

Social & Organizational Transformation: A Queer Organizing Milestone in Palestine

2020 Annual Report



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At the end of this year, *Haneen Maikey*, who has led alQaws for two decades as our director-in-office, will end her term and welcome *Haneen Sader* as the organization's new director. Twenty years ago, *Haneen Maikey* co-founded alQaws alongside a committed group of activists and friends. Since then, she has directed the movement throughout its evolution, as alQaws grew from a small community initiative into a well-established and highly reputable civil society organization in Palestine.

alQaws' leadership has always relied on collective efforts and community work, as well as the steadfast support of activists, friends, allies, and professionals who believe in our vision and progress. These efforts and support networks require exceptional direction and management in order to steer the organization forward. In her two decades at the helm of alQaws, *Haneen Maikey* provided the leadership, commitment, and devotion that brought our organization to the place it is today.

After conducting an extensive [search](#) to find the person best

suited for the role, we are extremely proud to announce that alQaws will proceed to grow and progress under the direction of activist Haneen Sader.

In the past five years, *Haneen Sader* has been an integral part of several organizational frameworks in alQaws, as an activist in our national leadership network, a board member for four consecutive years, and a trainer for our professional-oriental workshops that engage various social actors.

For alQaws, this transition process is not reducible to a simple change of directors. Instead, it signals a deeper transformation within our leadership structure and reflects the journey we have experienced as a dynamic collective. In recent years, our organization has entered new realms of public consciousness, whether by amassing thousands of new followers and beneficiaries through online and offline platforms, or by expanding our base of grassroots activists and partner networks. This visibility created a significant impact within Palestinian society and beyond, yet these developments did not occur by coincidence--they were instead the outcome of a planned, collective process to integrate new individuals into positions of leadership within our networks, communities, and initiatives.

The timing and execution of this process were not random, nor was it a reaction to any specific crisis. alQaws' 2018-2021 Strategic Plan initially outlined the leadership transition as a deliberate political objective. The consequent structural changes [over the past three years] included developing the capacities of alQaws' staff, expanding the responsibilities of the board, and incorporating the national leadership and activist bases into the process of charting out the future of our organization.

Throughout this period, we incorporated and engaged alQaws' various communities and structures to discuss the internal and external changes we were experiencing, both as an organization

and as a movement. In the past twelve months, alQaws' staff and board worked to outline the main organizational questions and challenges that arose from the transition process. They sought to identify the needs of alQaws' different communities, in order to effectively facilitate the exchange of knowledge and the division of organizational responsibilities.

Challenges of the Leadership Transition Process

The changes we underwent during the leadership transition process—and the changes that await us in the future—are a testament to alQaws' dynamic nature as an organization. Our present growth is a result of meaningful, value-oriented engagement with the various questions and challenges that arose during the transition.

During this process, a key question arose: how can we share the knowledge and experience that alQaws has accumulated throughout two decades of queer organizing in Palestine? We sought to answer this question by working to distribute our knowledge horizontally and make it accessible to everyone in alQaws. This approach allows us to further develop the leadership roles inside our community and respond to the new responsibilities that are emerging as a result. In addition to sharing this political knowledge, alQaws also sought to teach about the history of the movement and the development of queer politics in Palestine, including the evolution of our organizing, work tactics, and ethics.

We began to address the challenge of knowledge-sharing last year by establishing reflection and discussion spaces within alQaws' leadership groups. These spaces were dedicated to the question of how to center alQaws' values and politics in our everyday organizing, and how these political values are in turn reflected in

our strategies. We hosted similar knowledge exchange initiatives open to the broader activist community, such as [training programs](#) that provided a thorough introduction to queer and feminist thought. Our five-week [Fourth Academic School](#), titled "From Pain to Hope: On Confronting the System," provided an additional opportunity to showcase alQaws' political and organizing legacy within a theoretical framework, in collaboration with more than fifty activists and scholars who took part in the program. To build on these discussions, and to apply the knowledge generated in the course of the academic schools to our organizing practice, we will also host a national Queer School in 2021 for alQaws' national leadership across Palestine.

In the coming year, our commitment to knowledge-sharing will take the form of a significant and unprecedented archival project to document the history of alQaws and the history of the Palestinian Queer Movement more generally. This archival project, to be launched in 2022, will lay a foundation stone in the effort to preserve our history. It will serve as a chronicle of our movement, making it available and accessible to future generations.

An undertaking of this scale is accompanied—and will continue to be accompanied—by a wide range of emotions. These feelings are a natural and necessary aspect of our work in general, and of the leadership transition in particular. Our values and organizational culture emphasize the central role of emotional health in any movement or community-building process. Paying special attention to such emotions and their impact on our work is essential to our future growth and sustainability as an organization.

We believe that deep engagement with emotions, combined with a commitment to nurturing healthy relationships within alQaws, is the main fuel of our work. This attentiveness strengthens our capacity to engage with current and upcoming periods of change. We are well aware that the departure of influential and significant

leaders brings about a great deal of confusion and mixed feelings, a phenomenon common to political organizations and movements. These emotions also stem from the transformation of power dynamics and relationships within the political collective. To properly address these feelings, we intend to continue discussing and analyzing these matters collectively, in order to surpass miscommunication, grow as individuals, and evolve as a movement.

During the last month of the year, we arranged several meetups for all alQaws organizational structures—including our national leadership, board, and staff, in addition to our allies—in order to reflect upon and deal with the feelings that have naturally accompanied a transition such as this. These meetups were filled with emotional reflections on the huge impact that our previous director, Haneen Maikey, had on alQaws and its relationship with our allies and partner organizations. But more than anything, these conversations captured a sense of enthusiasm and faith in moving forward with the new leadership.

During this period of significant change, we prioritized cautious and wise strategizing about alQaws’ external work. We strove to build capacity within our various existing structures, while also maintaining a dynamic organizational discussion about the transition. Throughout this process, we worked to ensure that our internal preoccupations did not affect our most fundamental priorities: retaining our presence and influence within society and maintaining a line of communication with our communities.



Leadership Transition in Times of Social Change

Our current organizational transformation is unfolding in tandem with major social changes regarding issues of sexual and gender diversity in Palestine. Queer issues in Palestine have entered the realm of public discussion on several occasions in recent years, signaling an end to widespread denial and taboo around such issues. AlQaws has been a leading force behind these social changes and shifts, which impacted both our role as an agent of societal transformation, as well as the expectations placed on us by our own community and those outside it.

One of the most significant expressions of the changes unfolding in Palestinian society was the “[Rallying Cry For Queer Liberation](#)” that alQaws organized in July of this year. The rally marked the second public event where queer Palestinians reclaimed the streets, and followed in the footsteps of the previous demonstration, “[Palestinian Voices Condemn Violence Against LGBTQ people](#),” that took place during the summer of 2019 in response to a violent event that rippled through the Palestinian community. One of the most remarkable aspects of the “Rallying Cry For Queer Liberation” was the strong, visible presence of queer Palestinians, which reflects a broader trend of increasing queer visibility and public reckonings with societal violence.

Direct challenges to the status quo, which have come to characterize alQaws’ strategies and tactics, emerged alongside growing societal discussions about issues of sexual and gender diversity. These discussions, which have increasingly entered mainstream outlets and public forums, are a reaction to the increased visibility of LGBT and queer Palestinians. The veil of silence has been lifted, and it is no longer possible for the broader society to deny our existence or ignore the issues that affect our lives. This increased visibility has been accompanied

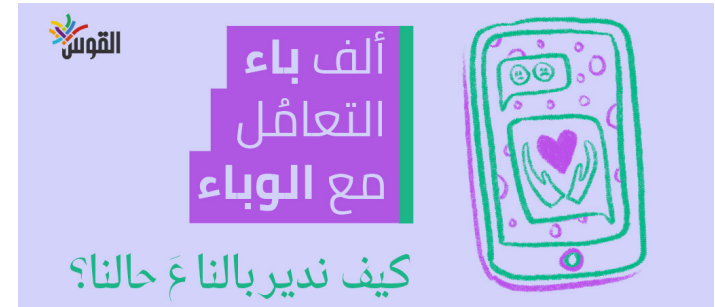


by an uptick in reactionary violence against us, yet it also provides an opportunity for a deeper and more constructive discussion about LGBT and queer issues. This discussion focuses on the role our society can play in combating violence and emphasizes the collective responsibility to publicly confront injustice and social exclusion.

The changes within our organization are unfolding in parallel with the broader societal shifts we are now witnessing. This is not a coincidence. Instead, it reflects the dialectical relationship between our work's impact and the positive transformation of social discussions about gender and sexual diversity.

The Pandemic & Its Role in Changing Our Lives

The Covid-19 pandemic ushered in a period of significant [upheaval](#) in our lives and in our organizing. The adverse effects of the pandemic, ranging from illness and job loss to isolation and precarious living conditions, led to a decline in safety and security among LGBT and queer Palestinians. These circumstances pushed us further to the margins and forced us to conceive of new forms of communication and solidarity in the wake of the sudden



loss of our safe community spaces. This pandemic has not only shed light on the vulnerability of our communities—it has further intensified the impact of the violence we face as LGBT and queer people in Palestine, struggling to navigate numerous interlinked oppressions.

Feelings of confusion and isolation have descended on many of us in the course of this global disruption. Many of us were forced to confront feelings of loneliness and depression in the solitude of quarantine. Many others were faced with a loss of independence, forced to rely upon repressive nuclear families and other social institutions that perpetuate violence against us. As a collective, we also felt the acute loss of our in-person community spaces where we were able to connect and express ourselves.

AlQaws successfully responded to this new reality by extending our availability and accessibility to our communities in quarantine. We navigated our state of emergency by adjusting our strategies and work methods to meet the pressing needs of our community members. We launched new programs and maintained existing ones, all of which took place over online platforms in order to sustain connectivity within our communities. We converted the [professional training](#) program for our alKhat support hotline into online sessions, and our Haifa youth group made a similar transition to remote meetings. We hosted [online workshops](#) that focused on the challenges faced by queer communities during the pandemic and conducted a regional [webinar](#) on the same topic.



Evolving Responses to Change

In the upcoming year (2021), we will proceed with the leadership transition process and enter a phase of deep strategic planning for the next three years (2022-2024). This process will incorporate every organizational structure within alQaws, from the board and staff to the national and local leadership. This period will also provide an opportunity to deepen our dialogue with various organizational partners and movements. We will engage in an extensive evaluation of our assumptions and strategies, and provide space to reflect on current structures, programming, and roles.

In parallel with the upcoming year's strategic planning process, alQaws will run various capacity-building programs to meet the needs of the staff, the board of directors, and the national leadership in the course of the organizational transition. These capacity-building spaces will help alQaws reestablish the responsibilities and the roles of each structure, develop their relations to one another, and determine how they intersect.

As we initiate these extensive internal processes, we will not allow our societal visibility and organizing to regress. We are committed to maintaining a vibrant and influential movement that can act as

a driving force of meaningful change within our communities and society.

Last, But Not Least...

In the last twenty years, alQaws has established itself as a profoundly influential social change actor and civil society movement, both in Palestine and beyond. We have consciously planned and established a strong grassroots infrastructure for queer organizing, and we see the fruits of our labor in our daily practice. These achievements have been brought to fruition through the efforts of our activists, who realized countless organizational, structural, and socio-political processes. We are filled with hope and are excited to embark on this new journey towards radical change and collective liberation.



Multidimensional Queer Confrontation

In recent years, our experiences as LGBT and queer organizers have driven home an important rule: the greater our visibility and the louder our voices, the more we are faced with societal violence. In contrast to the latent violence we experience in our everyday lives, these newer outbursts have breached the walls of social denial and taboo-ism and entered the realm of public consciousness. This phenomenon has also taught us another important lesson--one that we ourselves have imposed on our reality: the greater the violence we experience towards our struggle and movement, the greater our drive to confront this violence in a grounded and strategic manner.

“Crisis” has become the norm over the past three years, with new controversies and “heated debates” erupting before the previous ones have settled. This cycle of ongoing confrontation demonstrates the extent to which gender and sexuality issues are entering a new stage of visibility in Palestine. No longer can such issues be swept under the rug and ignored. This dynamic

sheds new light on the violence that excludes us from our own communities, while at the same time motivating us to engage in renewed efforts towards societal transformation.

This year, alQaws escalated its strategic confrontation against state and social violence on two levels. The first level focused on our use of discourse and language. Through careful and conscious planning, we sought to engage more directly with various groups within our society, linking grassroots work with cultural production and creative expression. Earlier in the year, we sang our story through our heritage with our music production “[Minkom O Feekom](#).” In this project, we reworked Palestinian and Levantine folk songs to tell our stories, making songs like ‘*Ala Dal’oona*’, and ‘*Ya Zarif Al-Toul*’ inclusive and representative of queer experiences.



We also strove to make queer politics--which is central to our organizing--more accessible to a wider audience through simple, informative visual resources. In conjunction with the “Rallying Cry for Queer Liberation” protest, which we organized and led during July 2020, we developed a series of graphics describing the multi-layered meanings of “[queer](#).” These informative visuals received substantial interaction and spread across various social media sites, indicating to us the need to permanently make such knowledge available to wider audiences. In the coming year, we plan to further develop this initiative through a variety of resources

that will explain the different political and queer concepts that we use in our work.

The second level of confrontation focused on the reclamation of public space for the second year in a row, through our “Rallying Cry” protest. In the week leading up to the demonstration, we took to the streets across Palestine, decorating the cities of Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, and Nazareth with posters and stickers that spoke to various sexual and gender diversity issues.

This demonstration offered a stage to alQaws and the queer movement, where we could affirm our collective presence and decisively state that there would be no room for regression into silence and quiescence. The event drew over 200 people, most of whom were LGBT and queer, indicating the progress achieved in terms of enhancing queer visibility and incorporating our diverse communities in the movement for change. A strong, supportive contingent of allies, friends, and civil society organizations also attended the protest.

The end of the demonstration featured a number of speeches by representatives from Aswat - Palestinian Feminist Center for Gender and Sexual Freedoms and the Tal3at feminist movement. [The final speech](#), delivered by alQaws’ director Haneen Maikey, carried a message of vulnerability and rage. It also took on an additional symbolic dimension, marking Haneen Maikey’s last year as the director of alQaws, a position she has held since the organization’s establishment.

The demonstration and street flyering initiative were accompanied by a flurry of media coverage that lasted for two weeks. In this period, we published a [lengthy report](#) on Arab48’s website that detailed the shifts in social attitudes towards gender and sexual diversity issues. On the day of the demonstration itself, **Radio alShams** hosted our activists for an [interview](#) about the meaning of the protest. We also produced and published a promotional

[video](#) featuring several queer activists from alQaws, which centered our voices and emphasized the importance of heeding the “Rallying Cry.”

While dedicating our efforts to strategically confronting violence on these two levels, we also publicly engaged with various controversies and debates that flared up in broader popular discourse and news events. These public discussions about LGBT and queer issues provided us with an opportunity to challenge violent rhetoric and make our voices heard. As we pushed the boundaries of social discussions, we further exposed the various forms of violence we are daily confronted with.



One of the most memorable incidents, which demonstrated the queer movement’s role in framing and leading social discussions, took place after **Al Arz Tahini**, a Palestinian food company, made a substantial donation to an Israeli Zionist LGBT organization in order to establish a support hotline for LGBT Palestinians. This hotline was branded as the “first” of its kind, erasing alQaws’ longstanding support hotline “alKhat,” which has been serving the Palestinian queer community since 2010. The donation itself provoked substantial controversy and heated reactions across various segments of Palestinian society, leading alQaws to publish a [statement](#) that reached tens of thousands of readers. We made

further attempts to contact the Palestinian company directly, in the hopes of addressing the dangers of such a donation, to no avail.

The Al Arz donation controversy offered a unique opportunity to foreground our critique of capitalism and its intersections with colonialism and patriarchy. In the heated debates that surrounded the incident, we were faced not only with reactionary sentiments and attacks from various groups in Palestine but also had to publicly contend with the opportunistic exploitation of our struggle by businesses whose actions bolster the very colonial power that erases us and demonizes our movement.

The space of confrontation quickly expanded into international news coverage, and our own role took on an additional layer of complexity as we confronted the biases and racial politics of mainstream Western media outlets. In its coverage of the controversy, **The New York Times** highlighted the narrative of the Israeli Zionist NGO that received the Al Arz donation, privileging the colonial organizations' description of Palestinian society rather than recognizing queer Palestinians as an authority of their own lives and struggle. The article further ignored the political interventions and statements from alQaws, which offered a holistic and nuanced view of the debate. We subsequently published a [statement](#) that addressed this erasure and interrogated the colonial rhetoric behind such a piece, which was shared and read by tens of thousands of readers from Palestine and internationally.

Our efforts to challenge and confront violence against LGBT and queer Palestinians--which grow more visible and influential with each passing year--would not be possible without a strong community and organizational infrastructure to support our work. The bedrock of our public advocacy consists of the various support structures and community initiatives that address the emotional and psychological needs of LGBT and queer activists

and communities on the frontlines of the struggle.

Among the most prominent of these initiatives is [alKhat - Listening and Information Line](#), our peer-run hotline that offers a key source of support to our different communities, particularly during periods of crisis. The upsurge of controversies and violent events connected to gender and sexuality issues in Palestine has been met with a corresponding rise in the number of callers seeking out peers to speak with.

This year alKhat received 808 callers, compared to 502 in 2019, marking a 60% rise in the total number of calls. From an analysis of the subject matter of hotline calls, two main themes emerged: individual emotional/psychological distress and the question of family. Together, these themes represented over 50% of the overall topics of calls. We witnessed a striking increase in the percentage of calls focused on familial relations and general questions about the concept of the *'family,'* from 3% in 2019 to over 25% in 2020.

Each year, in order to maintain a solid infrastructure for *alKhat*, we carry out an up-to-date [training program](#) for the peer activists who run the hotline. The program provides relevant background information alongside advanced training in listening skills and call management. After concluding the training course, new volunteers are welcomed and incorporated into the existing hotline team and structure. This year, we held 40 hours of training for a group of eight new volunteers, all of whom began their call work during the first week of December 2020.

In addition to building out our infrastructure for peer-to-peer emotional counseling and psychological support, we also prioritized expanding our communities' political and organizing knowledge. This focus on political education is crucial to our work; it equips activists and peers with the frameworks and concepts that can be used to decipher and respond to escalating



public confrontation and violence. To this end, we held a [series of training sessions](#) that focused on familiarizing activists with theoretical and practical knowledge about sexual and gender diversity issues. These training sessions took place in a number of our working hubs, and the curriculum was divided into three levels: introductory knowledge of queer and sexual politics, advanced knowledge, and practical knowledge for queer organizing. In the middle of the training series, the COVID-19 pandemic surfaced in Palestine, prompting us to switch to an online platform and finish the program remotely.

Our experiences over the past year led us to certain revelations about the nature of the confrontation. We came to recognize confrontation as both a form of healing and an important stage in the process of claiming collective agency over the future of our struggle. Working from this understanding, we began to think of our present moment as the beginning of a new chapter in our movement, brought to fruition by our daily work and vision. To better understand and contextualize the shifts in Palestinian queer organizing dynamics over the past two years, we dedicated our biennial [Academic School](#) to the theme of **“From Pain to Hope: Confronting the System.”** The School offered a platform for researching and developing new understandings of gender and sexual politics in the colonial context. This year, we specifically engaged queer feminist approaches to resistance, applying

these frameworks to analyze recent confrontations with different oppressive power structures.

Due to the limitations imposed by the pandemic, we hosted this year’s Academic School online. The program consisted of five weekly meetings, attended by forty participants from across Palestine. The academic school tackled questions about alQaws’ political activism, framing the work towards liberation as an ongoing daily practice. Participants discussed the emotional and psychological dimensions of confronting systemic violence, examined various political organizing notions, and spoke about the role of hope and imagination in sustaining political work.

In spite of the challenges we faced in moving the Academic School online, the switch allowed us to include Palestinian participants who previously faced colonial mobility restrictions or other accessibility issues that prevented them from joining the School in-person. For the first time, we were able to welcome participants from the Palestinian diaspora--mainly from Lebanon and the U.S.--who joined the School both as attendees and as speakers.

Queer Solidarity in Times of Crisis

alQaws is a grassroots organization, sustained by the hard work and devotion of our activists and broader community. Together we strive to embody the values of shared leadership, collective endeavors, and solidarity. Alongside our political work, alQaws’ activist communities and national leadership also focus on developing the local support networks that are the cornerstone of our growth as a movement. These community networks are crucial, offering essential support in times of hardship and providing a strong base for the struggle toward societal transformation.

With the global spread of COVID-19 and the implementation of social distancing measures across Palestine and beyond, alQaws and other political movements witnessed how the consequences of the pandemic impacted marginalized communities, including LGBT and queer people, in a unique and disproportionate manner. We experienced firsthand the pandemic's damaging effects on our lives--emotionally, materially, and physically.

Recognizing how the pandemic exacerbated violence against LGBT and queer Palestinians, it became imperative for us to strengthen our networks of queer kinship and solidarity. We also directed our energies towards addressing emergencies within our communities, which emerged with greater frequency as the pandemic disrupted our daily lives. Several structural factors have made our efforts more difficult, chief among them the machinery of ongoing colonial fragmentation that destroys our collective bonds as a colonized people while also impeding our social and physical mobility. At the same time, we've witnessed the devastating effects of neoliberal economic policies adopted within our society and entrenched by various authorities, which reinforce individualism and put our society under collective economic duress. Finally, we also had to grapple with the role of traditional social norms that are embedded in economic, psychological, and health systems--systems that often exclude non-normative and queer people from relief or support.

With the implementation of enforced lockdowns and other drastic changes, we began to [address](#) our new circumstances and shift our organizing strategies accordingly. Although we were forced to work and correspond from our homes, we made a concerted effort to maintain our relationships with activists, community members, and followers despite our separation. As was the case for many other organizations and groups, online spaces quickly became our main arena for organizing.

We started by providing basic information about how to practically

deal with the pandemic and its impact on our lives, through a series of articles titled "[Pandemic 101](#)." This series discussed topics and themes such as self-care, community solidarity, HIV/AIDS in the context of the pandemic, digital safety, and dealing with solitude. In order to fill newfound free time during quarantine, we also offered suggested readings on sexual and gender diversity in our "[Stay Home, Queer Reading](#)" series.

For alQaws' training programs and group-focused work, we developed two separate but interrelated approaches. [First](#), we carried out our established and pre-planned projects for the year, adjusting to the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

This was the case for initiatives such as our youth group "**Me, My Sexuality, and Society**," which started in Haifa but was disrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns. We faced challenges moving the program online, but ultimately completed the group sessions with great success. This experience led us to host another online youth group in November, attended by LGBTQ activists from across Palestine.

In the second half of the year, despite the ongoing confusion and uncertainty that characterized it, two remarkable programs were conducted online: alQaws' **Academic School** and our **Hotline Volunteers Training** (more information in the "*Multidimensional Confrontation*" section).

Our [second](#) approach to organizing during the year focused on establishing new initiatives that could tackle the unique needs of LGBT and queer communities in Palestine that arose as a consequence of the pandemic.

At the beginning of this year, we planned to establish a new online space where LGBT and queer youth could share and discuss their daily experiences and concerns under the name of "**Our Very Own Queer Life**." The launch of this platform coincided with the



lockdown in April, resulting in a high volume of interaction. It utilized the 'Story' section of alQaws' 'Instagram' page, allowing a diverse array of participants to contribute and ask questions anonymously. The activists running the series from the alQaws account shared Q&As, podcasts, videos, and texts to engage our community's Instagram audience. Throughout this year, the **"Our Very Own Queer Life"** series, which would run for weekend-long sessions, featured the themes of LGBT and queer relationships, family relations, and gender identity.

For many LGBT and queer Palestinians, the pandemic introduced new complications into daily life, ranging from family issues to unexpected economic and emotional burdens. To respond to these emergent needs within our communities, we launched an online workshop on family dynamics. The turnout of the workshop was outstanding, and the positive feedback of participants prompted us to organize a second workshop during the same period of time. Building on these successful experiences, we organized two additional workshops titled **"On the Question"** and continued to tackle the pressing issues connected to gender and sexuality during the pandemic. The first of these workshops focused on how to deal with [increasing violence](#) in this period of confrontation, while the second discussed how deteriorating [economic conditions](#) affect us.

Migrating to online platforms allowed us to access new realms of communication, both regionally and locally. We connected with feminist and queer groups in the region to discuss significant incidents and regional current events that intersected with issues of sexual and gender diversity, through a webinar series titled **"Queer Discussions in the Region."** Participating partners included the online platform **Jeem.me**, **The A Project** from Lebanon, and **Mawjudeen (We Exist)** from Tunisia. The first online discussion addressed the [political and professional challenges](#) imposed by the pandemic, while the second discussion tackled how [media, authority, and society](#) deal with gender and sexual diversity issues. These public webinars represented a long-awaited opportunity to broaden the scope of our local discussions to broader LGBT and queer issues in the region, resulting in a rich exchange of knowledge and experiences. We are looking forward to sustaining these relationships and exploring them further during the upcoming year.



The Question of Emotions

The question of emotions has long been present in alQaws' work, philosophy, and organizational culture. Over the years, we have developed knowledge and strategies that place emotional health

and feelings related to our sexual and gender experiences at the center of our queer movement-building efforts. We do not view our emotions as something dealt with only in a time of “crisis.” Instead, emotions play a defining role in our everyday work, and attending to them constitutes an important aspect of alQaws’ organizing.

This commitment to engaging with emotions is reflected in various spaces within alQaws. The development of alQaws local and national leadership proceeds from a commitment to name, express, and collectively reflect on the various feelings we encounter during our organizing. We understand how the question of emotions and feelings is inherently a political question, particularly when feelings serve as the force and motivation behind our political actions. Providing spaces to express and process our feelings prevents the accumulation of unspoken or repressed concerns that might lead to unhealthy communication patterns or trigger a constant feeling of emergency.

The question of feelings is ever-present at alQaws’ national leadership meetings, the bi-annual gatherings that bring together activists from various areas of Palestine. This year, as alQaws underwent a significant leadership transition, the question of emotions became particularly salient. Centering feelings throughout the transition process raised--and will continue to raise--different questions and challenges, revealing a dynamic of emotional turbulence and growth common to political and social movements that undergo changes in leadership roles.

Dealing with feelings contributes directly to the development and sustainability of alQaws’ long term strategies and programming. In order to strengthen our social and political organizing, we must deeply engage with the emotional and mental health of our activists, communities and grassroots networks. Recognizing and engaging with inter-community feelings allows alQaws to function as a dynamic and evolving organization on the psychological level.

This focus on emotional wellbeing acts as a bridge, allowing our communities to connect with and engage the larger political and organizational context.

The past year has been particularly painful for many of us in Palestine and the broader region, in the wake of the loss of LGBT and queer activists and community members. The pain we felt was not only the result of sheer grief--it was compounded by the violent discussions we witnessed alongside the unfortunate news. The ways in which violence haunts us as queer people, even after our death, was staggering. It provoked a sense of omnipresent fear and anxiety that impacted our life, work, and organizing. In the midst of the discussions that followed queer activist Sarah Hegazi’s tragic death, we sought to candidly address and frame these emotions through the statement: “[Pain, Action, Solidarity, and Confrontation.](#)”

Emotions are also highlighted and discussed in alQaws’ cultural production, in particular our [Tarwiha Comics Series](#). Tarwiha is a collection of online webcomics that portray the lives and experiences of LGBT and queer teenagers. The first Tarwiha season centered on school life, while the second turned to examine family dynamics. The third season (this year’s edition) tackled emotions, focusing on how emotional and psychological constructs intersect with our diverse gender and sexual experiences.

Using visuals and language that are familiar and accessible to teenagers, **Tarwiha** highlighted how different emotions manifest in our daily lives, in our relationships with friends and family, and in the private and public spheres. Each episode in the season discussed a different feeling: [loneliness](#), [guilt](#), [loss](#), [self-loathing](#), [anxiety](#), [angst](#), and [jealousy](#). The season concluded with a closing episode that discussed how we can perceive our emotions as part of our whole selves.

While working on the latest season of **Tarwiha**, we soon realized the complexity of emotional topics and the need to further explore LGBT and queer experiences of them. To expand the discussion, activists from alQaws partnered with the online publication [Jeem](#) to publish a series of personal essays based on **Tarwiha**. Each writer reflected on their own encounter with one of the feelings addressed in the comics and wrote about how they came to understand their emotions and interact with them. [The texts](#) were published on the Jadal section of Jeem’s website, a virtual open space for community dialogue, which offered a unique, unfiltered discussion platform to engage audiences beyond Tarwiha’s target age group and highlight the voices of alQaws activists. The texts were met with great engagement and enthusiasm, both by our activist communities and followers.



Strengthening Ties With Communities Abroad & Anti-Colonial Activism

At the end of Summer 2020, we concluded the second year of our [Fellowship Program](#), “Palestine Through The Lens of Queer Politics.” This fellowship provides LGBT and queer Palestinians in the diaspora (with a focus on US-based Palestinians) with the chance to work closely with alQaws through political education, cross-border networking, and movement building related to queer culture and knowledge production.

The fellowship aims to strengthen alQaws’ ties with our activist base in the diaspora and to open a space for joint work by sharing knowledge and experiences between Palestinians living in different contexts. The fellowship program was launched in 2019 and it took place in alQaws’ offices in Jerusalem, where our first fellow wrote the lyrics for “**Minkom O Feekom**” - *Singing Sexuality’s* third edition (more information about the project can be found in the [Multidimensional Queer Confrontation](#) section).

Due to this year’s pandemic travel restrictions, we decided to host the second fellowship online. The outcome of this year’s program was an [analysis paper](#) titled “Beyond Propaganda:



Pinkwashing As Colonial Violence,” which reframes pinkwashing through the lens of grassroots queer Palestinian approaches. As part of this initiative to reorient anti-pinkwashing activism, we organized a [webinar](#) in collaboration with the US-based **Adalah Justice Project**.

The analysis paper was preceded by several conversations and group sessions held among local leadership, activists, and allies in Palestine and beyond. Through these thought-provoking discussions, we came to publish two articles in the web magazine Metras. The first of these discussed how pinkwashing attempts to reframe colonial oppression as the [“salvation” of LGBTQ Palestinians](#), while the second debunked the myth of [Israeli asylum](#) for LGBTQ Palestinians. After publishing these two articles, we held several Hawamesh meetings in [Ramallah](#) and [Jaffa](#) to discuss these topics.

The final analysis paper, launched in October 2020, grew out of this long history of interventions and writings by queer Palestinian activists, who have examined the phenomenon of pinkwashing beyond the familiar propaganda framework. alQaws aims to expand the definition of pinkwashing for English-language audiences by reading it through the lens of colonial violence. This perspective allows us to understand pinkwashing not just as from a propaganda tactic used to improve the international image of the colonial regime, but as a settler-colonial tool of domination, which fragments Palestinian society and alienates LGBTQ Palestinians from their own communities.

It was essential for us to share the lessons of two decades of grassroots organizing with a wide range of audiences on a global scale. By sharing this analysis with Palestine solidarity activists and allies, we aimed to recenter queer Palestinian perspectives in organizing theories and practices. We also wished to share our political analysis with other colonized peoples and marginalized communities who battle similar forms of oppression, in the hopes that the strategies derived from our experiences could be adapted and applied in various contexts. **The Fellowship Program**, and the analysis paper that grew out of it, succeeded in grounding discussions about pinkwashing within a holistic, anti-colonial approach. This framework emphasizes an intersectional and radical critique of colonial policies, identifying how they uniquely affect marginalized groups within the colonized population.

One of the fundamental functions of pinkwashing is to promote the idea that LGBTQ Palestinians are not an integral part of their own society. In classic supremacist fashion, the colonial regime paints Palestinians as inferior; it depicts our society as static, regressive, and violent, with no future other than despair, and erases any vision of hope, growth, and change that we have for ourselves. These colonial narratives and prejudices are subsequently internalized and replicated within the colonized society, compounding the challenges that activists must

overcome to build an inclusive liberation movement.

The Analysis Paper produced through the Fellowship Program aimed to address and dismantle these violent colonial notions by proposing a new, intersectional understanding of them. Going forward, we wish to make this knowledge more accessible through dedicated educational campaigns that will connect global Palestine advocacy with local grassroots organizing. We are eager to continue this work during the third edition of the fellowship, whose call for applications was announced at the end of this year.



Numbers & Press

Notable Numbers

Calls to alQaws' National Listening and Information Hotline "AlKhat" have increased by **60%** in 2020, totaling 808 calls.

The number of the Hotline's volunteers increased to **18** after 8 new volunteers joined in 2020.

Our social media in 2020 witnessed a **13%** increase on Facebook reaching 18k followers, **76%** increase on Instagram reaching 9500 followers, and **27%** increase reaching 5200 followers on Twitter.

We released 8 new episodes of Tarwiha comics accompanied by 8 interactive essays. The audience for the series **doubled** in 2020, totaling 4000 readers per episode.

More than 200 protestors joined "Rallying Cry for Queer Liberation," and we distributed hundreds of posters in four cities. The social media live stream of the protests were seen more than **14k** times, while the promotion video reached **26k** views.

We've conducted two webinars entitled "Queer Discussions in the Region," and their views on social media exceeded **6 thousand** views.

Notable Press Coverage

MyKali magazine article covering alQaws' 3rd Singing Sexuality project "Menkom o Feekom":

<https://bit.ly/2XtFI64>

The Queer Arab podcast interviewed alQaws [Arabic]:

<https://bit.ly/39mFlA5> [English]: <https://bit.ly/35xKlRe>

Arab48 report on the societal changes surrounding sexual and gender diversity issues: <https://bit.ly/3nwwXyO>

Radio Shams interview regarding "Queer Chant for Liberation" protest: <https://bit.ly/2LhMgCt>

Mondowiess coverage of alQaws' speech at "Queer Chant for Liberation" [English]: <https://bit.ly/35r6Vem>

alQaws' intervention on Arab48's investigation regarding sexual harassment: <https://bit.ly/3i70XV2>

"Fusha" a local cultural magazine in a conversation with alQaws' former ED Haneen Maikey: <https://bit.ly/3qcmr5L>

Arab48 Op-Ed on the political debate surrounding issues of sexual and gender diversity: <https://bit.ly/38swVYz>



From alQaws to Haneen Maikey

We recognize your impact, appreciate your leadership, and we shall continue the struggle

For years, alQaws' name was intrinsically tied to Haneen Maikey's. This connection reflects the enormous efforts Haneen has made to build out the organization and ensure that it remains active, lively, and influential. Haneen Maikey concluded her tenure as Executive Director of alQaws at the end of 2020, a change we began preparing for three years ago, and which developed into a working path over the past year. We turn the page on a new year and a new Director.

The path to building an organization like alQaws wasn't lined with flowers, nor was its enduring success the result of good faith and intentions alone. It required exceptional and inspiring leadership, which Haneen generously provided to alQaws' activists and communities. Marking this milestone for alQaws, it is important for us—as activists, team members, and the board of directors—to pause, reflect on, and recognize the great impact of this leadership as we continue to build on its legacy of struggle and change.

Since its earliest beginnings, alQaws has relied on the efforts and capacities of its activists. This is an integral part of our organizational identity: we depend on collective work to realize and achieve our goals. Over the years, we've built work teams, activist groups, and a diverse grassroots base. To sustain this labor, we need leadership that motivates, coordinates, and encourages; leadership that inspires hope and gives space to existing capacities and energies; leadership that tirelessly works to build up the group, strengthen its relationships, and create support networks; leadership that carries the group to its fullest potential. Only by investing in our groups and laying the foundation for a solid grassroots base have we come to reach this moment of organizational transformation and leadership transition in alQaws. Now, we embark on an exciting phase led by fresh voices and experiences. alQaws new leadership is the harvest of seeds planted by wise and insightful predecessors.

The political identity of alQaws has also become an essential part of our work. We are an unwaveringly political grassroots organization, standing in direct opposition to patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.

The organization, therefore, requires leadership that encourages the development of political consciousness through daily practice and labor. We work hard to ensure that we don't undermine any of our political cornerstones, or compromise on the principles developed by alQaws during Haneen Maikey's leadership.

This political conviction was not a spontaneous development; it was the result of years of on-the-ground work, combined with knowledge accumulated from various movements and ideologies. Haneen's valuable experiences and leadership fostered the intersection of practice and

ideology, shaping the direction of alQaws and allowing its political principles to develop and crystalize.

Finally, the collective labor and intellectual production of our organization couldn't be realized without brilliant, detail-oriented, and practical management. Real leadership integrates all aspects of work, down to the finest details. Over the years, Haneen's committed and compelling leadership was able to manage the organization's daily life and bring to fruition its accomplishments and influence.

The daily life of alQaws is a world of its own. It requires a leader who lives in it through and through; who uses the most suitable and strategic tactics to confront daily violence, including the violence of friends and allies; and who pushes the team's capacities while maintaining constant communication with the organization's activists.

In addition to Haneen's knowledge, expertise, and organizational skills, her personal characteristics were also present in alQaws and had an immense influence on its path and identity—whether through her endless hope, her high energy, or her ability to call things by their name and put them in their correct places.

A moment like this can't be fully expressed with our words of gratitude, nor can these pages capture its abundance. We can only say that we recognize Haneen Maikey's significant impact, appreciate it, and will continue on the path she has tread towards struggle and change. We can't hide the confidence and hope we feel for our new journey, responsibilities, and roles. We are full of enthusiasm and eager to work with the new Executive Director of alQaws, Haneen Sader.



A word from Haneen Maikey

A Twenty Year Journey: Gratitude & Acknowledgements

I write this letter a few weeks after my departure as the Executive Director of alQaws. As my body replaces adrenaline with exhaustion, my heart is filled with deep gratitude for alQaws' activists, team, and Board of Directors, for the endless opportunities and lessons they've offered me until the very last moment. alQaws is where I learned what I know about myself, my community, and Palestine. No matter how hard I try, I won't be able to do my experience with alQaws justice. How can one reduce twenty years of friendships and activism to a few lines?

At alQaws, I didn't aspire to find a career path, express my ambitions, or build my future. In fact, alQaws wasn't a clear-cut project in its first decade. It was, first and forever, a gathering place for people experiencing sexual diversity, which has turned into grassroots networks of activists all over Palestine. Our stories and pain were the

main inspiration for us to persist in alQaws' journey. Our mistakes were a cornerstone in building our movement. The external challenges and conflicts were endless, but the main struggle was facing remnants of repression within us.

It is also difficult to limit this experience to its present only. alQaws has become an organization with a legacy that cannot be ignored. Yet, like the broader queer movement in Palestine, it has reckoned with many eras over the past two decades and was built by hundreds of activists who continue their struggle to this day, along with many others whom history has veiled. This is my opportunity to extend my deepest gratitude to all the early activists and founders of alQaws: you are the beginnings of the movement. Your stories remain an integral part of this journey and are forever in my heart.

From past to present, I send lots of love to the activists, who have been the backbone of alQaws in recent years. Be it on the frontline confronting Palestinian Authority police prosecutions and arrests, or on alKhat (alQaws' national hotline) comforting LGBT and queer people who have faced societal violence, or on the streets with dances and tears at the "Rallying Cry for Queer Liberation" to demand that our families, friends, and colleagues stand against the violence inflicted upon us. Thank you for your courage and for your trust, both in alQaws and in one another, as you take each step towards desired change. The road ahead is long and arduous, but today the responsibilities are also greater. We are no longer a marginalized group or a small institution, but a movement of great strength, influence, and credibility.

As for friends and allies, I offer my heartfelt thanks for all the consultations, advice, and enlightenment exchanged on our shared path. alQaws wouldn't be complete without

discussions and dialogues within our society, in all of its sectors. Our conversations weren't fleeting or shallow, and they certainly weren't easy. They were complex and filled with challenges and feelings—that's where their merit lies. Our pursuit of real and deep conversation has benefited not only alQaws and queer people but all of us in society.

I send my warm wishes to the team and board of alQaws in your new journey. Our joint and intensified work was not without its challenges and difficulties. Still, I am grateful for the rare opportunity to work with such beautiful and hardworking people, who live the organization in all its details and do not tire of learning or laboring. I learned a lot from you, and I am enthusiastic to follow your activism as it ascends to new heights.

As for Haneen Sader, a friend first and new Executive Director second, I wish you success upon this new journey. Your unique voice and fingerprint have long been present in your activism; your passion for the Palestinian queer movement did not start today. alQaws is fortunate to have you. You're fortunate to be organizing with the leadership of activists and teams who have dedicated their lives to ending all violence, be it societal or colonial.



A word from Haneen Sader

Pride and Excitement Amid Significant Change

It is no easy feat describing the density of certain moments—moments in which thoughts and emotions heighten; moments of monumental change. I write these words during a transformative period societally, organizationally at alQaws, and in my personal life. After studying computer engineering and working at different technology companies for the past decade, I've decided to take a new career path. This choice came from my five-year activist experience at alQaws, which has influenced me in the most meaningful of ways.

When I first joined alQaws five years ago, I felt stable in the world of Technology, yet I was burdened with creating formative spaces for my identity and community. Upon beginning my activism with alQaws, I glimpsed some hope for myself and my society, and I clung to it until it became

clear. That hope restored my faith in my community and our ability to create better living opportunities. I've played various roles at alQaws over the past years—first as a trainer in the professional training team, then as a member of the board of directors—which has allowed me to reflect internally on myself, as well as on aspects of our organizing and activism.

I start my new role at alQaws with a sense of pride and, of course, a sense of awe. I step into the Executive Director's position after Haneen Maikey, who has filled it for two decades. When alQaws went through the leadership transition process three years ago, as a member of the board of directors at the time, I had a lot of questions and felt anxious and pessimistic about the change. Haneen Maikey's departure from the organization represented the departure of tremendous experience and knowledge, without which it would be difficult to continue organizing at the same level. However, this change was an opportunity to examine alQaws' needs and create efficient and durable work structures. We set out to enhance the different roles and capacities of alQaws' team, the board of directors, and our different activist leadership groups. In recent months, I've had the opportunity to explore my role in the movement, and my personal responsibilities, passions, and capacities in a new professional path. During that time, my pride for alQaws and my confidence in our ability to make change increased.

I begin my new role during a milestone stage for alQaws politically and socially. Issues of gender and sexual diversity have become a permanent fixture of the discussion table, significantly changing the expectations placed on alQaws, as well as the responsibilities of the organization towards our communities. Such changes push us to embark on a path of planning for the future, as we explore the strategic

questions related to organizational and societal changes. We are aware that we cannot answer these questions without an in-depth dialogue with our local and national leadership groups and allies, and this is one of our main goals for this year.

I cannot deny the awe I carry when looking at and understanding the scope of my new responsibilities and the spotlight placed on me in this role, but I can say that it fills me with passion, enthusiasm, and strength. Working at alQaws means working at a tight-knit, grassroots, and values-oriented organization of great social impact. It means working at an organization led by a tireless base of activist and leaders, with whom I share my burdens, intellect, and labor; it means working surrounded with friends, allies, and real, effective connections; and, of course, it means working with the team and board of directors that have carried the organization into what it is today.

Thank you to the board of directors, the team, and the activists of alQaws, for their confidence in me. Thank you to Haneen Maikey for the endless support. I am proud of our journey and looking forward to the next stages of the struggle.



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