisings and civil wars in a number of regional States. The liberalisation of a number of economies occurred in 1991 as a result of economic reforms from the international community to fund national development, agreed between the IMF and World Bank (Pratt, 2007: 134–35). Pratt demonstrates that this structural shift was felt both economically, a 'loss of income, unemployment or reduced access to decent healthcare and education' and culturally, an 'impact upon gender roles, relations and identities,' (2007: 135).

The use of anti-LGBTQ+ discourses by the political class has become a site of domination, punishing those who are considered by the mainstream to be sexually deviant. It distinguishes the (cisgender-heterosexual) behaviour of domestic citizens from that of citizens of Western former-coloniser States, creating 'sexual difference'. It should be noted that this point, of course, only applies to the recent application of these laws that were, for the most part, written under colonial mandates. This is because Britain and France have historically criminalised the same acts but now largely do not. Thus, in a paradoxical way, countries like Lebanon and Egypt inherited these laws from their former colonisers, and now use them to distinguish their culture from these formerly colonising countries. This point will be further elaborated in later sections. As Parker (1992) posits, issues of sexual politics are performed on the map of national identity; conservative approaches towards sexuality serve as a marker of regional cultural identity. This justifies the legal and social repression of LGBTQ+ rights through discrimination against LGBTQ+ people by regional States (HRW, 2018: 6–13). Indeed, of the 19 nation-States in the region, only Jordan and Bahrain eliminated strict laws against homosexuality imposed by colonial legal systems after gaining independence (HRW, 2018: 6). Today, the majority of States in the region treat homosexual acts as a criminal offence; only Iraq and Jordan have no laws explicitly criminalising homosexuality (HRW, 2018: 6–13). There is no official pathway recognising an individual's right to change their legal gender from the gender that was assigned to them at birth in any State in the region (HRW, 2018: 11–13).

Cultural hegemony

Alongside an understanding of the role of national difference, a critical cultural analysis of the creation and maintenance of cultural hegemony further accounts for the existence of anti-LGBTQ+ discourses in the region. A Gramscian understanding of the operationalisation of power in society (Gramsci, 1988) reveals that culturally hegemonic discourses challenge LGBTQ+ advocacy. Dominant cultural attitudes are constantly reproduced by political and civil society through processes that appear to be 'permanent and "natural"' (Hebdige, 2003: 16). This presents anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes as a cultural permanency, and LGBTQ+ rights advocacy as a Western creation. The constant reproduction of dominant cultural hegemony benefits political forces who are able to 'maintain regime authority within nation-State boundaries' (Pratt, 2007: 143).

Hegemonic anti-LGBTQ+ discourses, deeply linked to colonial legacies and contemporary socio-economic and political factors, emerge as a site of domination to reproduce current power relations and protect regional identity by creating difference from the West. This justifies the legal and social persecution of LGBTQ+ people and rights advocates, who can be dismissed as agents of 'imperial sabotage' (Habib, 2009: xix).

Challenges posed by ILGBTQ+ rights groups and opposing scholarship

Scholars have rightly criticised ILGBTQ+ rights discourses for their essentialising and anti-Arab tendencies. This academic critique, however, goes too far, creating problems for Arab LGBTQ+ advocates by reinforcing perceptions that LGBTQ+ identity is inherently foreign to the region.

Scholars have linked progressive ILGBTQ+ movements with a form of modern imperialism, critiquing these activists' subscription to Western categories of identification. Puar identifies 'homonationalism' as a site of cultural difference between the imagined Western and Arab worlds, arguing that ILGBTQ+ groups have a right-wing nationalist ideology (Puar, 2007; Puar and Rai, 2002: 1–36). Massad (2002) coined the term '*Gay International*' to include a cluster of NGOs (including the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the International Lesbian and Gay Association) whose goal is the universalisation of LGBTQ+ identity politics. By this, Massad means 'transforming' people in the region 'from practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as homosexual and gay' (2002: 362).

Massad refers to those who construct the 'academic literature of historical, literary, and anthropological accounts' as being 'supporters' of the *Gay International* (2002: 362). This universalisation is produced by scholars through the exploration of historical texts to argue that homosexuality has historically been accepted in the Arab world, purporting that the longing to identify as 'gay' and be 'out' is universal (Boswell, 1980: 194; AbuKhalil, 1993: 33–34). This is also produced by cultural reproductions in civil society, including websites featuring tips for homosexual European and American tourists visiting the region, written in English. For example, Pratt refers to the prominent Egyptian website at the time *gayegypt.com* (Pratt, 2007: 131). This site has since been shut down.

According to Massad, ILGBTQ+ groups are inherently anti-Arab, and have an 'orientalist impulse' (2002: 362). They present the Western model of sexual freedom 'as the only possible—and universally applicable—liberatory telos' (2002: 365). This model oppresses LGBTQ+ people in the Arab world by creating homosexual *identity* where homosexual *desire* existed; Massad argues that homosexual identity is not indigenous to the Arab world and 'gayness' is a Western import (2002: 364). A crucial distinction must be made here between *desire* and *identity* in his argument; not all sexual desires become sites of identity. Visibility strategies, including 'coming out' and pride marches that ILGBTQ+ groups promote, are an 'incitement to discourse' (Massad, 2002: 371), which creates a national discourse and sexual identity where none existed. Massad argues that the 'socio-political identification of these practices with the Western identity of gayness' (2002: 382) intensifies anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in the region, bringing about 'more repression, not "liberation", and less sexual freedom rather than more' (2002: 383).

Massad is right to identify the essentialising, anti-Arab views of some groups that he considers to be the *Gay International*, which adopt a Western imperialist discourse that has 'fed into the colonial project' (Abdulhadi, 2009: 474). There are negative aspects of the universalisation of LGBTQ+ identities; in particular, a neo-colonial exploitative gay sex tourism (Massad, 2002: 376, 381–82). It is also true that these groups position the universal, secular, pro-LGBTQ+ rights discourse as the only way Arab LGBTQ+ people can be 'saved' from repressive local regimes, essentialising regional political culture (Abdulhadi, 2009: 474). However, Massad's theory contributes to the axis of oppression faced by LGBTQ+ advocates in the region. Habib argues that theories like Massad's, which assert that 'gays and lesbians in the Arab world do not exist' (Habib, 2009: xvii)

divorces Arab people from the possibility of authentic LGBTQ+ identity by reducing same-sex identity to a 'Western paradigm' (2009: xviii). Portraying advocates as 'agents of Western imperialist sabotage of Arab nations' (2009: xix), these approaches suggest that the 'true patriot' should protest 'Western attempts to infiltrate and destroy the nation' (2009: xliv). This demonstrates an 'insensitivity to the very real struggles' that advocates face (2009: xliv) by offering 'criticism without options for liberation,' (Abdulhadi, 2009: 482). It does not suggest a way in which local LGBTQ+ groups could critically consider their approach to advocacy. Massad 'perhaps unwittingly' oppresses these groups (Habib, 2009: xix).

Crucially, Massad oversimplifies the modern emergence of identitarian sexuality as a 'Western sexual epistemology' (2002: 374), a colonial imposition on the Arab world, through an authenticity/inauthenticity binary. A modern epistemology of sexuality better explains the emergence of modern sexuality as a form of disciplinary power wherein homosexuality is categorised and becomes a marker of identity, in opposition to heterosexuality (Foucault, 1979: 43). The categorisation of sexuality, a result of modernity, was heavily influenced by colonialism and cannot be understood as natural and universal in either the Western or Arab worlds; all identities are constructed. However, LGBTQ+ identity in the region can still be understood as authentic. Habib understands 'identitarian' sexuality to have naturally migrated to the region, having been 'voluntarily adopted' (Habib, 2009: xxxvii) by Eastern epistemologies of sexuality, rather than through an exclusively colonial imposition (2009: xix) that should be rejected and persecuted.

These two discourses, domestic discourses produced by the State and discourses produced by anti-*Gay Internationalist* scholars, converge to present the work of LGBTQ+ advocates as inherently alien to Middle Eastern culture. This restricts the options of LGBTQ+ advocates to either (a) mobilise and be seen as 'an agent of the *Gay International*' or (b) to not mobilise (Abdulhadi, 2009: 481).

Strategies of LGBTQ+ advocates in the Arab world

The strategies of LGBTQ+ rights advocates in the region position them against both explored discourses: as both counter-cultural movements and indigenous to the region.

Underground methods

Advocacy in the region is largely undertaken underground and outside State structures, using creative and unconventional methods rather than methods seen in the West, including legal advocacy and public protest (HRW, 2018; Issa, 2016). This approach sets LGBTQ+ advocates in the region apart from Western groups. The Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality (AFE) publishes online press releases regarding internet safety measures for LGBTQ+ people to prevent their social and legal persecution (AFE, 2015). Online statements condemn LGBTQ+ persecution, serving as protests, online education, and a call to action against State repression (AFE, 2017). This is also seen in the reporting of the recent banning of the gay dating app 'Grindr' in Lebanon by popular LGBTQ+ site *SMEX News* (2019a). The site's publication of tips for protest and internet safety also demonstrates this, including describing how to safely document human rights violations in the 2019 Lebanon protests (SMEX News, 2019b). Advocacy and education strategies focus on safeguarding LGBTQ+ people in the region rather than encouraging them to come out, which incites public discourse, as Massad suggests (2002: 371). This sets the group apart from ILGBTQ+ groups, challenging discourses presenting all LGBTQ+ advocates as foreign incursions.

Alliance building

The alliance-building and solidarity-focused activities of regional LGBTQ+ advocacy groups build connections with other rights movements in the region, including feminist and human rights organisations (HRW, 2018: 36–9). This re-joins regional LGBTQ+ advocacy with other indigenous forms of rights activism, challenging discourses presenting LGBTQ+ advocates as proxies for Western interests. LGBTQ+ groups' success is in large part dependent on their ability to 'build ties with forces struggling for comprehensive social change' in the region (Abdulhadi, 2009: 482).

The overall strategy posed by LGBTQ+ rights advocates is their ability to create a counter-hegemonic discourse in a *war of position*. The counter-hegemony that these advocates construct sets their message apart from ILGBTQ+ rights discourses, discourses presenting LGBTQ+ rights advocates as a Western incursion, and domestic anti-LGBTQ+ cultural discourses. The resulting ideological struggles from cultural forms of resistance

reveal the possibility for 'forms of social and political struggle' (Hall, 2016: 190) against dominant cultural hegemony and the power structures that it upholds.

Egypt and Mashrou' Leila

During a September 2017 concert in Cairo by Mashrou' Leila, an LGBTQ+-friendly rock band, rainbow flags were flown (Egyptian Streets, 2017). A crackdown on LGBTQ+ rights in the country followed, reported by numerous newspapers and rights organisations (Egyptian Streets, 2017; HRW, 2017; Reuters, 2017; The New Arab, 2017; The New York Times, 2017).

Following the concert, the Egyptian Syndicate of Musical Professionals banned Mashrou' Leila from performing in the country, accusing them of promoting 'abnormal art', and the Egyptian Interior Minister described the band's advocacy as contributing to 'internal disagreements' (Egyptian Streets, 2017). A formal 'media blackout' was imposed by the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, prohibiting the 'promotion or dissemination of homosexual slogans' (HRW, 2017). An estimated 65 people were arrested by the end of October, some of whom were subject to forced anal examinations (HRW, 2018; New York Times, 2017). Legal charges brought against them included the vague charge of 'promoting sexual deviance and debauchery' (Reuters, 2017; HRW, 2017).

Challenges

The origin of anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Egypt is linked to its colonial history, as it is in Lebanon. The 1951 laws used today to penalise LGBTQ+ people in Egypt were written under colonial influence, before the Republic of Egypt was established in 1953 (HRW, 2018: 65–66).

The 2011 Arab Spring protests in Egypt, a direct confrontation between the people and those in power, challenged the legitimacy of the Egyptian ruling class. Economic insecurity in Egypt is comprehensively explored by Pratt (2007: 135–36) and continues today; in April 2019, '60 percent of Egypt's population' was 'either poor or vulnerable, and inequality is on the rise' (World Bank, 2019). Socio-economic and political insecurities foster the need for a site of political domination.

The references of government officials in the above section to 'abnormal art' (Egyptian Streets, 2017) and 'deviance and debauchery' (Reuters, 2017) reinforces the cultural discourse that LGBTQ+ rights advocacy is by nature foreign to Egyptian cultural identity. The social and legal exclusion of LGBTQ+ people who are considered to be sexually deviant is made legitimate through this discourse. Advocates are portrayed to be agents of an outside intrusion and identified as a threat to cultural identity, 'alienated as a saboteur, dismissed as an infiltrator' (Habib, 2009: xxvi). The protection of cultural identity, through the State by rights violations against LGBTQ+ individuals, is in this way justified.

A critical cultural perspective reveals that descriptions of LGBTQ+ advocacy causing internal disagreements is a clear example of the securitisation argument surrounding LGBTQ+ advocacy, which threatens cultural hegemony. The guarding of national sovereignty and unity excludes the possibility of cultural fluidity and heterogeneity (Pratt, 2007: 135–37).

This case demonstrates how States construct discourses separating LGBTQ+ identity from cultural identity in what is presented as the national interest. In reinforcing this cultural hegemony, States legitimate their power through security dialogues in response to agitations following political/economic crises (Pratt, 2007: 130). This justifies the continued persecution of LGBTQ+ people.

Strategies

The strategies of these LGBTQ+ advocates demonstrate a cultural war of position. In interviews, lead singer Hamed Sinno has drawn attention to both the homophobic attacks he faces in the Arab world, and the anti-Arab *and* homophobic attacks he faces in the West, stating that the latter is more prominent and threatening (CBS News, 2016). Sinno's discussion of a liberal Arab world that accepts homosexuality (Attitude Magazine, 2019) presents local LGBTQ+ movements as indigenous by suggesting the movement can emerge authentically within the region. The singer claims that Mashrou' Leila's advocacy 'opens the floor for… renegotiating society as we know it' (Attitude Magazine, 2019). This challenges the hegemonic discourse understanding that Arab and LGBTQ+ issues are antithetical, creating the space in which both experiences can be lived together.

In 2012, Mashrou' Leila cancelled a concert with popular Western rock band Red Hot Chili Peppers after the band refused to support the Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel (The Electronic Intifada, 2012). By publicly advocating for issues impacting the Arab world through solidarity, this move marries LGBTQ+ advocacy with Arab rights advocacy. No longer are the two antithetical; it is possible to advocate for both and be both.

By criticising the West, opposing Western interests and advocating for Arab and LGBTQ+ issues together, the band challenges hegemonic discourses understanding that the two are antithetical. This war of position promotes the possibility of an LGBTQ+-friendly Arab world.

Lebanon and Helem

Helem is a Lebanese not-for-profit organisation that promotes the legal and social status of LGBTQ+ people in the region, the first advocacy group of its kind in the Arab world. The group has been labelled as 'Western proxies' by both repressive local discourses and critics of ILGBTQ+ groups. This label challenges their legitimacy by portraying their advocacy as a foreign incursion. This is particularly clear in the debate between Colombia University academic Joseph Massad and Helem's Ghassan Makarem over the legitimacy of the group's advocacy.

Challenges

Massad has claimed that Helem 'want to assimilate into the Western gay movement' (Massad, 2009a), and that the group is funded by 'Gay Internationalist organizations' (2009b). Massad's argument has already been explored in this paper. By associating Helem with ILGBTQ+ groups, the group becomes a target of suppression, as a foreign incursion. His argument mirrors dominant cultural dialogues that view LGBTQ+ identity and Arab cultural identity as inherently opposed, such as those expressed by government officials in Egypt. As agents of 'imperial sabotage' (Habib, 2009: xix), Helem's persecution is justified: they are seen as a colonial imposition that must be eliminated for the protection of the nation.

Similar to the Egyptian case, the repression of LGBTQ+ people in the country includes crackdowns against LGBTQ+ people (HRW, 2019). The origin of anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Lebanon is also linked to colonialism; laws used today (HRW, 2018: 68) are remnants of French colonial occupation (Pratt, 2007: 6).

Strategies

Helem has defended its status as part of an indigenous rights movement, creating a war of position by untethering LGBTQ+ identity from its apparently Western origins.

Helem's Ghassan Makarem denies Massad's claims that the group is controlled by a Western Gay Internationalist agenda (Makarem, 2009). Makarem posits a more complex account of 'subject formation' and claims that Massad's critiques are ultimately 'essentialist' (Makarem, 2009). Makarem problematises the notion of 'indigenous ways of being' (2009). This reflects the complex account of the modern epistemology of sexuality previously discussed (Foucault, 1979: 43), which creates space for indigenous LGBTQ+ movements, subverting Massad's authenticity/inauthenticity binary.

Crucially, in advocating for Arab rights-based anti-imperialist activities, and discussing its indigenous roots, Helem undermines Massad's accusations (Makarem, 2009; 2011). This can be understood as a counter-hegemonic war of position, overcoming this criticism in a similar way to Mashrou' Leila.

The group builds alliances advocating 'against imperialism and war' (Makarem, 2009: 107–09), directly opposing Western interests and creating a 'wider struggle for change and against imperialism' (2009: 110). This includes solidarity with Arab rights movements in opposition to US occupations and wars in the Arab world; 'anti-imperialist' stances including the 'adoption of an anti-sectarian, anti-racist, and anti-xenophobic position' (Makarem, 2011: 105). By boycotting the 2006 OutGames, Helem participated in Palestinian rights advocacy through the donation of space, resources and volunteers to humanitarian relief efforts to assist Palestinian refugees (Helem, 2006). Boycotting Jerusalem World Pride that same year demonstrated Helem's advocacy for pan-Arab issues alongside its LGBTQ+ advocacy (Makarem, 2011: 108). This is similar to Mashrou' Leila's support for the BDS movement. By building alliances with other Arab rights groups and advocating for other Arab rights interests that explicitly oppose Western interests, these advocates challenge their association by international and local

discourses with Western imperialism as 'agents of the West,' (Makarem, 2009). In this, the potential for wider social change becomes more plausible.

Helem is 'caught between neo-colonial agendas on the one hand, and regressive, oppressive local governments on the other' (Helem, 2006). By 'refusing both options', the group creates a war of position, creating possibilities for cultural change, in terms of an indigenous homosexual identity and more widely a pro-LGBTQ+ Arab identity (Helem, 2006).

In both the Lebanese and Egyptian cases, the apparent opposition between Arab and LGBTQ+ identity is reconciled through alliance-building with other regional rights movements against Western interests. A sub-culture is formed, creating a war of position that fundamentally challenges hegemonic culture.

Conclusions

The recent emergence of sexual politics as a site of political domination lies in State socio-economic weaknesses, including financial and political crises. The State is able to assert itself in this context through persecuting LGBTQ+ people, much of the time using laws left over from colonial regimes (HRW, 2018: 6). State persecution is justified as the affirmation of national difference from former-colonisers, and the maintenance of hegemony. Crackdowns are 'a direct result of the colonial project' (Abdulhadi, 2009: 471). Additionally, critics of ILGBTQ+ groups' advocacy exacerbate orientalist understandings of LGBTQ+ rights as inherently foreign to the region. These discourses converge to present LGBTQ+ and Arab cultural identity as permanently, inherently opposed.

The LGBTQ+ advocates discussed in this text position themselves apart from both discourses. This strategy legitimises their indigenous position, fundamentally challenging hegemonic anti-LGBTQ+ discourse through a cultural war of position, largely through alliance-building. The Egyptian case exemplifies the legal persecution and social discourses repressing LGBTQ+ advocates, and their ability to create a war of position by presenting themselves as indigenous actors. Lebanese alliance-building against Western interests with Arab rights groups demonstrates the ability of LGBTQ+ groups to challenge their association with colonial interests.

The success of local LGBTQ+ advocates will continue to be affected by their ability to disrupt the association of their activities with narratives of 'nationalist and imperial domination' (Puar and Rai, 2002: 130). Regional LGBTQ+ advocacy groups should continue their work by advocating for the wider Arab rights struggles through alliance-building and opposing Western colonial interests.

This research has shown that the chosen critical framework is useful for analysing modern IR events. Further analysis should explore the role of globalisation and the internet in the formation of globalised sexual politics and identity, as well as the implications of financial crises on sexual politics in the region. The key normative question of defining what the alternative routes are available to LGBTQ+ advocates in the region who wish to eliminate existing oppressive laws should also be examined by further research.

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