

Lil Watan: Queer patriotism in chauvinistic Lebanon

Sexualities
2021, Vol. 0(0) 1–22
© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/13634607211047523
journals.sagepub.com/home/sex



Sophie Chamas 

Centre for Gender Studies, SOAS University of London, London,
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Abstract

There exists a robust literature on the impact of the sexualisation of the war on terror as an imperial endeavour on both queer and non-queer subjects in the Middle East. This article explores the consequences for LGBT activism of the localisation of the war on terror in the region and the securitisation of governance, taking Lebanon as its focus. I argue the importance of thinking through the ways in which the war on terror is localised, taken advantage of and used as a means of strengthening state power in the Global South, and the effects of such processes on activism. I explore how LGBT activists in Lebanon have engaged the war on terror as an instrument of local rather than foreign power. The weaponisation of the war on terror as an instrument of governance by the Lebanese state, I argue, has reshaped the field within which LGBT activists in the country articulate and lobby for their rights and has enabled a turn towards what I call proto-homonationalism amongst some LGBT actors in Lebanon – attempts at positioning certain segments of the LGBT population as not only of the nation but beneficial to the security state.

Keywords

homonationalism, securitisation, war on terror, gender/class/race/sexuality, Lebanon, moral panics, LGBT activism

‘They taught you the anthem, they said your struggle is useful for the nation’

– *Lil Watan*, Mashrou’ Leila.

Corresponding author:

Sophie Chamas, Centre for Gender Studies, SOAS, University of London, GB, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Email: sc118@soas.ac.uk

In the wake of September 11th and with the advent of the US-led war on terror, queer theory began to engage more robustly with what has been called ‘the violence of inclusion’ (Haritaworn et al., 2014: 12). In a Euro-American conjuncture where military, political and economic interventions abroad, as well as alienating and disenfranchising policies towards refugees, migrants and communities of colour at home, had come increasingly to be justified through the language of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, through the racialisation of sexuality ‘as a property of the West and a deficiency on the part of the rest (as well as the rest in the West)’, scholars drew attention to the violence enabled by the embrace of *some* LGBT subjects by Western nation-states (Haritaworn et al., 2014: 11).

Jasbir Puar (2007), for example, theorises what she calls homonationalism, or homonormative nationalism, as an effect and technology of the war on terror that enables certain types of LGBT subjects to be folded into the nation. This is, however, a conditional embrace that is not extended to subjects racialised, classed and gendered in particular ways. Furthermore, this inclusion depends on fusing ‘the recognition of homosexual subjects, both legally and representationally, to the national and transnational political agendas of US imperialism’ (Puar, 2007: 9).

In this article, I concern myself with the effects of the war on terror on LGBT subjects in the non-Western world, specifically the Middle East, taking the contemporary Lebanese context as my focus. There exists a robust literature on the impact of the sexualisation of the war on terror as an *imperial* endeavour on both queer and non-queer subjects in the Middle East (Bhattacharyya, 2008; McClintock, 2009; Mikdashi and Puar, 2016; Schotten, 2018; Shakhari, 2012).¹ My interest, however, is in exploring the consequences for LGBT activism of the *localisation* of the war on terror in the Middle East, and the securitisation of governance in the region. I argue the importance of thinking through the ways in which the war on terror is localised, taken advantage of and used as a means of strengthening state power in the Global South, and the effects of such processes on activism.²

I am interested in how LGBT activists in Lebanon have engaged the war on terror as an instrument of *local* rather than foreign power. The weaponisation of the war on terror as an instrument of governance by the Lebanese state, I argue, has reshaped the field within which LGBT activists in the country articulate and lobby for their rights, and has enabled a turn towards what I call *proto-homonationalism* amongst some LGBT actors in Lebanon – attempts at positioning certain segments of the LGBT population as not only *of* the nation but beneficial to the security state.³ I use the prefix ‘proto’ to indicate that I am examining an attempt at making homonationalism palatable to the state, rather than describing a shift that has already taken place, as is the case in the West.

In what follows, I critically interrogate and contextualise the language used in a number of public campaigns and events that unfolded between 2017 and 2019 and were organised by LGBT activists or touched on LGBT concerns. This temporal conjuncture is significant. Over the past decade, the Lebanese state, like others in the region, has invoked the war on terror and the refugee ‘crisis’ to promote a chauvinistic strain of patriotism amongst large swathes of Lebanon’s population. It took advantage of the civil war in Syria and the rise of ISIS to fuel the sense that Lebanon was under constant threat from without

and within. During this period, routine crackdowns on refugees in particular became a means for the state, via its security arm, to demonstrate its strength through brute force and carceral politics; a very convenient and effective way of distracting from its neglect and exploitation of the population at large (El Khazen, 2017).

With the importation and localisation of the war on terror, the security forces and the military morphed in Lebanese public discourse into sacrosanct institutions – support for their extra-judicial practices a form of loyalty to the nation. Their arms extended out and grabbed the ‘monsters’ (Puar and Rai, 2002) threatening the precarious country: primarily refugees (El Khazen, 2017). By propping up its security apparatuses, the state could project the illusion of fighting back against these supposed enemies, presenting the state both as threatened and capable of defending itself. Central to the reproduction of this form of power, then, was not only the production and identification of threats, but the demonstration of an ostensible ability to quash these threats and punish those responsible for them (El Khazen, 2017).

With, however, the eventual waning or retreat of ISIS that saw battles on the Lebanon–Syria border decrease and terrorist attacks on Lebanese soil become less and less frequent, the state had to locate and identify other types of threats in order to hold onto the legitimacy it had gained through its framing of and response to the war on terror (El Khazen, 2017). The discursive production of refugees’ potential to become Islamist terrorists persisted as a source of fear-mongering, accompanied by periodic raids and arrests on camps or neighbourhoods with significant refugee populations, but the security forces also turned their attention to other ‘deviants’ or subjects that could be deemed destabilising to the social order. For the purposes of this article, I look to the state’s turning to LGBT subjects, who were framed not only as threats to the heteronormative family, on which the social reproduction of the nation depended, but importantly as either criminals – drug dealers, for instance, or Western agents or spies employed by embassies or foreign NGOs – making them *national security* rather than merely cultural threats (El Khazen, 2017).

I examine the consequences for LGBT activism in Lebanon of the making hyper-visible (Amar, 2013) of middle- to upper-class LGBT citizens who had previously been tolerated in the country as a technique of power in this particular historical conjuncture, exploring the ways in which some LGBT activists responded to this hyper-visibility by engaging in a politics of respectability aimed at highlighting the political expediency of not only tolerating but *protecting* a particular type of LGBT citizen.

LGBT life and activism in Lebanon

The mainstream Western press, as well as some Lebanon-based activist groups, entertainment venues, media platforms and social initiatives, often frame the country as a gay haven in an otherwise wholly homophobic Arab World. But, the ability to survive and/or thrive as an LGBT subject in Lebanon is contingent on privileges related to race, class, gender and citizenship, as a number of scholars have demonstrated. Ghassan Moussawi (2020: 31), for example, has written extensively about the exclusionary nature of ‘cosmopolitan’ LGBT spaces in Lebanon, accessibility to which is reserved for subjects with ‘economic capital and those who are racialised as “proper” gay subjects’. Scholars

have also noted the Lebanese state's discriminatory application of Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code, which criminalises 'unnatural' sexual relations and is most often used to target the working-classes, refugees, trans folk and the spaces they frequent (Makarem, 2011; Moussawi, 2018, 2020).⁴

A compelling and growing body of literature has grappled with that which is obscured by discourses that celebrate Lebanon's and, more specifically, its capital Beirut's gay friendliness and supposedly cosmopolitan culture more broadly (Allouche, 2017; Makarem, 2011; Merabet, 2014; Mikdashi, 2016b; Moussawi, 2018, 2020; Nagle, 2018, 2021; Sayegh and Al Ali, 2019). The scholarship on the subject draws attention, in particular, to the economic developments that have framed some LGBT subjects as deserving of tolerance while others are targeted for harassment, arrest and punishment; for example, the effects of the neoliberal reconstruction model introduced by the late former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in the aftermath of Lebanon's 15-year civil war (1975–1990) (Nagle, 2021).⁵

This same literature also engages the politics of assimilation adopted by some LGBT subjects in Lebanon – attempts at presenting certain LGBT subjects as aligned with hegemonic classed and gendered norms, and as economically profitable and politically unthreatening – which I seek to contribute to through this article. This scholarship addresses a lacuna in the 'literature on LGBT lives in the Arab Middle East', which has traditionally focused on 'marginality' and neglected to engage 'the multiple positions that LGBT individuals occupy, beyond their non-normative gender and sexualities' (Moussawi, 2020: 10). I am interested, however, in how this politics of assimilation develops in light of the localisation of the war on terror; how it comes to depend not only on economic and civilisational, but on nationalist and security logics as well.

It is important to point out that LGBT activism in Lebanon is not a monolith. The scene plays host to a range of strategies and ideologies, both in terms of how activists relate to their local context and how they engage international LGBT organising (Makarem, 2011; Moussawi, 2015; Nagle, 2021; Naber and Zaatari, 2014). Scholars distinguish between NGOs, more underground, grassroots groups, and radical queer activists who fold their work on sexuality into a broader leftist politics. In this article, I concern myself primarily with NGO advocacy and the respectability or assimilationist politics that it has already been critiqued for, thinking critically about how this respectability politics develops within a particular conjuncture.

I focus on prominent, well-funded organisations that are dominated by middle-class, cisgender gay men, and that have been critiqued by both activists and scholars for their single-issue focused approach to LGBT (primarily LGB) organising and their exclusion of the gender non-normative and/or working-class alongside non-Lebanese nationals from their organising spaces and agendas. I look to how 'discourses of modernity and exceptionalism' (Moussawi, 2020: 57) already drawn on by these activists and their organisations in order to secure and protect their exclusive spaces get repurposed and transformed within the political conjuncture I concern myself with in this article. I ask what, in this moment, this middle-class LGBT activism that adopts a non-confrontational and/or accommodationist approach to the state looks like. As in, what does it look like to be 'politically unthreatening' (Nagle, 2018: 9) to the Lebanese state in a moment when the state was targeting those LGBT subjects it had previously turned a blind eye to?

Criminality, security and state power in Lebanon

The tolerance experienced by some LGBT subjects in Lebanon, described in the previous section, is unstable. Othering, while serving as a key instrument of power in Lebanon, ‘takes on shifting manifestations’ depending on a variety of political and economic circumstances (Moussawi, 2020: 73), and it is used not only to create distinctions between Lebanese and non-Lebanese, but among Lebanese citizens as well (Moussawi, 2020). As Ghassan Makarem (2011: 100) notes, ‘non-conformity is only permitted by the ruling class when it serves the interests of the regime’. In this section, I contextualise the Lebanese state’s criminalisation of previously tolerated LGBT subjects in recent years before thinking through the ways in which some LGBT activists have responded to this criminalisation in ways that risk furthering, rather than undermining, the power and authority of the state.

I will elaborate on the above via a specific example. On 9 August 2019, the popular, five-man Lebanese alternative rock band Mashrou’ Leila, fronted by openly queer lead singer and lyricist Hamed Sinno, was scheduled to perform at the country’s annual Byblos International Festival. The band had performed in its native Lebanon numerous times since its founding in 2008, including at previous iterations of the BIF. This time around, however, a public backlash against the scheduled performance forced the festival to cancel the band’s appearance. On the 22nd of July, church leaders associated with the Maronite Catholic Eparchy of Byblos released a statement condemning the band for its ‘offensive songs’, which they argued were an affront to ‘humanitarian values and Christian beliefs’ (Amnesty International, 2019: paragraph 2). They urged the festival to cancel the band’s scheduled performance. Their statement inspired a vitriolic campaign against the band on social media, with supporters of the cancellation threatening to block the concert ‘by force’ if the festival refused to acquiesce.

Those outraged by the band’s inclusion on the festival’s roster pointed primarily to the following lyrics from its 2015 song *Djinn*, featured on the album *Ibn El Leil* (Son of the Night): ‘Drown my liver in gin/in the name of the father and the son’ – a ‘playful allusion to the ritual of baptism’ (Chehayeb, 2019: paragraph 7) and also a play on words as ‘gin’ and ‘djinn’ are homophones and the lyrics could be taken as a reference to the alcoholic spirit (gin) or to the otherworldly spirits associated with the Arabo-Islamic tradition (*djinn*).⁶ Furthermore, a screenshot of a Facebook post shared by the band’s lead singer on his timeline, also in 2015, depicting the popstar Madonna as the Virgin Mary cradling the baby Jesus, accompanied by the caption ‘Madonna and fanboy’, was deployed as evidence of the band’s ‘crimes’.

Band members were labeled blasphemous, satanic and even masonic. A legal complaint was filed against them with the Public Prosecutor of Mount Lebanon, accusing them of inciting sectarianism by disrespecting the Christian faith, and of proselytising homosexuality. It should be noted that blasphemy is a crime in Lebanon, and the prosecution of blasphemers is defended not only by reference to the ‘sanctity’ of religion but, significantly, by citing Lebanon’s fragile social balance, framing criticism or even jokes directed at any of Lebanon’s religious faiths as an incitement to sectarian violence in the multi-confessional country. The band was questioned by State Security as a result.⁷

But, given the band's history of playing a variety of venues in Lebanon and the wider Middle East, and of being vocal about a variety of social, political and economic issues, as well as its lead singer's openness about his sexuality, it would be insufficient to attribute the cancellation of the 2019 Byblos performance and the backlash that led to it simply to a static culture of homophobia and conservatism in Lebanon.⁸ Importantly, the band's middle-class and, in appearance, gender-normative members moved and were fixtures within a cosmopolitan, secular and LGBT-friendly cultural scene that had been relatively tolerated by the state (Moussawi, 2018).⁹ This begs the question, what was it about that particular Lebanese summer that inspired such a reaction?

To make sense of this, I think it is important to turn to other panics that were cultivated and acted on during that same period. In June of 2019, racist tweets and statements by then foreign minister Gebran Bassil, who was also head of the president of the republic's party, the Free Patriotic Movement, inspired a hate campaign against Syrian refugees and workers in the country. 'You love Lebanon...hire a Lebanese' (Houri, 2019a: paragraph 13), Bassil urged local businesses, blaming Lebanon's refugee population for its high levels of unemployment and precarious labour. Bassil tweeted that Lebanese belonging was a product of 'genetics', meaning it was something that foreigners, those devoid of Lebanese *patrilineal* bloodlines, could never be folded into – a biological impossibility. 'Our belonging', he tweeted, 'is what brings us together, and one of the aspects of our belonging is the nationality and the "lebanity" which we consider to be the highest belonging, over everything else, and this is the real common factor between us' (Houri, 2019a: paragraph 15).

This 'lebanity' was being tainted and needed to be protected in addition to the economy, the environment, public health and the countless other sectors whose failings were actively being blamed on refugees or migrants. Not long after, a campaign erupted against foreign labour aimed primarily at Palestinian refugees, who had already long been subject to severe work restrictions in the country, amongst other limitations that seriously reduced the quality of their living conditions. At the helm of this crackdown was none other than Lebanon's labour minister, Camille Abouseleiman, associated with the right-wing political party, the Lebanese Forces. This campaign inspired mass mobilisations within Palestinian refugee camps, to which the state and army responded with repressive containment measures aimed at preventing the protests from spilling out beyond the camps.

It is important to draw a link between these instances of state-sponsored racism – which had a trickle-down effect that saw hate crimes against Lebanon's refugee population spike as vigilante-citizens took it upon themselves to join the state in 'defending' Lebanese labour and 'Lebaneseness' more broadly against 'infiltrators' – and the campaign against Mashrou' Leila, which brought together the church, state security and the general public to secure the nation's moral fabric. These seemingly distinct cultivated panics were part of the same repertoire of biopolitical tools being deployed by a state that had come to increasingly rely on right-wing populism in order to consolidate its power and assert legitimacy and authority in the face of 'countless scandals, failures, and mismanagement' (Houri, 2019b: paragraph 7).

A chauvinistic expression of Lebanese nationalism rooted in pride towards and support for the Lebanese army and the security forces first became *overtly* manifest in post-civil war Lebanon in response to the Lebanese Army's 2007 military assault on the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Barid in the north of Tripoli.¹⁰ Jens Hanssen and Hicham Safieddine (2016: 211–212) write that this assault was 'accompanied by a surge in Lebanese ultranationalism reflected in media coverage, public displays of loyalty, and state publicity'. I would argue that this militarised ultranationalism was further exacerbated with the adoption of the 'war on terror' discourse after the start of the Syrian revolution by all mainstream political forces in Lebanon, which bolstered support for the army and its crackdown on Syrian refugees in the name of fighting terrorism and keeping ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra militants away from Lebanese territory. With the adoption and weaponization of the war on terror by the Lebanese state, the army and Lebanese security forces more broadly came to serve as a source of meaning-making, pride and identification for a citizenry mired in precarity.

The language of 'genetic superiority, racial purity' (Houri, 2019a: paragraph 17), and the spectacle of seeing it defended returned a dangerous form of dignity to disenfranchised Lebanese, making hatred for and discrimination against Syrians and other vulnerable 'outsiders' or anti-normative communities one of their only sources of redress. It did not matter, for example, that all evidence pointed to the Lebanese economy having fed off the presence of Syrian refugees.¹¹ The spectacle of sending security forces to expel them from neighbourhoods and shut-down their businesses was much more satisfying than pointing a finger back at the state to explain the precarity from which much of the Lebanese population suffered, when the feeling that nothing could be done with this information was so overwhelming for many. The same can be said for crackdowns on LGBT communities, which can become a means of temporarily alleviating, for example, anxieties around masculinity produced by economic processes that facilitate mass loss of income, unemployment, and reduced access to decent healthcare and education for the majority of the population.¹²

As scholars like Nicola Pratt (2007) have shown, protecting traditional gender roles and safeguarding heterosexuality can serve as means of asserting control and authority over the identity and the boundaries of the nation, particularly in moments of political unrest and waning confidence in the ability of states to address economic inequality and political corruption. If we want to understand the resurgence of crackdowns on LGBT communities in the Middle East over the last few years, we have to think about these crackdowns, as mentioned earlier, in relation to the waning of the threat posed by ISIS and the state legitimacy that crackdowns on this threat were productive of (El Khazen, 2017), alongside the role that sexual-moral panics have historically played in the sedimentation of political authority in Lebanon (Mikdash, 2014) and other Middle Eastern and North African contexts (Pratt, 2007).

States of the Middle East accumulated significant amounts of power and legitimacy through the war on terror and the regional fight against ISIS (El Khazen, 2017); through the fight against 'religious perversion' (Amar, 2013). With the waning of this fight, they had to locate new or resurrect old monsters through which to reproduce their power and legitimacy – in the case of the Mashrou' Leila affair, what Paul Amar (2013) calls the

threat of 'globalised perversion'. Of course, Lebanon has always been hostile towards its 'others'. The fact that racism towards refugees and migrant workers, alongside homophobia and transphobia, were already normalised, to a large extent, meant that they could easily be harnessed to cultivate the panics described earlier as a means of directing the Lebanese citizenry's anger during moments of unrest away from a negligent state and towards socio-economic and cultural 'infiltrators' presented as threats to the nation.

States continue to depend on the regulation of sexuality, in particular, for the reproduction of their power because of its ability to 'engender widespread social chaos' (Puri, 2016: 6). M. Jacqui Alexander (1994: 6) argues that it is important when conceptualising, in particular, the postcolonial state, that we approach its power and authority as perpetually 'under siege'. Alexander (1994: 6) argues that, in such a context, 'criminalisation functions as a technology of control, and much like other technologies of control, becomes an important site for the production and reproduction of state power'. This is why she argues that policing the sexual 'has something to do with sex' but 'is also more than sex' (1994: 6).

While the Lebanese state can and has benefitted economically and geopolitically from allowing some measures of freedom to a circumscribed group of LGBT citizens, it also, at times, benefits from cracking down on these same citizens in order to appease a socially conservative populace desperate for sources of dignity and pride in an otherwise humiliating and debilitating socio-political and economic context. Morality, then, has and continues to serve as a 'weapon of the state' (Makarem, 2011: 104). Furthermore, sexual deviance and racism are deeply entangled in Lebanon, as demonstrated via discourses that frame refugees, Syrians in particular, as sexual predators (Allouche, 2017; Mikdashi, 2014; Moussawi, 2020). Jyoti Puri's (2016) theorisation of the 'sexual state' in the context of India, reveals the intimate entanglement of racialisation and sexualisation as an instrument of state power, and the linking of sexual deviance to 'otherness' or foreignness means that the embrace of some LGBT subjects into the national fold is always an unstable one. 'Even the most accepted queer', writes Cai Wilkinson (as cited in Kehl, 2020: 23–24), 'is still a queer, conditionally included, and thus remains in danger of being stripped of their rights'. In particular political conjunctures, then, state power comes to depend more forcefully on protecting and enforcing heteronormativity in ways that deny those previously tolerated LGBT subjects the privileges they sometimes enjoy.

What the Mashrou' Leila incident reveals, then, is the conditional nature (Shakhsari, 2020; Puar, 2007) of the folding in of certain types of LGBT subjects into the Lebanese nation. I have demonstrated this instability by linking the resurgence of crackdowns on the LGBT community in Lebanon to the waning of the fight against ISIS and the need to resurrect punishable sources of panic to serve as distractions through which to reinforce and re-legitimise state power via securitisation (El Khazen, 2017) in a context where nationalism and patriotism are deeply entangled not only with racism but with heteronormative conceptions of the family (Naber and Zaatari, 2014). Next, I turn to how some LGBT activists in Lebanon responded to their criminalisation by the Lebanese security state within this conjuncture by developing the politics of respectability or assimilation in ways that aligned with or appealed to nationalist *and* security discourses.

National values and LGBT activism

To return to the Mashrou' Leila affair, the activist response to this incident masked, for the most part, the connections between it and the abuse being levelled against Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

After the concert's cancellation, a social media campaign named *Lil Watan* (For the Nation) was launched by the Skyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom in Lebanon and was picked up by supporters of the band in the country and its diaspora. In its commentary on the affair, the Skyes Center emphasised the harm that this form of censorship could cause Lebanon's reputation as a bastion of the arts, culture and entertainment, which were also framed as crucial components of the country's economy. Importantly, the incident was also presented as a *failure* on the part of public authorities – the judiciary and security services in particular – to protect the citizenry from the threat posed by religious fanaticism (Trad, 2019).

The campaign called on people all over Lebanon to play the band's music in homes, restaurants, bars, cars, workplaces and more – to fill Lebanon's soundscape with the art of the wrongfully censored. This act, while framed as a form of defiance or resistance was, importantly, articulated as a distinctly *Lebanese* form of counter-politics – as a very Lebanese response to a crackdown that went against the widely recognised ethos of the nation. It was an act on behalf of, rather than in opposition to, the nation; an attempt to safeguard one of its most beloved traits: freedom of expression. The campaign drew on the popular and much beloved trope of Lebanon as a haven of diversity and liberalism in a conservative and highly censored region. 'Kilna lil watan', the campaign announced on its Facebook page – all of us for the nation; a play both on the first lines of the Lebanese national anthem and the title of a beloved Mashrou' Leila song – *Lil Watan*.

But the song's title, if we listen closely to the lyrics, appears ironic – more of a provocation to question than an assertion of national pride. The song, despite constituting a critical engagement with nationalism and a meditation on its exclusionary elements, gets repurposed within the above-mentioned campaign as evidence of the band's rootedness in Lebanon; of its role as a symbol of the diversity and freedom said to distinguish the country. A song that waxes indignant about attempts to stifle criticism, debate and opposition in the country through appeals to national security and cohesion, gets utilised within this campaign to do exactly that which the song seems fearful of – to distance, rather than challenge or even embrace, the claim that someone or something is a threat to the nation because they are engaging critically with it.

In a conjuncture when the Lebanese state's power had come to significantly depend on its ability to conjure the threat of religious fanaticism and the terror it was thought to be productive of and demonstrate its ability to crack down on it, the campaign framed the state as beholden or subservient to, unable to control and to punish, this same phenomenon. In so doing, it reduced queerphobia and censorship to a matter of religious fundamentalism, ignoring the political and economic factors underpinning the state's commitment to particular norms, an attentiveness to which reveals the entanglement of moral and sexual panics with those that target refugees, migrants and the working-classes. It also inadvertently reified the logic of the security state, which depends on the

production of security threats and derives power from securitisation justified in the name of protecting respectable or proper citizens aligned with hegemonic national norms (Amar, 2013). Rather than challenge the logic of the state, then, this campaign attempted to redirect its gaze to another threat, the threat of religious fundamentalism which, importantly, is racialised in Lebanon.

To speak of freedom of expression, an uncontroversial value and a means of collective socio-cultural and political distinction often used to distinguish Lebanon from other Arab countries (Moussawi, 2020), is to distract from the turn towards right-wing populism symbolised by this and other incidents – a populism that relies on the production of racialised deviance and its subsequent eradication. It also belies that ‘Beirut’s openness and acceptance are made possible by exclusionary practices against undesirable racialised and classed others’ (Moussawi, 2020: 36). To speak of safeguarding, freedom of expression is to fail to challenge the dangerous logic through which the state had come to routinely consolidate its power in the age of the war on terror. It asks, rather, that certain communities, namely citizens, be *exempt* from that logic on the basis of their desire to honour and uphold a national ideal.¹³

Many attended the mobilisations and sit-ins organised in solidarity with the band, but few showed their support for the refugees being vilified at that very same moment. Few attended the mobilisations being organised in refugee camps, for example. And, a statement of solidarity with Lebanon’s Palestinian population and their demand for the right to work was signed by a mere six Lebanese civil society organisations, in a country teeming with non-profits (Houry, 2019b).

Ghiwa Sayegh, editor-in-chief of *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research*, argues in an interview with Thanassis Cambanis (2019: paragraph 21) that while most civil society organisations in Lebanon articulate support for the human and civil rights of all residents in the country, citizen and non-citizen alike, the fact that most of these organisations are dedicated to single-issue organising means that, in practice, they ‘often fail to take into consideration the interests of other populations’. I argue, moreover, that it is not merely the focus on single-issue organising, but the increased reliance on a nationalistic lexicon to push forward particular issues and frame them as worthy of being addressed and supported, that hinders these CSOs’ ability to tangibly connect the struggles they are focused on to those of others.

This tendency was quite evident during the 2018 parliamentary elections, in the response of some prominent LGBT NGOs and campaigners to candidates who indicated support for decriminalising Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code. Around 100 candidates voiced support for abolishing Article 534, many of them independents associated with civil society. Notable, however, was the Kataeb Party’s inclusion of this objective on its platform. The Kataeb is one of the oldest political parties in Lebanon which, when it first emerged in the 1930s, modelled itself after the Francoist Falange party of Spain. Since the end of the civil war within which it played a central role, the Kataeb has been an increasingly marginal player amongst the country’s crowded field of Christian right-wing parties. The Kataeb’s support for abolishing Article 534 can be understood as an attempt to clean-up and modernise its image, and appeal to a new category of voters: primarily secular, civil society-leaning voters, given its lack of popularity amongst the constituency it traditionally drew support from – politically and socially conservative urban Christians (Qiblawi, 2018).

The Kataeb's support for decriminalising homosexuality was welcomed by many LGBT organisers and activists, a significant number of whom had voiced routine support for the rights of refugees and migrant workers, the denial of which parties like the Kataeb have played an important role in facilitating.¹⁴ The Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality, one of the most influential and well-funded non-profits focused on gender and sexual rights not just in Lebanon but across the MENA region, compiled a list of candidates committed to LGBT rights on its webpage, and while it cautioned that 'supporting sexual freedoms is not the only calibre to vote for candidates', it went on to state that this was 'generally an indication of an intersectional vision regarding rights' (AFE Elections, 2018).¹⁵

In terms of the coverage of the elections, no attempt was made by organisations like AFE to overtly highlight and discount candidates who, while voicing support for LGBT rights, demonstrated at best a disinterest and at worst a dedication to undermining the rights of other marginalised communities. For example, within the same electoral period that saw the Kataeb announce their 'pro-LGBT' platform, posters and banners were hung up in a neighbourhood of Beirut considered a party stronghold, announcing the imminent expulsion of Syrian refugees and claiming that the crisis experienced by the Syrian people was karmic revenge for the Syrian government's 14-year intervention in Lebanon, which ended in 2005. These posters displayed images of late Lebanese President Bashir Gemayel, founder of the Kataeb. This incident did not feature in AFE's electoral coverage or evaluation of the Kataeb's platform. Furthermore, no attempt was made to highlight the limited impact of decriminalisation when Article 534 was used primarily against the working-classes and refugees.¹⁶

In the aftermath of the elections, a Lebanon-based queer activist published a scathing anonymous critique of the discourse around 'pro-LGBT' candidates, worth quoting at length:

'To make the case', they write, 'that queers and trans* folk only care about [Article] 534, not being hated, or getting a very light and disgusted (or heavy and co-opting) pat on the back – is belittling. It's condescending. It's offensive. And worse – it's just not true. And here's what we know about laws. You remove a hateful one. They'll find another. Remove honour crimes from the penal code, and you'll find the same crime filed under "crime in a moments rage". Can't charge a transwoman with 534 because you have no evidence that she has "sex against nature"? Then use identity theft, prostitution, immorality, public indecency, "masquerading as a woman" and so many more to randomly detain her' (*The A Project*, 2018: paragraph 8–9).

The author points not only to the limited impact of decriminalisation, but to the fact that it could only positively affect a privileged few – those, notably, who already enjoy some degree of stability in Lebanon and who publicly perform, if not subscribe, to some degree, to conventional norms of masculine and feminine comportment and, more importantly, a middle-class aesthetic and ethics of consumption – meaning, those who already possess a degree of recognisable economic, social or cultural capital. Moreover, as I argue in the next section, the price to be paid for such limited reforms is a steep one.

LGBT activism and the politics of security

Focusing purely on decriminalisation through the performance of respectability politics, amounts to asking the state ‘that it recognize the right of queer citizens to “come out of the closet” and into the space of the nation’ (Ritchie, 2010: 560). This requires turning a blind eye to, if not upholding, the forms of demonisation and scapegoating that the state is dependent on – ignoring policies on refugees, failing or refusing to attend a protest or sign a statement and, in more severe cases, playing into the war on terror discourse that the state has used to consolidate its power, and which it has utilised to oppress, if not kill, refugees.

This latter strategy, for example, was exemplified by prominent LGBT rights group Helem’s 2017 social media campaign, *Homophobia is Terrorism*, which involved drawing on the spectre of the terrorist that the state and its security apparatuses had so carefully cultivated in order to distinguish Lebanon’s LGBT community as composed of benign, law-abiding citizens; as susceptible, if not more, to being victims of terror than the population at large, because they had to protect themselves from multiple forms of hate and violence.¹⁷

‘I’m just like you’, explained one of the voice overs in the video campaign. ‘I don’t pose a threat to society. But this society allows the fact that I am beaten, humiliated, imprisoned, raped, or even killed. Don’t be part of it. Acceptance is what builds societies. Hate is what makes terrorism’.¹⁸ Here, homophobia is presented as a marker, a symptom, of the kind of fanaticism associated with terrorists – a means, almost, of discerning who is or who might become a terrorist: a surveillance or counter-terrorism tactic. Within this campaign homophobia, moreover, is *equated* with terrorism; is fused with it – an attempt to make homophobia distasteful by linking it to the most abject figure within this particular political conjuncture. But, in putting forward this rhetoric, Helem drew on the fear-mongering tactics of the state, reviving the idea that Lebanon was under the constant threat of a possible terrorist attack and needed to be actively distinguishing between potential terrorists and their potential victims. This, importantly, in a country where it was widely assumed that such an attack would come at the hands of a refugee, turning most Syrians, in particular, into suspected ISIS militants deserving of being habitually policed and disciplined by not only the security forces but the population at large – guilty until proven innocent.

The release of Helem’s campaign coincided with a crackdown on Lebanon’s LGBT community during a week of events organised to celebrate the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT), which had been marked in Lebanon for over a decade. The fundamentalist Association of Muslim Scholars pressured the minister of the interior and the director general of the security forces to intervene and cancel the IDAHOT-related events, and levelled threats against the venues meant to play host to them. Many events were cancelled as a result, and the discourse that emanated from some LGBT circles framed the pressure placed by the authorities on organisers to cease with their activities as evidence of the state’s collusion with the religious establishment, and its inability to confront the threat posed by this establishment on freedom of expression and assembly in Lebanon. Some wrote of the insistence on raising the rainbow

flag in different corners of Beirut despite the threats as an act of defiance in the face of ‘the cultural terrorism that Lebanon’s government allows’ (Fares as cited in [Lebanon’s 2017 Pride Week, 2017](#)). Some expressed alarm at the security forces’ failure to protect the organisers of IDAHOT. And, others framed the incident as indicative of the ‘intimate relation between homophobic politicians and government agencies with the extremist and conservative establishment’ ([Lebanon’s 2017 Pride Week, 2017](#)).

Through this discourse, the state was framed as weak and inadequate vis-à-vis the very same phenomenon that it had come to derive legitimacy from cracking down on through the instrumentalization of the war on terror. Such discourse belies the relationship between secular power and heteronormativity in Lebanon ([Mikdashi, 2011b](#)), between securitisation and moral panics, and reinforces the Islamophobic language through which the state has justified its crackdown on refugees in the name of protecting the populace at large, equating homophobia purely with religious fanaticism and framing the state’s desire not to act on the threats posed by the Association of Muslim Scholars as a product of weakness rather than of a particular political calculus.

I am drawing on this example to demonstrate that the politics of respectability within some LGBT circles in Lebanon develops in particular ways in response to the localisation of the war on terror, and comes to depend not only on distinguishing certain LGBT subjects from ‘non-modern’ working-classes or foreigners, but on articulating the need to protect such subjects from criminality, particularly that of the terrorist or potential terrorist, drawing not only on civilisational but on security logics as well. Beyond just making the case for gays and lesbians being ‘like everyone else’ ([Moussawi, 2020](#)), these discourses frame them as threatened by terror in similar ways to the rest of the Lebanese citizenry and posit terror’s targeting of LGBT subjects as a potential instrument of power – the protection of LGBT subjects as a counter-terrorism tactic.

I would like to further elaborate on this argument by discussing Beirut Pride, which first took place in 2017 and framed itself as the inaugural pride of the MENA region. Beirut Pride was a one-man initiative spearheaded by Hadi Damien, a cultural practitioner who was, at the time, little known within Lebanon’s LGBT advocacy scene. Beirut Pride focused on upper- and middle-class cisgender gay people, mainly men, presenting them as productive employees and business owners with the deep pockets needed to make them desirable consumers, advocating for their liberation ‘at the expense of the “unrespectable” poor, gender non-conforming, and paperless trans and gay communities’ ([Bitar, 2017](#): paragraph 1).

Damien’s inspiration for Beirut Pride came largely from pride events he had witnessed in Europe and hoped to replicate, which drew criticism from many in the LGBT community who critiqued the desire to impose a model from elsewhere that had, in its local contexts, been criticised for commercialisation and for accommodating institutions like the police. He was also critiqued for his lack of communication and coordination with local LGBT NGOs and initiatives that were organising IDAHOT events at the same time.

Beirut Pride, as [Ghiwa Sayegh and Nadje Al Ali note \(2019: 57\)](#), ‘was trademarked and registered with the approval of the Lebanese state’, and in its public statements, it ‘distances itself from political discussions, promoting “positivity” instead’. But contra this proclaimed political neutrality, Beirut Pride did in fact articulate and perform

a specific kind of politics. For example, it shared on its website that its vision was aligned with that of the country's political administration, which it claimed sought to 'improve the well-being of the Lebanese citizens through initiatives and reforms that reject hate and violence and stand up for a safe society to all citizens'. Beirut Pride's organiser, Hadi Damien, went to great lengths to demonstrate, via public statements, his initiative's compatibility with the dominant values of Lebanese society, distancing himself from divisive rhetoric and, controversially, collaborating with the Internal Security Forces and releasing a statement thanking them for 'protecting' Beirut Pride events and attendees, framing those involved or affiliated with Beirut Pride as respectable citizens of the body politic deserving of being shielded by the same forces that treat refugees and migrants as security threats. This statement, in particular, was condemned by a significant number of queer, feminist, anti-racist and pro-migrant activists (Bitar, 2017).¹⁹ Even NGOs distanced themselves from Beirut Pride, although the events they organised for IDAHOT, which unfolded during the same month, were advertised on its website, in some cases without their knowledge or approval.

Beirut Pride epitomised a form of activism that seeks 'the recognition and approval of oppressive structures' rather than the construction of alternatives (Bitar, 2017: paragraph 13). Importantly, Beirut Pride made the case for not only the tolerating but the *protection* of certain types of LGBT subjects as aligned with dominant security logics in the country. As writer and activist Lara Bitar (2017: 33) argues, the production of certain LGBT subjects as normative-citizen subjects, which Beirut Pride was invested in, 'alongside the anticipated exploitation of LGBT imagery by capital...also requires their absorption into a nationalist discourse that regards refugees and migrants as threats to national security'. Bitar explains (2017: 34) that

this seemingly well-intentioned attempt to ensure the safety of the attendees erases the well-documented violence of successive Lebanese governments against LGBT-identified people, stateless and undocumented individuals, and migrant workers. More troublingly, it reasserts the power of the state to arbitrate social questions and produce a reality that, in this instance, universalises tolerance or acceptance of a certain representation of gayness and a demonisation of others.

Beirut Pride, then, articulated a 'longing to be rescued' (Bitar, 2017: 34) that reinforced security logics that frame some communities as deserving of protection and others as deserving of disability because of the threat they are said to pose to the safety of those citizens targeted for protection.

This same discourse was also evident in September of 2019, after the Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality's NEDWA – an annual conference for LGBT activists from across the MENA – became the target of public statements by the Association of Muslim Scholars, who accused the conference of promoting both homosexuality and drug abuse. In response, security forces attempted to shut-down the conference and proceeded to collect the names of all attendees, many of whom were subsequently barred from Lebanon. In response, Georges Azzi, the director of AFE, took to Facebook in the aftermath of the murder of two police officers and two soldiers at the hands of a former ISIS

militant, to publicly accuse the association of caring more about demonising LGBT organisers than denouncing terrorists, writing that the association's silence with regards to the attack implied that the scholars appeared to be mourning the terrorist rather than the soldier.

The association is indeed a regressive and reactionary force that has obsessively targeted LGBT activism in Lebanon, but the danger in this statement articulated publicly by a prominent organiser with substantial social, political and economic connections is the ways in which it adopts the very war on terror rhetoric – reliant on a virulent strain of Islamophobia prominent even in ostensibly Muslim or Muslim-majority contexts – that is routinely used to construct Lebanon's refugee population as always already a terrorist population until proven otherwise by, among other things, linking it to a religious fundamentalism framed as outside 'Lebaneseness'. Azzi, in his statement, makes a clear distinction between the Muslim terrorist and the secular, queer patriot, lending support to a discourse through which the Lebanese state has been able to routinely reassert and inflate its power. Rather than challenging the security logics of the state and its reliance on the making hyper-visible of criminality or potential criminality, the comment displaces criminality onto the Association of Muslim Scholars.

Scholars like Moussawi have documented the social and political uses of Islamophobia in Lebanon (2020, 2013). What Moussawi calls fractal Orientalism is a mechanism whereby both Middle Easterners and Westerners create distinctions between Middle Eastern countries based on proximity to the West, and through which Beirut's middle- to upper-class LGBT scene, for example, has come to be framed as exceptional and modern in ways that obscure the oppression faced by LGBT subjects devoid of privileges based on class, race, citizenship and gender identity.

While scholars like Moussawi look to the link between queer exceptionalism and civilisational discourses and the ways in which they are entangled with Islamophobia, in this section, I have examined the relationship between LGBT rights, security discourses and Islamophobia. I am looking then, at the amplification and transformation of existing discourses around race and sexuality in a particular conjuncture, and at the effects of Lebanon's modernity having come to be linked not only to 'the privatisation of the media, sex tourism, LGB tourism, and certain measures of bodily autonomy for women' but to the fight against terrorism as well (Moussawi, 2018: 177). If the 'modern narrative of tolerance depends on not tolerating certain vulnerable groups (gender-nonnormative, trans, and working-class people, as well as refugees) who it regards as non-modern' (Moussawi, 2018: 187), in the age of the global war on terror and the securitisation of governance, this narrative of tolerance also depends on creating distinctions between terrorists and their victims.

In thinking about how this conjuncture affects LGBT activism in Lebanon, I am pointing to not only homonormative activism, but what I am terming *proto-homonationalism*, a mode of LGBT activism that emphasises the link between religious fundamentalism and homophobia and, in so doing, makes the case for the folding in of some secular, queer subjects into the nation as a mode of strengthening the security state.²⁰

Conclusion

There exists a robust scholarship on the complicity of “liberal queer strategies” with “urban modes of governance that are often inseparable from neoliberal, racist, nationalist, and militarist logics” in the Global North (Oswin as cited in Nagle, 2021: 3), to which I have attempted to contribute through this article, focusing in particular on how such strategies have been taken up in Global South contexts in similar ways, as a result of the manner in which the war on terror and its security logics have travelled and been localised and instrumentalised in contexts like Lebanon.

Given the importation and localisation of the war on terror in contexts like Lebanon, it is important that we think of the utility of drawing concepts like homonationalism away from North American or Western exceptionalism and towards contexts in the Global South. While this might, if looked at superficially, appear as a conceptual imposition, it is important to think of it as a reflection of and response to the transnational dimensions of certain mechanisms of oppression and instruments of state power in our current political conjuncture, as well as the ways in which modes of resistance and advocacy respond to this transnationalism and themselves travel, particularly in a world where activism has been heavily NGO-ized.

In this article, I have looked not only at how ‘homonormative activism reproduces the dominant, mainstream, heterosexual culture’ in a context like Lebanon (Nagle, 2018: 5), but at how the reproduction of this culture in a particular political conjuncture can feed and enhance the security logics on which contemporary state power depends. I have done so via the analytic of what I have called proto-homonationalism, and I have approached this not as evidence of Westernisation or complicity with Western imperialism, but as a response to the securitisation of power in Lebanon and as a strategy for LGBT survival that can have serious consequences both for LGBT subjects and for other marginalised communities.

The politics of visibility and recognition, the politics of respectability and protection, I have argued, require appeasement and compromise. They require that one design one’s public image in a way that is acceptable to the very power one ostensibly seek to oppose. In the conjuncture I have analysed, this involves appealing not only to civilisational and economic logics, but to security logics as well. This mode of politics aspires to normalisation, and in so doing it more often than not results in the dilution, if not dissolution, of more transformative and egalitarian political visions – ones that, in a context like Lebanon in particular, could fold in the *millions* of precarious residents or denizens who lack citizenship and who cannot make the case that they are of and for the nation, and on whose monstification the security state has depended for the consolidation of its power.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Hicham Safieddine, Rafeef Ziadeh and Janine Clark for their valuable feedback on early drafts of this article. Special thanks to Muneira Hoballah, Ghiwa Sayegh and Sabiha Allouche for helping me think through reviewer feedback and develop this work and for giving me the confidence to finalise it. Thank you as well to Ghassan Makarem for many a conversation that helped me refine my argument. I am also deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their generous and detailed feedback, which I found invaluable.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Sophie Chamas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6651-3085>

Notes

1. Amongst other things, this literature touches on the entanglement of LGBT activism in and related to the region and imperialism (Massad, 2002; Makarem, 2009; Ritchie, 2010; Mikdashi, 2011a, 2016a; Schulman, 2012; Goknur, 2015; Moussawi, 2015), and the fusing of queer and anti-imperial politics amongst some queer actors (Alqaisiya, 2018, 2020; Naber and Zaatari, 2014).
2. Following from Paul Amar (2013), I challenge the tendency to frame non-Western states as mere targets or victims of the war on terror and the securitisation of politics and governance more broadly. As Amar (2013: 20) puts it when discussing the state of critical research on security states, ‘people and social formations in the Global South’ are framed as ‘external to the politics of security, as either projections of securitisation processes or as victims of repression and war...Not wanting to blame the victim, the field blames the victimiser but still sees people in the Global South, largely, as dependents or causalities’.
3. I build on the work of scholars and activists who call for an attentiveness to the geopolitical when attempting to make sense of the development and transformation of LGBT activism in Lebanon and the wider Middle East within particular historical conjunctures (Moussawi, 2015; Naber and Zaatari, 2014; Makarem, 2009).
4. Rahul Rao’s (2020) theorisation of homocapitalism or Juan Miguel Kanai’s (2014) theorisation of homo-entrepreneurialism are useful analytics for thinking through the Lebanese state’s contradictory approach to LGBT subjects – its tolerance of LGBT spaces that cater to gender-normative, middle-to upper-class Lebanese and western tourists, alongside a routine targeting of spaces frequented by queer refugees, trans folks and the working-classes, those considered as ‘outsiders to cosmopolitanism’ (Moussawi, 2020: 68).
5. As John Nagle (2021: 2) writes, ‘on the one hand, gentrification has created a space of implicit tolerance for specific assemblages of sexuality, class and power, which are nonthreatening to institutionalised homophobia, especially gender-normative and middle-class LGBTQ people. On the other, this dynamic is mirrored by the ruthless, violent cleansing of spaces and forms of sexuality deemed to be transgressive. Working-class gays, sex workers, refugees and trans persons, and the spaces they inhabit, are brutally cast outside of the domain of acceptable citizenship’.
6. The original lyrics are in Arabic. What I have included here is a translation.

7. The lyrics penned by Sinno and other band members are notable for their commentary on a variety of socio-political and cultural issues specific to Lebanon and the wider Middle East. The band is known for openly advocating a number of social justice issues, including LGBT and women's rights, as well as freedom of expression and belief.
8. It is worth reiterating that the album that earned the band the charge of blasphemy and made them vulnerable to prosecution was released in 2015, and its songs had been played on the radio as well as in and through a host of other public venues and channels plenty of times between then and the summer of 2019.
9. In addition, the band has received international acclaim for its music that earned Lebanon's entertainment and cultural spheres positive coverage, and it regularly performed at popular and profitable venues in Lebanon that drew middle- to upper-class patrons.
10. Prior to the civil war, the Lebanese army, despite being a modest institution compared to the militaries housed by some of Lebanon's neighbours, served as a symbol of national unity because of its nature as a multi-confessional institution. When it fragmented during the civil war, it signalled the country's spiralling into sectarian chaos. While today Lebanon is not a militaristic state, the army has continued to serve as a symbol of national unity.
11. As Walid Hourri (2019a: paragraph 29) explains, 'billions of US dollars have been sent to Lebanon because of the refugees. Billions that have been pumped into the local economy and part of which paid as wages for countless Lebanese working in various sectors involved directly or indirectly in relief work. The Syrian community in Lebanon also constitutes a very large part of the Lebanese economy, paying rents, consuming goods, producing goods, providing a needed labour force, and pumping money into the stagnant Lebanese economy'. Hourri points to the gains, for example, that the telecommunications sector has made from the Syrian presence, benefitting off the increased need for phone lines.
12. See, for example, the work of Nicola Pratt (2007), Farha Ghannam (2013) and Salwa Ismail (2006) on the Egyptian context.
13. There is a history of challenging censorship in Lebanon by framing it as un-Lebanese. See, for example, Moussawi's discussion of the #stripforjackie campaign launched in solidarity with Lebanese Olympic skier Jackie Chamoun who was publicly berated by some Lebanese media platforms for appearing semi-nude in a photoshoot for an Austrian ski calendar. Sports officials in Lebanon also demanded that Chamoun's actions be investigated. Moussawi (2020: 55–56) writes that 'the solidarity campaign attempted to project Lebanon as unapologetically liberal and progressive' and sought to distinguish 'the Lebanese people from their counterparts in the Middle East' by portraying 'tolerance and a celebration of gender, sexual diversity, and visibility' as signs of 'the cultural advancement of Lebanese society'.
14. The Kataeb, for example, was the party behind the Sabra and Shatila massacre during the Lebanese civil war, which primarily targeted Palestinian refugees.
15. This information has now been removed from AFE's Web site.
16. Despite its prominence, it is worth noting that AFE is a controversial NGO within Lebanon's LGBT activist scene, and its leadership, alongside that of other NGOs, has been critiqued by radical queer activists in Lebanon for what is framed as their elitism, classism, refusal to address economic inequality and fixation on LGB rights advocacy aimed at securing the rights of the most privileged members of the community (Makarem, 2011). Furthermore, AFE's leadership

has been publicly accused of engaging in and enabling harassment and misogyny within the organisation and in its dealing with others, which led to the resignation of a number of its board members in 2020.

17. Helem was the first public LGBT rights organisation in the MENA and was founded in 2004. Helem started off as a node in a broader left-wing movement in Lebanon and emphasised the intersectional and anti-imperial nature of its activism, framing its agenda as also anti-sectarian and anti-racist and articulating a commitment to working-class concerns (Makarem, 2011). Over the years, Helem has ‘undergone substantial change in personnel and leadership’ (Nagle, 2021: 7) and has come to focus its work on advocacy around LGBT issues in particular, although it still voices support for other social justice causes.
18. Translation by Helem.
19. The revolutionary socialist organisation the Socialist Forum, for example, released a statement written by its Socialist Feminist Committee condemning the event.
20. I do not mean to imply that existing literature on LGBT activism in Lebanon has not engaged homonationalism as an analytic. The existing literature, however, relates homonationalism to distinctions made by some middle- to upper-class gender-normative Lebanese LGBT actors between themselves and the working-classes, migrant or refugee communities, or trans folks and attempts to position some segments of the country’s LGBT population as compatible with the existing national imaginary that frames Lebanon as exceptionally modern and cosmopolitan. I contribute to and build on this literature by thinking of homonationalism in relation to the politics of security, engaging distinctions made between some LGBT citizens and the figure of the religious fundamentalist, said to be prone to engagements in acts of terror.

References

- The A Project (2018) *It’s not Looking Too Good for LGBTQ Organizing*. Available at: <https://www.theaproject.org/content/not-looking-too-good-lgbtq-organizing?fbclid=IwAR0ux5t0LHQ7U4jyxMHW7crXXv3EpLGxrLq7uoYm5jXbgTNP9S7MDhZTIA0>
- Alexander MJ (1994) Not just (any) body can be a citizen: the politics of law, sexuality and postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas. *Feminist Review* 48: 5–23.
- Allouche S (2017) Dis-intersecting intersectionality in the time of queer Syrian-refugee-ness in Lebanon. *Kohl* 3(1): 59–77. Available at: <https://kohljournal.press/dis-intersecting-intersectionality>.
- Alqaisiya W (2020) Palestine and the will to theorise decolonial queering. *Middle East Critique* 29(1): 87–113.
- Alqaisiya W (2018) Decolonial queering: the politics of being Queer in Palestine. *Journal of Palestine Studies*. 47(3): 29–44.
- Amar P (2013) *The Security Archipelago: Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Amnesty International (2019) *Lebanon: Authorities must Ensure Mashrou’ Leila Concert Goes Ahead*. Amnesty International. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/lebanon-authorities-must-ensure-mashrou-leila-concert-goes-ahead/?fbclid=IwAR2U-8b7SkdyrhWfHlibMFIK08q3d-wQqSKJMt8gWVpu9uh-xjJTJr0CnSU>
- Bhattacharyya G (2008) *Dangerous Brown Men: Exploiting Sex, Violence and Feminism in the War on Terror*. London: Zed Books.

- Bitar J (2017) Against assimilationist projects: towards queering our political imaginations. *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 3(1): 30–35. Available at: <https://kohljournal.press/against-assimilationist-projects>.
- Chehayeb K (2019) *Freedom of Repression: Lebanon's Christian Inquisitors Invoke 'Blasphemy' Laws to Punish Gay-fronted Band Mashrou' Leila*: The New Arab. Available at: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/7/27/lebanons-inquisitors-invoke-blasphemy-against-gay-fronted-band-mashrou-leila>
- El Khazen E (2017) Monster terrorist f(l)ag. *Salvage*. Available at: <https://salvage.zone/online-exclusive/monster-terrorist-flag/>
- Ghannam F (2013) *Live and Die like a Man: Gender Dynamics in Urban Egypt*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Goknur S (2015) Queer imaginaries. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 11(3): 331–336.
- Haritaworn J, Kuntsman A and Posocco S (2014) Introduction: 'queer necropolitics'. In: Haritaworn J, Kuntsman A and Posocco S (eds) *Queer Necropolitics* London: Routledge, pp. 1–27.
- Houri W (2019a) *There is a Rotten Stench Coming from Lebanon*. Open Democracy. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/there-rotten-stench-coming-lebanon/>
- Houri W (2019b) *Lebanon: New Waves of Hatred with Little Solidarity*. Open Democracy. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/lebanon-new-waves-hatred-little-solidarity/>
- Ismail S (2006) *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Miguel Kanai J (2014) Whither queer world cities? Homo-entrepreneurialism and beyond. *Geoforum* 56: 1–5.
- Kehl K (2020) Homonationalism revisited. *Lambda Nordica* 25(2): 17–38.
- Makarem G (2011) The story of HELEM. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7(3): 98–112.
- Makarem G (2009) We are not agents of the West: Ghassan Makarem replies to Joseph Massad. *Reset Dialogues*. Available at: <https://www.resetdoc.org/story/we-are-not-agents-of-the-west/>
- Massad J (2002) Re-orienting desire: the Gay International and the Arab World. *Public Culture* 14(2): 361–386.
- Lebanon's 2017 Pride Week (2017) Beirut pride: an analysis from the inside. Available at: <https://may17.org/beirut-pride-an-analysis-from-the-inside/>
- McClintock A (2009) Paranoid empire: specters from Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 13(1): 50–74.
- Merabet S (2014). *Queer Beirut*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Mikdashy M (2011a) Gay rights as human rights: pinkwashing homonation. *Jadaliyya*. Available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24855/Gay-Rights-as-Human-Rights-Pinkwashing-Homonationalism>
- Mikdashy M (2011b) Why secularism is not the answer; gays in the Lebanese Khutba. *Jadaliyya*. Available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/23848>
- Mikdashy M and Puar JK (2016) Queer theory and permanent war. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22(2): 215–222.
- Mikdashy M (2016a) Fear and loathing in Orlando. *Jadaliyya*. Available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/33347/Fear-and-Loathing-in-Orlando>
- Mikdashy M (2016b) What a Queer Urban future looks like: Beirut. *Jadaliyya*. Available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/33297/What-A-Queer-Urban-Future-Looks-Like-Beirut>

- Mikdashi M (2014) Moral panics, sex panics and the production of a Lebanese nation. *Jadaliyya*. Available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30261/Moral-Panics,-Sex-Panics-and-the-Production-of-A-Lebanese-Nation>
- Moussawi G (2020) *Disruptive Situations: Fractal Orientalism and Queer Strategies in Beirut*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Moussawi G (2018) Queer exceptionalism and exclusion: cosmopolitanism and inequalities in ‘gay-friendly’ Beirut. *The Sociological Review* 66(1): 174–190.
- Moussawi G (2015) (Un)critically queer organising: towards a more complex analysis of LGBTQ organising in Lebanon. *Sexualities* 18(5–6): 593–617.
- Moussawi G (2013) Queering Beirut, the ‘Paris of the Middle East’: fractal orientalism and essentialized masculinities in contemporary gay travelogues. *Gender, Place & Culture* 20(7): 858–875.
- Naber N and Zaatari Z (2014) Reframing the war on terror: feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) activism in the context of the 2006 Israeli Invasion of Lebanon. *Cultural Dynamics* 26(2): 91–111.
- Nagle J (2021) Disarticulation and chains of equivalence: agonism and non-sectarian movements in post-war Beirut. *Third World Quarterly* 1–18.
- Nagle J (2018) Crafting radical opposition or reproducing homonormativity? Consociationalism and LGBT rights activism in Lebanon. *Journal of Human Rights* 17(1): 75–88.
- Pratt N (2007) The queen boat case in Egypt: sexuality, national security and state sovereignty. *Review of International Studies* 33(1): 129–144.
- Puar J and Rai AS (2002) Monster, terrorist, fag: the war on terrorism and the production of docile patriots. *Social Text* 20(3): 117–148.
- Puar J (2007) *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Puar J (2017) Homonationalism as assemblage: viral travels, affective sexualities. In: Sircar O and Jain D (eds) *New Intimacies, Old Desires: Law, Culture and Queer Politics in Neoliberal Times*. New Delhi: Zubaan Academic, pp. 1–27.
- Puri J (2016) *Sexual States: Governance and the Struggle over the Anti-Sodomy Law in India*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Qiblawi T (2018) *Hay Rights Come to the Fore as Lebanon Prepares to Vote*. CNN. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/04/middleeast/lebanon-elections-lgbt-rights-intl/index.html>
- Rao R (2020) *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ritchie J (2010) How do you say ‘come out of the closet’ in Arabic? Queer activism and the politics of visibility in Israel-Palestine. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16(4): 557–576.
- Sayegh G (2019) *Moving Feminism Out of its Silo: Questions for Ghiwa Sayegh*. The Century Foundation. Available at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/moving-feminism-silo-questions-ghiwa-sayegh/?session=1&agreed=1>
- Sayegh G and Al Ali N (2019) Feminist and queer perspectives in West Asia: complicities and tensions. In Luther JD and Logh JU (eds) *Queer Asia: Decolonising and Reimagining Sexuality and Gender* London: Zed Books, pp. 243–265
- Schotten CH (2018) *Queer Terror: Life, Death and Desire in the Settler Colony*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schulman S (2012) *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Shakhsari S (2020) *The Politics of Rightful Killing: Civil Society, Gender, and Sexuality in Weblogistan*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Shakhsari S (2012) From homoerotics of exile to homopolitics of diaspora: cyberspace, the war on terror, and the hypervisible Iranian queer. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8(3): 14–40.
- Trad S (2019) *Friday Night Plans in Lebanon? Mashrou' Leila, of Course*. Stepfeed. Available at: <https://stepfeed.com/friday-night-plans-in-lebanon-mashrou-leila-of-course-5661>

Sophie Chamas completed her Ph.D. in Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford and is currently Senior Teaching Fellow at the Centre for Gender Studies, SOAS, University of London. Grounded disciplinary in anthropology, her work focuses on the study of social movements, counter-culture, and political theory and discourse rooted in, focused on or related to the Middle East. Broadly speaking, she is interested in thinking through the life, death and afterlife of the radical political imaginary in the Middle East and beyond. Sophie is also an essayist and writer of creative non-fiction. Her writing has appeared in *Kohl: A journal for body and gender research*, *The State*, *Raseef 22*, *Ma-shallah News*, *Jadaliyya* and *The Towner*, amongst other publications.