Pinkwashing
Palestine and the Middle Eastern uprisings

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Gays, like women, are becoming a readily deployable tool in service of geopolitical interests that are oppressive and anti-emancipatory. As people concerned with fighting all forms, and all networks of injustice, we must not allow that to happen. (Mikdashi and RM 2011)

Pinkwashing is ‘the attempt by a state or people to highlight its treatment of gays to show how progressive it is, in turn covering up human rights violations from which it wishes to detract attention’ (Ryan 2012). It has repeatedly been used by western powers, for example, as a way to construct themselves as ‘superior’ or ‘advanced’ because they support LGBTQ rights, and to construct the Other as ‘backwards’ because they supposedly do not support these rights. A person or institution is engaging in pinkwashing when their motives are not to help LGBTQs but rather to further a separate agenda.

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In the recent past, Israel has perhaps been the most avid ‘pinkwasher’ due to its repeated attempts to divert attention away from its brutal occupation of Palestine by constructing itself as the only ‘gay haven’ in an otherwise homophobic Middle East. Israel has launched a publicity campaign aimed at constructing Israel as a safe space for Middle Eastern homosexuals. This campaign, which has included widespread advertising, is aimed at showing that Israel is the only homophobia-free country in the Middle East. This is specifically in contrast to Palestine, which is automatically cast as a dangerous and violent place for LGBTQs.

Numerous Palestinian LGBTQ groups have reiterated that Israel is currently engaged in pinkwashing:

In the last years Israel has been leading an international campaign that tries to present Israel as the ‘only democracy’ and the ‘gay haven’ in the Middle East, while ironically portraying Palestinians, who suffer every single day from Israel’s state racism and terrorism, as barbaric and homophobic. (Palestinian Queers for BDS 2010)

Israel’s worsening image globally has led it to launch a pinkwashing campaign in which it portrays itself as the only homophobic-free democracy in the Middle East. Stand With Us, a self-declared Zionist organisation, was quoted as saying: ‘We decided to improve Israel’s image through the gay community in Israel’ (Puar 2010). As Puar pointed out, the reason behind this is that ‘within global gay and lesbian organising circuits, to be gay friendly is to be modern, cosmopolitan, developed, first-world, global north, and, most significantly, democratic’ (Puar 2010).

A useful way of describing pinkwashing is that it relies on the ‘ideological capital of tolerance’ – in other words, at a time when gay rights are on the agenda of western liberals, Israel has seen the usefulness of portraying itself as a gay-friendly country. The special emphasis on sexuality is what makes Israel’s campaign a case of pinkwashing; by diverting attention away

2 Eg see http://www.bluestarpr.com/military-gay-rights-israel.html
from its political role in occupying Palestine to its supposed role as a gay-friendly country, Israel is effectively attempting to re-brand itself. An alternative definition of pinkwashing is the following: ‘Pinkwashing is the attempt to justify Israel’s occupation of Palestine by portraying it as a progressive and democratic haven for LGBT individuals in direct contrast with the rest of the Middle East’ (Sager 2011). As Puar argued, Israel’s pinkwashing campaign also aims to create a certain image of itself: ‘Israeli pinkwashing is a potent method through which the terms of Israeli occupation of Palestine are reiterated – Israel is civilised, Palestinians are barbaric, homophobic, uncivilised, suicide-bombing fanatics’ (Puar 2010, emphasis added).

An important aspect of pinkwashing is the idea that the Palestinian cause is unworthy and illegitimate because Palestinians are homophobic. This carries two assumptions. One, that homophobia only exists in certain places among certain peoples, when in fact it is universal and exists even in Israel. Two, that the Palestinian cause should be discredited because Palestinians are homophobic, as though only ‘ideal’ or ‘perfect’ peoples deserve to be free and govern themselves.

This campaign is problematic on several levels. First, Israel is not free of homophobia and portraying itself that way is simplistic and misleading. Second, Palestine, as well as other Middle Eastern countries, has a vibrant LGBTQ scene which includes organisations, events, campaigns and media promotions. Third, it appears that Israel is attempting to divert attention away from the occupation of Palestine and the various crimes it repeatedly commits, thereby re-branding itself as a gay-friendly country and thus endearing itself to western democracies and human rights organisations. Finally, Israel is using and reproducing old orientalist assumptions many in the west have about the Middle East, particularly with regards to homosexuality.

Since the wave of uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, there have been repeated instances of pinkwashing emerging from the western mainstream media. In an excellent article, Maya Mikdashi and RM argue:
The ‘gay issue’ is becoming an increasingly hot topic in Western media coverage of the Arab world. In fact, beginning with the spate of gay killings in US occupied Iraq, the status of non-normative sexualities has perhaps been enfolded within a discourse that highlights the plight of ‘women’ in Arab/Muslim countries, and the ideological, material, and military mobilization that such a discourse licenses … A critical reader might ask what lies behind this interest in gays? Where did it come from and what kinds of discourses and practices is it contributing to? What assumptions does this conversation make as to international practices of sexuality and politics, and what silences about other forms of oppression is this anxiety over the status of gay Arabs in Arab democracies implicated in? (2011)

This is not to say that homophobia does not exist in the Middle East. It does. It exists in every country in the world. However, the question here is: are these groups/governments legitimately and honestly concerned about LGBTQs in the Middle East, or are they simply using them and their struggles for their own ends, whether it is to show how much more advanced they are or to deflect attention away from their own homophobia/political problems? Does the Israeli government, for example, honestly want to help Palestinian LGBTQs, or is it simply using them to make a point about Israeli society being more advanced, and to whitewash its occupation? Indeed, if the Israeli government wanted to help Palestinian LGBTQs, surely ending the occupation would be the first step.

Palestinian Queers for BDS write on their website:

As an integral part of Palestinian society we believe that the struggle for sexual and gender diversity is interconnected with the Palestinian struggle for freedom.

As Palestinian queers, our struggle is not only against social injustice and our rights as a queer minority in Palestinian society, but rather, our main struggle is one against Israel’s colonization, occupation and apartheid; a system that has oppressed us for the past 63 years. Violations of human rights and international law, suppression of basic
rights and civil liberty, and discrimination are deeply rooted in Israel’s policies toward Palestinians, straight and gay alike.³

PQBDS show that the struggle for sexual rights cannot be separated from other political struggles, such as the one against Israeli occupation. They are interlinked, and should be fought together.

This focus on LGBTQ Middle Easterners is not new. It fits in with an orientalist world view in which Middle Eastern countries are seen as especially oppressive when it comes to minorities. Historically, these minorities have usually been religious minorities and women. More recently, however, there has been increased focus on LGBTQs as the most persecuted group in the Middle East. Again, this is not to say that LGBTQs do not face persecution in Middle Eastern countries: they do. My point is to ask why the west engages in pinkwashing, and why it repeatedly attempts to construct homophobia, sexism and persecution of minorities in general as constantly happening in the Middle East, and never at home.

Similarly, focusing on LGBTQs in the Middle East fits into the framing of sexuality in Other societies that orientalists usually engage in. Rather than focus on how specific histories of colonialism, imperialism and western domination have led to certain types of homophobia in the modern Middle East, the focus is instead on how Islam, Arab culture or other inherent traits are the reasons behind the homophobia in the Middle East.

In his monumental book, Desiring Arabs, Joseph Massad created an intellectual history of how western scholars have tried to impose western categories of sexuality, namely the strict binary between heterosexual–homosexual, onto other cultures, and how this has led directly to specific forms of homophobia found in places such as the Middle East today:

The categories gay and lesbian are not universal at all and can only be universalized by the epistemic, ethical, and political violence unleashed on the rest of the world by

³ http://www.pqbds.com/about/
the very international human rights advocates whose aim is to defend the very people their intervention is creating. (2007: 49–50)

Moreover, Massad pointed out that it is necessary to look back to western history in order to understand how the categories of gay/lesbian were created for specific political and economic purposes:

We can say that homosexuals did not exist in Europe before the medical and juridical discourses of the second half of the nineteenth century invented them as subjects of medical and juridical intervention, and before capital created relations of production that made possible the development of new residential and migratory activities, and new kinship configurations within and without the biological family that led to the development of forms of sexual intimacy that would be linked to identity and community. (Massad 2009)

What Massad was essentially arguing is that while same-sex relationships and relations have existed in the Middle East as far back as can be accounted for, they were not understood or practised in the forms that the West adopted in the late eighteenth century, namely as strictly tied to identity or as strictly tied to the binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality. People in the Middle East did not identify themselves according to their sexual acts (and neither did people in the West, before the identity of homosexual, and later heterosexual, was created by the medical profession). This is not to say that people in the Middle East today should not identify as gay or lesbian or queer, as many do. It is to show the importance of going back in history in order to understand contemporary sexualities and sexual relations in the Middle East and to show how these evolved over time.

To return to the point of pinkwashing and the Arab uprisings, it is clear how LGBTQs are once again being used to prove a point about Middle Eastern culture. In her article on how the MENA uprisings have been framed, Maya Mikdashi made the excellent point that the focus is almost always on issues of gender or sexuality: The legitimacy of a popular uprising
and/or revolutionary struggle can be gauged by how it treats “their women” and “their gays” (2012).

The act of pinkwashing in this instance, therefore, is to delegitimise the MENA uprisings because of their supposed lack of attention to LGBTQ and women’s rights. Rather than acknowledge the immense people power, creativity, bravery and peacefulness of the millions of protesters who took to the streets in Tunis, Cairo, Damascus and Sanaa, the western mainstream media has chosen to divert attention to the ever-present orientalist obsession: how minorities in the Middle East are (mis)treated.

As a queer Egyptian who has been living in the Netherlands for the past two years, it has become clear to me how essential pinkwashing is in the construction of the binary between the civilised ‘West’ and the uncivilised ‘East’. It is difficult to get into a discussion with a Dutch person, for example, about Muslims without questions about Islam and women, Islam and homosexuality, and Islam and freedom dominating the conversation. Homosexuality is often used against Muslim ‘immigrants’ (if you are not white you are forever an immigrant), rather than focusing on what Dutch society and government could be doing to help ‘integration’ (which often means assimilation).

In conclusion, it is crucial to note that LGBTQs in the Middle East cannot be separated from the societies they are in, as Mikdashi pointed out:

Gay Arabs cannot be cut out of the fabric of their societies; they are Arab, they are Muslim, Christian, conservative and progressive, soldiers and civilians, communists and capitalists, sexist and feminist, classist and revolutionary, and both oppressors and the oppressed. Islamist discourses are not ossified and stuck in the 16th century, as most Western commentators assume. They are plural, responsive, dynamic, and they represent the point of view of a large and diverse public. (Mikdashi and RM 2011)

As a queer person from the Middle East, I do not appreciate being used by western orientalists in their constructions of themselves as superior and more civilised. I do not
appreciate being used as tool to delegitimise the tremendously important uprisings that are happening across the Middle East. I am both queer and Middle Eastern, and therefore I will continue to fight both homophobia at home and racism, imperialism and orientalism abroad.

References


Sites with more information:

http://www.pinkwatchingisrael.com/
http://www.pqbds.com/
http://www.aswatgroup.org/
http://www.queersagainstisraeliapartheid.blogspot.com/