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Editorial

Put 'Minorities in the Middle East' into any search engine and a huge volume of articles are displayed insinuating that ethnic, tribal, family and sectarian affiliations are the only relevant factors needed to aid an understanding of the politics and societies of the Maghreb and Mashreq. Be it the often praised 'mosaic' of multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, or the explanation and anticipation of actual and potential conflicts in the Middle East, that are shaped by ethnic, tribal or confessional affiliations, the reading has a flavour of exoticism and orientalism since it focuses on affiliations that are not made through choice but governed by the unchangeable. It also conveys the impression that people in the MENA region are fundamentally different from Western societies, acting on the given and not on legitimate demands, needs, interests, and choices. Minorities are, in a colonialist way, considered as subject to protection by external forces, not as entities in their own right, defined through other characteristics of their identity than those assigned from outside. So for this issue of Perspectives, we decided to ask authors in a broader sense about minority-majority relationships that can, but do not necessarily have to, tackle ethnic or confessional subjects.

Activist Marcelle Shehwaro explains how Syria's repression of any form of civil society ensured that pre-revolution encounters only took place within your sect, a sectarian approach disguised as harmonic coexistence yet in fact leading to distrust and violence among citizens.

Lucia Marzova focuses on the Dom people, whose way of life, moving from one place to another, is affected by borders rendering them a minority of minorities in danger of losing their traditions because of a lack of recognition. Elza Sefarian, in her article on the disappearance of Lebanon's 'Little Armenia', shows how the garbage crisis is affecting each and every citizen posing not only a threat to health but to the traditions of the Armenian minority in Beirut in particular. The Moroccan expert Dr Ayad Ablal discusses the challenges to religious pluralism in Morocco, be it for converts or agnostics and atheists. Tunis office's Wafa Ben Haj Omar and Professor Wahid Ferchichi take a closer look at the Tunisian constitution and the granting of individual liberties which when not backed up by political action more often moves in quite another direction. Dr Ali Qleibo from Ramallah gives a comprehensive overview of Sufism in Jerusalem, providing an interpretation stressing the fact that Sufism is a community of practice based on choice.

The Syrian theatre director Abdullah AlKafari explains how artists, perceived as a threat to the authorities, are further marginalised and their work made more precarious than previously, in the wake of an authoritarian backlash.

Individual choices that go strongly against the social norm feature in Joey Ayoub's article on cycling in crazy traffic in Lebanon, where the lack of a government commitment to the creation of cycle lanes, means citizens take their life in their hands each time they jump on their bikes. Fedwa Bouzit from Morocco speaks about her choice first, to be a vegetarian, and now, a vegan, lifestyles that are difficult to explain in a society where, first through colonialism and later with the advent of fast-food culture, meat became a standard in everyday life.

And what if your identity does not fit with those that endeavour to impose their understanding of moral behaviour? Lebanese LGBTIQ*-activist George Azzi explains that it is not only, or even predominantly, laws that curb LGBTIQ* communities' space and contest their legitimacy but societies themselves. Tunisia's constitution grants inclusive rights to the physically and mentally challenged, however, as pioneering activist Manal Bergaoui explains, there is still much to achieve when it comes to its implementation; as revealed by her in-depth look into the realities of life for the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities.

Finally, the satirical magazine al-Hudood from Jordan caricatures the minority of optimists in the Middle East in a fictional interview accompanied by a visual caption.

We took the liberty of illustrating this issue with a regional adaptation of the German Süddeutsche Magazin's 'perceived truths' displayed in diagram form by Katharina Schmidt. In a way these transform 'common perceptions' into thought-provoking rather than scientific graphs.

We hope that the 'majority' of you will enjoy this 'minority' issue.

Dr Bente Scheller, Bauke Baumann, Dr Heike Löschmann, Dr Bettina Marx

In the Box

Marcelle Shehwaro

An exchange which occurs whenever I encounter new people goes as follows, 'But you don't speak with an Aleppian accent,' to which I respond, 'My accent is Christian Aleppian.' This sums up what I like to term 'my life in the bubble' or 'the box', a state where sectarian identity takes on specific traits, as particular as the way in which certain letters and words are pronounced. I come from a traditional, middle-class Christian Aleppian family, and for most of my life have lived in the 'Christian' neighbourhood of al-Aziziya, where the majority of residents belong to the same sectarian and economic class in Aleppo.

Throughout my childhood, and until I came of age, there was no diversity among my group of friends: not a single Muslim in a city whose Muslim population runs into the millions, no Kurds, no Armenian Christians. So I grew up in the box, with few opportunities to meet anyone outside its confines. This was Assad's Syria, in which the security services quashed ordinary human interaction: no volunteering, no civil society, no political parties. Any volunteering or social work took place within the confines of the church community; either formally, connected with the institution of the church itself, or informally, within the church community. We studied at a school affiliated with the church; after school we volunteered for the church; we celebrated public holidays and festivals at events overseen by scoutmasters who were members of the church. And so on. We grew up with these friends and in these circles and we shared the same stories, the same obsessions, the same fears of, and for, others.

Prior to the revolution, my city experienced two major political events: the slaughter and repression of the Eighties and the Kurdish intifada of 2004. Or at least, that's how I, as an apolitical adolescent and early twenty-something, remembered them. While Hafez al-Assad was committing massacres in Aleppo which led to the deaths of hundreds and the disappearance of thousands, I was being raised to believe that 'terrorists' were trying to overthrow the government, forcing Hafez to crush them. In response to the forced disappearances and massacres, the residents of the city stopped trusting one another so it wasn't until the revolution of 2011 that I met anyone who dared tell me that his uncle was in prison, or that his father was a martyr.

All I knew about the intifada of March 12, 2004, mounted by Kurds denied of their most basic political rights in Syria, was that, 'a group of angry young men' had provoked the security forces, burned tires, and blocked roads, forcing the state to meet them with violence. In this land of closed boxes, where walls had ears and even the most ardent regime loyalists lived in fear of the security branches inviting them 'to have a cup of coffee', there was only one narrative: that of the authorities. This narrative was one to which the totality of Syrian society, locked away in its boxes, was exposed, and frequently believed; indeed to question the authorities' version of any public incident was dangerous and could lead to imprisonment.

Christians also had their own narratives, myths and rumours about the way 'others' lived, just as these 'others' had their own about the Christians. In the circles in which I grew up these narratives frequently gave rise to feelings of superiority over, or an irrational fear of, 'the Other'.

But to return to the root of the problem: political and civic life was non-existent in Assadist Syria. How then could you hear, or read the news, of its victims? How were you supposed to encounter anyone of a different sect, with whom you might have thousands of things in common? What was the root of the differences in your two accounts of the 'one nation' in which you lived together? How, to find commonalities when art, culture, sports, science, civil society, and politics, even religion, were outlawed by the intelligence services?

It was in the shadow of these boxes, all carefully arranged and kept apart by the security forces, informers' reports, and media propaganda that the Syrian revolution of 2011 began. And, just as before, these different communities had their own accounts of the events, causes and aims of this revolution: some sectarian, some nationalist, and some regional. If opportunities for those interactions and encounters had been risky prior to the revolution they became suicidally dangerous afterwards. Nevertheless, even in its early years, the revolution managed to restore meaning to the term 'patriot' for an entire generation, and during the years of the non-violence movement (2011 to 2013) we were able to penetrate the barriers in between our boxes of class, region, and sect. Although certain groups within each class and sect did not participate in the non-violence movement, it nevertheless provided an opportunity for those who wanted to, to meet with 'the Other' within the space of their shared Syrian identity, an opportunity hitherto unavailable.

Then came the savage violence perpetrated by the security forces, and the geographical fragmentation of the country, irretrievably entrenching divisions between Syrian communities. Abetted by extremist Islamist organisations and through the deployment of its military, intelligence, and media agencies the regime promoted sectarianism. Narrow sectarian affiliations became the sole means by which individual citizens could protect themselves from one another and from the state violence. Yet, despite sectarian paranoia about 'the Other' and the widespread dissemination of insightful sectarian discourse on social media, Syrians who resolutely believed in citizenship, continued to take an almost directly contrary position on the sectarian question in Syria.

Take me, for instance. I still don't know how to respond when someone describes me as, 'a Christian woman who supports the revolution'. The mention of my sectarian affiliation embarrasses me, as though there were some conflict between the religious and the Syrian. The clearest example of this came at the beginning of the revolution, with the popularity of slogans such as 'I'm Syrian, not Sunni' and 'I'm Syrian, not Christian' and so on, as though it were impossible to inhabit these two identities simultaneously. Aside from that sense of embarrassment and the conflict between the religious and the patriotic, the sectarian conversation in Syria is flawed by a kind of dreamy romanticism, which disingenuously ignores what is said behind closed doors adopting the historical narrative of 'living together in harmony'. Spoken of in this manner, sectarian identities resemble more closely what these people would like Syria to be than what it really is. At the same time, and especially since the rise of the Islamists, a minority of extremists on all sides have adopted a violent discourse that regards 'the Other' as little more than an enemy it seeks to exterminate.

What is certain is, that after years of war, engaging with sectarian identities has become considerably more difficult and complex. Are we able to write about the political stance of a given sect or class without crossing the line and inciting violence? Is the struggle of these different groups, to safeguard their existence and their rights as a community, at odds with the struggle for the sake of the nation

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as a whole? Does recognising the reality of identitarian persecution lay the foundations for mass oppression? All we can say, is that after years of war, each and every one of us is afraid of being categorised as 'Other'. For example, as an Arab woman, I am obliged to clearly state my opposition to Turkish intervention in Afrin. This is for no reason other than my Arab roots make me 'Other' to my Kurdish friends and I have to defend myself. A Christian girl who supports the revolution? A secular Sunni? Like it or not, membership of any group means taking on the political views of the majority.

While Syrians are wary about discussing their sectarian identities, they are at the forefront of non-Syrian analysis of the conflict. Syrian demands are rarely viewed as political demands for a democratic state. Syrian politics are reduced to the minority rule of a 'Sunni' majority, and all attempts to achieve peace are reduced to the superficial belief that we must arrange a meeting between an Arab Sunni, a Christian, and a Druze, and endeavour to 'reach a compromise' between their competing views. It goes without saying that the majority of them are unable to freely voice a point of view in a state where citizens spy on each other and write reports to the security services.

'Protecting minorities' is an attractive proposition, but like most international responses it is superficial and fails to engage Syrians as essential partners in finding solutions to their own problems. Of course, this vision is problematic on many levels, it contains a considerable amount of Islamophobia, Orientalism, and generalisation, and insufficient time listening to what Syrians want, in particular the victims of human rights violations. The protection of civilians is removed from the agenda and replaced with the deeply insincere and superficial issue of 'minorities'.

Is it still possible to talk about a diverse Syria today, in light of the collapse of the patriotic, and the rise of regional, tribal and sectarian concerns? The answer to this question has to depend on the extent to which political change in Syria is a serious proposition. There is no hope of a diverse Syria beneath barrel bombs and torture, chemical weapons and forced displacement. No hope for a diverse Syria in which Bashar al-Assad's strategy can be summed up as lorries transporting residents from their homes for others to take their place. The violence must cease, alongside a committed attempt to initiate a process of transitional justice which can guarantee, first and foremost, that all communities come together to listen to the stories of their victims. The violence must cease, and the process of political transition begin, guaranteeing personal and political freedoms, access to the truth, and the freedom of expression, as part of a quest to construct an inclusive Syrian identity.

Democracy and provision of free spaces for mutual participation and engagement, are the only ways in which communities will be able to come together and work. In Assadist Syria there is no citizenship, no freedoms, no justice, only the tenuous illusion of security built on the back of tanks and aerial bombardment, which will one day, no matter how long the lie of stability prevails, blow up in everyone's faces. In Assadist Syria, the authorities will continue to entrench communities within their boxes, in order to one day set them against one another, transforming any movement based on political demands into a sectarian conflict. Democratic change in Syria is the only feasible path to protection and safety available for Syrians, minorities or not.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger.

Borders and Nations Rendering People Absolete: the Struggle for Identity and Recognition of Dom People in Lebanon.

Lucia Mrazova

The creation of nation states with defined borders, modernization, as well as political and climatic change, have led numerous peripatetic groups, including the Dom people, to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and prompted numerous challenges to their livelihoods and identity.

The Dom are everywhere in Lebanon. If you have been approached by a young girl or boy selling flowers or chicklets on the street, or a woman in colourful garments offering to predict your future, it's possible they are Dom. The common name for the Dom in Lebanon is '*Nawar*', 'Gypsy' or '*Ghajar*'- words with derogatory and condescending overtones that render its people 'uncivilised' or 'backward'. These words have been a major obstacle for the Dom and non-Dom. They prevent Lebanese society from acknowledging the Dom are people with a history, culture and traditions that should be upheld and treated with respect.

The sole study of the Dom carried out by Terre des Hommes (TDH) in 2011 estimated their number to be 3,000 in Beirut and Southern Lebanon.[1] Nevertheless, marginalisation has prompted shame which has led many Dom to hide their identity, making it difficult to find accurate figures of their exact number. What's more, experts predict that the Domari language could become extinct in the following 60 years, since the youth prefer Arabic.[2] This creates a pressing need to implement measures to retain the community's collective wisdom. My aim in this article is to encourage others to deepen their understanding of the Dom, because, put simply, each culture holds valuable knowledge that should be retained and its people celebrated, rather than marginalised for their differences.

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Origins

Few Dom can recount the history of their people. It has been passed from generation to generation through folktales and myths with no written record. Experts believe that their origins can be traced back to the *Domba*, an Indian caste whose members were merchant nomads who specialised in entertainment and the production of goods. Between the 4th and 6th centuries some *Domba* communities started migrating north from central India, before venturing West.[3] In the past, porous borders enabled the Dom to travel back and forth between Lebanon and neighbouring countries seasonally. However, the introduction of the French Mandate for Lebanon and Syria in 1923 marked the beginning of an end to their traditional nomadic lifestyle, capturing them in a legal limbo between statelessness and citizenship.

Since national identity and citizenship became the key institutions in determining access to resources, patterns of solidarity and active civil participation, the Dom have been subject to those who ruled the country they resided in. Their integration into Lebanese society has been overshadowed by their 'deviant' status and a lack of knowledge of, or willingness to understand their culture. It is therefore necessary to assess the interplay between their struggle for recognition and the changes in their sense of identity created by the acquisition of Lebanese citizenship and the struggles that came with it.

What Does it Mean To Be Dom?

The question of what it means to be Dom doesn't have a clear answer and varies from generation to generation. There does not even seem to be a consensus among those who self-identify as Dom, as to what being Dom actually means.[4]

Three Dom women spoke to me about their views on their identity and how their background, as well as their age, influenced their attitude towards 'being Dom'.

One Dom woman told me, '*I am proud that I am Dom, this is how I was born and it was not my choice.*' She went on to explain, '*a lot of people don't like to identify as Dom because people have a very negative perception of them.*' The separation from their homeland and disruption of their traditions often means younger generations take more interest in the language of their adopted country, and therefore also that identity.[5]

Another young Lebanese woman claimed being Dom does not mean anything to her, since she does not speak the language, and identifies as Lebanese.[6]

In fact, only one quarter of Dom children in Lebanon speak Domari,[7] with many families no longer teaching it to their children in order to avoid discrimination.[8] UNESCO has catalogued the language as 'severely endangered', particularly in Lebanon and Palestine.[9]

According to Bruno Herin, an expert in Middle Eastern minority languages, '*language is an essential component of ethnicity and identity, and the loss of an ancestral language is often felt as losing a part of oneself.*'[10]

Nomadism has also been lost with time in the Domari culture. Even though we still hear of some 'modern day nomadic Gypsies' who travel the old trade routes with no regard for national borders,[11] this only accounts for about 13% of Dom people[12] while the rest live sedentary lives.

Another Dom woman explained that Dom communities travelled because they did not like to socialize with other people due to the negative perception many people have of them. '*They never stayed in one place too long*', she recalled, as she recounted moving four times during her childhood as her family lived out a semi-nomadic lifestyle; moving every summer to work in Lebanon, yet maintaining a permanent home in Syria.[13]

For a long time, nomadism enabled the Dom to stay isolated and hence retain their culture, language and traditions. However, that lifestyle was largely halted by modernisation and forced settlement. This has made the peripatetic way of life redundant, forcing many into a life of poverty and social derision.[14]

The French Mandate

Historically, Lebanon and Syria were traversed by the migratory paths of numerous nomadic tribes, such as the Dom, who seasonally travelled the region and temporarily settled in the Bekaa Valley to feed their livestock.[15] After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the introduction of the French Mandate in Lebanon and Syria, all minorities – chiefly Armenians, Bedouins, Kurds, Syriacs and Dom - who could prove to have resided in Lebanon prior to 1924 were given Lebanese nationality. Many did not participate in the 1921 and 1932 national censuses because they were seasonally out of Lebanon or because of their distrust of the French colonial presence and fear of military conscription.

Dawn Chatty, a Professor of Anthropology and Forced Migration at Oxford University

states that as a result of this exclusion 'they effectively became stateless'.[16] In the past their people were stateless but free to move where they pleased, today they are still stateless but cannot even move within the country in which they settled.[17] Not having citizenship became a major obstacle to buying land, gaining access to healthcare, education or social services. This exclusion planted the seeds of an ongoing marginalization of the Dom people.

Status

There are two types of stateless citizens in Lebanon: those who are documented and those who are undocumented. The former are mostly registered as *Quayd ad-Dars* (under study) while the unregistered are commonly referred to as *Maktoumeen al-Qayd* (without records).

Quayd ad-Dars was the status given to stateless Dom in 1958 (those who were not registered in the 1932 census). According to the TDH report, 6% of Dom fall under this status.[18] This status is referred to as 'less than full' citizenship as it enables those so catagorised access to the basic rights of free movement, education and work; yet still imposes major restrictions on their access to basic government services such as social security and healthcare.[19] (*Quayd ad-Dars* often remain undocumented, because yearly residence permits are expensive).

As one of my Dom interviewees explained, '*IDs are expensive and people don't have the resources to pay for them. That is why they don't pass it on*.'[20] In many cases, it is also difficult for them to find evidence to prove their right to Lebanese nationality as they don't have the relevant documents - many fail to register their marriages or the birth of their children and are thus denied basic social rights.

Invisible Citizens

In 1994, the Lebanese government issued the Naturalisation Decree 5247 which granted Lebanese nationality to more than 170,000 people.[21] It applied to all those who were either 'unregistered at birth' or stateless persons whose national status had been 'under study'. Over 72% of the Dom gained full citizenship through this act.[22] In theory, it facilitated Dom integration into Lebanese society by giving them full citizenship rights: job mobility, education, healthcare, state welfare, political participation and representation. As a Dom woman who was part of this mass-naturalisation, explained, '*It is important to have it* [ID], *if you don't have it, you won't be able to go to a hospital, you won't be able to travel*.'[23]

It cannot be denied that a lot of Dom people have benefited from acquiring citizenship, nevertheless the fact that 21% remain stateless, and 76% live below the lower poverty line demonstrates that the process still leaves a lot to be desired.[24] Although people have the right to use their citizenship status, many fail to do so. Lebanese policies often create a system of discrimination and denial of rights and many mixed Lebanese-Dom couples lack proper documentation. Under Lebanese law, nationality cannot be passed on matrilineally and as a result children of a Lebanese Dom mother married to a stateless person cannot access state medical care or public education. Moreover, many Dom women who were already married with large families in 1994 were registered as 'single'. Their children are now catagorised as *Maktoumeen al- Qayd* and do not have any rights. As one of my Dom interviewees explained, '*People are not always aware of the policies that affect them, for example having an ID, they don't know their rights because they are not educated or exposed*.'[25]

Politically, the Dom minority do not have representation in the Lebanese Parliament and continue to be 'un-recognized' ethnic group. They are treated as second-class citizens and even when in the lead up to elections political parties give away generous bribes to their potential voters, the Dom are offered considerably less than other supposedly 'equal' Lebanese citizens.[26] While they do have formal access to state resources and services, in practice they are treated differently because of their skin-tone, their clothing, the way they speak, their family names and history.

Tahaddi was founded in the 1990s to offer medical, social and educational assistance to socially vulnerable families and people facing discrimination. They now teach over 400 students, mostly Domaris, but also some Syrians and run a health centre, offering social services to vulnerable families. The centre has been instrumental in making the Dom aware of their history and becoming proud agents of their communities. The education director and co-founder of *Tahaddi*, Catherine Mourtada, spoke with me about stateless children. She explained how, '*Even though the registration of stateless children in public schools has become easier since the Syrian crisis, a lot of families fail to put their children in school due to the harsh discrimination* [they face].'[27]

When attempting to register their children for public schools they are very quickly spotted as 'Nawar' (*Gypsy*) and dismissed by comments such as, '*there is no place, we are full*'.[28] Mourtada added that there has been a substantial

change to the dynamics at the centre since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and since the centre opened its doors to Syrian refugees, with negative stereotypes against 'Nawar' being reinforced. Claims such as '*my child became like this because of the Nawar*',[29] have led the Dom to increasingly internalise the negative stereotypes given to them and as a result their attendance at the school has dropped off. In fact, 77% of Dom children in Lebanon aged four and older reported never attending school,[30] compared to 10.3% of the broader Lebanese population.[31]

It is evident that negative stereotypes against the Dom and unequal treatment by the authorities have led to a lack of participation in society and prevented them from the full practice of their rights. They remain voiceless, not able to break the cycle of self- perpetuating statelessness and inter-generational poverty. The lack of any self-perceived positive attributes to Dom identity means that many Dom have no pride in who they are.[32] The fact that the Dom have internalised the negative stereotypes constructed by the public due to their 'deviant' status within Lebanese society suggests that the development of a proud Dom identity and a strong sense of collective self-worth would be the key to their future.

Outcry

Since the Dom are predominantly Muslim, the citizenship decree caused a public outcry from Christians who feared that the law would further tip the sectarian balance in favour of the Muslims.

Guita Hourani, the Director of the Lebanese Emigration Research Centre, said that a high-level official of the Christian and Sunni supported 'Future Movement' confirmed to her that the 1994 naturalisation Decree was entirely a 'political naturalisation undertaking', rather than a human rights project.[33] The act also awakened many underlying prejudices against the Dom minority.

A few years after the law was passed, Karam a resident of Zahle (the capital city of the Bekaa Governorate in Lebanon) raised his concerns in an interview with the Daily Star, fearing that the naturalisation act would encourage, '*more Muslim "gypsies" to move into the neighborhood*.' He claimed, '*These people cause trouble wherever they go and they're thieves. We want the government to do something about it, but they've just granted half of them nationality*.'[34]

In 2003 the Lebanese Maronite League submitted an appeal against the naturalisation decree, calling for its re-examination and an investigation potentially leading to the de-naturalising of individuals who had been naturalised in 1994.[35] Later on, in 2011 President Michel Suleiman signed the decrees 6690 and 6691 which withdrew Lebanese citizenship from 176 people. There is no proven evidence that this act directly affected any Dom people, nevertheless they face significant uncertainty due to the fear of de-naturalisation and their inability to gain official status.

Future Perspectives

Interventions need to be implemented by stakeholders on a governmental, civil society and personal level in order to integrate the Dom into Lebanese society - through dialogue and solidarity. An extensive study should to be carried out to identify their needs and educate public opinion about the Dom.

Since there is no written record of their history, the only way to trace their history is through their spoken language. The

'Endangered Languages Documentation Programme' at SOAS University in London is recording on audio and video the traditional Domari stories and myths in order to preserve their culture. Mandana Seyfeddinipur, the director of the department states that '*this medium gives people a voice and makes them visible.*'[36]

Education is a driving factor for class mobility and change and is one of the main instruments for breaking the vicious cycle of inter-generational poverty in the Dom community. The association *Tahaddi* is working toward positive change in this regard and government officials would do well to partner with such organizations to assist the Dom communities.

Governments should generate policy, particularly for naturalised and stateless people, that would create opportunities for the most vulnerable members of society to improve their status. They can do this by increasing access to economic opportunities and facilitating advancements that would traverse geographic and ethnic boundaries.[37]

Specifically, the Lebanese government could act to engender change for the Dom and other minority groups by signing up to the UN 'Convention for the Reduction of Statelessness'. For the Lebanese government, explicitly spelling out the principles regulating the right to nationality and the rights of stateless people, would bring the Lebanese Constitution up to speed with international human rights standards.[38]

The key challenge will be the integration of the Dom into Lebanese society. This would be the first step towards creating an understanding of the Dom's origins and culture, thus giving the Dom a platform for constructing and determining their own identity, exempt from the negative stereotypes constructed by majority communities.

Likewise, certain social attitudes must be altered within the community.

As a Dom woman explained to me, '*Change* [also] *needs to come from the Dom community. You can bring about change yourself, you should not wait for the outside world to change things for you. Change begins with the Dom.*'[39] We can interpret this as meaning - less isolation and more social networks are needed within the community.

She added that '*the one who hides their own identity has no identity.*'[40]

Essentially, the Dom will have to be their own advocates in order to move forward and keep their traditions from falling in to obsolescence.

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Cultural Heritage Under Threat: How Burj Hammoud's Landfill Threatens Lebanon's 'Little Armenia'

Elza Seferian

Preamble

If Mr Hammoud were alive today, he would be dismayed by the environmental crime happening in his neighbourhood which has rendered its coast an open-air dumpsite set to reach 600,000 meters square by 2020.[1] The Burj Hammoud landfill, now much bigger and expanding rapidly eastwards, has not only degraded the environment but has had a devastating impact on the city's Armenian cultural heritage.

In 2015, protests erupted in Beirut, over the trash crisis, and the city re-opened the uncontrolled dumpsite in Burj Hammoud. Certain traditions and customs that Armenians of Burj Hammoud have worked so hard to preserve for centuries are now under threat from this protracted and worsening garbage crisis.

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'The Toxicity of our City'

Little is spoken about the toxicity of the Burj Hammoud landfill and the irrevocable damage it causes to the cultural heritage of its first inhabitants, Armenians. The city of Burj Hammoud is Beirut's Armenian district, which sadly hosts a massive landfill estimated by environmentalists to release 120,000 tons of leachates annually into the Mediterranean Sea.[2] While various sources present inconsistent statistics on how much waste the landfill accepts daily, the city's landfill is part and parcel of Lebanon's waste management debacle, side-lined since the early 1990's. After reinstating the city's landfill in 2016, the environmental condition of the city deteriorated tremendously threatening, 'everything Armenian about the city'.

Now, a constant stench hovers over the city, although this wasn't always the case, at least for those Armenians who first arrived in Burj Hammoud in 1924 and later transformed the area into a commercial and cultural metropolis. Ethnic Armenians fled genocide and persecution from the Ottoman Empire and the city became a safe haven for Armenian refugees and later for other persecuted people such as Palestinians, Kurds, Assyrians and, since 2011, for many Syrians. Interestingly, out of the 10,000 Syrian refugees who moved to Burj Hammoud,[3] 4,000 Syrian-Armenians live in the district.[4]

The Armenian district is not only the most densely-populated area in the Middle East, but also the most 'Armenian' in terms of population in the region, especially following the departure of thousands from Aleppo in 2016; previously known as the city with the largest ethnic Armenian population in the Levant. Burj Hammoud is also home to working class Lebanese and a sizeable number of migrant workers giving the city a distinctive and heterogeneous facade compared to Beirut's other more polarised districts.

In this conglomerate of identities, *Hayabahbanum* which stands for 'Preservation of Armenian Identity' became crucial for a minority who wanted to stay. So the safeguarding of the Armenian language, the establishment of Armenian neighbourhoods, schools and the preservation of Armenian customs, traditions and cuisine became a 'duty' for Armenians in Lebanon, and particularly for those living in Burj Hammoud. More importantly, preserving Armenian cultural heritage became a means for Armenians to retrace the footsteps of their forefathers thereby giving the city its Armenian character.

As a result of this strong sense of belonging, Burj Hammoud evolved over the years to what it is today: a cultural cradle for Lebanese-Armenians, their home and a place where they can make a living. However, with Burj Hammoud's garbage burden, it would be naïve to expect a positive outcome from a waste management project that has not been properly evaluated[5]. Locals and visitors alike avoid the area. The polluted environment preventing many from considering the district an option for their education, commerce, food consumption and even from just taking a walk through the streets.

Women I spoke to on the streets in Burj Hammoud are sending their children to other schools. LK, a mother of two kids and a resident of Burj Hammoud said, 'Sending them to a non-Armenian school was a tough decision but it's a chance for my kids to get away from all the pollution.' Another woman, Hasmig Krikorian, who was carrying a keychain of the Armenian tricolor flag told me, 'Such a pity what the environment has become in this city. We're forcing our kids and ourselves to avoid it, a place where I personally have so many good memories!'

Right at the forefront of endangered cultural heritage are Armenian schools, the primary promoters of the Western Armenian dialect in Lebanon as well as Burj Hammoud's Armenian food culture.

Armenian Schools Under Threat and the Endangerment of the Western Armenian Language

It is impossible to avoid hearing Armenian while walking in the streets of Burj Hammoud. Armenians of Burj Hammoud and elsewhere in Lebanon speak a unique dialect different to the one spoken in Armenia, called 'Western Armenian.' Alarmingly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) classifies it as a definitively 'endangered' language spoken only by 250,000 people around the world, mainly scattered in the Middle East and other diasporic communities.[6] Over the years, Armenian-speakers in Lebanon have declined due to the influences of other languages such as Arabic, English and French used in Lebanese society. While in most cases, Lebanese-Armenians start acquiring this endangered language through their families, they can only become fluent through attending Armenian schools. In this regard, Armenian schools in Lebanon have played a big role in revitalising the Western Armenian dialect and in passing it on to different generations. There are Armenian schools throughout Lebanon and Burj Hammoud has the highest number; with six Armenian schools currently located in its vicinity.

Due to the city's poor environmental quality and the proximity of Armenian schools to the landfill, the schools in Burj Hammoud have become unappealing to Lebanese-Armenian parents. But getting hold of the numbers between 2016 and now is difficult, as government officials' environmental assessments are still pending. In fact, Armenian schools are only a *10 minutes-drive* from one of the country's biggest landfill (see map). Characterised as a working-class district, the city is known to have more affordable schools compared to those located in the suburbs, which are more expensive and difficult for low-income families to afford.[7] However, because of the polluted environment in Burj Hammoud, parents end up sending their children to affordable schools, sometimes public ones,

where the Armenian language is not taught. As a result, newer generations of Lebanese-Armenians are hindered from learning to speak the Western Armenian language with proficiency, and many can barely speak it.

LK also stated, 'We live in Burj Hammoud and my kids go to a non-Armenian school which is outside of the city. At least, they can get exposed to some clean air', she added, 'My kids speak Armenian but they cannot write or read it.'

Another mother, Hasmig Krikorian, who has three children and lives in a suburb outside of Beirut said, 'I always wanted my kids to go to the same school I went to in Burj Hammoud. It has a good reputation and strong education system but the area is so polluted and smelly that I can't risk sending them there these days, it's too close to the stink', she said. 'I send them to another one.'

Sadly, the general perception amongst parents is that their children would catch 'a disease' if they attend school in Burj Hammoud. Overall, Armenian schools in Burj Hammoud endure hard times as the number of schools is declining, and many are shutting down or merging. In 2011, Burj Hammoud had nine Armenian schools operating within its vicinity and many more previously. The number of Armenian-teaching schools stands at six now, with some institutions facing daunting obstacles to survive. Most blame the lack of funds and student enrolment, turning a blind eye to the environmental crisis, which in Burj Hammoud taints the image of a primary institution promoting Armenian cultural heritage and teaching the endangered Western Armenian dialect.

Armenian Culinary Habits and Food Community at Stake: 'No more Kebab on Sundays?'

But the harmful effect of Burj Hammoud's landfill goes beyond threatening the Armenian language. It reaches all the way to the city's most valued cultural foundation: Armenian food culture. This form of cultural heritage is manifested through Burj Hammoud's various restaurants, food markets and is most evident in Armenian households where cooking has preserved Western Armenian cuisine preventing it from disappearing over the centuries. Known as Lebanon's 'Little Armenia', Burj Hammoud is one of few districts in Greater Beirut that still offers an interesting street food experience, thanks to its spice and dried fruit markets, fresh produce bazars, street vendors and eateries that serve a traditional meat delicacy; Armenians take so much joy in making Kebab. While Burj Hammoud mirrors vibrant culinary cultures, its toxic landfill creates a damaging impact on the ability of many businesses and households to cook their most loved *soul* food.

Sadly, the air pollution and foul smell in Burj Hammoud have diminished food choices and taint the image of restaurants that promote Armenian food culture. Mr Leon, the owner of a thirty-year old kebab shop in Burj Hammoud, expressed his frustration with the pollution caused by the dumpsite, so close to his business. 'People think we're selling garbage here, when we have been grilling since 1989!', he exclaimed. 'My place used to be so busy, customers were like ants swarming, but ever since they re-opened the dumpsite, fewer and fewer people have been coming. I don't know how long I can survive.' Mr Leon's shop goes by the name 'Urfali' meaning 'hailing from "Urfa,"' a South-Eastern village in modern-day Turkey. Like most Armenians in the Levant, Western Armenian cuisine is strongly intertwined with the history and geography of ethnic Armenians who originally came from Eastern Anatolia. 'My parents journeyed from Urfa to Lebanon during the genocide,' Mr. Leon said, 'I remember being inspired by my father who had a passion for cooking. He never wanted me to become a chef though. But I eventually turned out to make the best kebab in town!' He boasted about his signature sandwich believing it to be the best in Burj Hammoud. When asking him about his customers he said, 'I totally understand their reasons It would be difficult to enjoy my food when the air stinks because of the garbage mountain over there!,' he pointed west towards the sea.

The dire environmental situation in Burj Hammoud prevents many residents from grilling food within the confines of their homes; a tradition dearly cherished and associated with Armenian culture. For Armenians, preparing Kebab is a 'sacred ritual' that involves family members coming together to cook lunch on Sundays. Though most cultures have their own version of 'kebab' (*khorovatz),* the Western Armenian is closest to the Greek, Turkish, and Kurdish versions, with a lot of flavours and spices.

This centuries old grilling practice, a famous Armenian pastime, is notorious for celebrating holiday events and birthdays. On 8 May after the victory of Nikol Pashinyan, the man behind Armenia's peaceful revolution, people were seen grilling meat in the streets across Armenia on their metallic square-shaped grillers, dancing and cheering their newly-elected prime minister. Serpouhi Jenanian, a 55-year-old who lives with her family in Burj Hammoud said, 'I can't remember the last time we had a barbeque on our balcony. There is always a disgusting smell coming from the landfill that doesn't allow us to enjoy anything!'

Indeed, inhabitants of Burj Hammoud have long complained about the foul stench coming from the landfill, even before the dumpsite was reinstated in 2016. As recently as May, fishermen of Burj Hammoud's port, which is Lebanon's second biggest port[8], protested that the unbearable ecological state their harbour was in was the result of reckless trash-dumping and a factor in them going out of business.[9] Jenanian also voiced how her routine visits to Burj Hammoud's food markets were less enjoyable, 'I go out only when I have to,' she said, 'The bad smell just gives me a headache.'

Recession vs Progress: Where is Burj Hammoud Going?

While talks of building incinerators in the outskirts of Burj Hammoud heat-up, it is important to take a step back and review what has become of the worrying environment in Burj Hammoud.

In 2016, the world, including Lebanon, renewed their pledge to ensure a successful implementation of the New Urban Agenda during the Habitat III vicennial conference, which pushed countries to focus further on Sustainable Development Goal no. 11: 'Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.'[10] Despite Lebanon being a signatory of this non-binding agreement, it is not clear whether or not the spirit of this pledge is being respected or even the spirit of any other binding convention such as the major environmental conventions of Basel and Barcelona of which Lebanon is a part.

In the case of Burj Hammoud, the cultural heritage of a minority group, Armenians, is under threat. Burj Hammoud's landfill makes the city far from sustainable; polluting not only its environment but its economy and society.

Nonetheless, as long as tons of waste continue to be buried on the city's coast, Burj Hammoud's problems will continue to increase. The city is in desperate need of sustainable reforms as there is no national waste management policy. Despite a $25,000,000 fund being awarded to the Burj Hammoud authorities, little is being done to improve the district's market environment, which could attract visitors and, in turn, benefit the economy.[11]

The endangerment of Armenian cultural heritage is an example of just one of the detrimental effects of Burj Hammoud's landfill but there are many more. A new mind-set is required to tackle the environmental, cultural, economic and social policy issues affecting Burj Hammoud and at the forefront of this agenda should be the interests, well-being and benefits for its inhabitants.

However, the Armenian residents of Burj Hammoud aren't seeing change come quickly enough so all they can do is hope the authorities will pay attention. As they battle the grave consequences of landfill, they continue to hope for change and wait for what may never come.

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Religious Pluralism in Morocco: Between the Spontaneous Change of Belief and the Creation of Religious Minorities

Dr Ayad Ablal

In discussing religious minorities in Arab and Islamic countries it is useful to consider the legal and sociological definitions of the concept of a religious minority, especially in light of the different constitutions and laws regulating public space in each country. At the sociological level, the existence of a religious, ethnic, or linguistic minority may not necessarily mean a legal recognition of their existence. Also, the existence of a minority is not separate from that group's awareness of being different from the majority, whether that be on religious, ethnic, or linguistic terms.

Ethnic specificities often characterize religious minorities in the Arab world. For example, the Christian minority in Morocco is the product of extensive missionary activities in areas with large Amazigh populations (Nador and Al Hoceima, in the high and middle Atlas, and the Souss Areas).[1] In this respect their production is not so different from the production of the Shi'ite minority through the process of Shi'itisation. Both minorities are founded on an intensification of differences between populations; based on the one hand, on the basic right of religious freedom, and on the other on complex processes of social and political failure. In contrast, the Baha'i minority, which has stood at about 350 followers since the 1970s, has not witnessed any increase in numbers or significant evolution in group formation, leaving them as a very small group at risk of disappearing altogether. Legal recognition is difficult to achieve in the absence of social recognition and in a conservative country such as Morocco the tolerance of religious pluralism is highly dependent on a number of determinants, which shall be explored below.

The Christian Minority in Morocco: Between Spontaneous Conversion and the Christianisation Strategy

Although the current data regarding Christian Moroccans indicates that there are approximately 8,000, mostly living in Rabat, Casablanca, Marrakech, Tangier, and Agadir; a US Department of State report on 'International Religious Freedom' 2014 noted that some clergy estimate the number of Christians living in Morocco was as high as 25,000 (including Christian foreigners living in the country).[2]

It is difficult to establish the number of Christian missionaries in Morocco, let alone ascertain the number of Moroccans who have converted to Christianity, as this topic is still considered taboo. Certain media outlets have reported that about 150,000 Moroccans have received courses in Christianity from the 'Arab World Ministries' (AWM) through email, yet these remain mere assumptions.[3]

According to a research paper by Mohamed Srouti, both Arab and Western reports indicate that there are around 800 missionaries and about 13 Churches in Morocco.[4] Other researchers claim that the number of European missionaries is closer to 900, with 500 of them are permanent residents in Morocco - along with 5 Protestant priests who are officially registered in the Evangelical Church. Some of these reports estimate that the number of Moroccans who have converted to Christianity from Islam is almost 7,000.[5]

According to US Department of State's report, local Christian leaders themselves say that the number of Christian Moroccans

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is approximately 8,000. However, they don't gather regularly out of fear of police interference, or what the report labels as social oppression.[6] Due to such factors and the secrecy surrounding unofficial religious belief the reports necessarily lack statistical accuracy.

Although the Moroccan Constitution, adopted in 2011, guarantees in its 'Article 3', 'free practice of religion for everyone,' the Law prohibits conversion to religions other than Islam. Moreover, 'Article 220' of the Code of Criminal Procedure punishes any activity that, 'undermines the faith of a Muslim,' and stipulates that 'whoever uses violence or threats to coerce a person or persons to practice or attend a certain religious practice, or prevent them from that, shall be punished…' The article, associated as it is to 'undermining the faith of a Muslim,' makes the change of religious belief *from* Islam synonyms with this crime. Hence, the majority of Moroccans who have converted to Christianity live in what has been described as a 'virtual world'.[7]

The State's fear of active missionary movements in Morocco has taken on a political dimension due to the increasing rise in the number of converts since mid 2010, as is confirmed by a WikiLeaks document.[8] US Department of State's reports, especially its annual 'International Religious Freedom' reports. During the last decade, Morocco has witnessed several missionary campaigns, which have been described as 'organised'.[9] These have been carried out in a discreet manner by numerous European associations and NGOs through the distribution of books, tapes, thousands of high-quality printed copies of the Bible and CDs about the life of Christ in French, Amazigh, and Darija (Moroccan dialects).

In this context, an important event was the deportation of a number of foreign missionaries in March 2010. These included 16 British and American Evangelicals; a Venezuelan couple; a Korean nun; and a French, a South African, and 7 Dutch priests. All of the above were accused of performing missionary work through an institution caring for orphaned and abandoned children in Ain Leuh, Ifrane. This case can be seen as a turning point in Morocco's relation to missionary activity, and the recognition of its role in the creation religious minorities.

Shi'itisation and the Issue of the Shiite Minority in Morocco

Shi'itisation has only come to light in the Moroccan public landscape in recent years. This growing awareness has been in no small part due to the US Department of State's annual International Religious Freedom reports, which along with other press articles reveal that the phenomenon has been largely hidden from view, due to the dissimulation strategy followed by the Shi'ites themselves.

The first widespread media and civil debate around the subject of Shi'itisation date back to 2009, after the release of the 2008 annual International Religious Freedom report. While this report only addressed the existence of 3,000 Shi'ites in the country, later reports mention 3,000 to 8,000 Shi'ites in Morocco. In contrast earlier reports in 2006 and 2007 only confirmed the government's admission of the existence of Shiites in Morocco, without attempting to determine their number.[10]

Despite claims of the existence of Moroccan Shi'ites from the time of the Muslim conquest, making Moroccan Shi'isim a historical phenomenon, sociological studies indicate that recent Shi'itisation in Morocco has been closely linked to the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979. This has been part of a broader process involving the exportation of Iranian Shi'isim into the Arab world in the context of the intensifying regional Sunni-Shi'a conflict.

While Shi'ite Moroccans may draw on historical arguments to justify their beliefs, since the death of King Hassan II of Morocco in 1999, Moroccan Shi'ism has been considered a dangerous indication of Iran's interference in Moroccan religious affairs and a threat to the Kingdom's security. Morocco and Iran have had a history of tension, disagreement and crises that began immediately after Khomeini's revolution overthrew the Shah of Iran 1979. Ever since, Iranian-Moroccan relations have experienced ups and downs, mixing political issues with religious and doctrinal matters.

Over the history of the two countries' strained relations since 1979 religious disagreement has become more intense, and the consequences of this have become more striking and visible, even reaching the level of accusations of *takfir* (apostasy). Since the Iranian Revolution, Morocco, like other North African countries, has not escaped the Iranian regime's strategy of spreading Shi'a Islam in the region. This has been especially notable in the Moroccan Diaspora.[11]

In West Africa the Iranian regime entrusted the Lebanese Shi'ite communities in Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, and Sierra Leone to support Shi'ites in the Maghreb. There are approximately 350,000 Lebanese in Western African countries most of them work in trade, invest in precious

minerals, and manage hotels and other tourist institutions. A large portion of their revenues, which are often dependent on Iranian capital investments, are then channelled to Shi'ites in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. This has been achieved through a range of methods including smuggling through the southern borders of these North African countries.[12] In this context there is a clear link between Shi'itisation as a change in individual religious belief (Sunni Islam to Shi'a Islam) and Iranian sponsored Shi'ite missionary work, thus removing the spontaneity of Shi'itisation and making it part of a broader political-religious strategy.

In 2009 a warning issued by Abdellah Boussouf, the General Secretary of the 'Council of the Moroccan Community Living Abroad'(CCME), stated that four Moroccan community mosques in Brussels were known to be following the Shi'ite doctrine. Representatives of the Moroccan community in Belgium speak of the growth Shi'ite associations and centres, centres which organise preaching activities every weekend and especially during Ramadan. Notable in this context is a famous Moroccan Imam, Imam El Ouerdassi from Tangier, who announced his conversion to Shi'a Islam in 2009, making him the first Moroccan Shi'ite Imam. He has since been followed by many members of his community. In Brussels alone there are currently numerous Shi'ite Moroccan Imams from a number of northern Moroccan cities.[13]

Arrests made by the security authorities in March 2009, were followed by the closure of an Iraqi educational institution (The Iraqi Complementary School, Rabat) and the prohibition and confiscation of magazines and books published by organisations with Shi'ite views. March 2009 also saw Morocco sever diplomatic relations with Iran, citing the Iranian regime's attempts to spread Shi'a Islam in the country as one of the key reasons.[14]

This all forms a clear indication that Shi'itisation in Morocco has reached what is for many an alarming level and is now a matter of official concern. The years following these events have seen an increasing media interest in Moroccan Shi'ites, especially as some attempt to gain legal recognition for their beliefs - beliefs which contradict Morocco's official *Maliki-Ashari* Suuni doctrine.

The current concern stems from the mix of political and religious issues that pertain to belonging to a Shi'ite sect in Morocco. These include the existence of Iran as an important regional power and the association of Moroccan Shi'ites with doctrinal authorities involved in political conflicts in their countries, including their involvement in public discussions, including *Fatwas* and religious speeches.[15] These, in turn, are seen to be contributing to the intensification of the regional Sunni-Shi'a conflict.

The Shi'ite Minority in Morocco and the Issue of a Legal Recognition

The claim that Moroccans were historically Shi'ites has fuelled several crises which have erupted between Morocco and Iran. The latest of which occurred in 2015 after the *Ressali Line* association, which represents moderate Moroccan Shi'ites, received a license to work legally through a 'studies institute', from a headquarters in Tangier. When the Commercial Court authorised this association to establish the 'Ressali Line for Studies and Publishing institution,' Moroccan Salafists rose up against this public 'coming out' of Moroccan Shi'ites.

The Ministry of Interior had previously rejected applications submitted by the lawyer Issam Hamidan, one of the most prominent supporters of the association, to establish their organisational entity on the basis of the 1958 *Dahir* of Public Freedoms. Although this was nothing more than a license for a publishing house of a cultural and scientific nature, a dispute (which has yet to subside) emerged between Salafist figures in Morocco and Moroccan Shi'ites. This can be seen as a follow up to the public's reaction towards the Shi'ite movements earlier attempt to establish a Shi'ite entity in Meknes in the 1990s, headed by Hassan Ighiri, which was dismantled after a campaign of arrests that targeted its members (who have since been released).

Similar events occurred in early 2000, when attempts were made to establish the *Al-Ghadeer* Association, also in Meknes, headed by Mohammad Taheri, and including members such as Mohsen Hani, brother of Idris Hani, and Soliman El Haouari, who had recently joined the *Ressali Line*. This time, the authorities' response was unyielding, arresting a number of the association's members and opening an investigation regarding their beliefs.[16] In the last two years, in an attempt to avoid the authority's sanction and due to the perceived lack of separation between religious and political issues in the Shi'ite case, Moroccan Shi'ites have moved towards working through associations that include other religious minorities. These include the legally established 'Moroccan Forum for

Freedom of Belief and Thought,' which includes representatives of Baha'i, Christian, and Shi'ite Moroccans.

Atheism and the Issue of the Atheist Minority in Morocco

A report by the Egyptian Dar Al Ifta estimated that the number of publicly atheist people in Morocco is a mere 325.[17] In contrast, in its annual International Religious Freedom report (2014), the US Department of State claimed that the number of openly atheist Moroccans is over 10,000 - much larger than the number of Moroccan Jews or Christians.[18]

Regardless of the contradicting reports, and numbers that change depending upon the definitions applied by each organisation, the 2017 report produced by the Red Sea Centre of the US-based Global Institute[19] presented a number of factors that have led Moroccan youth to atheism; these include 'terrorist groups' that have tarnished the image of Islam by representing violence and killing as part of the Islamic teachings. The report also claimed that social media outlets are providing atheist youth with a space for freedom of expression, enabling them to safely express their opinions, even those which transgress established societal norms, without being subject to intimidation or censorship.

The authors of the report had interviewed a number of Moroccan youth who were publicly atheist and suggested that there were three main reasons why young people in Morocco turned their back on religion. These were: those who do not oppose religion itself, but rather the use of religion for political purposes and the adoption of Islam as a political system - hence calling for the separation of State and religion; those who said they oppose the very idea of religion; and those who renounced Islam after the terrorist attacks carried out by extremist groups in the name if Islam. Among the reasons advanced in the report to explain why increasing numbers of young people in Morocco are refusing the idea of religion in general, and Islam in particular, they highlighted the strict religious rhetoric that is now prominent in many Islamic countries.[20]

The report also emphasises that '*the religious rhetoric that focuses on appearance and formalities, such as the way women and men dress, thus overshadowing the spiritual essence of Islam,*' is one of the reasons people give up their religious beliefs.[21] This is often done without a public declaration of their atheism, for fear of the harm that could be inflicted on them and their families. Morocco's modern and contemporary history is filled with examples of minorities who have openly renounced the country's official doctrine, and the consequences they have faced, especially under pressure from the Salafists and religious conservatives. These trends are becoming more evident every day, as exemplified by the conference on religious freedoms in Morocco that was going to be held in Casablanca in June 2018, but was indefinitely postponed due to several government officials' refusal to participate because of opposition from both governmental and non-governmental bodies.

There is a prevailing belief in the Moroccan religious domain that atheism is an elitist form of religious change that concerns only a small segment of Moroccan society. That it is generally limited to: youth groups; students – especially philosophy students; artists; intellectuals; and leftist politicians – particularly those who have been associated with the Marxist theory and practice.

Until recently irreligiosity in all its forms, including atheism and agnosticism, remained largely associated with the individual choices of people living in secrecy. This changed with the events of the Arab Spring in 2010, which accelerated the pace with which those previously hiding their irreligiosity have come to publicly express their views through a number of virtual groups and forums, such as: *Massayminch* (we won't fast), *Mamfakinch* (no concession), and the *MALI* Movement (alternative movement for personal freedoms) which called for public eating during Ramadan in 2009. These groups' demands represent a renewed call for the basic values of modernity, democracy and secularism. Such demands can be seen as integral to the establishment of a modern state based on the rule of law and respect for human rights; as such, these demands have been an essential part of the Moroccan Spring protests.

Atheism: Legal Recognition and Social Rejection

Confronting the atheist and agnostic groups' call for legal recognition and the right to express their opinions on religious issues, associations and movements - generally *Salafist* - have been established which oppose their demands. This has contributed to the founders and activists of atheist movements being stigmatised, accused of homosexuality, apostasy and heresy, and subject to social harassment. While these atheist movements do not aim to turn all Moroccans into atheists, some of their members have publicly proclaimed their atheism, especially through social media and in blog posts. They are relentlessly calling for the political neutralisation of religion, its separation from the state and the recognition of individual freedoms. They have also sent warnings to any person or group who attempts to monopolise religious or secular power. These developments demonstrate that there are Moroccans who are able to discuss all subjects courageously, even in the face of powerful opposition. Their demands are an attempt to establish greater social and intellectual openness in Morocco. As they seek to train the Moroccan mind in intellectual courage and the flexibility necessary to accept others' divergent opinions on important issues, the *Massayminch,* and other campaigns can be seen as primarily symbolic movements.[22]

These groups are demanding the establishment of a secular society based on individual freedoms, a difficult task given that Moroccan society has long been inherently conservative regarding such matters, especially those related to sexuality and religious sanctity. While Moroccan society is widely tolerant of those who abandon prayers, it becomes orthodox, even fundamentalist and extremist, when confronted with public atheists, especially those who eat during Ramadan (given the sanctity of this month for Moroccans). With, of course some exceptions, Moroccans can be said to turn into intolerant extremists when confronted with behaviour that challenges their religious identity; an identity based on the concept of honour and religious mandate - not free choice. This makes the religious domain in Morocco a profoundly social and political one.

Conclusion

Returning to the nature of the Moroccan Shi'itisation and Christianisation, it appears that the Shi'ite and Christian expansion strategies have been established on a communications and media foundation that utilises a discourse of universal human-rights to encourage Shi'ite and Christian converts to publicly proclaim their beliefs. Hence, the concept of religious minority in the Moroccan context is a political, more than simply a religious or social matter, in a way that does not pertain in more open and / or secular societies. Furthermore, the creation of Shi'ite and Christian minorities in Morocco, when understood through the lens of religious identity, is inseparable from their self-awareness as minority groups.

Their approach, which focuses on the right of religious conversion, works according to a communicative, constructive strategy of religious solidarity and mutual assistance that creates social solidarity between Shi'ite Moroccans on the one hand, and Christian Moroccans, on the other. Such solidarity, while found in smaller and closed groups engaged in practices of 'dissimulation', has recently become more visible through attempts to establish associations that include multiple minorities (Christians, Shi'ites, and Atheists) who have openly positioned themselves in the public sphere. This has been manifested through the establishment of the 'Moroccan Association of Religious Rights and Freedoms' in 2017 (an organization which appears to suffer from internal organizational problems and is yet to receive legal recognition, though it is not subject to any official harassment) and through the 'Moroccan Forum for Freedom of Belief and Thought' which was legally established on June 30, 2018.

Translated from the French by Nada Taibi.

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In Defence of Individual Liberties: Bodily Liberties in a Civil Democratic State

Professor Wahid Ferchichi and Wafa Ben Haj Omar

All citizens, male and female, have equal rights and duties and are equal before the law without any discrimination. The state guarantees freedoms and individual and collective rights to all citizens, and provides all citizens the conditions for a dignified life. (Article 21 of the Tunisian Constitution adopted on January 27, 2014)[1]

This constitutional provision crowns decades of militancy led by civil society and political activists. It functions as a common denominator bringing together all those who believe in human rights and their universal, interdependent and complementary acceptation.

Post-2011 Tunisia has been marked by human rights violations, violations of freedoms and the rights to be different. It has also been marked by attacks against cultural and artistic activities. Two cases have come to illustrate these attacks. The attack on the *Abdellia* exhibition in June 2012, when radical Salafists targeted and destroyed artworks they considered blasphemous; and during the same period the attack against the cinema *Africart,* which hosted the cultural event *Touche pas à mes créateurs* (Hands off my artists), organized by a network of Civil Society Organizations to claim and defend the right to freedom of artistic expression, and where the polemical film '*Ni Allah, ni Maître*' ('No Allah, No Master') by the Tunisian director Nadia El Fani was to be shown.

Women and people with non-normative sexuality have been assaulted in a political environment characterized by violence and impunity, an environment which led to two political assassinations: the Leftist political leader and long-time defender of democracy, Chokri Belaid was shot in front of his house on February 6, 2013 and his fellow nationalist leader Mohamed Brahmi was riddled with bullets outside his home on July 25, 2015 (the symbolic National Day of the Republic). These two atrocious, cold-blood murders were claimed by the radical Islamist militants. The Constitution of January 27, 2014 was sealed in blood.

Once voted in, a Constitution has to be implemented, a difficult task in a country where there are still century-old legal texts; texts that testify to an era prior to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; texts where the individual is absent. As such, the newly adopted Constitution has met with resistance to its implementation... Will we be content with a beautiful text? Are we going to limit ourselves to a beautiful legal showcase?

The Tunisian Penal Code of 1913 continues to be applied in order to imprison hundreds of people and especially young people - for a kiss, a smile, a glass of wine, or a sexual relationship between consenting adults in private. On January 12, 2017 in Hammam Sousse, two young men were arrested in their apartment, for the crime of having 'feminine clothes and accessories at home'! In application of 'Article 226' prescribing 'an offense against morality or public morality by gesture, word or intent,' they were sentenced to 2 months' imprisonment. During the same month, a woman in Nabeul was accused of drunkenness and having assaulted police officers. She was sentenced to 6 months in prison on the basis of the same Article. The police officers illegally filmed her and posted the video on Facebook.

Obsolete laws prevent women from enjoying their full citizenship, equal rights and freedoms. This situation has compelled civil society to continue its fight and to constitute itself in coalitions and networks gathering dozens of associations; most notably, the 'Civil Coalition for Individual liberties.'

These initiatives have had brilliant results: a law against human trafficking (August 2016),

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a law for the elimination of all forms of violence against women (August 2017), and the abrogation of the 1973 decree prohibiting Tunisian women from marrying a non-Muslim (September 8, 2017).

Then came the 'Report on Equality and Individual Liberties' of June 12, 2018, prepared by the Commission of Individual Liberties and Equality (COLIBE), a commission that was created at the request of the President of the Republic on August 13, 2017. For civil society this report constitutes a fundamental element in the debate around the proposals aiming to implement two key components of the Tunisian constitution: perfect and effective equality between Tunisian men and women, and the consecration individual freedoms.

The 235-page report consists of two main arguments and two proposals for legal reform. Firstly, arguments to establish complete and effective equality between men and women, and a related proposal for a bill providing for equality in inheritance (one that wreaked havoc in the public opinion). Secondly, an argument to establish individual freedoms, followed by a proposal for a draft 'Code of Individual Liberties.'

The latter attracts our attention on two levels: COLIBE has reconsidered the liberticidal texts[2] included in the still active Penal Code of 1913 in light of the Tunisian Constitution, Tunisia's international commitments and modern human rights guidelines; and the report presents a vision of criminal law based on these recent trends and developments. These are discussed below under the two following headings:

1. A vision based on a human-rights approach: COLIBE has complied with its mandate, as set out in the presidential decree that created it on August 13, 2017. The decree provides for the creation of '*a commission to the President of the Republic in charge of preparing a report on reforms related to individual liberties and equality, with reference to the provisions of the constitution of January 27, 2014, international human rights standards, and new orientations in the field of freedoms and equality*.'

This gave the commission a wide range of legal bases to establish an inventory of liberticidal texts and provisions and to propose reforms in this area.

Indeed, the Tunisian Constitution of January 27, 2014, is very advanced on certain human rights. The Constitution unequivocally guarantees freedom of conscience, belief, and the free exercise of religion ('Article 6'); individual liberties ('Article 21'); protection of dignity and physical integrity ('Article 23'); protection of privacy, inviolability of the home, and secrecy of correspondence and personal data ('Article 24'); freedom of opinion, of thought and expression ('Article 31'), as well as freedom of cultural / artistic creation ('Article 42').

In addition to this constitutional base, the wide range of international conventions and protocols duly ratified by Tunisia seek to establish equality and respect for freedoms. These include: the 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights' (ICCPR) and the 'International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights' (ICESCR); the 'Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women' (CEDAW), the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' (CRC), the European Council's 'Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data' (CETS No. 108), as well as 'The Protocol to the African Charter on Human Rights and Peoples' Rights' (the Maputo Protocol).

Last but not least, COLIBE considered recent (re)orientations in the field of human rights. These are manifested on the international stage through the recent European provisions in this area, the doctrine of the various international commissions and the specific mechanisms of the United Nations, such as the recent visit of the UN Special Rapporteur to evaluate the status of freedom of conscience in Tunisia (report still to be published). They are further manifest at a national level by recent contributions to the field such as the Tunisian coalition for the rights of LGBTQI people's report submitted on the occasion of the Universal Periodic Review of Tunisia in May 2017;[3] the Civil Coalition for Individual Liberties Report on the status of violations of individual liberties;[4] the recommendations of the special rapporteurs; and the development of certain national rights relating to equality and freedoms (holding the names of both parents, the change of sex and identity, same-sex marriage, same-sex parenting, euthanasia, etc.).

However, while drawing inspiration from this repository, COLIBE did not opt for the most comprehensive definition of individual liberties and equality. While it did present a more modern view of criminal law, it did not make clear recommendations on issues such as same-sex marriage, same-sex parenting, and/or euthanasia.

2. A modern vision of criminal law linked to individual liberties: the current Tunisian Penal Code, adopted in 1913, is riddled with liberticidal, moralizing provisions. This is particularly evident in the section entitled 'attacks on morals', the provisions of which include, '*six*

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months of imprisonment and a fine of one thousand dinars (approximately 300 Euros) for anyone who publicly commits an offense against morality or public decency by gesture or word or intentionally causes others to act in a way that undermines modesty.' The same penalties apply to '*anyone who publicly draws attention to an opportunity to commit debauchery, through writings, recordings, audio or visual, electronic or optical messages.'*

Faced with the danger of these fuzzy and manoeuvrable notions of good morals, public morality and modesty, which contradict the basic principles of criminal law, COLIBE proposed to replace these notions with clearer and more exact content. Indeed, only the '*voluntary exhibition of genitals for the purpose of harming others*' punishable by a fine of 500 Tunisian dinars (approximately 165 Euros) was considered to meet contemporary standards of jurisprudence.

Similarly, Article 231 of the Penal Code states that '*Except in cases provided for by the regulations in force, women who, by gestures or words, offer themselves to passers-by or engage in prostitution, even occasionally, are punishable by 6 months to 2 years imprisonment, and from 20 to 200 Tunisian dinars (6-60 Euros) fine. A person who has had sex with one of these women is considered to be an accomplice and punished with the same penalty.'* This provision, considered ambiguous and arbitrarily applicable, was reviewed by COLIBE, who proposed to replace the custodial sentence with a simple fine.

Finally, because it is aware of the dangers and abuses in the application of 'Article 230' which punishes homosexuality by 3 years in prison, the Commission proposes to simply repeal this article, or if necessary, to replace the deprivation of liberty by a fine.

COLIBE's approach, considered progressive and modern compared to the pre-World War I penal code, is to us, open to criticism on two levels:

Firstly, proposing to penalize homosexuality, even by a fine, is totally contrary to both modern science and contemporary jurisprudence. Homosexuality is no longer considered by the scientific community to be a disease or a perversion, and the legal meaning of homosexuality is not clear, and as such it should not be possible to institute a legal sanction on the basis of imprecise and indeterminate 'facts' and acts.

Secondly, COLIBE completely neglected the question of the criminalization of adultery. While modern trends in human rights and criminal law exclude adultery from the criminal sphere and consider it as part of a couple's private life, 'Article 236' of the Penal Code punishes adultery by 5 years in prison. However, despite this clear aberration COLIBE regrettably made no mention of any possible reform of this issue.

The COLIBE report met with a campaign of violent opposition from conservatives and radical Islamists in Tunisia. The members of the Commission, especially its president Bochra Bel Haj Hmida, a notorious feminist, even received death threats from Mr. Adel Almi a radical opinion leader, and founder of *Zitouna,* an extremist Islamist political party. With the exception of some civil society activists, progressive bloggers and journalists, the report and the commission received little political support. Some parties issued communiqués which, somewhat shyly, denounced the violent discourse against the members of the commission, amongst them the Islamist *Ennahda* party.

Civil society desperately waited for a supportive response from the President of the Republic, who had created this commission exactly a year previously, on August 13, 2017, on the date of the celebration of the National Women's Day and the 62nd anniversary of the Code of Personal Status. Two days before his speech was due, opponents of the COLIBE report staged a large demonstration replete with extremely violent slogans.

The awaited response from the President was largely disappointing as he went no further than announcing a legislative initiative to establish equality of inheritance. His legislative initiative was denounced by *Ennahda* party at the conclusion of its *Shoura* council of August 26, 2018, which in its communiqué, explicitly rejected the president's legislative initiative as they consider it to be against the principles of Islam.5 His speech was also denounced by civil society activists as it only addressed one single demand and showed no demonstrable support for the elimination of all forms discrimination against individuals in Tunisia.

On the day of the President's speech, thousands of Tunisians, both women and men demonstrated in the same streets as the Islamist radicals had two days earlier. They were armed with their own slogans, this time calling for the reform of all unconstitutional liberticidal legislation. Young and middle aged, men and women (veiled and not veiled), gathered not only to mark their presence and show their support for the COLIBE report, but to tell the world that Tunisia is moving forward and that it will be the pioneer in the Arab-Muslim world; through establishing equality of inheritance *and* in the continued fight for the consecration of all individual liberties.

Translated from the French by Wafa Ben Haj Omar

1 Translation of this and other texts from the Tunisian constitution and Penal Code by Ms. Wafa Ben Haj Omar.

2 Namely, 'Article 226' about public morality, 'Article 230' about homosexuality and 'Article 231' about prostitution.

3 See : https://www.damj.co/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Rapport-UPR-LGBTQI-Tunisie.pdf

4 See : http://www.adlitn.org/sites/default/files/files/documents/en_redui.pdf

5 See: http://www.ennahdha.tn/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-21-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%89-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%87%D8%B6%D8%A9 (In Arabic)

Sufism in Jerusalem

Dr Ali Qleibo

The façade of *al-Zawiya al-Afghaniyya*, the building that houses a Sufi order in the Old City of Jerusalem, is plain. One enters through the *zawiya's* pointed arch portal which is three steps above street level and flanked by stone benches on both sides. Above the entrance is an inscription showing the *zawiya's* name, order, founder, and the date in which it was built.

Once inside a short passage leads to a rectangular, though irregular, open-air courtyard. The sense of spiritual serenity is all pervasive. The use of space and the architectural design evoke Sufi symbols and concepts as one's eyes travel horizontally and vertically to encompass the five-hundred-year-old *zawiya*. A handsome water fountain spouts water in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by beds of fragrant roses, olive trees and other flowering shrubs. The courtyard is surrounded from the south and west by eleven small cells where Sufi pilgrims once lodged. The ablution room and related facilities are discreetly tucked to the corner on the northern side. An immense space extends to the far southern side of the courtyard with an elevated platform providing a casual gathering area. The old meeting hall stands to the east of the courtyard and comprises two levels: a lower, original level from the early fifteenth century and an upper level which was added later. The latter is used as a residence for the sheikh. The mosque, a two floor structure, stands on the south eastern side. It's handsomely chiseled stones stand in marked distinction to the other roughly hewn masonry. The round domes and a simple metal minaret dominate the space. One's attention is arrested by the symbolic green – a promise of paradise and a symbol of the family of the prophet. Sufi rituals are held within this sacred edifice.

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Abu Naser Al-Afghany the care-taker of *Al-Zawiya Al-Afghaniyya* and younger brother of the Sheikh Abd al-Kareem, leader of the *al-Shadhiliya* Sufi order in Jerusalem gesticulates to the garden and explains how on '*Monday and Thursday evenings the followers begin to congregate for the sun-set prayers (salat al maghreb) to pray, meditate and study here*.' My Sufi host wears modern clothes and dons a simple round, white head cap; a sign of religious piety. An affable middle aged gentleman, he peers attentively at me as he expounds on Sufism, Jerusalem and the *al-Shadhili* order.

Through the centuries Sufi thought has shaped the Muslim faith, Muslim identity and the geography of the sacred in Jerusalem. The mere Arabic name of Jerusalem, *al-Quds*, triggers an emotional, affectional upsurge in every Muslim heart and mind, wherein nostalgia, piety, and the love of God and his Prophet Mohammed meet. A pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad is a spiritual journey leading to a process of religious transformation. It is a mystical rite of passage that promotes one's personal connection with God.

Throughout the Umayyad, Fatimid, Ayyubid, Mamluk and Ottoman periods, Jerusalem witnessed a flourishing of Sufi orders and corresponding *madares* (theological colleges), *khanqawat* (monastic Sufi institutions of learning), *zawaya* (where Sufis of particular orders convened, lodged and prayed communally to invoke God's presence along ritually prescribed ways - *tariqa*), *arbitah* (which were lodgings built to house pilgrims from all over the world) mausoleums, hammams, covered markets, and caravanserais. These were built with endowments from sultans, emirs and wealthy dowagers as acts of faith to ensure their righteous place in the Day of Judgment – believed to take place in *Al-Quds al Sharif*, Jerusalem.

The early Ottoman period witnessed an additional influx of non-Arab pilgrims from the Muslim world: Indians, Afghanis, Central Asians, Indonesians and Turks who would extend their sojourn in Jerusalem to pray and meditate and whose offspring remain custodians of these *zawaya*.

In their respective *zawiya* each ethnic community could find spiritual guidance under the sheikh who was also the head of the dominant Sufi *tariqa* in their country of origin. Pilgrims from all over the Muslim world would be accommodated by their respective spiritual *cum* ethnic community. In the *zawiya* each Muslim ethnic group would find boarding and spiritual leaders. Whereas formal prayers would be performed in the Noble Sanctuary (*al-Haram al-Sherif*) the ceremonial meditations and the inner religious aspects of Islam – the Sufi rituals, would be practiced in the *zawiya* itself.

Sheikh abd el-Kareem, leader of the *Shadhily* Sufi order in Jerusalem spends most of his time in prayers and reclusive meditation in the *al-Aqsa* Mosque. In his absence his brother, Abu Nasir is my interlocutor. First established as part of the *Qadiriya* order, he explains the *zawiya* has recently shifted to the *al-Shadhily* order. This shift has been accompanied by a change in the ritual.

'*Each Sheikh and each sariqa have their own mystery and their own symbolism*,' explains my erudite Sufi friend *cum* Heideggerian philosopher Yusef from the *Khalwaty* order in Istanbul, who is quite familiar with *al-Zawiya al-Afghaniyya* in Jerusalem. As he sets forth the fundamental elements of Sufism, he describes how each founding Sufi leader has sacred poems; invocations; and specific names, known as *wird,* with which God is invoked and the Prophet Mohammad is blessed by the order.

Abu-Nasir al-Afghany is proud of his community which has expanded from being an al-Afghani *zawiya* to include local Jerusalemites. He reports that '*We have an average of fifty devotees celebrating* dhikr *on our weekly Friday evenings. Monday celebrations fewer people attend, a maximum of twenty ….*'

Sufi rituals are an extension of the evening prayers, divided into two distinct parts and punctuated by the two Muslim orthodox evening prayers.

He goes onto describe how '*the community members begin to arrive shortly before sunset prayers, salat al-maghreb. They congregate in the open courtyard, perform their ablutions, meet and talk in preparation for the celebration*.' In fact *zawaya* are exciting places where friendships are fostered, where men meet free of everyday constrictions and where spirituality reigns.

The Sufi ritual is a complex mystery and follows a strict sequence, each section with its own symbolism pertaining to the particular school. An outsider may reduce it to a 'cathartic' experience, but being of a religious order where connecting with God is the goal, the use of psychoanalytic terms is not relevant.

The meeting is referred to as *al-Dhikr*, the invocation of the presence of God by highlighting his presence. It can also be called a *mawlid*, or birthday of Prophet Mohammad, who in the 'Night Journey' connected with God and as such is perceived as the first Sufi *par excellence*. These two terms encompass the first section of communion with God.

The sunset prayers take place in the mosque. The faithful align themselves in the traditional rows and are led by the Imam. Once the prayers are over they move to the walls of the mosque, crouch on the floor and then begin the chanting of religious songs specific to the order. These religious recitations, interspersed with religious songs are referred to as *wird*.

Wird is not only formed of poetry, verses and traditions of the Prophet, each order also has its own *wird,* particular to that order. '*When it is recited with a group of people, it has a melody but is deprived of musical qualities*,' explains my Turkish Sufi friend as he expounds on the subtleties of Sufi ritual.

The second section is called *tasbeeh*, praising the name of God.

Yusef cautions that '*His names are infinite. Although the Prophet says there are 99 names in his famous sayings, the hadith, yet there are different versions of the hadith and some names differ in these versions, but it does not mean they are the only names. Ibn Arabi always emphasizes that God has infinite names. Tasbeeh of Sufi orders differ from each other, but there are common names used in the orders, for example Allah which is Al Ism Al Azam (the most hallowed name). Mostly 7 names are used in Sufi orders, but in some they use 12 names or some other number. They (or some, or only one of them) are given by a master to a darwish in a special number. According to the darwish's spiritual development, the number can increase or decrease, or other names can be recited under the guidance of the master. It is the worst thing for a darwish to recite a name of God periodically without a sheikh's guidance, because one can lose his way in his spiritual journey*.'

The names are private and mystical. They are kept as a secret between the devotee and the master. The master, it must be pointed out, has a special close relationship with his devotees and it is in accordance with his discourse that

the *darwish* are accorded their position in the hierarchy.

The second part follows immediately after evening prayers, *salat al-Isha*. The Sheikh performs the prayer in the *al-Aqsa* mosque, then joins the Sufi faithful. His entry is quite dramatic and he is accorded a deferential welcome with due respect. Since the believers have just finished the evening prayers they remain seated in their position in the ordered lines.

The sheikh first gives a lesson, explaining a story from the Quran, an event in the life of the Prophet Mohammad or a parable gleaned from everyday life. Once again they form a circle, spread towards the walls of the mosque surrounding the master and the *dhikr* chant begins. In *al-Zawiya al-Afghaniyya* the *dhikr* consists of a repetition of the word Allah rising to a full crescendo…soon afterwards the followers disperse.

al-Zawiya al-Afghaniyya was built by Muhammad Pasha, governor of Jerusalem (1632 - 33 AD / 1043 H). It stands on Barquq Street parallel to the far western section of Mujahidin Street towards al-Wad Street close to the famous *Ecce Homo* arch on the *Via Dolorosa* in the Old City of Jerusalem. The Ottoman *zawiya* has preserved its architectural character and is the last Sufi order that continues to perform *dhikr* under al-Sheikh Abed al- Karim al-Afghani. In addition to the bi-weekly *mawled* rituals Abu-Naser points out that they also celebrate all the religious holidays, namely: the 'Night Journey', the birthday of the Prophet and the New Year according to Muslim faith.

Time changes and rearranges. Most of the religious endowments in the Old City have since become tenements for migrant workers. Of the innumerable medieval *zawaya* only *al-Zawiya al-Hindiyya* (the Indian hospice) and *al-Naqshbandiyya* (from central Asia) survive as endowments under the custodianship of the offspring of the original Sufi *bukhari* or Indian founders. Though the libraries and various memorabilia still exist in these two *zawaya*, both have ceased to function as Sufi centres of worship. The handsome facades of these Sufi *zawaya in the Old City of Jerusalem*, over 46 in number, survive as witnesses to the vicissitude of time. They stand as eloquent expressions of Jerusalem's central position in Islam. Against this melancholic background *al-Zawiya al-Afghaniyya* endures as a spiritual haven and continues the centuries old mystic traditions in Jerusalem, *al-Quds al Sherif*.

On the Margin's Margin: Some Fragmented Thoughts on the Circumstances of those who Make Art

Abdullah Alkafry

This paper seeks to address those circumstances that can make the production of art in the Arab region a first step towards the marginalisation of the artist; not always deliberately, although certainly so at others, but in particular when the artist engages in controversy in their local context. We endeavour to outline some of the circles of influence which can affect the production of art in the region, and examine the different ways in which the arts can be captured and reformulated, turning artists into 'troublesome minorities' who pose a threat to society: either bought by 'foreign agencies', or disrespectful to the customs and values of wider society. With the ever growing challenges facing the freedom of artistic expression and the continual and vicious assaults against freedom of thought that have been mounted in the wake of popular uprisings in the region, we find that communities of artists in countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen and others, face a number of dangers. These dangers together constitute a process of marginalisation, which turns artists into a minority, nullifying their productivity and falsifying their image in the public eye.

We take a closer look at a range of experiences faced by individual artists in different contexts and circumstances, and focus on the circles and alliances that facilitate the transformation of artists into a minority, either through marginalisation, making them an issue in the court of public opinion, or in representing them as an active and pressing danger.

The subject of this paper is the community of artists, creative and cultural producers in some countries within the Arab region, and the challenges they have been called on to address as a meaningfully distinct group, both during and after the period known as the Arab Spring. It presents a closer examination of their role and status in the context of the questions and problems facing the region. We look at the public image of this community, the battles they fight, and the frameworks that are used to categorise them as a minority and/or majority.

The working assumption of this paper is that the values espoused by the Arab revolutionary movements, which held freedoms to be a right of the population as a whole, had a direct impact on the artistic community and contributed to a shift in their status and social power. The dominance of street movements during 2010-2011, and the consensus among all members of society over the need for equal access to rights, dignity, a rejection of repression in all its forms, and the importance of a functioning civil society, saw artists being accepted as a part of the majority in countries such as Egypt, Syria and Libya. Artists were seen as legitimate standard bearers of the revolution, no different to other revolutionaries, an approach that made its influence felt in neighbouring countries. This initial period of mutual engagement and consensus was overturned in the course of the counter-revolution and its deployment of a discourse which sought to exclude various social classes and type, among them the artist, as being 'astray': troublemakers categorised as a mercenary minority, linked to foreign powers or otherwise, who sought to weaken dominant social values.

The Need to be a Majority: Art as Revolution

During the Arab Spring, many artists and cultural producers made the decision to take to the streets and redefine public space in terms that asserted its ownership by all members of society without distinction. In Egypt and Syria, and during the mass civil

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society demonstrations in Lebanon, many such instances could be observed, in which the artist community attempted to become part of a larger social grouping, rejecting the restrictions of their minority identification. They did this by producing artistic materials whose primary value lay in sensitivity to the depth of their commitment to change, and by sending the message that artists, and artistic freedom of expression, were not special cases, but instead stood on an equal footing with other voices in society. In other words, that there is no distinction between the arts and the values of the people, and that the arts community makes no claim to exclusivity, to being an elite, but rather is one part of a majority, grounded in its society. Below are two different examples of how this process played out:

1. The Signs of Kafranbel

The Syrian town of Kafranbel was the public face of the Syrian revolution in the first years of the movement: a marginal municipality where Syrians would hold up crude signs made by local residents that delivered a tightly-focused discourse centred on a rejection of exclusion, extremism and armed resistance, and championing the sufferings of the people. There is much to say about the Kafranbel phenomenon and the intelligence with which it managed to give expression to developments on the ground and broadcast them to the world, but what concerns us here are the values it embodied: turning citizens into creative agents without altering their status as members of the popular majority.

The Kafranbel project was based on the principle of active and regular (weekly) participation in the non-violent popular movement, and it established real and practical links with the revolutionary movement proper. The signs demonstrated engagement by ordinary citizens; their value and impact lay in the simplicity of their design and execution, their lack of professionalism, and their focus, instead, on delivering intelligent, satirical messages, which gave expression to the sentiments of many Syrians and could be said to represent them. This shift, which shattered stereotypes of the artist as a member of the social and intellectual elite, refashioning their image as an ordinary citizen who used art as a tool to give expression to popular sentiments, was the product of an historical moment in which the Syrian people were focused on the need to bring down the regime. But it was also fuelled by the ability to take a different approach to the idea of the artist: no longer did membership of this supposed minority require membership of the arts world.

The legitimacy of this 'revolutionary' art was derived from its association with the revolution. It was, in other words, a tool of popular resistance which, read in different ways, could be used by political movements both internally and abroad, and had relevance during times of open warfare, and during the crises faced by Syrians and non-Syrians alike.

The two men behind the project were: Raed Fares, the revolution's media officer for Kafanbel, and Ahmed Jalal, a dental technician who closed his laboratory at the start of the revolution and began to draw satirical cartoons on scraps of card for demonstrators. Their standing within the movement never went beyond that of founding members, though any two men in their position could have easily gone on to positions of leadership had they wished. At the same time, the importance of what they did cannot be downplayed: initiating an action that saw dominant ideas about an 'elite' replaced by a sense of general inclusivity, which stated that we, as artists, are not cut off from our society, and that, as Syrians, we are not isolated from the outside world: we are impacted by all political powers and the decisions they take.

These signs do not make the claim that they are purely democratic expressions which take into account the views of all of Kafranbel's residents, rather they are a form of democratic practice which derive their legitimacy from residents and Syrian society as a whole, and they link revolutionary values and the activism of art with a practice that legitimised and promoted the use of signs in public spaces.

2. Art is a Midan

The *Art is a Midan* (Art is a public square) project began in April 2011 as an independent artistic and cultural initiative promoting the reclamation of public space in Egypt using culture and the arts. It first gained momentum at a festival held once a month in various squares around the country: Abdeen Square in Cairo, and others in Alexandria, Assiut, Minya and Suez. By October that same year it had spread to fourteen governorates and cities throughout Egypt, with an expansive social and political message, and by 2014, when it finally closed, the festival was one of the longest-running cultural platforms in Egypt.

Art is a Midan sought to restore art and culture to the streets in support of freedom of expression, democracy and diversity, gambling on its ability to establish firm links between art, culture and public space. The combination bolstered the revolution in the public squares, because by reimagining public space as belonging to the masses, it provided legitimacy to all those involved in the revolution, as well as their cause. Its contribution was to present a vision of what the triumph of a civic majority could look like, by engaging with Egyptian society, civil society and arts organisations, independent artists, youth groups, official cultural institutions, security agencies and the media.

Unlike the organisational model of the Kafranbel movement, *Art is a Midan* active in public squares throughout Egypt between April 2011 and August 2014, was organised through independent arts institutions in Egypt, the Independent Culture Coalition and a group of volunteers from the provinces, working together with ordinary Egyptian citizens and the institutions of state. Despite this difference, both initiatives shared their view of art and artists as a minority that could be legitimised by incorporating it into a majority representative of all classes within society.

Art is a Midan restored the right of Egyptian citizens to benefit from and use public space and abolished the main causes of the unjustifiable distinction between a majority which saw public life as a space for mutual cooperation and participation and a minority which worked to improve and enrich the life of the majority. It was these underlying causes, perhaps, which made shutting down the initiative necessary following El Sisi's coup. The new president's rise to power made the need for art and freedom of expression even more imperative if civil society were to play a clear and forceful role in promoting concepts such as social justice, freedom and equality among the broad mass of citizenry.

The *Art is a Midan* project, as a platform which gave art legitimacy, was to effect a transformational shift towards a political space for the people, in which issues such as abolishing military trials for civilians could be debated.

The two examples above illustrate different ways in which individual artists and creative members of a group which for years had been characterised as a minority divorced from reality, can be redefined as active members of society. They proved that the validity of this false assumption could be broken by the very means used to assert it: the artists condemned for their detachment could escape condemnation by engaging with the majority, where 'majority' means the citizenry.

The Counter-Revolution: the Need to Create an Enemy or Troublesome Minority

As counter-revolution tightened its grip in the region, there were widespread instances of anger, frustration and psychological breakdown at the inability both to create a meaningful artistic response and reenergise the street. Social tensions grew, prices rose, traditional values returned, and the collapse of dreams for change were accompanied by anxiety and foreboding over the future. One manifestation of these ominous changes was the return of the artist as a troublemaker and social failure, restored to their place among other social and professional categories and minorities, such as journalists and those calling for the restoration of public freedoms.

So, the attempt to redefine the meaning of artist involved turning them into a minority, but it was a kind of minority quite different to the one it had been before the revolution. This new minority posed a threat to the majority and attempted to infiltrate it, and it was the responsibility of the majority to maintain a clear line of separation between itself and the artist. This methodical targeting was principally practised by the state. As the popular revolutions lost their luster, there was a rise in the violations of cultural rights and freedoms practised against artists and cultural producers. The dictatorships were back. From 2015 onwards there were increasing numbers of reports of artists being imprisoned and their works confiscated, processes helped by the steady drip of legislation designed to curtail what freedoms remained.

The increasing social and political instability in Syria, Iraq and Yemen has led directly to flagrant violations of cultural rights. The Syrian regime, for instance, continues to detain opposition artists and writers such as Zaki and Mihyar Cordillo, Samar Kokash, Adnan El Zaraei, and others, while various arts unions call for opposition artists to face criminal and terrorist charges, even if they live outside the country, as a punishment for their political beliefs. In 2016, for example, the Union of Syrian Artists submitted a report calling for a number of its members to be referred to the criminal courts for their 'refusal to pay union dues', even though most of the names appearing in the document belong to artists living abroad who already face long prison sentences issued by the Terrorism Court, which was set up by the regime following the outbreak of the revolution. They include Jamal Soleiman, Abdul Hakim Quoteifan, Mai

Skaf, Maxim Khalil, Louise Abdelkarim, Samih Choukaer and Mazen Al Natour. In January 2016, the Algerian police detained the guitarist Mohammed Douha, triggering a movement in support of the musician and the right of all artists and intellectuals to reclaim the public space and practise their right of direct free expression to the masses. The protests, which began in Oudan Square in the capital, spread to social media and from there to European capitals. Even after the lifting of the state of emergency in 2011, Algerian law still prohibited unlicensed demonstrations, thus hampering efforts to engage in more widespread artistic activity in public. Since 2011 increased pressure from cultural figures has forced the authorities to free cultural activities from the constraints of licensing and has seen the state respond in a rather erratic manner, sometimes clamping down and sometimes granting permission more liberally.

In Egypt, the promulgation of the new Civil Society Law on 29 November 2016 placed further restrictions on civil society work and gave the authorities vague and sweeping powers to censor such activism. The law forbids any activity which acts against national security and public safety, legitimises government interference in the activities of civil society groups, particularly with regards to funding, and stipulates penalties of up to five years imprisonment or fines of up to one million Egyptian pounds, should the organisation engage in polling, field research, or any other form of civic activism, without first registering in accordance with the law; or cooperates in any way with any other international entity—including the agencies of the United Nations—without obtaining the necessary permissions.

From the above we can see that the agencies of the state are attempting to create a narrative which asserts that, within such groups and organisations, are individuals whose activities need to be controlled and curtailed through legally-enforced penalties and imprisonment. To protect both themselves and their relationship with the 'homeland' or 'revolution' (the definition of both terms having been fully co-opted by the authorities), organisations are expected to isolate this minority.

A second strategy operating in parallel and pursued once artists have been redefined as a minority, is to describe them as the enemy and position them in open conflict with the majority. There are many examples to choose from, but here we will look specifically at the experience of the band Mashrou Leila. In 2016 and 2017 the Jordanian authorities refused to grant the group permission to perform at private functions. They were also banned from performing in Egypt in 2017. Such bans have been accompanied by a sustained public assault on their reputation. The decision to ban them from playing was taken after a group of Jordanian MPs objected to the fact that the concert was being supported by the ministry of tourism and had been granted necessary permissions. When one of the parliamentarians submitted a complaint that Mashrou Leila, 'advanced ideas alien to our communities, promoted Satan worship and spoke openly about homosexuality,' the mayor of Amman cancelled the concert.

Meanwhile in Egypt, the debate centred on the band displaying a rainbow flag (a symbol of queer culture) during a concert in the country, which resulted in the Union of Musical Professions passing a resolution to ban all future performances by the group inside Egypt. The union justified its decision by stating that it was 'against all deviant art', and rejecting accusations that it had been responsible for allowing previous concerts by Mashrou Leila by pointing out that such concerts required permission from three separate bodies: the Union of Musical Professions, the Workforce Union, and the General Security Directorate. Here, the technique used to attack the artist's status is to categorise them as a minority which poses a threat to the lifestyle of the majority: it elides artistic expression and the beliefs of the group that produces it. Homophobia is a weapon used in all countries across the region. In a related incident, Lebanon's attorney general moved to stop all activities associated with Beirut Pride two days after festivities began on 12 May 2018. The festival, which was due to run until 20 May, and which comprised a range of social, artistic and cultural activities designed to reflect the aims of the International Day Against Homophobia, received the banning order an hour before scheduled readings at the Zoukak Theatre.

Last year, as a part of the same strategy, a group of young Libyan writers were subjected to a widespread campaign of slander and harassment, including threats of physical harm on social media and on the websites of official media outlets, a few days after the publication of an anthology of poetry, short stories and excerpts from novels entitled, *A Sun On Closed Windows*. The campaign, which saw the writers described as unbelievers and traitors, focussed on the appearance of certain words and phrases in the anthology's texts, especially in an excerpt from a novel entitled *Kashan*, first published and distributed in 2012.

Since the breakdown of security in Libya and the spread of militias, threats of this kind represent a real and present danger which must be opposed by all who take a principled stand in support of freedom of thought and creativity and who oppose intellectual terrorism.

In 2016, the Egyptian author Ahmed Nagi was imprisoned on charges of offending public sensibilities because his novel contained scenes of a sexual nature. The incident was described at the time as an 'assassination' of public space for free expression and a 'confiscation' of the right to political engagement.

In all this we can observe the 'satanising' of artists, by categorising them as members of an evil minority intent on disrupting 'security and the public interest' by attacking all that is 'good and right', as well as increasing numbers

of campaigns to ban or promote censorship against artistic censorship. In Algeria, in 2016, a ruling by the ministerial censorship board to ban the release of the film *Vote Off*, directed by Faycal Hammoum, on the grounds that it disrespected the symbols and sovereignty of the state (because it would affect the participation of young people in the 2014 elections), was violated when the film was shown on the last day of the banning period, a symbolic move that ignored the legal complaints raised against it.

In the same period Sudan also witnessed an increasingly stringent security situation which manifested itself in continual (and illegal) interference from the security services to prevent and obstruct cultural events and activities. Shooting of the film, *A Handful of Dates*, based on a short story of the same name by Tayeb Salih, was obstructed on routine bureaucratic and administrative grounds. The Union of Sudanese Writers had been ordered to close its offices, before the union appealed and managed to overturn the ruling in December 2016. It was closed anyway and the headquarters of the Muntada Al Shurouq organisation were also closed.

In Mauritania, the authorities moved to shut down all independent satellite channels (Elmourabitoun TV, Chinguit TV, Sahel TV, Elwataniya TV, Dava TV) in the first such move of its kind since they had begun broadcasting five years previously. The reason given was that they had accumulated a debt of unpaid taxes to the value of two billion ouguiya (approximately five and half million US dollars), but the question had to be asked: Why now, exactly? Were the taxes really the reason for the closure? Or was it that the government deeply regretted widening the margin for free expression and wanted to restrict it once again?

On 3 March 2018, the Egyptian military prosecutor ordered the imprisonment of a theatre troupe for fifteen days pending investigation on charges of slandering the Egyptian army. This followed a lawsuit brought by a lawyer, Samir Sabry, and the military prosecutor, against Ahmed El Gerhy (director), and Walid Atef (scriptwriter), for putting on a performance of a play entitled *Suleiman Khater* at the Shooting Club in Cairo, which contained criticism of the Egyptian Army and its role in fighting enemies of the state. The suit asked that the accused be tried in the criminal courts.

And what now?

The orchestrated political campaigns described above are accompanied by an increasingly dominant discourse which states that culture and the arts should not be a priority for governments and societies during periods of major change. This discourse further intensifies the already serious marginalisation faced by both civil society and society in general, but it also seeks to exile artists from the community at large: uncategorisable, historically-demonised individuals. The danger of such a shift is that it takes place in the absence of any proper framework to produce legal and security-based studies of the position of artists, or of any attempt to raise awareness of the challenges that artists face. But the situation is becoming even more dangerous as security agencies make alliances with various social classes on the understanding that their assaults on cultural institutions are a part of the war on terror and the preservation of internal security. There is no more telling example of the destruction this causes than the case of Ziad Itani who was released in March 2018, following his detention on charges of cooperating with Israel to encounter subsequent complications to do with political persecution and personal vendetta. The troubling aspect of this case is that when Major Suzanne Al Hajj decided to take revenge on him and found herself unable to imprison him, she promptly attempted to turn him into an enemy of the people.

The question remains: Who will champion this vulnerable minority? Who will restore their reputation in the public eye? Who holds who to account?

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

Why Cycling in Lebanon Matters

Joey Ayoub

Since the end of the Lebanese Civil war in 1990, public spaces in Lebanon, and Beirut in particular, have largely been assimilated into private ones in the name of post-war 'reconstruction'. Here, I explore how cycling initiatives could empower a re-negotiation of space from private to public.

Mohammad al-Homsi is a 62-year old Syrian man who cycles fifty kilometres a day to work in Lebanon. There are no cycle lanes and he has to share the country's notoriously dangerous roads with the cars, buses and lorries that have made them so.[1]

Despite being an exceptional cyclist, al-Homsi was Syria's cycling champion in 1976, he has been hurt several times on his way to work. In 2017, in an interview with AJ+ Arabic he recounted how a lorry had hit him leaving him badly injured: and when lorries aren't ploughing into him there are countless potholes and piles of rubbish to navigate. [2]

Tales such as al-Homsi's are common among Lebanon's small community of cyclists. I remember when I took up cycling while I was living in Beirut between 2010 and 2013 my friends and family wondered whether I had lost my mind and, in retrospect, I probably had. At this time cycling initiatives were still in their infancy and just like al-Homsi, every day I faced the danger of lorries driving erratically oblivious to the cyclists around them, 'service' taxis competing for custom and frustrated commuters raging at the wheel.

It would be an understatement to say Lebanon is not cycling-friendly and encouraging real change is taking far longer than hoped due to the lack of cycle lanes and road safety more broadly. The country's car-centric infrastructure encourages traffic jams, wide urban highways and complicated interchanges and accidents are common. According to Internal Security Forces statistics between January and November 2017, 3,140 accidents were reported leaving 441 people dead and 4,179 injured.[3]

Yet, thanks to many more cycling initiatives, some are hopeful that this is set to change in the near future. Take for example the 'Bike to Work 2018' initiative,[4] which saw over 1,000 people 'interested' on Facebook on April 25, 2018. The concept was simple: two groups, 'The Chain Effect'[5] and 'Live Love Beirut',[6] with the support of several other bike shops as well as 'participating cafés', provided free bicycles and helmets available at a number of sites for people to use to travel to and from work or university. The Chain Effect has also been recruiting volunteers to paint the city with pro-cycling graffiti.[7] In addition there is the Cycling Circle[8] which organises group tours on bikes and owns a 'bike café'[9] which it describes as 'an engaging bicycle shop and coffeehouse featuring a selection of bikes and accessories with an on-site repair service'. Revealingly, its co-founder, Karim Sokhn, told CityLab that 'before the civil war in Lebanon, biking used to be for everyone. The police were on bicycles, the postal service, all the social classes'.[10]

As I will show, cycling in Beirut, in its negotiation of space, is an act of defiance. Indeed Sokhn has touched upon a subject that many people in Lebanon understand to be true, namely that increasing the number of people cycling everyday is an act of solidarity that signals the potential for change in Lebanon. While this may sound like an odd claim, in recent years many scholars have pointed out how sectarianism, widely perceived to be both catastrophic and inevitable, is far from natural, and is in fact reproduced on a daily basis through existing service infrastructures such as electricity, educational and social work facilities,

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credit services, and mobility infrastructures as Joanne Randa Nucho writes, 'For my interlocutors in Lebanon infrastructure and service provision were topics of daily debate and concern and were directly interwoven with an apparently totally different topic, the notion of a sectarian community.'[11]

The fifteen years of civil war destroyed much of the country's infrastructure and public services were degraded. The post-war era was defined by a reconstruction largely executed under the logic of neoliberalism, public infrastructure fell into disuse and public spaces, once the symbols of a cosmopolitan capital, were almost entirely privatised. Contrary to popular belief, not all of this began after the 1975-1990 war. Indeed, Beirut's tramways were decommissioned in the 1960s 'to make room for more automobiles'.[12] The country's beloved trains, were largely abandoned or destroyed during the war and the last train ran in 1994. Adorned with a banner reading 'the train of peace', its demise symbolised the end of the pre-war era and the beginning of the post-war. The iconic trains[13]of the pre-war era elicit nostalgia[14] in the minds of many, and a sense of permanent loss to younger generations, unfamiliar with that period. While it is undoubtedly the case that Lebanon's so-called 'golden age' (the 1950s and 1960s) is heavily romanticised, I can't help but wonder what life would be like in Lebanon today if we still had an accessible and reliable means of transportation connecting the country's different regions.

As an illustration of how important alternatives to cars, buses and lorries are, let us look at the 47-minute documentary by Al Jazeera on Lebanon's Harley-Davidson bikers.[15] Its promotion hints[16]at the inherently political message that this group puts forward. Militiamen during the war, often on opposing sides, they are now united by their love of biking. Although somewhat of a cliché, it is no doubt the case that these men associate their motorbikes with a new way of experiencing their country, very different to the country of checkpoints, snipers and decreasingly mixed neighbourhoods of their youth. As two of the bikers tell us, shortly after the war bikers from East Beirut showed those from West Beirut around, and those from West Beirut returned the favour. The ease with which bikers can stop and communicate with one another is one that proponents of cycling, in addition to the many health benefits, hope to promote.

Today's Beirut often feels like a grey monstrosity where cars and buses rule, as its depiction in Ely Dagher's short film *Waves '98* reminds us.[17] There are few spaces for pedestrians, and even pavements are converted into car parks. Cyclists, have only one prototype cycle lane[18] that cars regularly drive along and the number of cars on the country's roads show no signs of decreasing. [19]

This is why talking about bicycles in Beirut is ultimately a discussion about a basic right to freedom of movement. It is about how a city's residents see one another. Endless congestions contribute to a feeling of unease already present in a population haunted by a violent past and uncertain future. Being stuck in traffic has become a metaphor for the Lebanese condition, just as the 2015 waste crisis that launched the 'You Stink' movement became a metaphor for widespread government corruption.

And how could it not? The lack of alternatives means that countless people spend hours every day getting from one place to another in the smallest recognised country on the entire mainland Asian continent. My daily trips to the American University of Beirut often took me nearly two hours despite my village being a mere twenty kilometres from the university. I calculated that in a year I spent a whole month in my car. It was only later, when I moved to the UK, that I realised what a difference to my life it made being able to walk and cycle, use the metro and train, which we do not have in Lebanon, as well as having reliable buses. As often as I could I found myself wandering through parks or just walking for hours at a time in an attempt to catch up on all those months lost driving around Beirut.

My story is not unique. Those of us who have travelled outside of Lebanon cannot help but feel especially frustrated by the lack of alternatives in our country. Frustration then leads to anxiety and a widespread sense of claustrophobia. It is as though our country is hostile to our very existence, invading our spaces at every opportunity. Needless to say, this feeling is itself the result of nearly three decades of a post-war *status quo* built without consideration for the people inhabiting its spaces.

While something as mundane as cycling would certainly not feature as one of the most pressing issues plaguing Lebanon today, I would argue that the mundane is in desperate shortage in a country relentlessly intent on squeezing out most of its population with what's left only available for the lucky few able to afford it. For cycling to happen on a large scale, national and local authorities would have to invest in appropriate infrastructures, that would enable residents of a city to feel they belong again. It may not solve everything, but it's a decent start.

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3 See: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2018/03/lebanon-beirut-world-bank-congestion-new-transportation-bus.amp.html Accessed: 17 September 2018
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14 See, 'Rare Footage of Tripoli Lebanon Train Station 1970' on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMNx_5hv3u8 Accessed: 14 September 208.
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16 See, 'Meet Lebanon's Harley-Davidson bikers, who put aside their differences through their love for biking' available at: https://twitter.com/AlJazeera_World/status/963721347971993601 Accessed: 14 September 2018.
17 See Ely Dagher's short film *Waves '98* available at: https://vimeo.com/252441577 Accessed 14 September 2018.
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Vegan Life in Morocco

Fedwa Bouzit

Growing Up a Vegetarian in Morocco

Among those most vivid memories of my early childhood, I remember that I had what adults called a 'healthy appetite'. With pleasure and without second thoughts, I devoured everything served. Then one day, while enjoying a *kebda mchermla* (lamb liver in sauce), I remember thinking: 'where did this tasty meat come from?' I would soon get to know its origin, and this would change the way I looked upon a part of my culinary culture.

I grew up in an animal-loving family. For as long as I can remember, I have been surrounded by cats, dogs and rabbits. We talked about them as social beings in their own right. Upon the arrival of a sheep at my grandparents' house, I greeted it with the same enthusiasm as I would have welcomed a newly adopted cat. I must have been four or five years old and it was the first Eid al-Kabir that I can recall.

Then one morning, I woke up to find the sheep in the middle of the courtyard. My grandfather was there, as were the other men of the house, all gathered around the animal in a rather strange formation. They were struggling to keep it standing still, and before I had time to fathom the situation, I saw blood gushing from the sheep. My mother tried to ward me off as she did not want me to observe the sacrifice, but I kept standing there, watching with eyes wide open at this curious spectacle. They told me that it was just a red shampoo - I was young and naive, but not to the point of believing them! I remember very well that I felt neither fear nor sadness, only incomprehension. I did not understand how anyone could do harm to a sheep, it seemed to me absurd and pointless.

After this incident, it was as if a curtain had been drawn back revealing the backstage to all these delicious family dishes that I used to love. Initially, I only refused to eat red meat, but one day as I watched a roast chicken being set upon the dinner table, I recognized the animal's shape and refused to touch it. Then the same thing happened with a fish. It was then that my family and the adults around me tried to intervene. They told me that it was impossible to maintain a healthy diet without meat, that I should *at least* eat fish. To prove that I was wrong, they ventured into the religious domain, asking: 'Would you dare to forbid that which God has made permissible?'

Stubborn as I was, they learned to live with it. More and more often, we would all eat vegetarian food at home. However, eating out as a vegetarian was more complicated. If it was not the waiters' incomprehension, it was the virtual absence of suitable food choices. As such, I often found myself left with an uneven match of side-orders while the rest of my family ate a full meal. At the time it was difficult to find a single vegetarian option on a restaurant menu. Even today, the primary plant-based option, a salad, often contains tuna.

In school I encountered similar resistance. During the month of Ramadan, when kids brought their lunch to school, my vegetarian meals were a fond topic of ridicule. At the time, my classmates often teased me for having poor taste, a taste 'belonging to the poor,' how easy and uncostly it might be to feed me with vegetables and seeds!

Eating meat in Morocco has always been a question of social status. In pre-colonial Morocco, meat was a highly prized food and only the most affluent classes could really afford it on a daily basis. The general population only ate meat on the occasion of the major celebrations: *Eid al-Kabir*; *Ouziâ* (Berber New Year); weddings, etc. During the rest of the year,

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the average Moroccan was confined to a near-vegetarian diet.[1]

With colonization and the emergence of the first modern slaughterhouses, Morocco's diet changed profoundly. Celebration dishes became everyday favorites, and the foods which had previously been the preserve of the richest became common fare. Today, the average Moroccan consumes 17.4 kg of red meat per year,[2] although this number does not (yet) equal that of most European countries (for example in France the figure is 60 kg per year), it does remain significantly higher than during the pre-colonial era. As the upper-class diet became accessible to the middle classes, the act of refusing it was frowned upon as curious at best, or at worst as haughty and snobbish.

The fast food boom cemented the role of meat and products of animal origin, casting them *centre plate*. No sooner had the major international fast food chains opened their doors in Morocco than they were beset by the country's middle classes. To eat out became more and more popular, and among my classmates not eating cheeseburgers or deep-fried chicken wings was the very antithesis of cool. Luckily, in recent years things have become a bit easier for vegetarians - on most menus there is at least one vegetarian option, and even some all-vegetarian restaurants have seen the light of day.

Having become vegetarian for ethical reasons and been faced with the incomprehension of everyone around me, I often found myself justifying it as a matter of individual taste, which is to say that growing up vegetarian in Morocco, my biggest concern was not so much to claim the rights of animals, but simply my own right to exist—to be accepted for who I am.

Discovering Veganism

With age, I became more and more comfortable with my vegetarianism. I surrounded myself with friends who, if not vegetarians themselves, at least understood my commitment. I discovered that vegetarianism had roots in my North-African culture, and I discovered several traditional Moroccan dishes that were 'accidentally' vegetarian: vegetable tagines, seven-vegetable couscous, lentils, white kidney beans, split peas, *bissara*, *harira*, *herbel*, *seffa*, etc.

I also discovered that vegetarianism was not a novel phenomenon, and that thinkers whom I admired like al-Ma'arri had been vegetarians long before our time. Abu al-Ala' al-Ma'arri was a great 11th century Syrian poet and philosopher. To this day, he is considered one of the greatest thinkers and poets of the Arab world. His notoriety is often accompanied by anecdotes about his vegetarianism and solitary lifestyle. In his poem, 'I no longer steal from nature,' al-Ma'arri writes:

Do not unjustly eat fish the water has given up,
And do not desire as food the flesh of slaughtered animals,
Or the white milk of mothers who intended its pure draught for their young, not noble ladies.
And do not grieve the unsuspecting birds by taking eggs;
for injustice is the worst of crimes… [3]

I understood perfectly his refusal to eat animal flesh, but what about the other products, such as milk, eggs, or even honey? I had already asked myself these questions, but had not thought them through. As a child, when I asked my mother whether the milk we drank did harm to the cows, she said that it was what kept them alive longer. I took her word for it, partly because I was afraid of change. Just like the omnivores who were afraid of changing their habits and perplexed in the face of my vegetarianism, I was perplexed in the face of veganism.

I did not understand the vegan lifestyle, which I found radical, and I had a hard time imagining imposing so many restrictions on myself, restrictions that at the time I hardly understood. In addition, I already felt secluded in my vegetarianism and was afraid to become more so by adopting veganism. I had a hard time imagining myself explaining to others why I would refuse to eat a piece of cheese or a slice of cake containing egg. Within my own circle, I was often told that as long as I ate eggs and dairy products, it was OK, as long as I did not become like those 'crazy people' who would not eat anything that comes from an animal.

Those 'crazy people' were the vegans. A vegan is a person who practices a lifestyle, which excludes, as far as possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals; whether this is for food, clothing or any other purpose.[4]

The Internet gives us a privileged opportunity to see for ourselves the flip side of certain popular phenomena. Thus while surfing online, I discovered these infamous vegans and found that they did not seem to have a more complicated life than mine. Gradually I came to see them as ordinary principled people, people among whom I might stand.

More and more often I came across websites and webpages directed towards vegans in Morocco and the Arab world and found comfort in the feeling that I was not so eccentric after all. I closely followed one of the first websites on veganism in the Arab world: *Vegan Life*.[5] I had been following the Facebook group *Vegetarianism in Morocco*[6] for a long time already, but from 2010 on I noticed a substantial increase in the number of vegan members. This trend has become more and more pronounced in recent years; that is, more and more vegetarians have adopted veganism.

Exposed to other vegans in Morocco, I no longer saw veganism as a totally inconceivable practice. I was already avoiding leather and inspired by vegans I started to seek out information on the origin of hygiene and cosmetic products, doing my best to avoid those that might have been tested on animals. However, I continued my consumption of eggs and dairy products. I still did not understand what might drive anyone to such extremes, until the day I got my own visual evidence.

I must have been 20 years old when I first saw a video disclosing the hidden reality of the livestock industry. Until then, except for the ritual sacrifice of *Eid al-Kabir* and a few fleeting visions of caged chickens in the *souk*, I had not really looked the violence of the livestock industry in the face. Until then I had never seen what happened behind the slaughterhouse walls. I looked into the eyes of the animals and saw a distress that marked me deeply. I now understood that, in addition to meat, products like dairy and eggs were also the product of violence and suffering.

When I spoke to my friends or family about these acts of violence, they often assured me that it only happened in the West. They insisted that in Morocco, livestock farming was radically different from what one saw in the *Earthlings* documentary. However, I was not satisfied with this response. To me it was only a question of scale. Whether small or large-scale livestock farming, animal suffering and exploitation was inevitable in the production of meat *or* milk. I also learned that slaughterhouses had been introduced in Morocco at the very beginning of colonization and that in developing countries the application of industrial livestock farming produced, if anything, even greater suffering than in that of their colonial counterparts.[7]

I felt completely paralyzed in the face of this suffering. While animal protection organizations are becoming more numerous in Morocco, they focus almost exclusively on pets or the welfare of animals such as donkeys, still used to pull cargo in villages and towns. The livestock we eat and which produce milk and eggs for human consumption remain without any protection whatsoever. As such, I knew that something must change in order for me to align myself with my true values and that would start on the plate right in front of me.

I started transitioning towards veganism, even though I was still afraid of the social consequences: incomprehension, exclusion, and the new difficulties I would have to deal with on a daily basis. Not speaking about it to anyone, and little by little, I started excluding products of animal origin from my lifestyle. The list of things that I could eat in restaurants narrowed, but becoming more and more creative in my orders I still managed to eat decent meals. At home my taste became more sophisticated and I discovered all the subtleties and delights particular to vegetable cuisine: cashew-based *faux cheese*; egg- and milk-free cakes that had nothing to envy of their predecessors; ground lentils and nuts for a flavorful Bolognese; crushed chickpeas curiously reminiscent of tuna; perfectly creamy coconut milk-based ice cream, and more still.

However, the time soon came when my dairy- and egg-free dishes began to spur intrigue. People around me started asking questions and I was forced to speak about it. To put my new commitment into words was difficult. I was afraid to seem pushy towards my interlocutors, to seem too weird or too extreme. I was especially afraid of assigning blame, aware that it is a sensitive topic involving complex questions, such as: As humans are omnivorous, are we not supposed to feed on animals? Do we really have a moral obligation towards animals? Should we not above all abolish human suffering?

Growing Our Understanding

The incomprehension I encountered upon turning vegan was even greater than that which I faced at the time of my vegetarianism. But this time, older and armed with what I had learned from Moral Philosophy and Animal Studies lectures, I had a little more confidence in my own position. Without judging or pointing fingers, I calmly explained my point of view, why I had chosen this lifestyle, and why it was not as far-fetched as it may have seemed. I started out by stating clearly that it was not simply a question of personal taste, the pretext that I had previously used in order to avoid embarrassing discussions. I also explained that it was neither a whim concerning calories, nor a purity dogma; I simply did not want to contribute to animal suffering.

Reading Peter Singer's work,[8] as well as the thoughts contributed to *Effective Altruism*[9] I understood the importance of a pragmatic approach to the cause of animal welfare. While I am now committed to a vegan lifestyle, and do feel regret about my past consumption of animal products, I have learned to appreciate vegetarians, flexitarians and all those who in some way attempt to limit the suffering caused to animals. When it comes to practice, two 'semi-vegans' may do more to alleviate animal suffering than one vegan, and the large majority of people are more likely to adopt this 'middle way'.

From Melanie Joy, I learned that what she terms 'carnism' is a dominant and invisible ideology based on 'the three Ns of justification,' namely that eating meat is 'Normal, Natural and Necessary.'[10] Echoing the issues relating to meat and social status described above, I could add yet a fourth N in the Moroccan context, that is, 'Noble'. I also learned that there was a whole psychology behind the act of eating meat; much more complex and deeply embedded in our culture than my 5 or 6-year-old self could have ever imagined… sitting at the table before a roast chicken dinner.

We grow up in a given culinary culture. It marks us from early childhood. We associate certain flavors with communion with others, place, identity and value; as such, it becomes difficult to relate these to the face of a suffering animal. Moreover, and just like me when I first became vegetarian, and then vegan, people are afraid of isolating themselves, of feeling misunderstood or becoming the subject of ridicule. These are all factors that make resistance towards my lifestyle so strong. Instead of opposing them with anger or frustration, I learned to deal with them by means of a more open and understanding mind. On this new ground, I learned to communicate better in my everyday life, whether it be about veganism or any other topic close to my heart.

Coincidentally, as I became more and more comfortable with my veganism, the people around me became more receptive to it. More and more, I was able to share my lifestyle with family and friends. Some people around me have even chosen to become vegans, or vegetarians, or to reduce their consumption of animal products.

Surfing the Internet, I discovered that there were other vegans in Morocco, that I was not as isolated as all that. Within the group Veganism in Morocco I made some friends, we shared meals and thoughts upon our experience as *vegans au Maroc*. To my knowledge, this was the first time I had met another vegan in the flesh.

I also discovered *L'Vegans*,[11] one of the first vegan communities in Morocco. The collective aims to unify vegans and vegetarians, not only in Morocco, but throughout the Arab world. Another of *L'Vegans'* objectives is to normalize veganism in the eyes of the non-vegan public. To this end, they have begun to organize events around the discovery of the vegan lifestyle. The first event took place last Ramadan in Casablanca, in the vegetarian restaurant 'Veggie'. The program consisted of a 100% vegan *Iftar* and coincided with the release of the documentary *Forks over Knives*,[12] which deals with the health consequences of animal product consumption. The event was a success, and the collective plans to organize further events in the near future.

Translated from the French by Pierre Alain Parfond

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2 Entreprises-Coloniales (2017) *Société Générale des Abattoirs Municipaux et Industriels au Maroc: Création de la Société Générale des abattoirs municipaux de France, de la Cie générale du Maroc*. Available online at: http://www.entreprises-coloniales.fr/afrique-du-nord/Abattoirs_industriels_Maroc.pdf Accessed: 15 August 2018.
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4 The Vegan Society (ND) *Definition of veganism*. Available online at: www.vegansociety.com/go-vegan/definition-veganism. Accessed: 7 July 2018.
5 See: www.vegslife.com
6 See: www.facebook.com/groups/VegAuMaroc/
7 Faunalytics (2017) Factory Farming in Developing Countries: A Review. Available online at: faunalytics.org/factory-farming-developing-countries-review Accessed: 18 July 2018.
8 Singer, P. (2009) *Animal Liberation*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
9 See: www.effectivealtruism.org
10 Joy, M. (2011) *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*. Newburyport: Conari Press.
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On the Verge of a Breakthrough: Hope for LGBTI Communities in the MENA Region

George Azzi

The MENA region might appear to be a desperate one on the surface, and truly, it has been burdened with the toughest of laws. However, breakthroughs are happening, the landscape is changing and there are more advocates for positive change across the Arab world. Nevertheless, we still have a long way to go.

This article aims to explain the direction we're moving in, and the strategies that are enabling us to fight for our shared goal to abolish crucial laws and social practices against the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual and Intersexed community (LGBTI) across the Arab region.

Understanding the Regional Context

To gain a better understanding of the regional context, we will consider it from three perspectives: legally, socially, and politically. The challenges faced by the community on a daily basis are strongly allied to these three principles. These are the areas that affect the way in which LGBTI is stigmatised on a social level, how much it is persecuted on a legal level, and how much it is used to shift public opinion for political gain. One would think that the issue in the region is simply a matter of legality. Given the many laws, religious or state, which still criminalise LGBTI practices the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity movement (SOGI) needs to fully grasp the repercussions of all three layers on the LGBTI community.

Let's start with the legal sphere: there are many laws that govern different countries and which differ according to when the law was established and how the country's law system was built. We can split laws related to LGBTI into four kinds:

- Countries where LGBTI practices are clearly criminalised like Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria.
- Countries that are less clear on the definition of LGBTI and consider it 'An act against the laws of nature.' Such is the case in Lebanon and Syria.
- Countries that don't have any laws pertaining to sexual conduct but nevertheless refer to laws that are set to maintain public morality. Such is the case in Egypt and Jordan.
- Countries that apply laws on LGBTI according to their understanding of the Shari'a. Such as KSA and Sudan, where they are sentenced to capital punishment.

The frequency and number of laws passed do not provide clarity on how the law relates to LGBTI communities. For example, Egypt, where the law is based on public morality and doesn't cover LGBTI *per se*, is one of the countries where the LGBTI community is most persecuted. Other countries, where it is clearly criminalised, like Tunisia, are the least likely to persecute the community. Therefore it is not legislation that determines the way a society treats the LGBTI community rather it is the extent to which societal norms in different countries impact on an LGBTI individual's life.

The most documented cases of persecution are not reported by the courts but by individuals. For example, cases recorded in Jordan, are related to tribes and range from acts of violence to total rejection of individuals in their workplace and environment. They have more power than the government in some instances and can sometimes influence the most violent of mobs. There have been instances where an individual has had to be removed from Jordan in order to protect them from their tribe. Even if

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this person has done nothing illegal in the eyes of the law, society can build a case on its own against LGBTI individuals with total disregard for the individual, government, and the state.

In some instances, society acts violently against civil society and the LGBTI community as a result of political uprising. We witnessed a backlash against civil society and human rights' activists in general after the Arab spring and in countries where the Arab spring failed. In Egypt, we witnessed a worsening of laws controlling civil society under President el-Sisi's reign, particularly those related to organising and funding. Laws have bestowed the power to inflict severe punishment on anyone working in human rights to the extent that those engaged in such activity have been accused of treason and compelled society to support the political power that imposed this. The LGBTI community in Egypt was greatly affected by this and most activism had to be shifted online. This was a direct result of the Egyptian government's enforced closure of a number of international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and their imposition of harsh laws on foreign funding and other practices thereby enforcing greater constraints on civil society and LGBTI activists. In this way the government aligned itself more closely with many of Moubarak's practices.

Another practice that Sisi has appropriated from Moubarak, is to focus on LGBTI and smaller cases related to the community in order to turn the tide of public opinion against them and use them as a scapegoat; a distraction from other issues facing the country most of which are the current governing body's responsibilities. A good example of this was when a member of the audience waved the rainbow flag at a Mashrou' Leila concert (a group known for their support of the LGBTI community and whose lead singer is known for being openly gay). The event was recorded by the government controlled media and eventually caused an outrage. The group was banned from Egypt, the individuals associated with the event were arrested; which caused further homophobic backlashes across the country. The country's focus shifted to this, and away from the bigger issues prominent on social media just a month before.

Another instance of how discrimination against the LGBTI community can be used for political ends takes us to Algeria, where preventive measures were taken to silence civil society and avoid another Arab spring. One of these measures was to try to discredit members of the opposition by outing them as gay. This worked in favour of the government's media campaign, rallying the masses against the opposition.

State of the Movement in the MENA Region

Despite the many obstacles the LGBTI community has had to face, and continues to face, in the region the movement against discrimination and criminalisation of LGBTI individuals is growing. In fact, until 2009, 'Helem' of Lebanon, was the only LGBTI organisation publically operating in the Arab region. The role that Helem could play on a regional level was the subject of debate, but being small and mostly run on a voluntary basis, Helem chose not to be overwhelmed by regional projects and focus on the already complicated national context. Following consultation with regional activists, it was clear that one of the ways to move forward was to create a learning platform to produce knowledge exchange on gender and sexuality, in a region where non-pejorative words to describe LGBTI people were only introduced in 2004.[1]

The Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (AFE) based in Beirut and established in 2009, spearheaded by former Helem activists, with the aim of supporting the movement for LGBTI rights and protections across MENA. AFE broadened participation in LGBTI rights by investing heavily in grassroots civil society and building the capacity of nascent activists, groups and organisations, through knowledge exchange, research and protection.[2]

Since 2009, and especially in the last four years, the MENA region has witnessed an outburst of activism and social entrepreneurship initiatives primarily fuelled by a general discontent with the prevailing political turmoil and social inequalities it has highlighted. From social movements in Cairo campaigning against sexual harassment to demonstrations in Beirut against domestic violence, from Syrian gay refugees under exploitation, to Sudan's growing opposition to female genital mutilation practices, and the widening awareness in North Africa to vulnerable groups regarding HIV/AIDS and sexual health, it is safe to say that on the whole the MENA region is at a crossroads in relation to questions of gender and sexuality.

The situation is far from the same in other Arab countries and can be broken down into four different categories:

Countries where the community is completely invisible with no form of organisations: Saudi Arabia, Mauritania

Countries where the community is visible but there are no organisations or associations: Kuwait, UAE

Countries with secret LGBTI groups who are not yet visible enough to create a social movement (Sudan, Algeria, Jordan, Egypt)

Countries with publically operating LGBTI groups (Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco)

However, this situation is far from stable, the political instability in the MENA region can radically change the shape of LGBTI activism in a country, hence the importance of regional structures that offer contingency plans and logistical support; enabling activists to continue working in the region even in the face of threats.

Currently, we have more than seventeen organisations operating in MENA and this number continues to grow. Most of the achievements on the LGBTI front in the MENA region were made possible because of this growing movement and the unshakable belief of key people across the region that things can change.

Strategies

These seventeen plus organisations employ a number of strategies to empower the community to speak out in their quest to fight against discrimination and criminalisation.

Visibility

The decision to seek greater media coverage is not a unanimous one in the community, who are split between supporters of visibility as a way to demystify homosexuality by giving a face to the LGBTI community, and those who fear a backlash.

An example of how important it is to be visible was when, in 2006 and 2007, an avalanche of national and international media invaded the centre of Helem. While media attention from outlets such as, CNN, BBC, Arte and other international and regional TV stations were centred on Helem the community was protected against detention. Needless to say the police knew that the arrest of Helem members would not go unnoticed. Activists in Jordan are also using visibility as a strategy by

creating alternative media platforms such as my kali.

Building Alliances

In July 2006, Israel invaded part of southern Lebanon, which forced many from the south to seek refuge in the parks of Beirut. One of these parks was the 'sanayeh' garden, right next to Helem office. In light of the political situation, Helem suspended its activities and offered its office as a crisis management space. Twenty NGOs were operating from Helem for a month, the urgency of the situation forced people to overcome their differences and work together. During this month sexual orientation did not matter, there was an emergency situation and the humanitarian crisis needed to be managed. By the end of the war, Helem's allies and supporters had grown considerably, a great lesson for everybody in terms of intersectionality.

We witnessed a clear role for the LGBTI community during the Arab spring. This was particularly visible in Egypt and Tunisia. The main organisers and spokespeople for many protests back then were LGBTI individuals and this forged a relationship between the LGBTI community and the political cause. In Tunisia, for example, several of the parties that came out of the movement adopted the LGBTI case in their agenda.

Documentation

In most countries of the Arab world, campaigning for LGBTI rights has, at some stage, proved difficult and nigh on impossible. The public situation made it impossible for activists to operate physically through rallies and communication so the community resorted to work being done underground: work on the documentation of LGBTI cases. This work proved to be invaluable as the documentation of individual cases of LGBTI discrimination, criminalisation, and abuse brought in results on a regional and international scale. The main focus of Egyptian activists in recent years was to produce reports against the government around the LGBTI community: these reports were used to expose the government in UN conventions and regional bodies such as the African commission and to engage these bodies in investing in more support for the LGBTI community.

Services

One of the ways to create a community that interacts with each other and empowers one another is to provide services that respond to their needs. Be it medical, psychosocial, legal, these services empower the community and equip them with the drive to conduct political work, and to preserve the support that this community is providing. In Morocco and Tunisia, the first form of gay activism was born from support groups and initiatives for HIV/AIDS. The movement began because individuals felt they had the support of the whole community and this in turn had fostered a trusting environment between activists and the community enabling the community to play a greater role in lobbying against LGBTI discrimination.

Success Stories

Certain tactics employed by the community have led to a great number of success stories across the region.

Lebanon

There is no doubt that the situation in Lebanon, particularly in Beirut, has improved for LGBTI people. On a legal level, four rulings positively affected the LGBTI community in Lebanon, each ruling built on the previous one and pushed the agenda further towards more extensive rights for the LGBTI community, the first ruling was by Judge Mounir Sleiman in 2009. In his ruling, Sleiman argued,

whereas man is part of nature and one of its elements, and a cell within a cell in it, it cannot be said that any practice of his or any behaviour of his is against nature[….] *therefore consensual same-sex relations were not "unnatural," and therefore shouldn't be subjected to legal penalty.*

In 2014, Judge Naji El Dahdah built on the previous decision in a case against a transgendered woman, adding 'a person's gender should not simply be based on their personal status registry document, but also on their outward physical appearance and self-perception.'[3]

In 2015, Judge Janet Hanna of the court of appeal recognised the rights of a person not to identify with the gender they were assigned at birth[4].

Earlier this year, judge Rabih Maalouf, considered homosexuality to be a personal right and any persecution under Article 534 an invasion of an individual's privacy.

Tunisia

In 2017, the human rights committee appointed by the president, recommended the abolishment of Article 230 of the Tunisian penal code that criminalises homosexuality. In 2016, following the UPR report of Tunisian activists, Tunisia was actively engaged in the call for a ban on the practice of anal testing.

Morocco

When a Lesbian couple was arrested in Morocco, all LGBTI organisations across the region released a statement against this act. The ripple effect created by the accumulation of these statements led to the story becoming international news, which eventually put pressure on the government to release the couple.

Although a lot of work has yet to be done in the region, we are on the verge of a breakthrough supported by everlasting hope. We are seeing changes; whether big or small, individual or communal, slowly but surely, in some countries more than others, but change is happening and there is no stopping it. I strongly believe the more we continue in our efforts to stand our ground for what we believe in, more individuals will feel it is possible for them to play a role in the movement. The more individuals feel empowered by the action that some groups are engaged in, the stronger these movements will become. It is a ripple effect, caused by one case, one strong media headline or one NGO that, against the odds, continues to campaign throughout the region and will hopefully create enough noise to overcome the difficulties that the community still faces on legal, societal and political fronts.

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4 See, Safdar, A. (2016) 'Transgender ruling in Lebanon an 'empowering' moment.' Available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/02/transgender-ruling-lebanon-empowering-moment-160206125311413.html Accessed: 15 September 2018.

Being Deaf in Tunisia, Being Excluded?

Manel Bergaoui

Manel Bergaoui is a Tunisian teacher of English and the first teacher of English to deaf and hard of hearing people in Tunisia and the MENA region. She is author of Let's Handspeak English, the first English textbook designed for the deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Tunisia and the MENA region. Manel is also a creative entrepreneur who created a mobile application called LET'S app, the first educational mobile application for the deaf and hard of hearing in Tunisia. A passionate advocate for the deaf, since 2012 Manel has been an active volunteer for the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Tunis (Association Voix du sourds de Tunisie, AVST). She has devoted her work to lobbying for improvements to education and defending the rights of the deaf and hard of hearing, an invisible minority in Tunisian society.

Tunisia, where the protests and demonstrations of the Arab Spring began, is in the process of democratic transition. Since 2011, Tunisia has faced a number of challenges in the process of building a democratic government and stable economy. But 2014 heralded a significant moment in its history with the creation of a new constitution. This constitution will provide the legal framework for how Tunisia will be governed and guarantees that fundamental rights including human rights, freedom of expression and freedom of information will be protected; and the rights of people with disabilities is no exception.

The new Tunisian constitution, Article 47 states that, 'Children have the right to be guaranteed dignity, health care, education and teaching by their parents and the state. The state shall provide all forms of protection to all children without discrimination according to the best interests of the child.' In addition, article 48 says that, 'The state shall protect persons with disabilities from all forms of discrimination. Every disabled citizen shall have the right to benefit, according to the nature of the disability, from all measures that will ensure their full integration into society, and the state shall take all necessary measures to achieve this.' The 2014 national census found that 2.3% of Tunisia's population (around 252,000 people) have a disability, 37% are children and by of which 37% are children of which 16% have auditory disabilities.

The Tunisian government signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007, and ratified it and its Optional Protocol on April 2, 2008. The Convention covers a a big variety of disabilities and reasserts that all persons irrespective of their disabilities are entitled to enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. It identifies areas where adaptations must be made for persons with disabilities to effectively exercise their rights and areas where their rights have been violated. The convention also shows where protection of rights must be substantiated. Yet there seems to be a serious disconnection between legal policies and common practices so that persons with disabilities remain largely segregated from society, suffering discrimination and not enjoying the same rights as other citizens.

Furthermore, the first Tunisian municipal elections held in May 2018, prescribed specific disabled access rules to enable people with disabilities to participate in the voting and to stand as candidates in the elections. All polling stations had to be made accessible for wheelchair users and ballot papers and other materials made available in a format suitable both for people with visual and auditory disabilities.

Notwithstanding all these positive developments, deaf people still suffer discrimination and this is particularly noticeable in the field of education. Tunisia has a two-track system of education: one run by the Ministry of Education, which provides mainstream schooling, and one controlled by the Ministry of Social Affairs, which provides education for children with special needs. The two tracks are completely different. The schools under the Ministry of Social Affairs are known as centres or associations and don't follow the same strategy or programme of education as mainstream schools. In addition, people with hearing impairment have to study six years in these centres and then go on to follow a vocational training programme; although their certificates are not held in high esteem by the government. Each centre has a different focus and goal although they often share similar

methods and ideologies. However, if you visit the centres for the deaf and hard of hearing, you may find autistic, profoundly deaf, hard of hearing, and mentally ill people together in the same centre. This only exacerbates the problems as their behaviours and needs are completely different and require different kinds of care. A shortage of specialists in Sign Language and special educational needs is the problem, attests Wassim ben Dhiab, a deaf person himself, an engineer, and a previous member of the Association Voix du Sourds de Tunisie (AVST), the oldest Tunisian association for the deaf.

The majority group ignores the needs of this minority group. Wassim believes that there is a need to raise awareness among the hearing community. For instance, Tunisians ignore the CRPD convention so he suggests, 'There should be workshops to introduce the convention to everyone tailored according to their needs.' Even the deaf are not fully aware of their rights and duties but as the illiteracy rate is high among the deaf community, they are unable to read or understand these conventions and articles so everything should be translated for them. There are no up-to-date statistics about the number of deaf people living in Tunisia but as it stands the infrastructure is not working and needs to be adjusted to accommodate people with special needs.

The Tunisian deaf community faces numerous challenges in order to survive within the hearing community and deaf people today still encounter discrimination, stereotyping and misconceptions, such as the perception that they are dumb and incapable of learning. As an invisible minority group in Tunisia, several students find they are not able to carry on their studies in school taking a vocational path such as hairdressing or sewing in order to make a living, very often not fully exploring and exploiting their intellectual and human capacity.

Integration into the job market for the deaf minority in Tunisia is poorly recognised and provides another challenge not only for the deaf, but also the majority of disabled people. In terms of employment, companies' enthusiasm for adhering to the quota of hiring 1% disabled employees is promising. The Tunisian government offers an incentive allowing the wages of disabled employees to be paid out of taxes. In practice, however, the quota is rarely implemented. The low rate of integration into the job market is perhaps also a reflection of the relatively poor quality of education offered in specialised centres.

However, we cannot ignore the role associations have to play in the improvement of the quality of life of disabled people. As a minority group excluded from the majority group, people with disabilities find refuge in these associations as they encounter like-minded people speaking the same language who treat them as equals. When you visit AVST, for instance, you will find a new culture with a new language, Tunisian Sign Language.

Those associations do not only provide a refuge but can also improve the lifestyle of people with disabilities. From a medical perspective AVST in collaboration with the ministry of healthcare, and Doctor Amira

Yaacoubi, founded a hospital in Djbal Lahmar for the deaf and hard of hearing where they can have a medical consultation in Tunisian Sign Language. In terms of education, AVST is the first association to deliver lessons in English, in Tunisian Sign Language, by the first and only teacher of English in the MENA region, Manel Bergaoui; they also teach French and Arabic. In the cultural sphere, AVST has organised a number of activities to raise awareness among the Tunisian community, like World Deaf Day which was celebrated for the first time in Tunisia in 2017. In addition, AVST team filmed the first movie in Tunisian Sign language in Tunisia in 2016. The film's name is *Bardo* and is a German production.

'Café signes' is another cultural activity created by the deaf themselves in AVST in 2015. This is an event that brings deaf and hearing people together in a café to introduce deaf culture to hearing people and share unforgettable moments together. The deaf community is certainly working hard to make their voice heard by everyone.

AVST not only plays a crucial role in the development of disabled people, but also other associations like Ibsar for blind and partially sighted people as well as Handicap International (HI). For example, in 2011, HI launched an inclusive local development project that aims to improve the access of disabled people to the environmental sector to boost their full participation and integration into Tunisian society. Indeed, each association, has in its way, contributed to the development of their community and the Tunisian community in general. However, as Wassim ben Dhiab mentioned in his interview, there is a lack of information. The media has a key role to play in the sharing of information, in sensitising society. Accurate media coverage of disabled people living in depressive situations only began after the revolution. A documentary about an isolated and forgotten family with four disabled children in North Eastern Tunisia gained particular attention. However, this is still very limited. On Tunisian TV the news is only signed once a day, at noon, on one channel. Moreover, there are no programmes translated into Tunisian Sign Language which shows a real exclusion of people with hearing disabilities.

A Personal Contribution to Make Deaf People in Tunisia Speak English

In 2015, Manel Bergaoui delivered the first English lesson for the deaf and hard of hearing in Tunisia in the AVST. It was the first time that deaf students in Tunisia had had the opportunity to study English. However, there are no appropriate textbooks for deaf students and there are no teaching-methodologies for deaf people in Tunisia. There is also no provision to enable deaf students to learn a foreign language widening their access to a whole body of knowledge through reading online.

Frustrated at the lack of materials available for teaching English to deaf and hard of hearing students in Tunisia, Manel invented *Let's Handspeak English*. The Professional Fellow Programme sponsored by the United States Department of State enabled this book to be produced. It is the first English textbook for the deaf and hard of hearing in the MENA region. Manel started using her book to teach English in 2017 in Amideast (a leading American non-profit organisation engaged in international education, training and development activities in the Middle East and North Africa), they offered their space and help. It was a successful experience as their level of English improved. In 2018, she also invented the first educational mobile application for the deaf and hard of hearing, the application is called LETSapp and is fun and helpful, providing an opportunity for the deaf to play and learn at the same time. As Manel stated, 'I do hope that the deaf community in Tunisia will have equal opportunities in education and within Tunisian society'.

In conclusion, we cannot assume that civil society can give meaning to the legal texts in place if the population is not well informed about the situation of people with disabilities. As mentioned above, deaf people in Tunisia believe there is a need for society to be sensitised and the media are well placed to play a key role in the dissemination of greater and more accurate coverage of issues related to persons with disabilities. The roles of civil society, the government, and the media are catenated and influence each other. In order to make Tunisia unreservedly a better place for disabled people, it is imperative that all three actors are held accountable for making this issue a priority and that they take a step forward to bridge the gap between legislation and reality. If we really want to change our system and policies in Tunisia to comply with Articles 47 and 48 of the 2014 Constitution, we can no longer tolerate communities of people being excluded because of their special needs.

'Optimists are a Threat to our Customs and Traditions, and to our Children's Morals'

Al Hudood interviews Citizen Saeed Douzan

Scarcely a day goes by without fresh news of charitable activities being carried out by individuals, as they haphazardly work to bring their plans to fruition and spread their message that tomorrow will be a brighter day. Each report brings further confirmation that these people have inserted themselves into society's seams and intersections, that they have followers, fans and supporters, up and down the country. It is almost as though they are a part of us that they belong here.

Despite the great progress we have made in eradicating minorities, many people—the likes of Citizen Saeed Douzan of Jordan, for instance—are concerned about the ever-growing number of optimists. Their excessive optimism has started to disturb his rest, to muddy the already murky waters of his existence with their fantasies that life is full of opportunities, butterflies, flowers and rainbows - things which are an insult to our customs and traditions. They corrupt our children and turn them against us.

Al Hudood met with Mr. Saeed and spoke to him:

Al Hudood: Very good to meet you, sir, and thanks for agreeing to this interview. We hope it's…

Saeed Douzan: You hope?

AH: Ah… Um, as you see it, how have optimists affected your life?

SD: The thing is, they give a false impression of our lives to foreigners. They make out we're all happy and our future's bright, so the foreigners get the idea we don't need them or their aid, and they cut us off. Plus, they're a danger to the mental health of our children. Think about it. My little boy sees some optimist who believes the future's bright and that there's such a thing as hope in life. He's going to start believing the same thing. How do I get poison like that out of his head?

AH: What drives the optimism of these people?

SD: Whatever it is, it's unnatural. Clearly, they're getting their optimism from illegal sources. Like, money from abroad in exchange for

Al-Hudood
The Caricature by Lo'ai Hazem: Content Manager at Al hudood. Lo'ai is also a caricaturist, writer, illustrator, and graphic designer, with work published on several media platforms, newspapers, including a number of sole-authored books. Al hudood: Is an Arabic publishing organisation founded in 2013 that produces its own original satirical content covering a wide array of topics including politics, economy, technology, culture, and women's issues.

working as a fifth column, for spying. Or they've been taking drugs and it's affected their brains and they've lost touch with reality. Or they might be sex offenders, or pedophiles, or antiquity smugglers.

AH: What do think they are trying to achieve?

SD: I don't know exactly, but I'm confident they are planning something major and extremely dangerous, and it's quite clear they're in the final stages, because they wouldn't be so suspiciously cheerful otherwise. This is why we have to root them out as quickly as possible.

AH: What would you do if you met one?

SD: The first thing I'd do would be to try to convince him that he should repent his optimism. I'd remind him of his wretched existence and the grim future that awaits him. If he remained unconvinced, I'd resort to violence. I'd beat him until he was permanently disabled in some way, without hope of being cured, and if that proved beyond me, I'd run away as fast as possible in case I caught the disease myself.

AH: How can we fight the optimists ourselves?

SD: To fight them we have to fight the optimism that's infected them. We can force them to watch the news. We can send them daily emails with reports from human rights organizations and details of our debts to the World Bank. Spoil the mood on happy occasions. On high days and holidays instead of saying, 'may every year find you well!' we can borrow from the poet Mutanabbi and say, 'what have you brought this time?' If they laugh we'll ask God's forgiveness and warn them that mirth is a sign of impending disaster.

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