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"With My People": Tunisia's LGBT NGOs and Activists

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“With My People”: Tunisia’s LGBT NGOs and Activists

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Abstract

The Tunisian Revolution brought a sharp increase in the number of NGOs in the country, as well as a plethora of new rights which were unprecedented during the reign of former leader Ben Ali. Among these new organizations were those which specialized in progressing LGBT rights. The current laws in Tunisia, established during the French protectorate era, criminalize homosexuality and vaguely worded disgraces to public dignity. The revolution has allowed these organizations to exist and politically oppose these laws, yet LGBT Tunisians still experience a harassment, arrests, and intrusive anal examinations.

This study compares three LGBT NGOs – Damj, Mawjoudin, and Without Restrictions – through interviews of their leadership, revealing stark differences in strategy and the types of activism employed. These organizations are capable, and have in the past, formed coalitions and worked together. However, maintaining their membership depends on remaining separate and keeping to their own methods of activism.

The study also analyzes the personal, day-to-day experiences and perceptions of seven LGBT activists, through reports of their involvement, harassment, and the difficulties of existing as LGBT within public space. There were commonalities among reasons for becoming activists, as well as experiences which are reflective of both the poor state of public opinion on LGBT matters as well as the staunch public life-private life dichotomy in Tunisia.

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Introduction

Since the Tunisian Revolution, the country has seen a veritable explosion of NGO creation. LGBT NGOs and activists have arisen, despite the continued criminalization and discrimination against LGBT individuals. This study is intended first, as a comparative view of Tunisia's LGBT NGOs, utilizing the observed comparisons to draw conclusions about similarities and differences between the organizations. Second, this study is meant as an anthropological report on the lives of seven LGBT activists, analyzing their personal experiences and their perceptions on the current status of LGBT people and rights in Tunisia.

The objective of the first portion of the study is to discover why these organizations, with similar overarching goals, nonetheless remain separate in their activism. This is accomplished through observations about their founding, services, legal issues, work with news media, obstacles, funding, coalitions with other organizations, and their methods of gaining membership. The second portion of the study, through self-reporting and personal history, explores the experiences and perceptions of these activists. This includes analyses of identity, their reasons for getting involved in LGBT activism, 'outness', harassment, news media, safe spaces, religious and political affiliations, and their perceptions of the effect of the Tunisian Revolution on the LGBT community. These objectives are achieved through comparative views, identifying commonalities between the NGOs and between the experiences and perceptions of the activists themselves.

A review of the available literature included, first, studies of a similar nature which have been conducted throughout the Middle East-North Africa region. The most notable contribution to this topic is an analysis of formal and

informal LGBT organizations in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq through the lens of a post-colonial context.¹ It focused in on the status of the activism and how these organizations and members operate within a society which perpetuates discrimination against LGBT people. The Lebanon portion of the study did a comparison of the activities and intersectionality of two organizations, finding differences in their strategies and finding that while one had moved from a broader context to identity politics, the other had moved from the identity politics of gay women to a larger, international context which assisted LGBT Syrian refugees. The author's work in Palestine primarily focused around the participant's unwillingness to discuss the matter and the politics of "pinkwashing" by the Israeli government – that is, overrepresenting its comparatively progressive LGBT rights – to justify its Palestinian policy. The portion of the study dedicated to Iraq focused on the creation of safe spaces by gay men in the country. Each of these points contributed to a further understanding of the contexts of LGBT activism in the MENA region.

There is also a debate concerning international LGBT rights NGOs and their involvement in the MENA region. One analysis theorizes that the application of political, Western sexualities to these countries corrupts an already present, unlabeled, private bisexuality present among Arab and Muslim gay men.² Homosexual works of poetry and literature date back to early Islam, and the Arabic language reflects changes made to accommodate Western concepts of sexuality. Much of the terminology in Arabic associated with discussions of

¹Jedidiah Anderson, "Sexual Intifada Now! Postcolonial Arab LGBTIQ Activism," Ph.D. diss. Indiana University (2009).

²Joseph Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002): 361-385.

homosexuality comes from Arabic translations of Western psychology texts in the last century. However, the other side of the debate seeks to counter the notion that these activities were not taboo before Western influence, pointing out that “for a century before Stonewall activism, Arab writers were condemning same-sex acts with whatever terms or euphemisms they could find aside from ‘gay’”³ Similar works, which do not criticize the modern Arab LGBT activist, look to a historical view of colonialism’s influence on homosexuality in the MENA region. In the case of the French in North Africa, one sees the cultural and political climate in which Tunisia’s current anti-LGBT laws were founded. Homosexual tourism and instances of same-gender sexual activities between French soldiers and young Arab boys were not uncommon by any means,⁴ and French colonial law prohibiting sodomy sought to either “illegitimize” the acts or to create further power imbalances.

While the literature expounding on colonialism and the current Western influence on sexuality topics certainly contextualized the associated terminology and laws, this study does not seek to expand on those works. Whether or not the concept of labeled homosexuality came from the West or was inherently taboo in Islam, the fact remains that these ‘Western’ labels currently exist across the MENA region, and it is not the intention of this study to determine whether these activists are justified in utilizing them, or whether the international organizations from which they receive funding are perpetuating colonialism. These works were only reviewed to provide background for the creation of anti-LGBT laws in Tunisia during the French protectorate era.

³ Vernon Rosario, “A (Mostly Homo) History of Arab Sexuality,” *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* 15, no. 3 (2008): 35-37.

⁴Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

In readings of the relevant laws from the 1913 Penal Code, one can easily find the anti-homosexuality law which states that “Sodomy...is punished by three years of imprisonment.”⁵ Article 230 is the notorious law which has been used to criminalize the same-gender sexual activities of gay and bisexual men. One must search deeper and take on a vaguer interpretation of the law to find Article 226, which penalizes offenses to public decency⁶ – a clause which has been used by the police to arrest transgender individuals. In order to better understand the outrage against these laws, one must also consider the guarantees made by the Tunisian Constitution of 2014, which theoretically supersedes the Penal Code. This document promises the citizens of Tunisia individual rights and dignities in Article 21, human dignity and physical integrity against torture in Article 23, and humane treatment for prisoners in Article 30.⁷ All of these rights have been violated through the enforcement of the Penal Code.

These violations have occurred each time someone is arrested, each time an invasive anal examination is forced on citizens, and in each instance of brutality against LGBT individuals in police custody. The United Nations Committee against Torture voiced concerns in a recent hearing regarding anal examinations in Tunisia, urging the country to cease this practice. The delegation from Tunisia apparently responded by claiming it simply did not occur, the transcript summary noting,

Anal and virginity tests were not forensic medical practices. These examinations only took place for investigating sexual attacks. Tests reported by civil society organizations had been prohibited under the medical code of ethics. The National Medical Ethics Committee had

⁵*Le Code Pénal*. (Tunis: L’Imprimerie Officielle de la République Tunisienne, 1913, re-published 2012)

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷ Tunisia Constitution, Part 2.

firmly condemned, and was investigating, alleged violations of this code for the purpose of criminalizing same-sex relations. Doctors conducting tests without the consent of the patient or the authorization of a judge could be subjected to sanctions.⁸

However, Tunisians who had received anal examinations testified in a Human Rights Watch report, which included descriptions of forced penetration with a tube by a medical professional while two police officers watched the procedure.⁹ The arrests themselves constitute further abuses of constitutionality and human rights, according to activists. In reviewing the literature, I pulled the most widely known cases for the topic, as any attempt to cover them all would be incomplete by nature of inaccessible records and the fact that there are simply too many cases to describe here.

The two most widely known cases, which received huge public attention, were that of Marwan, and that of the Kairawan Six. Marwan, a pseudonym for a Tunisian man in his early twenties, was investigated for murder after the death of a previous partner in 2015. The police in Sousse threatened to rape him and charge him with the murder if he did not confess to sodomy. He was then subject to an anal examination at the request of the court, and was sentenced to a year in prison. Marwan was released on bail to take his university exams, during which his attorney appealed to have his sentence reduced. The appeal reduced the sentence to two months, which Marwan had already served, and thus he was freed.¹⁰ This case began a national and international outcry against sodomy laws in Tunisia, though no changes occurred in the aftermath and the Minister of

⁸ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Committee against Torture reviews report of Tunisia," April 21, 2016.

⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Dignity Debased: Forced Anal Examinations in Homosexuality Prosecutions," July 12, 2016.

¹⁰ Amnesty International UK, "Marwan freed after being imprisoned in Tunisia – for being gay," February 1, 2016.

Justice was dismissed shortly afterward for publicly stating that Article 230 was a violation of human rights and the constitution.¹¹

The case of the Kairawan Six occurred several months later, when six men were arrested from their student apartment in Kairawan, and were subject to anal examinations as well as beatings by police officers. They were found guilty of sodomy in a tribunal, sentenced to three years in prison and six years banishment from Kairawan.¹² Activists such as those from Shams claimed that these arrests violated Article 24 of the constitution, which promises the inviolable privacy of the home and the right of citizens to choose their place of residence.¹³ However, the government responded by suspending the LGBT NGO Shams, a move which garnered much national and international attention.¹⁴

Though these cases were heavily reported, public opinion on homosexuality remains low. The Pew Research Center's surveys on global morality showed dismal results in Tunisia's surveys. One from 2013 asked, "Which one of these comes closest to your opinion, number 1 or number 2? #1 - Homosexuality should be accepted by society or #2 - Homosexuality should not be accepted by society." This study found that 94% of respondents from Tunisia believed homosexuality should not be accepted by society.¹⁵ A survey done more recently, in 2014, also by the Pew Research Center, found that 92% of

¹¹ RFI Afrique, "Tunisie: les raisons du limogeage du ministre de la Justice," October 23, 2015.

¹² Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: Men Prosecuted for Homosexuality," March 29, 2016.

¹³ Tunisia Constitution, Part 2.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: LGBT Group Suspended," January 16, 2016.

¹⁵ Pew Research Center: "Global Views on Morality," (2013).

<http://www.pewglobal.org/question-search/?qid=1125&cntIDs=&stdIDs=>

respondents in the Tunisia thought homosexuality was “morally unacceptable.”¹⁶ As of yet, there have been no comprehensive studies of such a nature reflecting opinions on transgendered individuals and the perceived morality of alternative gender identities in Tunisia. Still, the available surveys nonetheless provide a view into the public opinion which surrounds these NGOs and their membership.

Additional reading, relevant to the second portion of the study, focuses on the experiences and inter-sectionality politics of LGBT Arabs and Muslims. Of particular note was the cultural distinction between the public and private spheres. This is reflected in the aforementioned Article 24 of the Tunisian Constitution, yet also an unspoken cultural trait. A study of culturally Muslim gay men in Britain found that they frequently engaged in heterosexual ‘passing’ – that is, adhering to strict gender norms – and that they did not wish to come out to their families for fear of bringing them shame or possible violence against the gay men themselves.¹⁷ Additional readings about the Arab Spring also expounded upon a collective ignorance that limits ‘outness’.

The issue with ‘homosexuality’ arises when the men who perform these acts clearly and publicly define themselves as homosexual, that is to say, define their identity based on the exclusive sexual involvement with other men... By breaking away from the expectations set in the public and private spheres of life and by rupturing the idea of collective denial through the presentation of exclusive, romantic homosexual relationships in the public sphere, openly homosexual men force people to acknowledge their presence.¹⁸

¹⁶ Pew Research Center: “Global Views on Morality,” (2014). <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/04/15/global-morality/country/tunisia/>

¹⁷ Rusi, Jaspal and Asifa Siraj, “Perceptions of ‘coming out’ among British Muslim gay men,” *Psychology and Sexuality* 2, no. 3 (2011): 183-197.

¹⁸ Jayesh Needham. “After the Arab Spring: A New Opportunity for LGBT Human Rights Advocacy?” *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 20, no. 1 (2014): 287-323.

This leads, for organizations, to a sort of “activism from the closet.”¹⁹ Theories have arisen which suggest that, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring – shattering the collective denial of authoritarianism – that other such denials, like LGBT issues, will be more openly addressed and move toward acceptance.²⁰

There are a limited number of academic works which have mentioned the specific contributions of LGBT NGOs in Tunisia. One mentioned Damj and Chouf in passing, lauding these organizations for their on the ground activism, as opposed to the many online LGBT groups which arose after the revolution.²¹ This mention was placed within the wider context of discussing the effect of the Arab Spring on sexual – not just LGBT – perceptions in the MENA region. Another study mentioned Klemty, within a larger work which compared LGBT activism across MENA countries.²² However, the piece drew several incorrect conclusions about the status of LGBT organizations before and after the revolution, and thus was not utilized as a reference for the purposes of this study. Clearly, there is an knowledge gap in the available literature concerning Tunisian LGBT activism – a gap which this study seeks to fill.

Methodology

Two separate interviews were utilized for the purpose of this study. The first was given once for each organization, to an individual in a position of

¹⁹ Hassan El Menyawi, “Activism from the Closet: Gay Rights Strategising in Egypt,” MELB. J. International, 28 (2006)

²⁰ Needham.

²¹ Shereen El Feki, “The Arab Bed Spring? Sexual rights in troubled times across the Middle East and North Africa.” *Reproductive Health Matters* 23, vol. 46 (2015): 38-44.

²² Michael Anthony Figuerdo, “An Examination of Factors that Catalyze LGBTQ Movements in Middle Eastern and North African Authoritarian Regimes,” MS diss. Portland State University (2015).

leadership, a founder, or a cofounder. The second interview was meant to delve into the lives and experiences of organization's membership, and was given to each participant – including those who received the first interview. Both interviews utilized primarily open ended questions. For example, “What is the story of your organization's founding?” and “How would you classify your sexual/gender identity?” For questions involving the operations and actions of organizations and individuals, a dichotomous response was first requested so that the questions would not be perceived as desiring a particular response. For example, when discussing the NGO's media interaction: “Does your organization interact with the news media? How does your organization interact with the news media?” When discussing political engagement with individuals: “Did you vote in the last election? How did you vote in the last election?” The interviews were all formal in nature, though subjects were given the chance to speak freely and expand upon their answers, with no input from the researcher.

Protection of human subjects was a significant concern with the study, as the topics discussed were taboo and, at times, could be considered incriminating. Subjects signed informed consent forms which outlined the purpose of the study, as well as the associated risks and benefits, and their rights as participants. Before each interview, I verbally reviewed each portion of the informed consent form with the subjects, and they asked questions as they saw necessary. Subjects were clearly informed that there was a risk to reputation, employability, and criminal liability for participation in the study. To counteract this risk, subjects were offered the option of contributing to the study anonymously. Subjects were also informed of the risk of emotional distress, due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed in the interviews. There were no benefits associated with the study, and

this was clearly stated. Subjects were given my own contact information, and the contact information of an advisor, should they have any questions, wish to withdraw from the study, or wish to report violations of their rights.

Less formal means of protecting the subjects included allowing them to choose the location of their interviews. As I would not claim to have knowledge of safe spaces – by which I mean, locations in which others would not cause emotional or physical distress to two individuals discussing LGBT-related topics – in Tunis, I informed each participant beforehand that the study would cover LGBT issues and their personal experiences. I then asked them to choose a place where they felt most comfortable discussing these topics, and we held the meetings there. Locations included NGO offices, public cafes, and private residences.

These participants were obtained through two means: through personal connections and word of mouth, via previous participants in the study, as well as contacting the groups directly via their Facebook pages. The first method was used extensively due to the vast network of connections between organizations, while the second was used as it was the only way to contact an organization directly – most of their websites were quite sparse and included no contact information. On a recommendation from Academic Director Mounir Khélifa, I spoke first with Shams Abdi, a member of Mawjoudin. This contact connected me to an interview with Mawjoudin president and cofounder, Ali Bousselmi, as well as member Aziz Dridi. Bousselmi later referred me to Salwa²³, whom I later interviewed as well. In contacting Damj, I sent a message to the organization

²³ ‘Salwa’ is only part of the subject’s name. This participant wished to use their real name, but not their full name, for the purposes of this study.

through their Facebook page. Their response connected me to the email of the treasurer, who invited me to the Damj offices to interview himself, as well as two other members who had agreed to be interviewed. One of the informants did not come, so I interviewed Nadhem Oueshati, the treasurer, and Farouk²⁴, a member of Damj. Without Restrictions, another NGO, was contacted via their Facebook, in much the same way, and they put me directed me to the president and founder of the organization, Ramy Ayari. This particular interview was conducted over video chatting software, as Ayari was, at the time of this study, outside of Tunisia.

Because of the laws surrounding LGBT issues in Tunisia, many were hesitant to participate in the study. Organization leadership often could only find a few individuals willing to interview, even with the anonymity clause outlined and clearly offered while seeking participants. Because of the nature of participant gathering had to be discreet, and because even members of NGOs felt uncomfortable interviewing for the research, much of the data gathered may be from those who are considered more ‘outspoken’ – as much as one can be on LGBT issues in Tunisia, that is. Of note is that, even among those who utilized their real name for the purposes of the interview, all chose to invoke their subject rights and ask questions about the distribution and presentation of the information given.

Additionally, though all six of the major LGBT NGOs were contacted, only three responded and kept up consistent enough correspondence to establish interviews with organizers and members. Though I would have liked to include

²⁴ ‘Farouk’ is a pseudonym. This participant opted to contribute to the study anonymously.

all of the organizations' perspectives in this study, some comparisons are made between the ones who did interview and those who did not. This is because the other organizations frequently came up in conversation, especially when specifically discussing the differences between the NGOs. Nonetheless, the study only takes from the perspectives of the membership and leaders of three: Mawjoudin, Without Restrictions, and Damj. Organizations who were not available for interview included Shams, Chouf, and Klemty.

I conducted these formal, individual interviews in English, with some French, at the insistence of those interviewed. The services of an LGBT-friendly translator were offered to each participant, yet all preferred to discuss the matter primarily in English. Still, subjects were encouraged to use whichever language in which they could best convey ideas, and code switching to French for particularly complex subjects – especially discussions of protests – was seen among all participants except three, an English teacher, an English student, and a participant who had studied for three years in the United States. The participants who did code switch would frequently say the phrase that they were looking for in French, then a translation afterward in English. The use of English was not entirely surprising to me, as Tunisian education follows the French requirements of a minimum two foreign languages learned during schooling²⁵ and the fact that a preference for English language interviews among participants was also the case in Anderson's study on LGBT organizations in the Middle East.²⁶ To avoid possible power imbalances, it was important to me that the subjects were

²⁵Kat Delvin, "Learning a foreign language a 'must' in Europe, not so in America," Pew Research Center Fact Tank (2015).

²⁶Jedidiah Anderson, "Sexual Intifada Now! Postcolonial Arab LGBTIQ Activism," Ph.D. diss. Indiana University (2009).

comfortable with the language of the interview, yet the subjects always chose to speak in English.

The city of Tunis was chosen as the location for this study, motivated by the significance of the city in LGBT activism. The six major LGBT NGOs in Tunisia are all headquartered in Tunis, though there are some smaller gatherings and even branches of the Tunis NGOs in other cities. This contextualizes the perceptions reported by activists, as experiences with LGBT issues in Tunis may be different than in other locations throughout the country. However, for the purposes of a study which analyzes the major NGOs, Tunis was the ideal location. There were no limitations on neighborhoods in which the interviews took place, and these were conducted in a variety of places all over the city.

The biases that I brought into this study were those of a United States resident, who had previously witnessed LGBT activism and LGBT community interactions within a Western context. These preconceived notions were undoubtedly apart of my consciousness, providing unwarranted context. I knew that I did not wish for this study to be a comparative view of Tunisian and US LGBT activism, but rather an internal look at Tunisia's activism, drawing comparisons between organizations. However, there is little that I could do to control for these biases, because I live primarily in the United States and I see that activism and interact with the LGBT community often. I cannot remove these experiences from my mind. The only solution was to go forth without expectations, and to keep any unintended mental comparisons with US LGBT activism out of the final publication.

Findings and Analysis

Organizations

There are six LGBT NGOs in Tunis, all of them active. This portion of the study is meant as a comparative view of three NGOs – Damj, Mawjoudin, and Without Restrictions – with the intention of determining their different strategies and experiences. My findings include descriptions of several aspects of the organizations – their founding, services, legal difficulties, interactions with the media, obstacles, membership criteria, involvement, and funding. The findings are reflective of the practices of these NGOs, and my comparisons seek to analyze the differences between them. These are, indeed, three very different organizations, though some common themes have arisen between them.

Founding

Civil society in Tunisia was practically nonexistent before the revolution, with the regime's understanding that any sort of cultural or political fulfillment should come from the government itself.²⁷ The revolution saw an explosion of action in civil society, which bloomed to include approximately nineteen thousand NGOs,²⁸ six of which support LGBT Tunisians. However, the actual status of these organizations is consistently a complex, convoluted issue, with issues of technicality, illegality, and harassment.

Damj began as an informal group, with meetings as early as 2002 – while the country was under former leader Ben Ali – in private residences. Nadhem

²⁷ Mounir Khélifa, "Tunisian Revolution III," September 9, 2016. Lecture.

²⁸ Szakal, Vanessa. "Governance of civil society associations: the gap between legislation and practice." *Nawaat*, November 16, 2016.

Oueslati, the treasurer for the organization, was not there at the inception, but he described this beginning based on remembered testimony and the presentation given to international NGOs. He said,

This first group- it was informal. We made a support group for LGBT psychological and social reporting, identifying the needs of the community. As you know, in 2002, Ben Ali is the president of Tunisia and the dictatorship is very intensive, that's why no LGBT NGOs have the right to be built. So after 2002, we observed and marked the rise up of the violence...in 2010, we had the first attempt to register Damj as an NGO for LGBT and the answer was 'no'.²⁹

From these meetings before the revolution, Damj was prepared to come into its own almost immediately after Ben Ali fled the country in January 2011. Damj was a recognized NGO less than two months later. Oueslati said that now they have a good relationship with the government, because Damj has been invited to participate in meetings between human rights organizations and government ministries. However, this came at the price of some legal technicalities. One cannot register an LGBT organization as an NGO due to the penal code; as such an action would be supporting criminal and socially taboo activities. Damj's registration statement, Oueslati said, is convoluted:

Yes [we are registered]. Not as an LGBT NGO – for minorities. You can put 'sexual minorities' Yes, we can say 'sexual minorities', not LGBT. If you say 'LGBT minorities,' they will say 'No, that's not legal'. We can find a straight person who does not like sex. We can play with [the term] 'sexual minorities' so it does not mean 'LGBT.'³⁰

The obfuscating of the true purposes of organizations is a survival tactic, allowing these organizations to exist within loopholes of the law. This process is a commonality across all the participating organizations, a legal hoop through which they must jump to begin their activism.

²⁹ Nadham Oueslati, interview by author, Tunis, November 23, 2016.

³⁰ Ibid.

These tactics are certainly seen within the organization Mawjoudin, which was founded several years after Damj. The idea for this NGO took root in 2014 after the two founders, including Ali Bousselmi, found that the left-leaning human rights organizations for which they were working would not foster LGBT activism. Bousselmi described the founding, saying,

They refused to work on LGBT issues but they didn't say it directly. They said it indirectly. Like 'We have a campaign in five, six months, My Body, My Rights, and we're going to work on LGBT issues.' But after that [initial statement] there is nothing. So me and the other cofounder, we decided to create Mawjoudin because some NGOs that are very famous in Tunisia that work on human rights – they won't work with LGBT issues.³¹

The organization, from there, was registered in January 2015 and began its activities. The objective, as stated on their civil society application, said that they “work on gender, on sexuality, but not LGBT issues,”³² as Bousselmi mentioned the importance of using general terminology for these purposes.

Without Restrictions, the youngest organization featured in this study, was founded in a similar fashion as Mawjoudin. Ramy Ayari was a member of a political party and took part in many demonstrations after the revolution. However, he soon noticed a point of concern with the party's work. He described the situation, saying, “When I asked them when we were going to talk about Article 230, they said ‘No, no, it's not the time. We have many problems that are more important than Article 230.’”³³ This prompted Ayari to reach out to people and begin his own organization, though he had many initial difficulties with the application. As with the other NGOs featured here, the government would not accept the organization's ‘LGBT’ objectives. He also had difficulty getting

³¹ Ali Bousselmi, interview by author, Tunis, December 2, 2016.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ramy Ayari, interview by author, Tunis and Montreal, November 22, 2016.

people to pledge their names as members for the purpose of the application, because they were concerned about their security. He started the process of creating the organization in 2014, yet the entire movement from inception to recognition took a year. Now, as a young organization on the LGBT NGO scene, Without Restrictions is beginning to receive recognition and expand their activities.

There are some commonalities between these organizations. Without Restrictions and Mawjoudin were founded due to an indifference by others to LGBT issues. Their founders had experience in activism and sought to apply it to this venture. Additionally, all three share the issue of upfront legal issues, because of the criminalized nature of LGBT existence. There is some distinction between Damj and the other two, though, because it is the oldest organization, well-established, and has a member base that is slightly older than the rest of the organizations.³⁴ Still, the shared experience of obfuscating the truth is a rite of passage for all the LGBT organizations – not because it is perceived favorably, by any means. It is, however, a necessary legality in which each organization must engage to simply exist.

Events and Services

The creation of an NGO is consequential, yet the majority of the nineteen thousand NGOs in Tunisia could be described as inactive.³⁵ The LGBT NGOs studied here are anything but, providing services, assistance, and events for their membership, as well as the LGBT community at large. It is through discussions

³⁴ Oueslati.

³⁵ Vanessa Szakal, "Governance of civil society associations: the gap between legislation and practice," *Nawaat*, November 16, 2016.

of these events that one begins to see the divulging purposes of these organizations. Perhaps they all share common goals – the cessation of anal examinations, arrests, Article 230, public scorn, and the rest of the problems which endanger the lives and wellbeing of LGBT individuals in Tunisia.³⁶ There are even some common methodologies. However, the primary focuses of these organizations, and the ways in which they commit their activism, varies greatly.

Mawjoudin, for example, stresses the importance of arming LGBT Tunisians with the necessary training and skills for activism. The co-founders have backgrounds in activism, including work for Amnesty International, and seem to have centered the organization around preparing people for advocacy, rather than the advocacy itself. One member of Mawjoudin, described these methods as a reason why she joined, saying,

We in Mawjoudin – we are more interested in survival strategies, and in how to make people survive homophobia, or people who are born in very conservative families, or people who know that they are attracted to men but simply cannot classify their feelings and find a name for it. This is what happens in the regions of Tunisia – people getting attracted to other people thinking they are sick or feeling that way. So our work is mostly allowing people to know more about the question and developing their survival strategies.³⁷

Certainly, there are services offered besides the training, but they are on an individual basis and often referred to as special or emergency cases. These include psychological and legal counseling, as well as providing lodging and some degree of financial support for LGBT Tunisians who have been rejected and evicted by their families.³⁸ However, Bousselmi used the phrase “capacity building” to describe the organization’s primary purpose. He said, “We do a lot

³⁶ For more on individual struggles, see subsection ‘The Individual Activist’.

³⁷ Shams Abdi, interview by author, Tunis, November 18, 2016.

³⁸ Bousselmi

of training for our members to learn about human rights and sexual rights, training for public communication, training for digital security.”³⁹ Facebook seems to be a significant source of harassment for several of the activists with which I spoke. Additionally, LGBT activists and groups sometimes receive online communications from those who wish to expose them, pretending to be a young LGBT person desperate for assistance.⁴⁰ This capacity building certainly fulfills a need in the community, and while most organizations do provide training, Mawjoudin is centered around it.

In interviewing the co-founder of Mawjoudin, I also found that this organization was the only one in the study which actively works with migrant and refugee issues. Tunisia has grown in popularity, both as a transit country for entry into the European Union and as a popular destination for students from sub-Saharan Africa.⁴¹ The founders of Mawjoudin have worked with refugees in their past activism, and continue to do so through this organization. Bouselmi says, “We help refugees here in Tunisia from other countries in Africa because they don’t know where to go, they don’t know the places that are gay friendly... We help to orient them, and sometimes we help with lodging.”⁴²

Without Restrictions is a relatively new organization, and does provide training. This activism is not by any means “official,” says organization president Ramy Ayari, and it takes place in the homes of organization members and

³⁹ Bouselmi.

⁴⁰Bochra Triki, “Chouf: LGBTIQ in Tunisia,” October 10, 2016. Lecture.

⁴¹Katharina Natter, “Revolution and Political Transition in Tunisia: A Migration Game Changer?” *Migration Information Source: Online Journal of the Migration Policy Institute* (2015).

⁴² Bouselmi.

friends. Without Restrictions primarily focuses on other forms of activism, and Ayari went on to list their recent and biggest works, saying,

In March 2015, we participated in organizing a protest in Bardo with many organizations, and we were there with the gay flag. We also like to denounce Article 230. We do many campaigns on the internet with international organizations to help Marouan.⁴³ We work with many international organizations and organizations in Tunisia on petitions...And we did two videos, it's like- people explain what it is, to be homosexual, to help people accept homosexuality. We have another video about what the homophobic people say on TV. There is one [news personality featured in the video], he says we should be killed, and more homophobic speech.⁴⁴

The organization has also made videos concerning what to do and your rights if you are arrested by police, as well as videos explaining sexuality and gender for those individuals who may be questioning their own identity. In its day to day, more individual-focused activism, Without Restrictions does some of the same activities that are seen across the other LGBT NGOs. Namely, providing assistance to homeless LGBT youths who are evicted by their families, and “trying to create many activists”⁴⁵ by giving them training and information.

Damj includes some similar activities, but focuses mainly on advocacy, educating and preparing members for a sort of verbal resistance against their surroundings, and against those who would speak out against them. It seems to train them for debates and verbal defenses, offering the community information. They accomplish this through lectures, inviting speakers who speak on the subjects of law, religion, society, and science. Recently, they held a popular lecture by a notable law professor, who discussed the Penal Code and its relation to the new constitution, saying that the law should be below the constitution.

⁴³ Amnesty International. “Challenging Tunisia's homophobic taboos.” September 30, 2015.

⁴⁴ Ayari.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

These lectures breed activism, according to the organization, and allows LGBT people to speak for themselves. Oueslati said, “If you want to make a real argument, you must have all dimensions.”⁴⁶ It would seem that purpose of Damj, rather than to advocate for the community, seeks to teach the community how to advocate for themselves, in the everyday conversations that they will experience as LGBT people.

Damj also offers some of the same individual services as the other organizations. Legal and psychological support are available, much like they are within the other organizations. One particular project stood out to Oueslati, who has a background in the medical field. Damj has begun a new service which seeks to provide HIV testing to the LGBT community in Tunisia.

These health services are unique to Damj of these three organizations, yet there are many similarities between them when one considers the individual level activism. The special and emergency cases, on which these organizations sometimes even work together, are consistent. These NGOs provide financial support, information, housing, psychological counseling, and legal aid to LGBT Tunisians in need.

That said, the day to day activism outside of these special cases varies tremendously from one organization to the next. Mawjoudin provides training workshops in communication, security, and sexuality. Damj, while its strategy may sound similar, prefers to focus on lectures and education for the community on the law, human rights, science, religion, and any number of issues which are intellectually important to an LGBT activist. Without Restrictions has a vastly different purpose from the other two, focusing on protests, petitions, and online

⁴⁶ Oueslati.

campaigns which garner attention for their cause. This divergence in strategy reflects the differences between the mentalities of the organizations, each fulfilling a distinct need in the community through the methods which work for them.

Police, Government, and Legal Issues

With the criminalization of homosexual acts in Tunisia, as well as strong disapproval by the general population,⁴⁷ issues often arise for the LGBT NGOs. These tend to include harassment in many forms. Harassment combined with the special cases and arrests that the organizations deal with as part of their activism, has led them to seek legal advice and security assistance, the latter of which is not always met well.

According to Ramy Ayari, the police and local government are not an issue at even their loudest protests, primarily because their protests involve multiple organizations. However, there is always fear of the police at their events, and he is sure that there have been plainclothes officers at some. He said that the real issue tends to happen directly after the event itself, and usually digitally.

The police, they harass the activists. They can't harass the organization, because the organization is not a person. So they go to the people that work in this organization to harass them and speak homophobically and say 'We're going to kill you.'⁴⁸

For the protests, as a security measure, Without Restrictions never requests police protection or asks for permission to protest. This is primarily how they keep these events safe for protesters, yet he points out that Shams, another LGBT NGO,

⁴⁷Pew Research Center, "Global Views on Morality," (2014). <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/04/15/global-morality/country/tunisia/>

⁴⁸ Ayari.

requests permission for their protests and it is never granted. However, Ayari described a moment which took place on the anniversary of the revolution in 2016, when the police were forced to actually protect them for the first time. He remembered, perhaps a bit of pride in his tone, that Without Restrictions received significant attention from journalists at the event, and the police protected them as they would any other organization, so long as the cameras were rolling.

When LGBT activists request personal protection following death threats, the police also fall short. Ayari described the situations of several activists who had requested assistance from the police, including his own. He said, “I can’t go to school, I can’t go to work, I can’t get a job because I don’t have protection.”⁴⁹ These protections, which are vital to activists, are inaccessible because of the stigma against homosexuality in Tunisia, which serves to only endanger them further and create a vicious cycle of threats and violence.

Ayari recently gave a speech at a conference in Montreal, where he still encountered difficulties with the Tunisian government, half a world away. He remarked, “The embassy – they sent someone to come into the conference to listen to what I said. At the end of the conference, [the embassy representative] said, ‘This person doesn’t say the reality – all of this doesn’t exist.’”⁵⁰

Without Restrictions does not have officially designated legal specialists or lawyers, due to a lack of funding. However, Ayari personally knows a lawyer who was involved in the cases of Marouan and the Kairawan Six, and Ayari goes to them when the organization needs legal advice.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Mawjoudin has not experienced as much difficulty with the police or local governments. This is likely because they base their activism around training rather than protests, and events often takes place in private, rather than public spaces. However, they have certainly had some experiences with the police, even though these may be less confrontational than the more public organizations.

Bousselmi described one such encounter, saying,

When we were in Sousse in the summer, we did training there. We had some visits from the police. They said, ‘What are you doing exactly in the hotel, what is the topic of this training?’ But because we have good networking...we called [name redacted for privacy] and she called the police, and they said ‘We are so sorry. You have our number, if you come back here you can just call us and it will be okay to be here.’⁵¹

Mawjoudin does not keep a legal specialist with the organization, yet, as shown, they have many connections with the legal community. There are lawyers who have reached out and offered their services when someone is arrested. Bousselmi himself studied law in university, and has no issue handling the administrative legalities of running the organization. Due to the more private nature of their activism, and their network of connections, Mawjoudin has had less problems with the police.

Damj also does not keep a legal specialist on hand, but they do have some legal assistance. Oueslati says, “They work for us. They help us. But they’re not really working only for us, or only on LGBT rights.”⁵² These lawyers primarily have extended their assistance when an organization member is arrested under the anti-LGBT laws, or the organization may forward to them the case of a nonmember criminalized under those laws. These lawyers also help them in the

⁵¹ Bousselmi.

⁵² Oueslati.

legal administration of the organization, assisting with any legal issues that the NGO has with the government.

There are some similarities between these organizations, in that all tend to utilize legal advice and a network of connections to maintain the security of their organization. However, there is a divergence of experience between Without Restrictions and the other two. Because of the nature of Without Restrictions' activism, revolving around very public campaigns and events, this organization has experienced much more direct contacts with the police and the government. Mawjoudin and Damj, alternatively, have a relatively secure network, though they are by no means immune from harassment. This demonstrates the effect that these organizations' varying strategies have on their operation and security.

The News Media

News media in Tunisia was viewed as unanimously homophobic by all participants in the study, both by members and by organization leaders. The leaders themselves had quite a bit to say on the subject, but the sentiment was strikingly similar across the board. Bouselmi of Mawjoudin says, "We know, when they invite us, they will invite an imam and a homophobic person to do the show. That's why we don't participate."⁵³ He stresses that there should be an equality between the talk show guests, not simply a group of homophobic people attacking a member of the LGBT community.

Other organizations contribute to the media, but also remain selective in doing so. Without Restrictions and Damj seem to have established a network of

⁵³ Bouselmi.

journalists with which they will work, who will release statements as they are intended and provide a fair view of the issues. Ayari of Without Restrictions says,

We know the media in Tunisia, but we don't work with all the media in Tunisia. We have some media, we know 'these people are not homophobic.' We know 'this journalist is not homophobic, they're gay friendly.' So we work with people who are not homophobic...with them, we are sure that the journalists will write what we want.⁵⁴

Damj also limits its interactions with the media for similar reasons. Oueslati said that most of the media sources in the country "want to make the buzz"⁵⁵ and so, in response, they carefully choose non-homophobic media to speak to when those interactions become necessary.

Indeed, the participating organizations were quick to point out that the news media was not a part of their activism. They referenced Shams' work with the media, primarily in discussing how different Shams' tactics were from their own, but these three particular NGOs have chosen to keep clear of the media. No participant had a positive view of the mainstream Tunisian media in reference to LGBT rights, and that speaks volumes for the state of public opinion and news outlets in the country. The media is all-too-willing to paint the LGBT community in the light of immorality, sacrificing fair debates for inciting public outrage. This, in turn, creates more public backlash – or indifference – toward LGBT issues, and a vicious cycle continues.

Organization Problems and Obstacles

These organizations certainly face some similar problems – legal issues, arrests, homophobia. However, when asked to self report the obstacles that their

⁵⁴ Ayari.

⁵⁵ Oueslati.

organizations face, leaders diverged significantly in their answers. The day to day issues and goals of the organization – the wider context of their activism – took precedence over security issues for Damj and Mawjoudin, while Without Restrictions found these security issues vital.

Ayari cited government intervention and scrutiny, as well as death threats sent to their membership as obstacles to their organization’s goals.⁵⁶ Considering that Without Restrictions is the youngest and the most ‘vocal’ of the three, perhaps they experience these instances of violence and government pushback more than the others in the study. Theoretically, there should be modes of security in place to protect the members digitally and at their more public events, yet the completely founded lack of trust in the police, and the fact that the police generally do not care, leaves the members exposed to possible threats. This lack of security is, according to Ayari, the largest obstacle to their activism.

Damj placed an entirely different issue as an obstacle to their work – indifference from the general population, especially from academic circles.

The cause is not very important for [academia] here. It’s not a priority. There’s no violence, there’s no aggression, there is nothing. They are indifferent about LGBT. Yes, it’s a big problem because if you want to make a change, you must really have connections with the intelligentsia...only activists cannot make change. I feel that many stakeholders [in academia] are very indifferent.⁵⁷

These circles could contribute to talk shows and vital studies which would help the work of the organization immensely, yet they do not care. This is reflective of how strong secular parties and organizations refuse to address LGBT issues and a general sense of dislike from the population. As mentioned earlier, 92% of Tunisians surveyed during the Pew Research Center’s study on morality

⁵⁶ Ayari.

⁵⁷ Oueslati.

associated homosexuality with immorality,⁵⁸ which is hardly a statistic that harbors activism and speaking out against the issues faced by the LGBT community. This apparently manifests as absolute indifference to LGBT issues, which Damj, at least, views as its largest obstacle to achieving its goals of acceptance and overturning the anti-LGBT laws. When considering that their activism revolves around lectures and education, one can see why the organizations is concerned about these matters.

When asked about Mawjoudin issues and obstacles, Bousselmi focused on internal problems rather than external ones. He cited the places in which their activism was lacking, and his hopes for the future. Funding, primarily, seemed to cause the issues. He wanted them to be able to contribute more money when people are arrested, because non-activist LGBT people have a difficult time getting financial assistance from the NGOs for their various legal costs after arrest. He was also disappointed that they cannot provide longer term lodging and rent for LGBT youths evicted by their families. However, the largest limitation to their goals, he said, stemmed from difficulty in achieving their long term goal of including members across the gender spectrum as well as across the country.

There are general problems which face all the organizations as a whole, yet those which matter most to the organization leadership varies. Without Restrictions is focused on security concerns, while Damj struggles with indifference from the intelligentsia and the general public, and Mawjoudin wants to attract a more diverse membership. Over the course of these interviews, I came to the realization that these were all problems that the community shared, rather

⁵⁸Pew Research Center. "Global Views on Morality," (2014). <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/04/15/global-morality/country/tunisia/>

than organization specific ones. Damj, for example, also has difficulty with diversifying their ranks and the security of their members. However, a stark difference was found in what these organizations focused on, and what they felt was their biggest obstacle. These answers are reflective of the type of activism in which each organization engages – security issues for the more public Without Restrictions, inclusion for the Mawjoudin which shows membership preference towards applicants who are women and people from the interior, indifference for the organization which focuses on intellectual debate and educating its members. These answers, though they could have applied to any LGBT organization in the study, are unique to their particular organization because of their strategies.

Transgender Activism

There is a ‘T’ in ‘LGBT’ yet the topic of transgender Tunisians received little more than a passing mention in all interviews but one. Most participants, seeking to explain to me the laws associated with LGBT issues, were quick to point out that Article 230 is specific to homosexuality, but that trans people are often arrested under Article 226, which criminalize vague disgraces to the public morality.⁵⁹ The transgender community was also mentioned in tales of news stories which had stood out to participants. Of the organization representatives, only Bousselmi of Mawjoudin discussed transgender issues in any depth, and he cited difficulties in supporting these individuals as one of the failures in his organizations, as well as one of the places for growth and expansion. He said,

We really want to cover the LGBTQI community, and it’s so, so, so difficult to work [in public] with transgendered people because for

⁵⁹*Le Code Pénal*. (Tunis: L’Imprimerie Officielle de la République Tunisienne, 1913, re-published 2012).

example, if we do training, we cannot invite them into the hotel – the hotel is going to ask ‘Why are they like this?’ And we are going to have some trouble with the police, exposing these [transgender] people to the police. It’s really a difficult thing.⁶⁰

Activism is, by nature, a public venture. Even though Mawjoudin adopts a subtler, more private activism than those organizations which focus on the media or protests, there are still dangers associated with existing as a transgender person in these spaces. While people of various gender identities stepped forward for this study, none were male-to-female or female-to-male transgendered individuals. As such, a more nuanced discussion of this topic is impossible.

Still, strong transgender advocacy is undoubtedly an issue which all of the organizations are lacking, considering the near-absence of mention. Contributing to this is hesitance by transgendered individuals to join the organization and expose themselves to unsafe situations. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual activists already have security issues, and the situation is, as described by activists, marginally less dangerous for them than the trans community. Perhaps, in the future, a balance can be struck between visibility and safety, allowing activism, research, and publicity for this matter.

Gaining Membership and Keeping Members Informed

Inviting people to join LGBT organizations and the events run by those organizations is not simple. Making a very publicized invitation to a demonstration would attract the police, while accepting anyone who asks to join without question would cause a security risk to members. However, these organizations do need some way of getting people in and information out. Each

⁶⁰ Bousselmi.

NGO has its own strategies for doing so, again reflective of their different takes on activism.

Mawjoudin began with friends. Now, they recruit membership primarily through their training. Non-members who come to the organization's training events are screened and considered for membership, with "positive discrimination given to women and people outside of the capital."⁶¹ Bouselmi boasts proudly of members in Medenine, Gafsa, and Sidi Bouzid,⁶² which exemplifies their methods of choosing membership. These sprawling networks and friendships are maintained through Facebook, a major tool for any Tunisian NGO.

Even when Mawjoudin hosts a public event that they believe might cause risk to participants, they create a secret event on Facebook to inform people of the event details. "With the security issues, we hate Facebook, but Tunisian people use Facebook, they don't use email. So we didn't have another solution. We know it's quite risky,"⁶³ Bouselmi said. There is a certain irony in utilizing a public social networking site to organize these events, but this is something encountered across organizations. Sometimes they do not like it, and Bouselmi certainly does not, but the way that Facebook is embedded into Tunisian culture renders it the primary form of communication in the country, even when discretion is necessary.

⁶¹ Bouselmi.

⁶² For more on the economic disparities between the capital and the interior regions: *Statistiques Tunisie*. 2014 Census. <http://www.ins.tn/fr/statistiques>

⁶³ Bouselmi.

Without Restrictions also primarily uses Facebook as a means of informing people of events, as well as utilizing the site for activism and sharing information.

If a gay person is arrested, and I have the information, I inform the other activists in the organization and then we all meet and agree on a strategy we are going to use. We try to get more information about the case, and then we put it on Facebook to inform everybody.⁶⁴

Facebook also assists in drawing members to Without Restrictions. Prospective members generally contact the NGO through the site, after seeing one of their video campaigns or other online content. In the beginning, though, Ayari used his own network to gather membership. There were people who had contacted him after he did interviews on the LGBT subject, and when Without Restrictions began, he reached out to them.

When describing how to gain membership and inform them of upcoming activities, Oueslati of Damj cited many methods of doing so. These included social media, mail, phone calls, and a vast network of connections. Yet he nonetheless expressed the difficulties in doing these very things, and described the precarious line on which the organization treads when it must reach out to others, thereby exposing itself. He said, “It’s not private, and it’s not public. It’s between public and private.”⁶⁵

Because of the difficulties and security issues involved in running an LGBT NGO, Damj is careful about those who seek to join the organization. Unlike the other NGOs in this study, who also sought to vet and ensure the legitimacy of prospective members, Damj takes this a step further. Oueslati explains, “The person who wants to join must be approved by two persons of

⁶⁴ Ayari.

⁶⁵ Oueslati.

Damj. Any new volunteer must be approved by two executives of the Damj association. It's patronage."⁶⁶ These protections ensure the security of the organization, supplementing the typical forms of security employed by other organizations.

As far as gaining new members, informing them of upcoming events, and the associated security issues with these matters, many of the organizations have a similar approach. They network with the other organizations and their friends, ensuring the legitimacy of the prospective member before accepting them.

Damj's approach of patronage adds an extra level of security – critics might say paranoia – to the equation, yet this is steeped in the history of the organization.

Damj is the oldest of the participating organizations in this study, and began under an intimidating regime which did not allow them to meet openly. Without Restrictions, the newest of these organizations, has a much more lax attitude towards membership in NGO, though with some digital security measures in place. These organizations vary widely in their means of gaining membership, and this can be attributed to the context in which they were formed.

Inter-Organization Projects

All of the organizations included within the study described a healthy working relationship with the other LGBT organizations in Tunisia. There have been coalitions between them in the past, and as they look to the future there are projects in which collaboration will be key.

Five of the six LGBT organizations came together to submit a shadow report on human rights to the United Nations. The Human Rights Committee

⁶⁶ Oueslati.

monitors implementation of the Independent Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Ratifying countries, such as Tunisia, are required every four years to submit reports on their adherence to human rights protocols⁶⁷. However, NGOs may submit ‘shadow reports’ to the Human Rights Council, and these reports are meant to supplement – or disavow – a country’s self-reporting document.⁶⁸ The coalition of LGBT organizations collected information on arrests and abuses against LGBT individuals throughout the country, and will submit one such shadow report to the United Nations. This is a common tactic seen globally for LGBT NGOs in countries which criminalize and otherwise abuse the human rights of LGBT people.⁶⁹ This coalition has opened the door for future cooperation between all the LGBT NGOs, and there are plans for grant applications and the creation of an LGBT Front, a coalition which will focus on certain points of agreement between the organizations and further their activism in a unified manner.⁷⁰

As far as relations between the NGOs, there are often projects and overlap between organizations, and all described a close relationship with the other NGOs. Only Mawjoudin mentioned a closer relationship to any one over the others, and that was with Klemty. Klemty has a small membership and releases an LGBT magazine. They seem to be moving towards becoming absorbed by

⁶⁷ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “Monitoring Civil and Political Rights.” <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CCPR/Pages/CCPRIntro.aspx>

⁶⁸ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “NGO and NHRI Information.” <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NgoNhriInfo.aspx>

⁶⁹ Outright Action International, “Shadow Reports.” <https://www.outrightinternational.org/documentation/shadow-reports>

⁷⁰ Shams Abdi, interview by author, Tunis, November 18, 2016.

Mawjoudin and continuing to run the magazine project under the larger organization.⁷¹

The established joint projects and the plans for future projects indicate that these organizations continue to grow closer in their activism, yet it seems that they will – with the possible exception of Klemty – remain relatively independent. The strategies utilized by each organization leave them separated, though there are certain points and statements on which they can agree. They may have the same goals – acceptance and decriminalization of LGBT. They may also work together to achieve those goals. However, the varying strategies still ensure the separation between them.

Funding

Damj, a well-established organization, has several sources of funding grants and even has an office that they keep, in which their interviews took place. As the treasurer, Oueslati gives detailed information about their funding sources. They have received grants from a German organization focusing on ecological issues and human rights, as well as the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network.

Without Restriction, in contrast, is a relatively new organization with few sources of funding. Their members themselves give money to support and run the activities. However, the organization is growing, and it has received its first international grant from the US-based organization OutRight. Action

⁷¹ Bousselmi

International,⁷² which focuses on LGBT activism around the world, especially in countries where LGBT activities are criminalized.

Mawjoudin also receives funding from OutRight Action International, as well as LGBT Denmark, Action Aid, Planète Homéo, OutRight Action International, and Famille Oxygène. The organization also receives individual donations – generally from prominent French LGBT activists. Through this funding, they have recently acquired a small office through which they can coordinate and run activities.

Commonalities appear when considering funding sources. Namely, OutRight Action International supports both Without Restrictions and Mawjoudin. However, the differences in sources of funding are quite tangible, and reflective of the organizations themselves. Damj is older, with several large donors which maintain their activities and the office. Mawjoudin has only recently been able to afford an office, and much of their funding comes in smaller increments from a wide variety of sources – not just international NGOs, but also businesses and private donors. Without Restrictions has just received its first grant and has now started to expand its activism with that money. The organizations themselves have very different backgrounds, contexts, and activities, and this is shown in their various forms of funding.

Self-Reporting Comparisons

As I drew my own conclusions about comparing these organizations, I decided it would be vital to ask the organization leaders what they thought made

⁷²For more on this organization: OutRight Action International, <https://www.outrightinternational.org/>

their organization different from the others. The answers varied widely from direct comparisons to others to speaking about the positive aspects of their respective organization. Nonetheless, the differences reported aligned significantly with my observations – namely, a variation in strategy among the organizations.

Bousselmi noted that Mawjoudin is different from others by nature of its approach, saying that this NGO addresses issues that others do not. He also cited the lack of a hierarchy as setting it apart from the others.

It's the participative approach, the decentralization. Actually, some LGBTQI organizations in Tunisia, or outside Tunisia in Europe, when they say 'LGBTQI' issues, they work mostly on gay rights. But really, we try to work with LGBTQI+, and we have more women than men. There is no hierarchy.⁷³

When comparing this to my own observations, I do see some of the trends which he mentioned. Mawjoudin was certainly the only organization to discuss transgender advocacy in any depth, and the individuals from this organization who participated in the study were the most diverse – though the sample size is too small to draw any definitive conclusions about this second point. Bousselmi's duties as an organization leader, far from a unilateral approach, seem to merely include administrative and legal matters. Additionally, interviews of other participants from Mawjoudin had them echoing the same praise for the organization's teaching of "survival strategies"⁷⁴ and an approach which does not include garnering media attention.⁷⁵ The approach of training – in public speaking, digital security, etc. – is certainly found in other organizations, yet

⁷³ Bousselmi.

⁷⁴ Abdi.

⁷⁵ Salwa, interview with author, Tunis, December 6, 2016.

Mawjoudin has made this training its *raison d'être*, These differences set Mawjoudin apart from the other organizations.

Without Restrictions is a young and eager organization, with more public events than the other two. However, Ayari cited the area in which they are not particularly public – the media – as a separating factor between them and another organization, Shams. He said,

Our organization is not like Shams – they have contacts with any journalist, they do the interview, they go on TV. It's good, but we think that if we are going to talk on TV, there should be equilibrium...after you finish talking, they will augment the homophobia...We don't go to TV shows like this. The organization has the same objective, and the same project, but the difference is in the strategy.⁷⁶

Certainly, being 'not Shams' is something which five out of the six LGBT organizations have accomplished. Ayari's statement does, however, highlight the strong defensiveness which these organizations have when comparing themselves to others. Ayari was quick to point out strategy as a separating factor, and I agree that this is the largest point of contention between organizations. Without Restrictions focuses on demonstrations, while Mawjoudin and Damj do not take that particular approach.

Oueslati of Damj also reported the variation in strategy as the primary difference between his organization and others. He said, "We focused our work mainly on advocacy and how to connect with people or stakeholders so that they can make changes. Our literatures is built among this activism."⁷⁷ The strategy of education and building networks with the intelligentsia remain at the center of Damj, and is reflected in their self-reported obstacles – indifference – as well as in their activities, which frequently include lectures.

⁷⁶ Ayari.

⁷⁷ Oueslati.

No one describes the situation of these converging organizational differences so well as Oueslati, who practically voiced the picture which had been forming in my mind as the result of these interviews. He said, ““We share the work. Damj, advocacy. Mawjoudin, capacity building. Chouf, for arts and culture.”⁷⁸ There is certainly an undercurrent of codependence to these organizations, which had me wondering – before the study began – why they did not simply come together to form one large organization. Yet, in speaking with membership, one sees the divergences less as parts of a whole, and more as vastly different personalities and approaches to the same issue – very separate parts which could not fit together to make a whole.

Yes, the organizations all agree on key political points. However, the methods vary greatly because the membership prefers certain strategies over others. A larger organization would have members who did not wish to be exposed to the media, nullifying Shams’ approach. There would be members who did not have the experience in dealing with refugee issues, nullifying one of Mawjoudin’s goals. Each NGO is wholly unique in their approach, and I found that their membership to be overwhelmingly loyal to their particular organization – sometimes after having researched and even tried out the others. There was always something about organization they chose which set it above the rest, in their opinion. If the NGOs joined together as a larger organization, this would alienate their membership base and make them lose sight of the overarching goals. Nonetheless, the organizations are entirely capable of working together, as the United Nations shadow report and various shared activities show. Future

⁷⁸ Oueslati.

cooperation is expected, in spite of vast differences and diverging approaches to activism.

The Individual Activist

This section is not meant as a survey of LGBT Tunisians. Indeed, the questions were far too open ended and the sample sizes too small to pull any sort of statistic from the results. One cannot draw conclusions about the number of gay men in the study, for example, when asking an open question about sexual and gender identity leads to an answer exploring philosophic queer theory and the politics of expression. This section is, instead, meant as an anthropological view into the experiences and involvement of seven activists from the three organizations which contributed to the study. These activists shared personal histories and their opinions on the state of LGBT politics in Tunisia. Common themes arise between them, which will be explored in-depth.

Sexual and Gender Identity

As aforementioned, the open-ended nature of these questions left a wide variety of answers. Taking an anthropological approach, it was important for participants to self-report based on their own perception of themselves, rather than applying a strict set of responses from which they had to choose. The nature of these answers allows me to draw certain conclusions about their responses.

Three of the respondents chose a political, complex approach to their identity, describing at length their issues with labeling their gender and sexuality. Bousselmi of Mawjoudin felt uncomfortable with the question by nature of it asking for labels, yet he insisted on giving an answer. He stated, after much

consideration on the subject, “I can say I don’t like the boxes or the etiquette. I’m not heterosexual.”⁷⁹ Another participant, Shams Abdi – also of Mawjoudin – rejected labels and divulged into the politics of gender performance. She said,

I’m basically “cisgender”, that is, I was born female and conceive of myself as female. But society does not see me as fitting perfectly in the role of female... In terms of sexuality, I don’t identify, simply. But I’ve always been attracted to men, I’ve been in a monogamous relationship with a man for three years. So according to the existing labels, I’m heterosexual, but according to the way I see my sexuality, I just don’t identify. Maybe ‘pansexual’, to make it easier? I just don’t identify.⁸⁰

Abdi went on to discuss the political nature of labels and ‘LGBT,’ believing that these labels should be superseded by personal identity and how individuals feel toward others, without applying a name or categorizing those feelings. The third respondent to take an anti labelling stance was Farouk of Damj. Farouk began by orienting his sexual identity based, without any sort of prompting by the researcher, on the Kinsey Scale.⁸¹

On the Kinsey? Yeah, it’s like, I think the six is gay? So probably a five. Oh, probably five and a half. Actually, I am against labelling whatever it is – sexual orientation or gender identity. Especially for me, I can say that I’m a man attracted to men, obviously, but I’m not against the idea of one day being attracted to a woman or trans person or probably one day- sometimes I identify myself politically as a woman or even sometimes, when I’m involved in the trans cause, I think of myself as a transgendered person. So yeah, it depends. It’s fluid.⁸²

These three respondents took an opposition to labels which reflected their activist nature. They were well-educated in matters of queer theory and the relevant literature, as a result of personal research and as a result of their involvement with their respective NGOs. The explanation may have been due to education, yet the

⁷⁹ Bousselmi.

⁸⁰ Abdi.

⁸¹ Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell Baxter Pomeroy, and Clyde E Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 1948).

⁸² Farouk.

actual nonconformity reflected their own feelings and identities on the subject. Still, the articulation of these complex issues – especially considering that all were communicating these answers in their third or fourth language – is notable in its presence.

Two participants were more willing to label their identities and describe their gender experiences, where the ‘male’ and ‘female’ labels did not fit their own feelings. Salwa of Mawjoudin said, “I’m a homosexual and for my gender- I’m a woman. Let’s say gender fluid. Sometimes, it depends.”⁸³ Nadhem of Damj expressed a similar identity, stating that he was gay and had no gender.⁸⁴ Nadhem found these expressions concrete and unwavering, which was also the case for two other participants. Aziz Dridi of Mawjoudin and Ramy Ayari of Without Restrictions self-identified as gay men with no additional quantifiers or explanations.⁸⁵⁸⁶

These individuals had vastly different identities which were in no way reflective of their organizations – though the sample size does not allow for any sort of trend analysis, in this case. However, these self-identifying remarks were reflective of the participants themselves as activists and as people, and the question was nonetheless vital to establishing a context for the remainder of their responses.

⁸³ Salwa.

⁸⁴ Nadhem.

⁸⁵ Aziz Dridi, interview with author, Tunis, December 3, 2016.

⁸⁶ Ayari.

Joining the Organization

The reasons for joining their respective organizations made vital contributions to the previous section which compared the organizations. From a perspective of the individuals' personal histories, these responses helped to establish their own connection to the organization. Each had their individual motivations for becoming LGBT activists, varying from those with previous NGO experience who wished to help, to those who were deeply affected by global and personal events which shaped their activism.

Oueslati joined an LGBT NGO with the belief that change is possible in Tunisia, and he wished to participate in this change. His reasons for joining Damj specifically were "because I know the founder and I think that Damj is more near for me. Because others, they're not the same age as me. They are younger than me." This observation was quite interesting, as it was a reflection of what the organization portion of the study had shown. Oueslati is not elderly, by any means. However, he is a young professional in an activist field which depends largely on university students under twenty five, who are at the age where they would still be, by Tunisian custom, living with their parents and receiving economic support. He is self-sufficient, has stable employment in the health field, and he is not still in or fresh out of university. His profile was vastly different from the other activists with which I spoke, and yet he found a very specific comfort in joining an organization that he felt was older, more established, and generally catered to young professionals more than the graduate students which tend to make up the other organizations.

Farouk, though a member of Damj, does not fit Oueslati's reason for joining. He is young and has just completing his graduate studies. Age does not

concern him, and he cited very different reasons for joining the organization. Farouk described a lack of personal interest in LGBT activism after the revolution, saying that he was more focused on going where his services were needed. After the revolution, he worked on issues of democratic transition and youth involvement. When he felt that he had contributed significantly to these causes, he turned to the LGBT movement and the organization, Damj, of which his boyfriend was a member. Farouk's decision was also motivated by his own objections to the treatment of the LGBT community. He said,

As a gay person in Tunisia, you pay taxes, you are sometimes a very good citizen, you don't have problems. But still, you are seen as less than a person and you can be jailed for your private choices. And that kind of revolts me, because that's very unfair. So I am fighting against that article and [supporting] equality between citizens.⁸⁷

Farouk was drawn to Damj in particular because of the particular strategies this organization utilized for their activism, more so than the age of the membership described by Oueslati. He described this draw, saying,

Can I say it's more serious? Not really. Damj kind of knows how to work because Damj works mainly on advocacy and community support. These two are, for me, the most important things. Building a community that's strong, aiming for the long term, but advocating against the law 230, fighting against discrimination, making sure LGBT people have their rights. So I think Damj is more consistent than the other NGOs. I appreciate the approach better than the other NGOs.⁸⁸

Which left the two participants of Damj with similar 'bigger picture' reasons for joining – the activism – and vastly different personal reasons – Farouk because of his boyfriend's involvement, Oueslati because of his age. This divide between the idealistic and the practical was certainly an intriguing trend which also began to emerge with the other activists.

⁸⁷ Farouk.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Other participants were affected by a single event or time in their lives which brought them to the organization. For Salwa of Mawjoudin, a major event in the LGBT community prompted her to join. She said,

I asked a friend of mine – it was straight after the Orlando shooting.⁸⁹ I felt really devastated and I wanted to do something for the community. So I asked a friend of mine and he was like, ‘Yeah, come try Mawjoudin.’ Of course, I’d heard about them before in a few campaigns, since I follow lots of news in Tunisia.⁹⁰

Salwa also described attempting to do some work herself before, trying to tell people that homosexuality was natural, but has found that her efforts have been much more effective since joining the organization. As for why she chose Mawjoudin over other LGBT organizations in the country, she said, “It’s honest. I’ve done some research and I found out that...they’re not really out to the media...So Mawjoudin is doing a pretty good job, and they’re not bragging about it.”⁹¹ She did a lot of research and tried Chouf, another organization, but settled with Mawjoudin for a more individualistic reason because, she said, “too many lesbians in the same place.”⁹² As in the cases of previous participants, we see a wider ideological goal as well as more personal reasons for choosing one particular organization.

A desire to do more and personal experiences fueled Dridi’s decision to join Mawjoudin. After three years in the United States, where he attended school to receive his master’s degree, he found a stark difference between the LGBT situation there and the situation in Tunisia. However, he saw comparisons with the past as he learned more about US history. He said,

⁸⁹Lizette Alvarez and Richard Pérez-Peña, “Orlando Gunman Attacks Gay Nightclub, Leaving 50 Dead,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2016.

⁹⁰ Salwa.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

When I went to the US, I was really shocked – but in a positive way. Impressed, really, about how powerful the LGBTQI+ community was and how these people could make change happen... I learned a lot about LGBTQ history in the US, and so I decided to try to make a contribution to my community in Tunisia. So that was one of the first things I did, when I returned to Tunisia....I wanted to see change happen like I did in the US.⁹³

He continued with an anecdote about the US, an experience which he said put the situation in his home country into perspective:

I met with a very old gay couple, Harry and Ted. Eighty years old! And they were telling me the story of their lives, like when homosexuality was a crime in the US, when AIDS was a very dangerous issue and people didn't even know about it. Through their stories, I saw the current situation in my country. When they were describing the situation in the US in the Sixties, I saw some similarities with Tunisia. So it touched me, and I said 'Okay, if the US succeeded in changing, why not Tunisia?' Of course, it's a different situation, a different society, all of those different obstacles, I know. But I decided to move from the position of always criticizing and being not involved to a position where...I can make a contribution, even if it's very small.⁹⁴

Upon returning to Tunis, he contacted every LGBT organization in the city.

Mawjoudin was the first to respond to him, and he met with cofounder Bousselmi at the same café in which this interview was conducted.

For these participants, we see a divide between the ideological reasons for joining – that Abdi was motivated by his experiences with LGBT activism in the United States – and a more immediate, practical reason – that Mawjoudin was the first NGO which responded to his Facebook message. Being LGBT, opposing the criminalization of LGBT people in Tunisia, or agreeing with the goals of the LGBT movement are the reasons which motivated these participants to become activists. However, in choosing specific organizations, there was often a more personal note. Participants chose the NGOs in which they felt that they 'fit', be

⁹³ Dridi.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

that through knowing someone in the organization, a warm welcome in a café, the diversity of the organization, or the age of its members. The wider goals and events which pushed them are vital in shaping the activists themselves, but the study found that particular organizations were chosen through much more individualistic means.

Discussing Identity

Being ‘out of the closet’ – that is, selectively or unselectively sharing one’s LGBT identity with others – is a topic of importance for LGBT activism and academia. The perceived consequences of ‘outness’ becomes much more pronounced when one studies LGBT individuals living within religious Muslim populations.⁹⁵ Participants were asked how they felt discussing their sexual and gender identity with their friends, then asked how they felt discussing their sexual and gender identity with their family. Answers varied across individuals, though shared commonalities arose.

One such commonality was seen among ‘outness’ with families. Abdi, for example, only describes herself as heterosexual to her family and does not delve into the nuances of her personal, non-identifying feelings.⁹⁶ Oueslati, similarly, does not discuss LGBT issues or his identity with his family at all. Dridi is not out to his family, yet he expressed in the interview that he remained hopeful for the future, saying, ““I hope to. I don’t even hope to, I’m planning to – not now, not immediately. But one day.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵Jaspal Rusi and Asifa Siraj, “Perceptions of ‘coming out’ among British Muslim gay men,” *Psychology and Sexuality* 2, no. 3 (2011): 183-197.

⁹⁶ Abdi.

⁹⁷ Dridi.

Bousselmi also does not feel comfortable discussing his identity with his family, and described himself as a private person by nature. However, he shared that there was a certain purposeful ignorance within his household. Several people and extended family members had, in the past, approached his family with concerns that he might be gay. He described the situation at home, saying that

I can discuss [LGBT politics], but that's because they didn't ask me [about my identity] and I'm a person who really doesn't share it... I'm private. One person, they sent an SMS to my mother to say 'Your son is gay', and she showed me the text and I didn't say no, I'm not.⁹⁸

The issue was not brought up again in his household after that.

This avoidance of the subject is also seen among participants who had discussed the matter of their identity to their families. Farouk described his situation at home, saying,

Yeah, I came out to my family. My brother is very supportive. My parents don't want to talk about it anymore. So I mean, for an Muslim country, coming out to my parents- I'm still living with them and being supported. I'm quite lucky.⁹⁹

Indeed, this experience was not shared with Salwa and her family, though there was a distinct commonality in not discussing the matter. She said,

Well, my parents know. My mom for like four years was really cool about it, but lately she was asking me if I'm done with my 'phase.' And my father was not really happy about it, he kicked me out of the house. For now we are keeping it simple, we don't really talk. But my siblings do not know."¹⁰⁰

These two individuals have vastly different situations, yet not openly discussing the matter was a similarity between them. This attitude may stem from the cultural separation between the public and private spheres within the Arab world. The available literature on the topic theorizes a breakdown of this divide after the

⁹⁸ Oueslati.

⁹⁹ Farouk.

¹⁰⁰ Salwa.

‘Arab Spring,’ where the collective denial on authoritarianism is questioned, and postulates that the taboo nature of sexuality will as well.¹⁰¹ However, at least among Bousselmi, Farouk, and Salwa, these cultural intricacies persist.

Ayari was the only participant who was entirely out to his family, and simply said on the subject, “They don’t accept it.”¹⁰² In the context of this participant, who gave long, impassioned answers to many of the other questions, this reaction was telling.

When asking about the participants’ friends, my initial question was often met with an answer much like Farouk’s, who said, “Which ones? Which friends? Gay friends?”¹⁰³ Most of the participants had a strict separation between the friends which knew of their identities and those which did not. Dridi expressed a similar view, saying, “Obviously, I can’t discuss it with some of my friends.”¹⁰⁴ These participants had very separate categories of ‘friends I am out to’ and ‘friends I am not out to’.

Ayari, Salwa, and Bousselmi were the only ones who were completely open with their friends about their identity. This was a consequence of the reshaping of their friend groups. Salwa, for example, felt comfortable discussing her identity with friends because all the friends who did not approve began to ignore her. She lost her best friend, who said that she would be ashamed to have a friend like Salwa.¹⁰⁵ Ayari and Bousselmi also had friends who were within their activism circles, cutting ties with those who did not approve. This ‘outness’

¹⁰¹Jayesh Needham. “After the Arab Spring: A New Opportunity for LGBT Human Rights Advocacy?” *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 20, no. 1 (2014): 287-323.

¹⁰² Ayari.

¹⁰³ Farouk.

¹⁰⁴ Dridi.

¹⁰⁵ Salwa.

comes with the consequences of severed connections, much like it did in the case of some participants for their family members.

The separation between public and private persists in Tunisia, and this is reflected in the reactions that families showed toward their 'out' children. Even those had relatively 'positive' reactions – Farouk's parents, who did not evict him, and Salwa's mother, who was initially accepting – caused emotional distress to the participants at the time. As far as friends, activists also felt more comfortable displaying their identity within LGBT and LGBT-friendly circles, though some also had separate circles of acquaintance through which they perform 'straightness'. Though the literature may suggest a gradual dissolution of the lines between public and private after the Arab Spring, that was certainly not the experience of these activists, living in the birthplace of the movement.

Difficulties and Harassment

Existing as an LGBT person comes with its own dangers and shortfalls, and these activists were no stranger to those. There were the more passive forms of mistreatment and harassment, which each activist had experienced in some way. Then there were more violent acts of harassment, such as the death threats received by Ayari. Both forms are, unfortunately, not uncommon.

Passive forms of aggression include passive comments, on the streets and on Facebook, as well as completely ignoring the person. Salwa's friends distanced themselves from her, and Oueslati experienced similar problems at his work. He said, "They do not talk to you if they know that you are

homosexual.”¹⁰⁶ Other micro aggressions experienced by these activists included passive verbal remarks. Salwa described her situation, saying that “Sometimes in the streets I get really homophobic remarks because I look gay, I have short hair. Once, I shaved it, so everyone was like – on every street – asking the question ‘A boy or a girl?’”¹⁰⁷ These interactions are not limited to strangers in the street, though. Farouk described his everyday experience with existing as an activist online, saying,

[The harassment is] Facebook comments, but they don’t really count. There are mean ones, but they’re more spread out. I mean, I never publicly defend gay people, especially on my Facebook account. I sometimes post press releases, but as a human rights activist, whenever there’s an injustice, I post it. Some people are against it. But when I talk, they say ‘Oh, this isn’t in our country, we don’t have that, et cetera, et cetera, why are you defending them?’ And that’s not really mean.¹⁰⁸

These experiences of aggression perhaps stem from a lack of education on LGBT topics,¹⁰⁹ yet they persist and continue to affect the lives of activists.

More sinister forms of harassment were also described by the participants, who gave anecdotal accounts of particular instances when they felt that their safety was compromised. Salwa described one such situation, saying, “A man was really flirting with me, and I said ‘Hey, back off, I’m gay.’ And he actually tried to rape me. He was like, ‘You don’t know how it feels to be with a man.’”¹¹⁰

Dridi discussed the nature of these forms of harassment, especially bullying, and expounded upon their commonality within the country. He said, “I have faced many difficulties, psychological and physical. You know, when you’re gay in Tunisian society, there’s always a price to pay... I was bullied,

¹⁰⁶ Oueslati.

¹⁰⁷ Salwa.

¹⁰⁸ Farouk.

¹⁰⁹ Ayari.

¹¹⁰ Salwa.

beaten up by members of my family, by friends...by police. It's a daily burden, it's a daily persecution."¹¹¹ Dridi went on to describe a particular instance of harassment and discrimination that affected him greatly:

When I was in high school, one of my teachers told me that I am a devil...and he said it in front of all the class, that I will burn in hell for the rest of my life. He forbid for me to attend the class for the whole year...I could have failed the whole year, could have been excused from high school...in a normal situation, I could have asked for help from my parents, but I couldn't go to [them] because I'm gay, because I'm not out to them. I couldn't go to the principal of the high school for the same reason. So you only keep it to yourself.¹¹²

These themes of harassment and endangerment remain common experiences for LGBT activists, and the authorities are often indifferent, if not implicit, in these issues. Earlier on in the study, Ayari described the police's refusal to provide protection after death threats, as well as the fact that some of these threats came from the police themselves.¹¹³ Additionally, Salwa did not feel safe in reporting the attempted assault, nor did Dridi feel safe in reporting the harassment by his teacher. There is a not unfounded sense of distrust for authority seen among the activists, as they continue to experience both day to day micro aggressions as well as dangerous situations.

News Media and Perception By Others

Public opinion in Tunisia does not support LGBT people, and this is heavily reflected by the news media. The organizations which participated in this study expressed many issues with mainstream news media outlets in the country, citing issues with unequal debates and disrespectful commentary towards LGBT

¹¹¹ Dridi.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ See subheading "Police, Government, and Legal Issues."

Tunisians. When interviewing the membership about their own experiences, I asked how they thought LGBT people were presented in news media, and how they thought most Tunisians viewed LGBT people. Participants in the study expressed a similar dissatisfaction on both topics.

Perceptions in the news media, which contribute greatly to public perception, was seen by participants as an institution which rendered acceptance nearly impossible. Dridi of Mawjoudin described the media's tactics, saying,

In the best case they present us- you know the circus, when they exhibit animals? Yeah, this is the best case. Like what they used to do in the Middle Ages, when they brought very strange species from Africa to Europe, and they exhibited it and showed it to people, and people would come and see an elephant for the first time in their lives. Yes, this is how they present us. And this is the best case. Sometimes they present us as deviant people who should be punished, who are not normal.¹¹⁴

Dridi also noted that the stories one hears in the news about LGBT rights violations, such as the Kairawan Six¹¹⁵ or the case of Marwan,¹¹⁶ are only a few examples. There are many cases that activists hear about and are involved in which do not make it to the public discourse. To illustrate this point, he said that he knew – through his activism – the story of a twelve year old boy who was beaten by his father, stabbed by his uncle, and ended up homeless. The activists encounter situations such as this one, but the news media rarely covers it.

Even in the cases that the media does cover, or in popular talk shows, Farouk claimed that the media frequently fell back on stereotypes when

¹¹⁴ Dridi.

¹¹⁵ Amnesty International Tunisie, "La condamnation de six hommes pour relations homosexuelles met en lumière l'homophobie d'état," December 15, 2015. <http://www.amnesty-tunisie.org/blogs/blog/tag/kairouan/>

¹¹⁶ Amnesty International UK, "Marwan freed after being imprisoned in Tunisia – for being gay," February 1, 2016.

discussing LGBT stories and issues. He said that the news outlets represented them as “The stereotypical, classical presentation of the butch, of the feminine gay, of gay guys hunting straight guys for sex. As gay guys who want to be women. So they’re giving like the stereotypical image and it’s a problem because they’re influencing the public opinion.”¹¹⁷

However, one of the participants had hope for the future of Tunisian media when it came to this issue. Salwa, who is an avid follower of news, said,

A few years ago, they were considered as pervs. I don’t know if you know the word “shadh” in Arabic. It means perverted. When they used to talk about homosexuality, they would say ‘perverted.’ But now, the terms changed. They started to use the right terms, like saying ‘homosexual.’ They are still making fun of it, they are still not taking it seriously. But for me, just the fact that they changed the terms is a good sign.¹¹⁸

Perhaps this optimistic view is accurate. Nonetheless, the current situation of the news media continues to be unanimously perceived by participants as perpetuating unfair representations.

These representations influence public opinion, in which participants also unanimously reported problems. When asked about how ‘most Tunisians’ felt about LGBT issues, these activists voiced discomfort within the current situation, but examined it critically – including with these analyses the reasoning behind that public opinion and a generational shift. Ayari cited education as the primary factor behind Tunisian attitudes towards LGBT people, saying,

Actually people in Tunisia are not homophobic... The problem we have is with our education. When we were young, in school, they said that we should not tolerate LGBT people because God doesn’t like this. So it’s like a machine. The system of education is a machine of homophobia. So the people, they are homophobic but they don’t know why they are homophobic... I know many people who say ‘I’m straight’ but you give him three beers and he may be bi. The problem is that we don’t have a

¹¹⁷ Farouk.

¹¹⁸ Salwa.

sexual education in Tunisia, so the people don't know what is identity, what is gender, what is sexual orientation.¹¹⁹

This lack of education was also cited as a major problem by Abdi, who said that one of her goals as an activist in Mawjoudin is to help people understand their identity and advocate for better education on these matters. She also expressed a public divide between what she described as the “old school left” and the “new school left” over LGBT issues. She said that her generation of secularists is willing to change the system, but the older school is still limited by theoretical boundaries.¹²⁰ This generational divide was also observed by Farouk, who said,

[Public opinion] depends on the region. In the coastal regions and the capital, it tends to be more accepted within my generation – the Nineties born children, the Eighties, Nineties. But for rural regions, sometimes it's unacceptable and they get killed for it. So pretty mixed. The public opinion nowadays in Tunisia talks about it, but a lot of people are against it. They are not accepting.¹²¹

Public opinion in Tunisia is certainly not in favor of LGBT rights, nor are any of the mainstream media sources. Yet the activists themselves seem to place more blame on education, and through their work, seek to remedy this matter. Some, like Farouk and Salwa, even see hope for the future of Tunisian public opinion.

Spaces of Comfort and Discomfort

Participants in the study were also asked about safe and unsafe spaces for displaying their identities. A location of comfort that was unanimously expressed as a safe space was within the organizations themselves. When asked about safe spaces, Dridi immediately responded, “With my people, Mawjoudin! You know

¹¹⁹ Ayari.

¹²⁰ Abdi.

¹²¹ Farouk.

the mascot of Mawjoudin- our mascot is the giraffe. And so we call ourselves giraffes! This is my gang. So I feel very comfortable being myself with my giraffes.”¹²²This sentiment was also expressed by Salwa, also in Mawjoudin, who found her “giraffes” to be the safest and most comfortable company.¹²³Oueslati of Damj also cited the association and his friends from the association as his primary safe space.

Unsafe spaces were wider spread, with participants listing a variety of places. Oueslati generally feels uncomfortable in cafes and bars, identifying the danger of these situations “because of the regard.”¹²⁴ Farouk expressed a similar fear of those places based on looks and appearances, saying, “Yeah, sometimes [I feel unsafe] in like cafes...but it wasn’t especially about sexual identity or my identity. It was like, if you look like you’re in a fancy way or you’re wearing too many colors, you’ll be attracting people and they just might come and hit you or tell you to give your money and phone and stuff.”¹²⁵ Cafés and bars were identified as particularly dangerous locations, based on which part of Tunisia one found themselves in. Additionally, following the theme of police distrust, Salwa said that she felt most unsafe in the presence of police officers. She described,

Once, in the police office – My phone got stolen and I went there. The policemen were like, making fun, trying to start a conversation about finding the right husband and everything. Usually, I would say ‘No, I don’t want a husband,’ but I was like, ‘Yeah, he should be really nice’ and whatever. And in my work. For example, I work with religious people and I try to keep it professional. So when they start asking me if I have a boyfriend or something, I just don’t answer. I say ‘no.’¹²⁶

¹²² Dridi.

¹²³ Salwa.

¹²⁴ Oueslati.

¹²⁵ Farouk.

¹²⁶ Salwa.

Activists Dridi and Ayari both gave vague definitions of unsafe spaces, describing the dangers of simply existing as an LGBT person in any location within Tunisia. When asked about places in which he felt unsafe, Dridi gave a scoff. “Yeah, I would say every place!” He answered immediately. “Every place is unsafe to some extent.” Then he took a long pause and clarified,

It’s difficult to say, really. When you are gay...you have what I would call the ‘survival mode.’ It’s a magic button that you turn on automatically, and it’s something that we have acquired from our early days. Like I said, it’s survival mode, and so we switch to that mode unconsciously. So we can recognize easily a situation or a place where there’s potential danger. Automatically, without even thinking about it, you switch to the ‘straight’ or ‘normal’ mode.¹²⁷

Ayari of Without Restrictions agrees with Dridi, saying that “Everywhere, you don’t feel safe. Because you don’t know, the police can come checking and see you with your boyfriend or girlfriend.”¹²⁸ The lack of safe spaces in Tunisia is clearly felt prominently by these activists.

The creation of safe spaces is also difficult in Tunisia, where public sentiment and the formerly religious government found ways to subdue these spaces. Though there are no LGBT-specific places besides the organizations now – only those which activists hesitantly call ‘gay friendly’ –Ayari described a gay bar which had once existed in the city. He said, “Actually, in 2012, when we had the Islamic party in the government- we once had a gay bar, named ‘Peace and Love.’ The people there were all from the LGBT community. But the government decided to close this place...Now we have just two places that are gay friendly.”¹²⁹ However, the destruction of safe spaces is not simply a relic of the past rule by the Ennahda Party. Abdi described going out with a group of gay

¹²⁷ Dridi.

¹²⁸ Ayari.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

men to a club which they knew to be LGBT-friendly the evening before the interview. The group found that they were forced to leave the premises soon after arrival, because the club had come under new management which did not approve of their presence.¹³⁰

Safe spaces in Tunisia are sparse. Even businesses which are ‘gay-friendly’ may change their minds at any time, which puts LGBT people in a dangerous situation. All the participants found that the safest spaces were within their organization, with some, like Dridi, only expressing their identity with other activist friends. Though the creation of safe spaces has proven to be nearly impossible, these organizations have managed to do so by maintaining a close network of activists who also serve as companions.

Religion and Politics

The political and religious leanings of the participants were of particular interest when crafting this study. Activists were asked about their religious and political affiliation, and clear commonalities soon emerged between these interviews.

The activists were all currently or previously politically active besides their involvement in their respective LGBT NGOs. All who were in the country during the elections voted. However, only one activist claimed a strong leaning toward any political party. Bousselmi identified strongly with the party al-Massar. He pointed out that the party had participated in campaigns with other LGBT organizations, and that several members of Mawjoudin – none of which volunteered for this study – occupy spots the executive board of Jeunes Massar,

¹³⁰ Abdi.

the youth division for the party. Ayari and Salwa both expressed that they had been formerly active in political parties, with Salwa noting, “I used to be in the left wing party, when I was twenty or nineteen years old. But then I quit and became like a- I don’t care. I mean, it’s pretty dirty out there, so I’m not politically active at the moment.”¹³¹ Salwa submitted a blank ballot in protest of the last election, reflecting this sentiment in her actions.

When asked about parties which support LGBT rights, all participants identified al-Massar. Indeed, the party has released statements denouncing human rights abuses against LGBT people.¹³² However, this has not garnered them any unwavering support from the rest of the activists in this study, save for Bousselmi’s loyalty. Farouk, who voted with the Tunisian Communist Party despite some ideological differences, said about al-Massar, “I won’t vote for a party just because they are pro-LGBT.”¹³³ Oueslati, who had no particular party leanings, said that al-Massar did not do enough for the community. When asked if there was a party which he felt supported LGBT people, he said, ““Parties? No. Persons, yes. But parties, no.”¹³⁴ Dridi agreed, saying that there are ‘gay-friendly’ parties, but expressing disappointment they were not willing to openly express this fact more often.

Religion was also a factor in the study which saw emerging commonalities. Five of the seven activists responded to the question, “Would you consider yourself to be a religious person?” with an automatic and resounding no. Two of the participants gave complex answers, yet still did not ascribe to any sort

¹³¹ Salwa.

¹³² Les jeunes du Parti Al Massar, “Communiqué.” Press release, September 25, 2016.

¹³³ Farouk.

¹³⁴ Oueslati.

of organized religion. Farouk described himself as “spiritual but not religious.”¹³⁵ When asked to clarify, he said that spirituality was a way of thinking, of keeping your spirit healthy, possibly through meditation. Salwa is the only other participant who claimed any sort of religious leanings, saying, “I believe in a God, but not in religions. I’m a very spiritual person.”¹³⁶

The fact that no participant in the study found themselves to ascribe to an organized religion revealed a curious commonality. However, with this sample, I would not dare to point to any causal relationship with any of my other observations. The responses were much more varied when it came to political leanings, though each participant was certainly secularist left, by the Tunisian scale of political affiliation. Their actual involvement and party preferences varied widely, though, from lapsed party members to those with strong NGO backgrounds. Regardless of political preference, however, there was another commonality between most of them – involvement in the Tunisian Revolution.

The Revolution

“Of course, I was on this street, yelling ‘Dégage! Dégage!’”¹³⁷ Dridi said with a grin, referring to Avenue Bourguiba which lay just beyond the entrance to the café in which we sat. Indeed, all but one of the participants – who had a series of vital exams during that time period – were avidly involved in demonstrations across the country during the revolution. Oueslati was in the street, Salwa began demonstrations in her hometown, Bousselmi demonstrated in La Passage in the days leading up the January 14th – there is no doubt that these activists were

¹³⁵ Farouk.

¹³⁶ Salwa.

¹³⁷ Dridi.

involved. There is, however, a point of contention in how the revolution has affected LGBT people.

All participants agreed that LGBT people had more opportunities now than before the revolution, simply by nature of ability to actually discuss the topic and form NGOs. “Now we have the right to explain and express our point of view,”¹³⁸ said Oueslati. Dridi seemed to agree, saying, “Since the revolution brought freedom of speech, now we can talk about this issue publicly. The revolution definitely helped the LGBT community.”¹³⁹

However, there was a distinct dissatisfaction among participants concerning the law’s treatment of the LGBT community in the aftermath of the revolution. They say that the current constitution, which guarantees that the government will pursue human rights and the dignity of all Tunisians, is not what is practiced. The constitution should supersede the Penal Code and render the anti-LGBT laws void, yet the arrests and anal examinations have continued. Ayari expressed frustration with the current state of the issue, saying, “The LGBT people – they participated in the revolution. And now, after the revolution, we don’t have any rights.”¹⁴⁰ Salwa had similar sentiments, with high hopes in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali’s departure. Now, looking back on the revolution, she is more pessimistic. She said, “We thought that the revolution would give us what we asked for, like dignity and freedom of expression, but it did not. It was like a huge cake, and everyone got a piece but us.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Oueslati.

¹³⁹ Dridi.

¹⁴⁰ Ayari.

¹⁴¹ Salwa.

Certainly, none of these organizations would exist without the revolution. Damj, as aforementioned, attempted to become an NGO but was rejected. The others would have met similar fates, had they existed back then. The revolution is what made these organizations possible, allowing them more freedom – though not absolute freedom – to speak about their issues. However, there is a definite disaffection with the current status of LGBT people in Tunisia. As young citizens, they built the revolution. However, the post-revolutionary state does not grant them their human rights, nor does it ensure their dignity or even safety from inhumane treatment for those arrested. The revolution has made organizing possible, yet the actual state of LGBT rights in Tunisia still leaves much to be desired.

Conclusion

When discussing founding and strategies, there were several instances of similarities and differences between the three organizations. All went through the initial process of obfuscating the nature of their NGO for the purpose of the association application. However, further analysis finds a clear divergence in strategy for the actual activities of the organizations. Damj, an older organization with pre-revolution origins, chooses to focus on lectures and education. Without Restrictions, the youngest organization, engages in demonstrations and online campaigns. Mawjoudin focuses almost entirely on training, providing tools and strategies to LGBT activists. The organizations were similar in that they were created to fill a disparity – in Damj’s case, to fulfill a need for organization under an oppressive regime, while in the cases of the other two, because their founders realized that political parties and human rights NGOs would not discuss LGBT

issues. They also shared some activities, including providing housing to young LGBT people in need, as well as psychological and legal services. However, these varying strategies were often vital to membership, who were critical of other activist methods besides those which their organization used. There is room for further study in these areas. Future research should look to the other LGBT NGOs which were unavailable for this study, as well as taking a qualitative survey of LGBT NGO members – perhaps online, so that more individuals can participate without security concerns. This research would take excellent steps in analyzing the experiences of the average LGBT activist in Tunisia, and could be supplemented by more qualitative interviews.

Another point of comparison for the organizations is their interactions with the police news media. The organizations were all mistrustful of the police, Without Restrictions receiving the brunt of dangerous police interactions. This organization is, however, more exposed to the police due to the nature of its strategy. Unanimously across organizations, none trusted the mainstream media. These NGOs have developed networks of LGBT-friendly journalists to contact if they need to release information. However, leaving this activism to the more vocal organization, Shams, seemed to be the consensus. Further study in the relationship between these institutions and the NGOs is needed, and should include leadership from Shams as a contributing participant. Additional studies may also be structured as an overarching study of LGBT arrests and the circumstances surrounding those arrests, or a study of news media reports concerning LGBT issues, identifying trends in reporting.

The obstacles faced by each organization could be considered indicative of obstacles faced by the whole. However, when asked to self-report,

organization leaders focused in on very specific issues. The ones on which they focused were reflective of the organization. Damj, which seeks to educate, saw intelligentsia indifference to the LGBT community as their main obstacle.

Without Restrictions focuses on demonstrations, and thus follows that security issues remain a large concern for them. Mawjoudin, the most diverse of the organizations I interviewed, thought that more could be done to diversify their ranks, and wished to include more transgender activism in their strategy. Points of interest for future consideration and research include a study of transgender Tunisians, surveys which establish the opinions of university professors on LGBT matters, and an expansion upon this project which includes other NGOs such as Shams and Chouf.

There were also divergent methods in gaining membership, keeping members informed, and funding. Damj is more protective of its membership than Mawjoudin and Without Restrictions, with a patronage requirement in which prospective members must be sponsored by two current members. This higher security may be traced to Damj's history, and that fact that the NGO has spent more years in hiding than not. As a result of this organization's long history, identifying it as well-established, they receive large international NGO donations to fund their projects. Mawjoudin, in contrast, tends to receive many smaller donations, from international NGOs, private businesses, and individual donations from international activists. Without Restrictions, the newest organization, relies almost entirely on the membership to fund their activities, though they have just received their first grant. Further study into the matter of gaining membership could be a study of cyber security methods utilized and taught by LGBT activists

in Tunisia. On the topic of funding, there should be a study which analyzes this matter in depth within the context of recent NGO funding scandals, and compare funding sources and finances to non-LGBT NGOs.

These organizations, though possessing the same goals and even some of the same individual-level tactics, nonetheless have very different approaches to their activism. There is a strong sense of disassociated unity between them, where organizations should further the larger cause through their specialty, through their unique membership, rather than form one larger Franken-NGO. This does not preclude the opportunity to work together, and these organizations have proven – through the UN shadow report project – that they are more than capable of this. The future with doubtlessly see more cooperation, which they have already begun planning for, and further research should take an in-depth view of these coalitions.

As for the experiences of individual activists, there were also observed commonalities and differences. Sexuality and gender identity varied from ‘I’m gay’ to expounding upon heavy queer theory. As for joining the organization, I noted a trend among the group concerning their motivations. For each participant, there was a larger reason which prompted them to become involved in activism – such as outrage over human rights abuses – and there was a secondary, more practical reason for joining one specific organization over another – my boyfriend was a member, I did not like the other organization, they were the first to respond, etc. Considering that this was an unwavering distinction made among all participants, a larger study might seek to expand upon this with more subjects.

On the matter of ‘outness’ and discussing orientation, answers varied as widely as they did for the identity questions. However, a common theme of public versus private emerged, reflecting a certain blissful ignorance. The literature, while acknowledging that this was embedded in the culture, claimed that the Arab Spring indicated a move toward ‘outness’ within Arab LGBT communities. This is certainly not the case for these participants, whose anecdotes were littered with family and friends who would not address the matter. Again, a survey or larger study on the matter could provide valuable insight.

Common distinctions were also found when discussing harassment, in which participants drew lines between more passive forms – such as people pointedly ignoring them, Facebook comments, and remarks made by strangers – and more treacherous forms of harassment – namely, death threats and attempted assault. Spaces safe from both forms of harassment were identified unanimously as being with other NGO members in offices and private residences. There was also themes of safe spaces being dismantled, and gender conformity performances within unsafe spaces – which make up almost the whole of Tunisia, according to participants. The commonalities found here when discussing harassment and safe spaces should be extended into a larger, multi-country which compares these issues between countries in which LGBT activities are criminalized and countries in which they are not.

Additional commonalities included the fact that all of the participants had at least some experience in political involvement, and all who were in the country at the time of the last election voted. Additionally, none of the participants ascribed to organized religion. These results could never claim to be reflective of

LGBT Tunisians as a whole, because the study only covered activists. Future studies on the matter should include a larger survey, which includes LGBT Tunisians who do not take part in the LGBT NGOs, so that conclusions on religiosity and political involvement can be drawn about the community at large.

The revolution undoubtedly shaped the lives of the participants, and six of the seven were involved in demonstrations and social media activism during January 2011. The vast changes brought about in the immediate aftermath allowed for the existence of NGOs which the government had previously banned. LGBT activists were excited in the flurry of new constitutions and statements lauding human rights. Today, however, the activists are still fighting for the basic rights which are guaranteed by the constitution, but only seem to apply to others. Activists have the right to speak more openly than they did under Ben Ali, with some continued intervention by the government. Yet the issue is that no one listens. Public support remains low while indifference to LGBT issues remains high. Future research should follow the efforts of these activists and NGOs as they move forward in their demands for equality and dignity.

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