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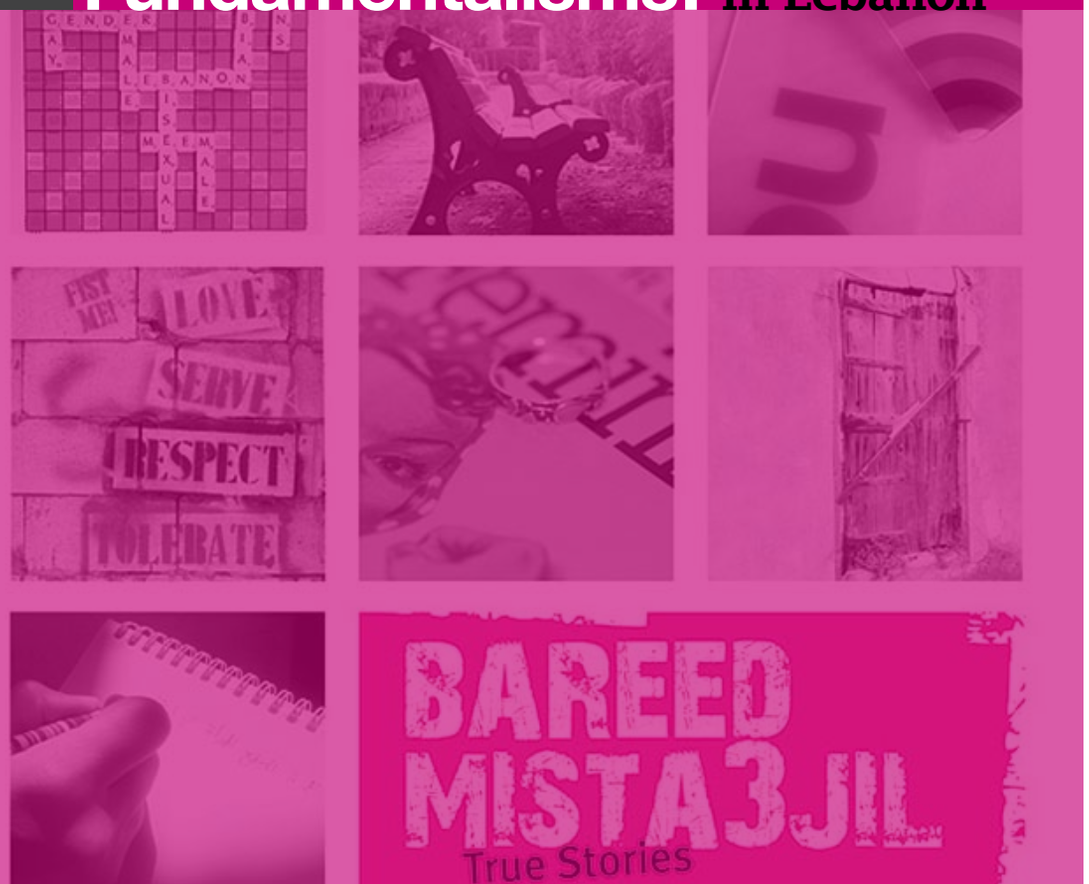

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Meem
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Deconstructing Religious Fundamentalism

Language is a tool of power. And words are only as powerful as the meanings we give them. We see it happen all the time: under certain circumstances, some names begin to gain currency, and what had once been just another word or phrase becomes a concept that carries a forceful social and political impact around the world.

"Religious fundamentalism" has become one of those scary terms that evokes a range of intimidating images in people's heads. Some imagine it as the threat of anger and violence and destruction, driven by a religion that we don't understand. When these people happen to share our religion, we are quick to distance ourselves from them. The term "religious fundamentalism" is particularly scary to women. It evokes a mission to "go back" to morals and values that are almost always oppressive towards women. Going back on change and progress means taking away any liberties women may have won in the past decades. In addition, religious fundamentalism monopolizes the spiritual life of people, claiming to be the "correct" or "pure" religion. It justifies all sorts of violations—especially against women's bodies and lives—in the name of God.

In the particular case of Lebanon, religion mainly becomes fundamentalist when several factors take their toll on a community, such as poverty, a negligent or corrupt state, sectarian feuds and wars, and a general socio-economic inability to adjust to this post-modern, globalized world. Religion thus intervenes and becomes more political, speaking out against what it perceives as the threat of secularism and providing services for impoverished communities that the state has long neglected. And so, fundamentalism rises and takes on a sectarian face. Because of historical and colonial peculiarities, the Lebanese state and law recognize 18 distinct religious-ethnic communities, and the population of every sect is concentrated in specific geographical areas.

This paper aims to map out the strategies used by Meem in resisting these diverse religious fundamentalism(s).

A Theoretical Understanding of "Religious Fundamentalism"

Dissecting "religious fundamentalism" as a term, we start with the first word—"religious," i.e., relating to religion. But what is religion? Is it just a deep belief in powers that are greater than we as humans, or is it an institution, with its own hierarchies, its own morals and values, and its own martyrs, heroes and archenemies? No religion is ever monolithic; it changes with people's interpretation of it, according to factors such as their socio-economic background, geographic and cultural location, ethnicity, as well as their gender and sexuality, among other characteristics.

Most religions are similar in their essence. They are all forms of organizing both relationships between human beings and a relationship that goes beyond the human, the material, to the divine. Since the beginning of human history, there has been an unshakeable tendency in people to think beyond the here and now, to question where they come from, where they're going and what higher powers control their lives. With time, these questions became more organized, more widespread, and were quickly instrumentalized for the reinforcement of patriarchy under the influence of male leadership in both the personal and political spheres. The ascendancy of different religions has a lot to do with prevalent powers, and as power is sometimes a corruptor, many religious institutions became more concerned with assuming or retaining power than with morals. Moreover, patriarchal religious institutions take families as their nucleus, where, in the case of monotheistic religions, God, the father, is equivalent to the heads of the religious institutions as well as to the head of the family. This has proven to be a "good" strategy to control people, particularly women, through the reinforcement and replication of patriarchal structures.

But we must not forget that, when tackling issues of a religious nature, spirituality is also a very important part of people's lives. Religion answers many of our questions and gives us a greater purpose in loving a higher power. When religions and their current institutions fail to answer existential questions satisfactorily for some people, they turn to atheism, or to old-new spiritualities. Religious institutions also foster a sense of community among members who share the same beliefs. The church, for example, is a place where a community congregates socially as well as where it communicates with God. Yet these institutions also present beliefs and rituals on a silver platter, demanding that they not be challenged, and promising to make things easier by indirectly saying things like:

1. There is no need to think about your spirituality so much. More intelligent and enlightened others have thought about it for centuries before you and this is what they came up with, so use your time to follow it rather than question it.

2. Look around you; everyone believes in this religion: your parents, your family, your friends, and your elders. They will love and accept you more readily if you follow the same beliefs and rules.

3. You owe us. We have connected you to God. We have given you meaning and purpose. We are here for your spiritual guidance, so you owe us respect and love and loyalty. And in return, we will take care of you; we will protect you from other religions and enemies, and from confusion and uncertainty.

Yet there will always be people who question religious institutions and constructively criticize their interpretation of doctrines. This is particularly the case with many queer people because they are excluded from most religious discourses and histories and, therefore, find themselves having to abandon either their faith or their sexual identity. This is a common theme of struggle for queers everywhere and often leads to schisms among activists in their political thinking around strategies. The dominant LGBTQI discourse around the world is one of human rights, in which religion is a personal choice that shouldn't interfere with the laws that govern people's lives. At the personal level, many self-identified queer activists in Lebanon consider themselves atheists or agnostics, rejecting completely the oppressive system of religion. On the other hand, some members of Meem refuse the prevalent stereotype in the queer Lebanese community that all queers are atheists. These members write prolifically about subjects such as being a veiled queer woman, or about how their Christian faith and their faith in their activist work are alike and feed each other. Religion thus fills a gap that exists in most of us. And while religious institutions are patriarchal and homophobic, we believe that the core of religion is not necessarily anti-women or anti-queer. But when fundamentalism arises, the ability to question religion becomes impossible.

"Fundamentalism"

Fundamentalism is a refusal to engage, to criticize, or to allow for multiple interpretations. Within fundamentalist strains of religion, this means rejecting any interpretations of religious texts other than what the orthodoxy has decreed. Fundamentalism is an absolutist and self-justifying phenomenon. It is the opposite of change. It is a will to "go back" to beliefs and values and stick to them.

In some ways, religious fundamentalist groups or people are just like social justice activists: they have a cause. They feel righteous. They need to organize. They need resources. They have a system of governance they believe in. They recruit, fund themselves, and form alliances. They are a support group to their own people.

Just like us.

The critical difference, however, lies in our refusal of violence, imposition, militarism, and human rights abuses for the sake of achieving our vision of the world. In addition, social justice movements must always remember that our strength has to derive from engaging in constant self-criticism of hierarchies and power both within our movements as well as outside them. Our strength also lies in our approach. We don't seek to indoctrinate; we aim to educate. We don't work through fear, but through empowering people and giving them hope.

It is also important to look at the recent rise of "religious fundamentalism" after 9/11, when the term became intricately linked to terrorism and, more significantly, to "Islamic terrorism." This, it was clear to many, was a strategy used by powerful Western governments and mainstream media based in those states to justify or understand wars and political intervention in other countries' affairs. The branding of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists and the inter-changeability of identities like Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern were politically convenient tools in the global capitalist race for resources and markets. Women in Afghanistan and Iraq suddenly needed saving by the U.S. military. Palestinian gays and lesbians suddenly needed saving by the Israeli military. For Western audiences, the prevalence of a gay nightlife became the measure of democracy.

In our part of the world, which has been the site of many such wars, we felt no sudden difference after 9/11; on many levels, life went on as usual. While many of the threats of internal struggles between religions and sects and corrupt governments continue, what the rise of global Islamophobia did to our activism was further complicate our rights-based discourse. After 9/11, not only did we have to defend our rights within our communities, but we were also forced to continuously distance ourselves from imperialist and neo-colonial politics.

The main task at hand for any social justice activist or community is to stop fearing the non-negotiable, always-angry, and ever-powerful belief system that religious fundamentalism is alleged to be. If fundamentalism is a refusal to engage, our stand must be an insistence on engagement. But we must navigate our engagement intelligently, constantly re-evaluating our strategies. We, in Meem, have found that the most effective way to approach religious fundamentalisms in our context is through grassroots organizing that resembles, in many ways, the strategies that fundamentalists themselves use.

Contextual Analysis: Understanding Where We are to Get to Where We Want to Be

In everyday Lebanese discourse, we come across different Arabic terms that fall under "religious fundamentalism." "*Ta3assob*" is one, and it means "fanaticism" or prejudice against a particular sect or religion. "*Ta2ifiyya*" means "sectarianism," and for many social activists is synonymous with religious fundamentalism, although it is very commonly used in political and public discourses as a perfectly neutral (and in some cases even positive) term. The implications of sectarianism are not only that every community of the different 18 sects (in a total population of only around four million) is governed by its own personal status laws, but also that this provides a breeding ground for divisions and intolerance among people of the same nation.

Lebanon is notorious for its violent history. In the recent past, the country has been through many civil wars and political upheavals and deadlocks—all sectarian in nature. In fact, Lebanon's formation as a state was sectarian at its core: in 1920, under the sponsorship of France and other colonial powers, the State of Greater Lebanon was declared through the amalgamation of Arab territories that were previously under Ottoman rule, with each territory being the historical home of a different sect(s).[1] This sectarian division was emphasized in 1943 when Lebanon gained its independence from the French Mandate. Currently, Lebanon officially acknowledges 18 different sects within three monotheistic religions, where every sect has its quota in Parliament and in state institutions. Of the 18 constitutionally recognized sects, the three that are dominant are Maronite Catholicism, Sunni Islam, and Shi'a Islam.[2] Some common manifestations of these deep-rooted sectarian divisions are reflected in the fact that every sect in Lebanon has:

- a quota of seats in Parliament;
- a high-level chair (a Maronite president, Sunni prime minister and Shi'a speaker of the house);
- support from and/or close alliances with specific countries in the Middle East and/or in the West;
- its own political party or parties;

- its own geographical "base," with each region of Lebanon known as the centre for a particular sect (or sects); and

- its own religious authorities outside of Lebanon

It is also important to note that Lebanon's diverse sectarianism, and the sects' deep ties with regional and Western "centres" of religion, has made it a prime target for international and regional tensions to manifest themselves within its borders.

In this context, it is worth noting that all of the above sects, parties, and coalitions between them strongly condemn homosexuality and all—even the most leftist of them—are very poor in addressing human rights issues, and women's rights in particular. Additionally, because religion is intricately tied to politics, every sect, and the political party that represents it, concedes to fundamentalists in its own way, because every sect jostles for influence and power, and each fears for its own safety and existence against "the Other(s)."

And so, we confront the oppression and deal with the fundamentalism of all these parties in two ways:

- as a group fighting for social justice in Lebanon as a whole; and

- as individual queer members of our own particular sects working alongside our allies of different sects.

Lebanon criminalizes homosexuality under Article 534 of the Penal Code, a law left over from the French colonial period that condemns "sexual acts against nature" with up to 12 months' incarceration. Even though the law is not frequently applied to put people in jail, it gives the Internal Security Forces the ability to harass (and sometimes even blackmail) people based on what law enforcement officers may perceive to be homosexual behaviours or characteristics. In the summer of 2008, Meem documented cases of police officers harassing women who "looked queer." None of the women pressed charges against their harassers, as they were convinced that the police and judicial authorities would only make their situations worse by outing them to their parents and communities. It is perhaps parental control and social pressure that are the biggest problems facing queer women and transpeople when it comes to their sexual and gender identities and expressions. In Lebanon, it is expected that women (as well as men) should live in their parents' homes until they get married and move in with their spouses (should social class and economic means allow them to live outside of an extended family). Yet while families and society at large will most often give men more freedom to do what they want, women are constantly pressured to dress a certain way, look a certain way, go to "respectable" places and not stay out late at night. It is a double pressure for queer women who are forced to keep their sexualities a secret at the risk of being locked up inside the house or kicked out of their homes.
Here are the different manifestations of religious fundamentalism facing us as individuals and as a movement:

- Religious institutions want to:
  - punish homosexuals (by killing or criminalizing and incarcerating them); and
  - rescue homosexuals (by "curing," reforming or rehabilitating them).

- Religious families:
  - fear that their children's sins will be counted as their own sins on judgment day;
  - fear their children will go to hell; and
  - fear the condemnation of their larger social and religious communities.

- Political authorities:
  - are too pragmatic and self-interested to challenge inequalities derived from colonial or confessional laws, even if they may not personally agree with those laws; and
  - are very careful to appease conservative and fundamentalist allies for their public image and to maintain important ties and influence.

In the Lebanese context, both fundamentalist Islam and Christianity are vocally and aggressively against homosexuality. Whether they believe that it is an inherently sinful urge that can be overcome through the power of faith and prayer, or that it is an imported Western behaviour, fundamentalists want to purify the world of homosexuality.

As it stands, the world's main Sunni Muslim authority (Saudi Arabia) kills homosexuals, and the world's main Shi'a Muslim authority (Iran) kills homosexuals (i.e., both of these states maintain the death penalty for homosexuality). The global Catholic authority (the Vatican) also strongly condemns homosexuality and transsexuality as a disease that humanity must be rid of. While the latter's public statements do not directly demand death to homosexuals, they encourage an atmosphere of intolerance that leads to hate crimes against queer people.

The Case Study at Hand

In August 2007, a small group of lesbian and bisexual women decided to create Meem as a support community for non-heterosexual women and transgendered persons (in all their sexual diversities). The reason was that queer women and transgender persons in Lebanon face multiple layers of discrimination: sexism, classism, homophobia, racism and sectarianism. Because Meem was formed to address the needs of the LBTQ community on a personal level, it was decided that it would remain an underground community, in order to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of its members and in order to be able to reach out to those most vulnerable. We still recognized the importance of public actions and awareness-raising campaigns, but we maintained that our strategy over the first five years would be to build a powerful community. We believed that once we did that, the possibilities for our public advocacy in the future would be endless. So far, in two years, Meem has already developed as a strong queer movement in Lebanon and has grown to over 300 members and many more allies. Challenging religious fundamentalism was clearly something that its members knew they had to take on, but this was a slow process.

At the beginning, we were very afraid to address religion in any way—in our rules or in our debates. We were worried that we wouldn't know how to tackle this issue and that we might offend some members. We were also concerned that discussions would turn into a "my religion vs. your religion" sort of debate, which is probably the most common argument in Lebanon, but which we could not afford to let split our newly formed community. Moreover, because we had been through a fifteen-year war, it was predictable that some of our families may have participated (at least ideologically) in the battles. Many of us also lost relatives during that period. One of our members once wrote about how her friend told her: "your sect killed my aunt 30 years ago and I can never forgive nor forget that." It is this tragic history that convinced us that we had to block any religious debates for a long time and ask people to "leave their religions at the door" when they entered the Meem House.[3] Because we demanded absolute respect for diversities—be it ethnicities, classes, sexualities, languages, or gender identities, and most especially religious sects—we were able to be an open space for anyone to come in and feel welcome. Consequently, people felt relieved that Meem offered a space where they could get away from the political sectarian tensions that are a part of our daily lives in our homes, schools, workplaces and in our society at large. Meem became one of those rare places where they did not have to replicate the fanaticism they experienced in their own communities. And very notably, because one of Meem's uppermost values is that of confidentiality, we do not oblige our members to give their full names. As a result, we were able to create a space where a woman is no longer defined by her family (father's) name, her sect, and the political party that her family follows. That has allowed each of our members the freedom and space to grow and learn outside her own community's bubble, to meet other women from all over Lebanon, not on the basis of religion, but individual personality. In other words, it has closed the doors on fundamentalism and sectarianism within our community.

Many months down the line, when we felt more confident both about our understanding of how religion works in our different communities and about having developed a solid base of respect for each other—and after we had studied and discussed what a "community" really is—we were able to finally broach the subject of religion and religious fundamentalisms, and to discuss how our very existence as a diverse yet united community—one of the rare few in Lebanon—is in itself a challenge to the sectarianism endemic in Lebanese society and politics.

Getting to know each other closely, inside and outside the Meem House, we saw how religion does not automatically have to imply fundamentalism. And we became better educated about each other's beliefs, with the result that we do not fall prey to the prejudices of our communities. This strength of this community was tested during a week-long violent conflict in May 2008. Angry, racist and sectarian language became common as armed fundamentalists claimed the streets, confining people to their homes. We, too, could not open the Meem House for two weeks. But while the fundamentalists could restrain our movements, they could not stop members of "warring" sects from keeping in touch with each other and rejecting the sectarianism and militarism surrounding them. That was a moment when we could clearly see how religion and fundamentalism were very distinct.

Meem's Strategies

Meem employs different strategies to challenge religious fundamentalism towards alternative sexualities and gender identities in Lebanon. All of them revolve around our community tools. Our goals are about grassroots change, from the bottom up, and therefore it is not part of our strategy to counter institutions publicly. That pushes us to be creative in our low-profile approach. Religious fundamentalisms still affect us in

two ways: in posing a direct threat to non-heterosexual people and in promoting deep-rooted sectarianism that can be used to divide the queer community in the blink of an eye.

Building Communities: The Personal Is the Political

We decided early on that to instigate any social change, we must build our community first. Perhaps the greatest power that queers in any region can possess is their organized numbers. So, the first part of this strategy is to find the numbers, and the second is to organize them. Fundamentalists attack homosexuality by saying that it is an anomaly and an exception to the norm. So if we can present a huge community of LGBTQIs, we have countered that idea. Fundamentalists also enjoy the support of masses of people who believe in their cause. We need the same. Let us suspend judgment and take the common inference that LGBTQIs make up around 10% of any given population; by that count, there are potentially 6.5 million queer women in the Arab world, whether they actually self-identify as queer or not.[4] If we add to it the people who are allies to our cause, the number rises, and it rises exponentially, because the larger the number of people in a community, the more people they can potentially attract. But also, by taking on other struggles and by making common cause with others—seeing the parallels and interconnections between our needs and the broader issues of sexual liberties, women's rights, social justice and human rights in general—rather than limiting ourselves to a narrow focus on LGBTQI or LBTQ rights alone, we build and strengthen our alliances even further.

Too often, human rights advocacy groups have been formed of an elite, perhaps even alienated or isolated, few who rush to the public eye to demand their rights, to attack fundamentalism, and to solicit public support. But if they are not ready, they burn out quickly and lose the faith of the people whose rights they may be fighting for (if they had the faith of those people to begin with). Their organizing gets torn to pieces by a more powerful opposition. Therefore, before one comes out to demand LGBTQI rights, one needs the support of a larger community. So, we wait for the right timing. We build our numbers, for there is strength in numbers, and we work on building a true sense of a strong community so that we have the human resources, the skills, the leadership, and the momentum to continue through when the time is right to take our fight to the public eye.

So, for the time being, we are working quietly. Our online presence reveals only a limited type and amount of information about the group's activities. While we get many requests for media interviews every month, our policy mandates that we only use the media to highlight products such as our online magazine *Bekhsoos* (Arabic for: concerning, about) and our book *Bareed Mista3jil* (Express Mail). We safeguard our cause and our members from sensationalized mass media consumption. But more importantly, Meem's job is to work underground. We have an almost-free counselling service that is available to all members, and that has been very popular. We hold capacity building workshops; we offer training sessions at the Meem House on diverse subjects such as sexual education and sexual health, information and communication technologies (ICTs) and other technical skills, the history of lesbians in the movies, etc. We hold closed support groups for transgenders and transsexuals. We have debate sessions, bring-a-friend days, and, importantly as well, we have sent all active members to international conferences and workshops to gain experience, network, inform, learn, and boost their confidence. It is this empowerment—through building our members' self confidence and sense of community, as well as building their skills and talents and capacities—that we believe will make us better prepared for confronting fundamentalisms and conservatism in the days ahead. Thus, all of our activities have focused on community and activist-building, which we see as building the base of our greatest movement assets: the people.

Ironically, because Lebanon has been plagued with ongoing wars and political assassinations, the years since 2005 have been the best time for us to build our queer community. With so many political tensions, no one pays much attention to a group of women coming together to organize. In the eyes of political and religious leaders, women are not really threatening; they are not capable of producing real change or of jeopardizing patriarchal authority, especially in a case such as ours where we are not tackling politics directly. Parallel to the country's distraction from the queer movement came the rise of the Internet, which became our most powerful organizing and awareness tool.

Secularism vs. Moderate Religion

Traditionally, activists have argued that secular states that do not mix religion with governance are the answer to countering religious fundamentalism, and most LGBTQI activism around the world has been secular. In Lebanon, the broadest and most powerful opposition to sectarianism relies on a staunchly secularist strategy. Leftist groups call for a separation of religion and state, and the elimination of the Personal Status Law that is divided by sect. What they propose instead is a unified, civil, secular law that is common to all citizens. This strategy, of course, would be helpful in many aspects such as civil marriage, divorce and custody laws. But it has been very weak against the overwhelming

dominance of the sectarian tradition, which has seeped into so many systems and institutions in the country that it seems almost impossible to establish a unified, secular law. Moreover, when it comes to women's and LGBTQI rights, little will change when the state replaces religious institutions and legal codes if the state is not egalitarian in nature, if it does not treat all people equally, and if it does not reject sexism, homophobia and heteronormativity. There is no guarantee that a shift to a unified, secular personal status law and the reduction of the discriminatory colonial or religious influences on Lebanon's current civil and penal codes will automatically lead to truly egalitarian and gender-just laws.

Succeeding in the removal or reduction of colonial and religious influences from State laws does not mean that fundamentalisms will cease to exist, nor will it mean that fundamentalisms will not have an impact on new laws, or that old practices and beliefs will not remain ingrained in people's minds. Secularism does not necessarily take power away from religion. In the particular case of non-conforming sexualities, there is very little space for the protection or expansion of gay rights within the sectarian system in Lebanon. It is the system itself that is the greatest object standing against the homosexual identity. It just doesn't fit. Public morality and religious laws are symbiotic. They affect each other. It is not only religion that feeds public morality, but public morality also affects religious leaders who, ultimately, want to keep their followers. So calling for secularism does not necessarily affect public opinion towards homosexuality. One lesson we have learned from our activism is that a strong and viable force against religious fundamentalism might not be secularism at all, but rather progressive religious groups committed to accepting a pluralistic approach to their theological debates and concerns.

Eventually, too, queer people must enter into religious debates. It is noticeable that many queers in Lebanon, including many members of Meem, consider religious arguments a lost cause because they feel it is too difficult a battle to fight. But it is a necessary battle. We, as queers, must offer arguments pertaining to our spirituality as queer people, and to our full right to live in dignity and love and safety. We must assert why homosexuality and bisexuality and transgenderism are natural, God-created sexualities and gender identities. Our members have already been inspired by the work of groups like Sisters in Islam in Malaysia, who produce or disseminate progressive interpretations of Muslim texts, and the Women's Ordination Conference in the United States which is working for Catholic women's rights. In July 2009, after much initial opposition from those who feared falling into sectarian traps, a multi-confessional prayer group formed in Meem to address the needs of members who wanted to come together not to discuss religion politically but to share spirituality, faith, and stories of hope, overcoming and higher purpose. It might well be the only multi-confessional prayer group in Lebanon.

While this strategy of engaging with religion stemmed from a pressing need from our members, it also proved an important strategy to address the Lebanese public. To expect the masses of religious folk (Lebanon's overwhelming majority) to switch to a secularist ideology or buy into the secular argument seems very unlikely in our current time and place. All of the homophobic comments we have received on Meem's online portals, for example, have brought up the argument that religion condemns homosexuality (as opposed to arguments like science, medicine or psychology). Therefore, it is important for us to have moderate and more progressive religious interpretations. While the secular argument to fundamentalist groups would be, "what you believe doesn't matter and should not be reflected in our laws," the moderate religious argument to fundamentalist groups would be, "we have the same faith as you do, but this is how it is reflected in our practice and understanding."

Accordingly, in our mission for LGBTQI equality in Lebanon, we work on finding sheikhs, priests and other religious public figures who are at least tolerant towards homosexuality and don't want to kill or punish or "cure" gay people. They are our biggest allies against religious fundamentalism. We are often confronted with the question, "It is explicitly stated in both Christian and Muslim texts that homosexuality is wrong, so how can you say that it is all right to be gay? The secular reply would be, "That is your faith and you cannot impose it on me." But that doesn't give religious people an answer to their question. There needs to also be people who are replying, "I believe in the divinity of those texts but that's not how I read them because it would contradict the greater message of love and tolerance of our religion." This has been quite a difficult undertaking because of the scarcity of gay-friendly Islamic interpretations in particular. Where we lacked the expertise to do so, we aligned ourselves with experts in the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR) who have been instrumental actors for understanding, analyzing, and

researching issues around (homo)sexuality and religion not only in the Arab world, but across Muslim societies all over the world.

This is not to say that secularism, or rather anti-sectarianism, is not an important principle that the LGBTQI movement must stand by. It is just to say that it isn't the only strategy we must be focused on.

Building Alliances

Alliances are important because they entail differently purposed groups coming together for a common agenda. They're also important for queer movements in particular because they show that non-queers are advocating for the rights of LGBTQIs (and *vice versa*).

It goes without saying that we are also building our alliances with the local women's and human rights movements, with leftist political parties and progressive thinkers. In this respect, we utilize what we see as a powerful strategy. We don't just network with these groups in order to gain their support. We ally with them so that our community is lending strength to their programs as well. Often the gay rights movement sees itself as "under" the umbrella of the women's or human rights or left movements: "Please help us; we need your support." We do not believe in that strategy, because it is reactive. A better strategy is to say, "We are here to help you," because they need all the help they can get, and because all our struggles are inextricably intertwined. We work, in Meem, on participating in all the campaigns and networks that we can, thanks to our large membership, sometimes openly and directly, and other times less so. One example is how many of our members volunteered at a local women's rights group when it was trying to push for a law against domestic violence. The hyper-visibility of queer women in that NGO led to open discussions inside it about non-conforming sexualities, where we were able to present our opinions and address some misconceptions. This happened without there ever being an explicit reference to Meem. Different Meem members joined the campaign as individual volunteers from different organizations and universities. This illustrates how we navigate the politics of the personal, coming out for the sake of raising awareness—all while making sure that our members are in a safe space and that Meem as a group remains anonymous and underground.

Here is another example, this time one that illustrates more of an "infiltration" than open participation in partnership with other social justice activists. One of our members is affiliated with an addiction rehabilitation centre for women governed by a religious board. Many of the women at the centre were severely depressed lesbians. The invisibility of lesbianism as a legitimate sexual identity meant that the centre's programs offered those women no real support and in fact caused them greater harm in some ways. Since the centre's strategy obliges recovering addicts to come clean to their families about every experience they've been through, lesbians in the program were also required to reveal their homosexual experiences or identities in order to remain in the program. The people running the centre treated homosexuality and drug abuse as though they were mutually reinforcing, equally harmful, and wrong. This, of course, deterred many lesbians from seeking help in the centre or from carrying on with the program. Those who stayed in the program were forced to come out to their parents and family members—something that caused them much harm in the immediate term and potentially in the long run as well.

The Meem member who had connections to the centre knew it would be impossible to convince the board of the organization to change the system, because all the board members were also all religious leaders. Instead, she kept talking to the centre's director about the issue and pretended to have stumbled upon the Meem website, urging her to contact Meem to learn more about the issue of homosexuality. Over a number of meetings with Meem members, the director learned more about lesbianism and the incredible pressures facing lesbian women in their everyday lives. She then decided to make Meem a part of the follow-up program that recovering addicts who identified the need would have to remain in after they had completed their rehabilitation in the centre. The board of the organization still does not know about this, but the lesbian clients of the centre have benefited greatly from this shift in attitude. However, it is important to add that our strategy to ally with (and at times "infiltrate") different groups is not simply due to a desire to build a strong base of queers for our revolution. Alliances are important because we are convinced that single-issue politics is not effective politics. Queer women are women first; many are working-class women, women from different ethno-religious communities, from different nationalities living in Lebanon. So we work on women's rights, on socio-economic inequalities and on anti-racist advocacy at the same time that we are working on our rights as queer people. That is why Meem adopts very progressive feminist politics and encourages all of its activists to join the Feminist Collective in order to work on other issues related to sexuality such as abortion rights, sex workers' rights, sexual education and health for youth, rape, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.

Resisting Sectarianism

The biggest challenge to any form of social justice in Lebanon is the sectarian makeup of its society. The precarious sectarian balance is probably the single most precious thing for Lebanon's government to attempt to preserve. The stability of the country is always hanging by it. And because almost every single governmental seat, whether elected

or appointed, has a confessional colour to it, either maintaining or attempting to influence the relative balance between the sects is what keeps Lebanese people and particularly Lebanese politicians busy most of the time. With that picture as the prominent backdrop, how does one advocate for gay rights in Lebanon? Suppose the government did want to expand gay rights, how would they even do that? Any effort to reform laws and practices towards expansion of gay rights would have to negotiate independently with each religious community because while the penal code is uniform, any major political development in Lebanon requires the support of all the various sects. This need for religious consensus obstructs all positive reform in social justice areas, which is why very little social justice change has happened in Lebanon's modern history. The failure of many women's rights campaigns, such as the constant obstruction of the women's nationality campaign, attests to this.

The trap of sectarian feuds within the LGBTQI movement at large is therefore a constant threat. A common misconception, for example, is that Christian sects are more tolerant of homosexuality than Muslim sects and that Muslim sects are more tolerant of transsexuality than Christian sects. One of our pressing challenges is to prevent queer issues from furthering sectarian divides among our community. We can't allow a "my religion is better than yours" argument because it will backfire against our community, and it will be used in the political arena, where the more tolerant will back down and the less tolerant will boast the more virtuous ideals.

Reclaiming Our Own Voices

We learn from world history and from other social movements across the world, but we also recognize the specificity of our current time and place. Most notably, while European ideals place the individual above the collective, family and community values remain the highest priority on the scale in Lebanon and the Arab world. We are not raised to think of ourselves as developing into individualistic adults; our identities depend on us being the daughters and sons of our parents, on the communities we come from, and the sect that binds us in ways that we do not consider optional. While this certainly has its impacts, which we are struggling against through our resistance to patriarchy and sectarianism, our strategies must always be sensitive to community values, and must bear in mind and recognize that the impacts of these traits of our cultures can be both negative and positive.

We stress a local and indigenous identity, even though it can be very difficult sometimes. Western ideals can be useful, but unfortunately, "the West" harbours deep prejudices about the Middle East. In the words of Edward Said, "Since the time of Homer every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric." Therefore, even when we want to build alliances with groups and movements in Europe and North America, we have to be careful, because we can easily be targeted and dismissed by local fundamentalist groups as agents and traitors because of these alliances. For instance, an article was once published in an Egyptian newspaper alleging that we (as Arab queers) work for the CIA and the Israeli Mossad to weaken the Arabs. While at this point such random targeting is easily dismissed, such slurs may grow more frequent in the future, as accusations of "treachery" are very easy to make and take long to be forgotten (if they ever are). Still, we do also have to build alliances intelligently. And not all movements and groups for women's rights or for LGBTQI rights in Europe and America are immediately allies. While the West lures us with its trends, its individual liberties, its parades, its lesbian shows, its queer singers and its gay movies, we understand the power structures that made these trends possible. So we insist on an Arab movement, on Arab solidarity, which has more recently led to the formation of a regional Arab LGBTQI network.

We want to express ourselves in our own language, yet we find ourselves faced with a powerful blockade against talking about sexuality in Arabic. It is a struggle to find a space within language, just as we struggle to find a space in our society. It's always hard for us to find words to express exactly what we want them to, and we are additionally torn between the Lebanese dialect of our everyday lives and the modern standard Arabic used in writing and in formal speech. Words that refer to sex and to bodies are considered "vulgar" and in fact they are swear words (when they used to be far more neutral in the past). Instead, they have been replaced by more medical, alienating terms in modern standard Arabic.

The words for "gay" and "lesbian" are still commonly translated as "pervert" in common everyday language, while the LGBTQI community is starting to get used to the more recently coined term for homosexuality—"*mithliyya*." But we still feel awkward with these new terminologies that denote queer identities, transsexuality, bisexuality, etc., as they are direct transliterations of the English words. We also struggle to find words for terms like "wetness" for instance, or to translate a gender-neutral English text into Arabic (which, like many languages, has no neuter) without using gendered words. Sadly, and for the lack of Arabic expressions, queer people in Lebanon are more likely to frame their identities in English or French (even when speaking Arabic), because that's where these words exist more freely and are less laden with judgments or prejudices, and because these are the languages in which we find books and websites about sexuality. So the struggle to define oneself as lesbian and Arab is an incredibly difficult one. But it is crucial. We've tried to analyze the reasons for this, and we believe that it

is mainly because we no longer talk much about sexuality or eroticism in the Arab world, and therefore, the language has not been able to create new words or a more comfortable use of existing words to describe things related to sexual expression.

Many activists in the region such as Aswat - Palestinian Gay Women have spent a great deal of effort to dig up references to homosexuality and transsexuality in ancient Arab and Islamic texts. We are in constant debate over finding the terms and words in Arabic that reflect our sexualities and gender identity. Pushing for the word "*mithli*" to be used instead of derogatory words like "*shaz*" (pervert) or "*looti*" (derived from the name of Lot in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah) has been a strategy employed for many years by organizations like Helem. Another, more recent trend has emerged in Meem with the demand to reclaim derogatory words like "*shaz*" in everyday conversation. Some activists think it is easier for people to understand what we mean when we say "*shaz*" instead of "*mithli*" in our spoken Arabic. They also believe that it is necessary to advocate for the idea that "yes, we are deviants from normative society and we should be proud of that," rather than try to convince everyone that "we are 'just like them.'"

However, queer people in Lebanon have adopted a sexuality jargon that is different from that of heterosexuals. We have standardized our own underground lingo, as well as having dived into more liberated discussions of sex. Discovering that we do have a history of discussions of sex and sexuality in the Arab world[5] that is now censored or rendered invisible by fundamentalist forces also gives us hope that we can reclaim and make these discussions mainstream again.

The Master's Tools

In the words of poet and activist Audre Lorde, the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. That is true. But sometimes we have to claim some tools as ours. We can use some of the same tools that fundamentalists use. We can build a community around powerful values and ideas. Why should justice be a lesser ideal than God? Many times people ask us, "How can you put so much trust in your members? Why do you have a 'handshake of honour', rather than obliging your members to sign onto rules and contracts to ensure confidentiality or compliance?" It's because we believe that these values of trust, love, solidarity and loyalty work. Look at what they have done for the religious institutions. They work. We cannot operate with reason alone. We ask people to have faith—not only in a divine being, but also in themselves, in their values, in the power of movements.

And like fundamentalist movements, we play the money game. Capitalism sucks, but we cannot do without money, so we put our money where our sexuality is. We empower women to make their own money. We build capacities and skills. Since its inception, Meem has found 61 jobs for its members. In some cases, we have raised funds from our own community to provide temporary jobs for women or transfolk who were kicked out of their homes and needed financial support. For example, in November 2008, we learned that a post-operative transsexual man was working at a gas station because he could not find a better job that didn't require his identity card (which exposes his biological sex as female). Within one week, Meem's Community Support Committee had raised over USD 3,000 to support his legal fees to speed up the gender change on his identity card and found him a job where he did not have to show his card. We strongly encourage women to use women-owned or lesbian-owned businesses, as scarce as they are in Lebanon. Religious fundamentalism is also built on money and greed, just as strongly as it is built on values. Money equals power. There is no questioning that. There is only the strategy of putting it to work.

Every religious institution in Lebanon has its own media: television and radio stations, newspapers, magazines, websites, Facebook groups and campaigns, billboard chains—all of it. Mass media is a scary and powerful monster. In Lebanon, it also feeds sectarianism on a daily basis. Independent media is close to absent because it has such a tiny market. There is no source from which to get reliable and accurate information on anything. Even our history books have no agreed upon common historical narrative. We have opted not to use mass media at all until we are well prepared to take on that beast and until we have large numbers of queer women who are ready to do so. We want to avoid the poster-activist strategy that limits people's understanding of a sexual or gender identity to one model.

And so we were forced create our own media. We write our own poetry and stories and essays; we document our own history; we investigate our own reports; we produce our own films; we come up with slogans; we design; we paint; we graffiti the walls of Beirut at 3 a.m. with anonymous provocative messages. And we post all of it online.

In early 2008, we created *Bekhsoos*, a quarterly online magazine that would focus on lesbian issues in Lebanon. We started out as a replacement for a "real" print magazine. We knew we probably couldn't manage printing a

magazine because we'd need lots of money to purchase a publishing license and do the printing, and it wouldn't fit too well with Meem's underground nature. At the time, then, *Bekhsoos* online was a replacement. Eighteen months later, however, with the way information sharing evolved, it became clear to us that *Bekhsoos* actually *belongs* online. That's where young LGBTQIs in the Arab world were looking for information, connections and support. So we decided to provide information quickly, accurately and consistently. Since September 2009, *Bekhsoos* has been publishing ten to 15 articles in English, Arabic and French weekly—and it's run entirely by volunteers. To date, the articles have been read over 35,000 times and are becoming an important archive accessible to everyone. The consistency and professionalism displayed in *Bekhsoos* has demanded the respect of Arab bloggers, many of whom were conservative or uninterested in the LGBTQI cause, and has created for us a new alliance with them.

Because of these circumstances, we fortunately became (by necessity rather than by choice) ICT experts. When we first started, we would hold many debates about whether or not the Internet only reaches out to a certain class who can afford it and who can read English. But it soon became clear, without a doubt, that the Internet was becoming more widespread and more accessible to more people every day. And as the online trends changed, our strategies changed with them. For example, our rules forbade the usage of Facebook for any Meem-related activism because of safety concerns. When it became inevitable to use Facebook as a tool for information sharing, we adjusted our strategy to use the social networking website efficiently by creating a *Bekhsoos* fan page.

Today, Meem operates a very powerful online activism strategy, while still maintaining the group and members' anonymity. This includes the Meem blog, *Bekhsoos* online magazine, a Meem YouTube channel that hosts video clips challenging gender binaries and the criminalization of LGBTQIs, a Meem Twitter account, a Facebook page, various websites for different campaigns (such as the Gay-Straight Alliance) and other features for public or underground organizing. Many of our members also have their own personal blogs, in which they write about sexuality in a variety of ways. This strong online presence has given us the ability not only to express our lives publicly, but also to stay connected to members and other queer people and allies across Lebanon and the world. We sometimes forget how widespread this presence is, until an occasion presents itself. For instance, in March 2009, when we created a petition for decriminalizing homosexuality in Lebanese law, more than 2,000 people signed in less than a month.

The value of this strategy in confronting religious fundamentalism is twofold. Firstly, it allows us safe spaces to express ourselves, to build our knowledge, to slowly grow our network of followers and supporters, and to be able to post information that counters other mainstream misinformation. Very often on the *Bekhsoos* comments section, for example, our members enter into debates with individuals who use religion to discredit homosexuality. It allows us a voice in a protected environment and our reach is growing wider every day. We also benefit from Lebanon's lack of online censorship to be able to post opinions and material that would otherwise not be allowed in print or on TV. Secondly, statistics show that the Middle East is adding six million Internet users a year,[6] and so, to quote the editorial of *Bekhsoos*' comeback issue:

> The world is now moving into *our* side of the playground. And when media moves online, they're coming to where we are strong and numerous and unafraid. They're coming to where the younger generations are. And no, of course, this side is not the best because it leaves out the older generations, it leaves out the people who can't afford internet or computers, it leaves out my mother. But they are on the course to getting there. It's getting more affordable, more Arabicized, and more widespread. The Middle East is adding 500,000 internet users a month. That's 6 million a year. If the queer community is everywhere online, then the internet users are bound to bump into us somewhere. They're bound to listen to what we have to say. *Ahla ou sahla fee mawaqi3na* [Welcome to our websites], fellow Arab internet users. We're here, we're queer, we're online. And we're publishing weekly.[7]

We have also recently published a book called *Bareed Mista3jil* (Express Mail) with 41 short, anonymous, first-person accounts of the lives and experiences of LBTQs in Lebanon. Many of the stories tackle personal relationships with religion and how the members have reconciled their faith with their sexuality. They also present different interpretations of religion than the ones we are used to, and cover a variety of sects and faiths. Our aim was for readers to see past their hatred to the humanity of every story. This book (which was written, illustrated, edited and translated by Meem members)[8] illustrates how our lives, our dreams and fears are very similar, especially among women who may identify with the book themselves, be they queer or straight. *Bareed Mista3jil* was launched publicly through the support of two partner organizations, IndyACT and the Feminist Collective, in Beirut's biggest (and packed) theatre on 30th May 2007. In its first three months, it sold over 2,000 copies and topped the bestseller lists of Lebanon's biggest bookshops. And, again, it did so without revealing any details about Meem itself. The introduction's final lines state:

> We are the non-conforming sexual community of Lebanon: the lesbians, the bisexuals, the queers, the questioning women, the

transgender and transsexual men and women, the Muslims, the Christians, the Druze, the atheists and agnostics, from the North, the South, the Bekaa valley, Mount Lebanon, Beirut, your daughters, your sisters, your mothers, your aunts, your teachers, your students, your employees, your managers, the people you love, and the people who love you dearly. And we shall no longer be afraid.[9]

Word-of-Mouth and Grassroots Organizing

Our main strategy for social change is word-of-mouth, which we see as far more powerful than billboards and TV commercials and magazine ads. Word-of-mouth is how we gathered 300 members in our group in a country where lesbianism was entirely invisible just over a year ago. Every girl is a walking commercial, a walking argument for justice. If every week, she influences one other person, that's 1,000 minds we have changed in one month. If those people join us in influencing only one other person per week, that's 5,000 more minds per month. And so on: the ripple effect. And for that, we hold weekly trainings on all sorts of topics so that our members are armed with arguments, information, education, and a sense of confidence about themselves. No religious fundamentalist can then ever make them feel that they are sinful or sick. And it is through our members that we connect to diverse religious communities in Lebanon, allowing our members to be the change in their own environments. For example, rather than creating a project where we go to a remote village to educate people about sexuality, we rely on empowering our member who is from that village. She will then be able to influence change among her community. Our group is large and diverse but we are constantly engaged in discussions, sharing experiences, finding commonalities, and looking for opportunities to strategically push our cause in different circles.

Coming out is very a powerful tool. It allows people to actually meet a lesbian, especially if they have known her for a while and can see that she is neither threatening nor abnormal, nor is her moral fabric any different than that of her straight friends. However, we do not push our members to come out. On the contrary, we advise them to reveal their sexuality only when they feel safe enough to do so, and only to people who they expect to accept them. We also hold monthly meetings where we open our Meem House to the family and friends of our members. In this way, parents, relatives and friends get a chance to talk openly about their feelings and their fears and get to know a whole community of healthy and happy queer people. Dealing with families is a very complex road that our members navigate personally. And because of Lebanon's very diverse nature, it is almost impossible to lump all of these experiences into a single "dealing with a Lebanese family" model. This always comes back to sectarian divides that create diverse cultures even within small populations. And so our policy is to present our members with all the tools, ideas, arguments, experiences, lessons, counselling services and opportunities for discussion so that they may make their own decisions about how to deal with pressures from the family. For example, one of the difficult issues facing the queer women's community in Lebanon is the pressure to get married, which exists across all religions. The family unit in sectarian societies is of utmost importance as it holds together the heteronormative structure that allows for the propagation of oppressive systems. There is no civil marriage in Lebanon, and marrying from outside one's sect (which would require a religious conversion) is very highly frowned upon. Meem members have dealt with this pressure in different ways, from succumbing to a heterosexual marriage, to an arranged marriage with a gay man (of the same sect, of course), to running away from home to avoid marriage, to emigrating to escape parental control, to insisting on refusing to marry until her parents drop the subject (or she turns 30, after which she becomes a spinster—whichever comes first). Meem, as a group, does not endorse one strategy over the other because we believe it is every individual's personal choice to make. All we can do is make sure the decision is informed and well thought through.

Planning for the Future

We are planning for the future. Meem members have visited several Arab cities very quietly and met with lesbians there very quietly. Where they are not organized or active, we do not ask them to come out or lobby or to turn into activists for queer rights immediately. Instead, we give them tiny little pushes, and a lot of empowerment, so that in five years, in ten years, in 20 years, whenever they are ready to speak up, they will be strong enough. For our movement to succeed, it must be an Arab movement, emerging from the different communities within the Arab world. This is because of our shared battles against religious fundamentalisms and also because religious fundamentalisms are a regional force, spreading, feeding upon, diverging, and rising across different Arab cities. We have been building alliances and meeting with individuals and groups in Arab countries. While the situation for lesbians in these countries is a lot more strenuous than that in Beirut, ten years ago, we were in the same position (and it is still very challenging in areas outside of Beirut). There are always ways to use underground strategies like ours to help others. At the same time, we are careful not to impose

whatever works in Lebanon on other countries that—albeit similar in culture or language or history—each have their starkly different and particular characteristics too. So instead of "exporting" our expertise wholesale, we make it available to LBTQs in the Arab world, connecting with them so that we can share, learn from one another and collaborate, and putting forward our experiences for them to adapt or customize.

Reflections

Religious fundamentalisms have used similar tactics and strategies across history, across religions, and across continents, and in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, they inspire, borrow from, and support each other. The first step, as always for social justice activists, is to unlearn the fear that comes with big, complex, scary systems of oppression. We need to take up creative strategies and allow ourselves to adapt them frequently according to new lessons and circumstances. Strategies are alive. But first, always, we must dismantle the fear.

Endnotes:

[1] For a detailed treatment of inter-ethnic and sectarian divisions and coalitions and their formations and impacts on Lebanese politics, please refer to Bassel Salloukh, "The Limits of Electoral Engineering in Divided Societies: Elections in Postwar Lebanon." *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 39 (2006). For a more general survey of Lebanese history, please refer to Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007. The full English text of the Constitution of Lebanon is available at the International Constitutional Law Project website.

[2] Note that due to the extremely contentious nature of the issue (including the political sensitivities around the issue of representation and the precarious balance of power-sharing based on confessional identities), no official census has been held in Lebanon since 1932. The *CIA World Fact Book* gave the following estimates for 2006-2007: Muslim 59.7% (including Druze and 'Alawi), Christian 39% (Maronite Catholic, Latin Catholic, Melkite Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Chaldean Catholic; Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Protestant), other 1.3%. Some followers of the Druze religion do not consider themselves to be Muslim, but the state legally considers them Muslim. Aside from the Sunni, Shi'a and Maronite sects, some of the other sects influential enough to have specific parliamentary representation are the Druze and the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Christians.

[3] The Meem House, also known as the Womyn House, is an apartment that Meem has bought in Lebanon's capital, Beirut, as a closed and safe space for queer women and transgendered people.

[4] By queer here, I mean anyone who identifies as lesbian, bisexual, queer or transgendered. I also use the term "non-conforming sexualities" in this essay to refer to sexual identities and relationships that are not heterosexual and bound by marriage. Thus, a woman who is sexually active but is not married is also sexually non-conforming.

[5] There are numerous classical and contemporary resources on the subject of sex and sexuality in the Arab world and the general region. Here is a small sampling: J.W. Wright Jr. & Everett K. Rowson, eds., *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, New York: Columbia UP, 1997; Basim F. Musallam, Sex and Society in Islam: *Birth Control before the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983; Shaykh Muhammad al-Nafzawi, *The Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight (ar-rawd al-'âtir fî nuzhat il-khâtir)*, first translated into English by Sir Richard F. Burton in 1886; Pinar Ilkkaracan, ed., *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*, Istanbul: Women for Women's Human Rights-New Ways, 2000.

[6] "Middle East adds 500,000 internet users a month," *Digital Production Middle East*, 30 Aug. 2009.

[7] "The Evolution of Us," *Bekhsoos*, 6 Sept. 2009.

[8] The publication of the book was funded by the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

[9] *Bareed Mista3jil*, Beirut: Meem, 2009: 29.

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Organizational Bio:

Meem is a support community for lesbian, bisexual, queer and questioning women and transgendered people in Lebanon. Founded in August 2007, Meem quickly grew to over 300 members in two years and runs a safe house in Beirut where LBTQ activists meet daily to organize, write, research, discuss, and empower one another. Navigating progressive feminist and anarchist politics, Meem's mission is to improve the quality of living for Lebanon's sexual and gender minorities. It strategizes around the firm belief that real social change comes from within, and that when it does, it cannot but permanently transform the world. www.meemgroup.org