

**Queerness as a Weapon:  
Pinkwashing as a Tool of Counterinsurgency  
and the Battle for Intersectional Resistance in Palestine**

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To the Palestinian people. The people whose resilience persists against the dehumanizing forces of occupation, erasure, and weaponization.

To my queer comrades, I carry your strength and stories in every word of this work, with the hope of amplifying our truths and honoring our collective fight for liberation.

## **Abstract**

This paper argues that Israel employs sexuality politics, specifically through Homonationalism and pinkwashing, as a tool of counterinsurgency to fragment Palestinian society and weaken resistance. By instrumentalizing LGBTQ+ rights, Israel seeks to present itself as an "LGBTQ-friendly occupier" when, in fact, it is strategically using LGBTQ+ inclusion to align with broader nationalist, neoliberal, and security narratives. Drawing on discourse analysis of public reports and Instagram media content, including images, videos, and captions produced by Israeli LGBTQ+ organizations, the Aguda and Beit El-Meem, the paper demonstrates how LGBTQ+ identities are co-opted to undermine Palestinian solidarity and, ultimately, Palestinian resistance. The paper also examines parallel media produced by a Palestinian queer organization, alQaws, to show how queer liberation is framed as inseparable from the broader anti-colonial struggle. The paper concludes that resisting pinkwashing requires reclaiming queerness as a tool for liberation, not as a means of complicity with colonial oppression.

## **Keywords**

LGBTQ+, homonationalism, pinkwashing, queer, settler colonialism, counterinsurgency, liberation, resistance.

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## Introduction

In the ongoing colonization and occupation of Palestine, counterinsurgency policies are no longer limited to military operations. Instead, they expand to operate through soft power, discourse, and identity politics. In this context, the media have emerged as a battleground where the logics of settler-colonial domination are reproduced through cultural representation and naturalization, while the local population's<sup>1</sup> narrative is systematically targeted, fragmented, and undermined.

This paper examines how Israel weaponizes LGBTQ+ identities<sup>2</sup> as a tool of counterinsurgency in Palestine. By using media as a means for this end, the Israeli state, along with its affiliated organizations, strategically deploys LGBTQ+ rights discourse and visibility to rebrand itself as tolerant and progressive. Central to this strategy is *pinkwashing*, the promotion and branding of LGBTQ+ inclusion as a cover for its colonial oppression (Schulman, 2011). This rebranding is not aimed solely at international audiences, but it also targets Palestinians. In this context, queerness becomes deeply contested; on the one hand, it can be instrumentalized to weaken collective liberation, and on the other hand, it can be reclaimed as a mode of resistance (Alqaisiya, 2018).

At the center of this paper is the argument that media, particularly digital media, have become a powerful counterinsurgency tool (Mirzoeff, 2011), for when they are deployed strategically, platforms such as Instagram serve as a site to produce knowledge about queerness and sexual identity that aligns with colonial interests. This way, through media campaigns and digital platforms, pinkwashing aims to fragment Palestinian society and co-opt dissent, in order to undermine solidarity, intersectional resistance, and collective struggle.

To analyze these dynamics, this paper focuses on three key organizations: *The Aguda*, the Association for LGBTQ Equality in Israel, a prominent Israeli LGBTQ+ organization closely aligned with state-sponsored narratives; *Beit El-Meem*, a sister organization under The

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use "Local", "Indigenous", and "Native" interchangeably to refer specifically to the Palestinian people.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I use "LGBTQ+" primarily in depoliticized contexts, such as referencing Israeli state discourse and institutional frameworks, or a relatively "neutral" context. In contrast, following Cohen's (1997) argument that queer politics should not merely represent non-heterosexual identities, but should align with broader struggles against systemic oppressions, including racism, classism, and colonialism, I deliberately use "queer" when referring to Palestinian voices and movements, emphasizing its political role in resisting oppressive systems. This choice is not only terminological, but it is also political, aligning with how Palestinian activists and scholars have increasingly challenged the universal application of Western LGBTQ+ terminologies, favoring "queer" for its decolonial nature and context-specific meanings (Atshan, 2020).

Aguda's auspices, targeting Palestinian citizens of Israel through depoliticized cultural engagement; and *alQaws* for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, a Palestinian grassroots organization that actively resists pinkwashing and reframes queerness as integral to anti-colonial liberation.

Drawing on critical discourse analysis, this research examines the media output, particularly Instagram posts of these organizations from October 7, 2023, the beginning of the ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people, through March 2025, the period during which the data for the research was collected. The paper focuses on how queerness is framed in language, visuals, and silences: who is named, who is erased, and what queer visibility is made to signify. In doing so, the analysis moves beyond questions of inclusion or representation and instead interrogates how LGBTQ+ discourse is weaponized in the service of colonial power.

The paper proceeds in four parts. First, I map the conceptual terrain by defining homonationalism, pinkwashing, counterinsurgency, and the neoliberal nexus that underpins these formations. This theoretical framework establishes queerness not simply as an identity but as a field of power, incorporable into state systems and fertile for co-optation. Second, I explore how Israeli organizations, The Aguda and Beit El-Meem, participate in the pinkwashing project through selective visibility, alignment with military values, and the depoliticization of queer Palestinian identity. Third, I contrast this with the discourse of *alQaws*, which articulates a form of queer politics rooted in decolonial praxis, intersectional solidarity, and refusal of both Zionism and heteronationalism. Finally, I reflect on the broader implications of these dynamics, arguing that resisting pinkwashing requires reclaiming queerness as a space of collective struggle and intersectional resistance.

Ultimately, this paper offers a critique of how LGBTQ+ rights can be mobilized against the very communities they claim to serve. It intervenes in the existing literature by shifting attention from Israel's outward-facing image to its internal counterinsurgency efforts, revealing how pinkwashing works not only as diplomacy but as an internal strategy of control. It also sheds light on the importance of discourse and media in shaping the terrain of struggle, showing that the fight for queer liberation in Palestine is as much about language and representation as it is about land and sovereignty.

## **Reflexivity**

This research emerges deeply from a political and situated perspective. As a Palestinian and queer individual, conducting this study during an ongoing campaign of colonial violence against my people, I am acutely aware that the targeting I observe is not only "hard power" through military and state violence but also "soft power," operating through fragmentation, co-optation, and the dismantling of collective solidarity. As a member of a civil society organization and an activist committed to decolonial and feminist theory, I understand that I am not merely an external observer of the phenomena I study; I am directly implicated in them. The soft tactics of pinkwashing and counterinsurgency target my community as a whole, and myself as both a subject and a critic.

Moreover, I recognize that my methodological choices, particularly my use of media discourse as primary material, are shaped by my positionality. I selected media, particularly Instagram platform, because it is the terrain where these organizations are present, active, and seek to construct public narratives, as well as it being accessible and available to me. My analysis is, therefore, informed by the accessibility of these narratives but also by a critical awareness of the power dynamics embedded within them.

At a time when colonial tactics seek to fragment the Palestinian society, even resistance becomes fragmented. Through this study, I seek to contribute to the production of decolonial narratives that resist fragmentation and instead work to reweave solidarity across fractured lines. Stemming from my belief in collective liberation and a demand for analyses that move beyond individual survival and toward the broader, radical horizon of Palestinian freedom; I see this research as part of a broader weaving of cumulative work against the occupation.

## Part I- Conceptual Frameworks and Context

### 1.1 Background and Literature Review

The term “*pinkwashing*” was first used by the organization *Breast Cancer Action* (BCA) after companies started to deceptively use the pink ribbon to advertise their support for breast cancer survivors, victims, and charities for marketing purposes, often without contributing meaningfully to the cause (Blackmer, 2019; Breast Cancer Action, n.d.). The term was later adopted within activist and academic circles to critique how states use LGBTQ+ rights rhetorically to sanitize or obscure other forms of violence. In relation to Israel, while Schulman (2011), played a central role in popularizing the term “pinkwashing”, activists had already been critiquing this strategy as a form of co-optation and erasure, especially after the launch of *Brand Israel* campaign in 2005 (Popper, 2005).

Brand Israel, originally initiated in response to the Palestinian-led movement “Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions” (BDS) (Palestinian Civil Society Organizations, 2005), is a broad campaign that seeks to soften Israel's international image and highlight the “human element of Israel” to forge emotional connections with global audiences and counter accusations of BDS supporters of Israel being a settler-colony, committing human rights violations (Popper, 2005). As part of these strategies, Israel positioned itself as a safe haven for LGBTQ+ rights, distinguishing it from the broader Middle Eastern region, which was framed as uniformly homophobic, and specifically from Palestinians, who are framed as homophobic, uncivilized, barbaric, and “insane suicide bombers” (Elia, 2012). By marketing Israel as a beacon of LGBTQ+ inclusion, Israel aimed to cultivate solidarity among LGBTQ+ individuals worldwide, encouraging them to identify with Israel despite its occupation of Palestine, for Israel is, after all, “the only democracy in the Middle East” that respects LGBTQ rights (Popper, 2005). Activists and scholars were quick to recognize these tactics as a form of pinkwashing.

In one of the most literal representations of pinkwashing, Israel once painted a fighter jet pink to raise breast cancer awareness while simultaneously enforcing a siege on the Gaza Strip and denying Gazan cancer patients access to life-saving treatment (Horowitz, 2016). A more recent and disturbing instance occurred in November 2023, just weeks into the brutal genocide in Gaza, when an image circulated online of an Israeli soldier raising a rainbow flag

on the ruins of civilian houses in Gaza. Shared by Israeli government social media accounts, the flag bore the phrase “In the Name of Love” in English, Arabic, and Hebrew (Dabbous, 2023). This act embodies the pinkwashing logic: mobilizing the language of love, rights, and tolerance to obscure the material realities of colonial violence. Today, pinkwashing is broadly understood as the strategic promotion of LGBTQ-friendliness by governments or corporations to wash off their wrongdoings (Puar, 2010).

While many studies offer valuable insights into the external-facing dimensions of Israeli pinkwashing, particularly how Israel presents itself to Western audiences as progressive and tolerant, comparatively little attention has been paid to the internal dynamics of pinkwashing, particularly how it affects queer Palestinians and Israel’s own LGBTQ+ population. Pertaining to the latter, Stedler (2018) notes that the very identity of Israel as a Jewish state stands in tension with LGBTQ+ acceptance, for according to traditional Judaism views, homosexuality is an abomination of the holy identity of Israel. Pinkwashing further conceals ongoing homophobia within Israeli society, such as violent attacks against LGBTQ+ individuals and the Orthodox Jews’ heated opposition to the yearly gay march in Jerusalem (Hochberg, Maikey, & Saraya, 2010). Even within the political establishment, there is resistance to genuine inclusion; to illustrate, the Zionist Union has criticized the state for repeatedly refusing to pass legislation that would have improved the rights of LGBTQ+ people living in Israel (Newman, 2016). While this paper focuses on how pinkwashing is deployed against queer Palestinians, this brief overview of internal contradictions offers essential context for exposing the performative nature of Israel’s global image campaign.

Regarding queer Palestinians, Stedler (2018), drawing on Said (2007), elaborates that Zionism only operates through the dispossession of Palestinians and the negation of their existence. Therefore, the genuine inclusion of such queers within the Zionist project is a contradiction in terms. In this context, Carson (2013) observes that Palestinian queers are only accepted if they conform to Zionism, revoking by that their “Palestiniannes” (Schotten, 2018). Elia (2012) underscores that, like all Palestinians, Palestinian queers face systematic violations of their fundamental rights; they were not exempt from the 1948 Nakba as they are not exempt from the genocide committed by Israel against Palestinians in Gaza today. Therefore, the politics of sexuality cannot be disentangled from the politics of occupation.

While this paper focuses on the internal mechanisms of fragmentation in Palestinian using queerness, a global overview remains crucial, as Pinkwashing thrives through broader

historical and global systems that link sexuality, nationalism, and neoliberal development. Therefore, in later sections, I engage more deeply with the broader terrain of pink militarization, asylum, and neoliberal capitalism, addressing a specific gap the literature: the ways in which queer discourse is mobilized internally to fragment Palestinian identity and undermine collective resistance.

As colonial violence against Palestinians intensifies, through both military aggression and soft power tactics such as pinkwashing, the need for critical analyses that expose the weaponization of queerness has become even more urgent. This research is situated within a larger decolonial project that seeks to critique representation and confront the structural mechanisms that fragment, discipline, and suppress Palestinian resistance and collective liberation. It is informed by the critical interventions of *Queer Necropolitics* (Haritaworn, Kuntsman, & Rosocco, 2014) which map how deployments of sexuality, race, gender, and desire have been co-opted into imperial projects that mark these times.

## **1.2 Theoretical Framework**

Since the paper draws on an interdisciplinary set of theoretical tools to critically examine how queerness is weaponized, the analysis is grounded in a reading of power that links sexuality, nationalism, neoliberal development, and settler colonialism, using the following lenses:

### **1.2.1 Homonationalism**

*Homonationalism*, coined by Puar (2007), refers to how LGBTQ+ subjects are incorporated into nationalist and imperialist projects, often at the expense of other marginalized groups. This framework offers a particularly critical lens to analyze how Israel in general, and the Aguda in particular, frame military inclusion as a sign of LGBTQ+ progress. Before delving into homonationalism directly, however, it is important to situate the analysis within a broader global context.

Even before the emergence of the discourse on homonationalism, scholars like Butler (2008) highlighted the intersections of sexuality with violence and power dynamics. In this context, Butler (2008) examines how time and temporality contribute to the conceptual and political division between Western modernity and Muslim backwardness. According to Butler (2008), Western constructs assume that certain communities, particularly Muslim ones, do not align with the West's timeframe. This assumption is deeply rooted in the teleological

historical narrative that positions the West as the beacon of freedom and modernity while casting other communities as lagging behind and having yet to grasp the concept of the rational, modern, free human (Butler, 2008).

By tackling the question of time, Butler (2008) highlights how secularism lays the groundwork for contemporary politics to claim freedom, mainly homosexual governance, as a standard of civilization when, in fact, this freedom is often instrumentalized rather than genuinely upheld. Revisiting the history of the governance of sexuality, however, reveals a different narrative: the West's current framing of LGBTQ+ rights as human rights paradoxically emerges from a colonial legacy that once criminalized homosexuality<sup>3</sup>. Delatolla (2020) notes that with the rise of international human rights frameworks in the mid to late twentieth century, Western powers rebranded LGBTQ+ rights as markers of progress, even though these same powers had previously exported anti-homosexual laws through colonialism. This shift culminated in a landmark resolution by the UN Human Rights Council, which formally recognized LGBTQ+ rights as human rights (Klapeer, 2017).

Building on Butler's, Puar (2007) introduces the concept of homonationalism, showing how LGBTQ+ inclusion becomes a tool of nationalist and imperialist projects. Leveraging Butler's critique of modernity and temporality, Puar demonstrates that the West's enduring "moral vocation" to save the "sexually underdeveloped" remains central to its global self-image. This impulse reflects what Spivak (2004, p. 523) calls the "burden of the gift," or the urge to "right the wrongs of the unfit," which implies that the West was once like those "underdeveloped" societies, but has since developed, suggesting that the destiny of the Other is to follow the same development trajectory (Rao, 2014). This moral duty, along with the West's self-declared leadership in LGBTQ+ rights, positions it as uniquely qualified to extend its model of development to the Other. Klapeer (2017) terms this phenomenon as *Homo(trans)nationalism* describing it as a form of transnational governance where LGBTQ+ rights are instrumentalized to reinforce Western superiority. In this context, Lind (2010)

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<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth century, capitalist industrialization and the rise of the bourgeoisie led European societies to associate moral virtue with familial reproduction as a path to spiritual proximity to God (Delatolla, 2020; Weber & Kalberg, 2013). This perception, part of the moral vocation the West imposed upon itself, was exported to the colonies and later laid the groundwork for local regulations that criminalized homosexual conduct, as exemplified under the British Empire, where "homosexual conduct" is seen as a threat to the ideal of the nuclear family (Hobson, 2004).

observes that these development projects often target LGBTQ+ individuals in the Global South<sup>4</sup>, positioning them as needing rescue through Western intervention.

Related to this discussion is the concept that Duggan (2002) had earlier coined to describe the assimilation of LGBTQ+ subjects into heteronormative social structures, which is *Homonormativity*. According to Duggan (2002; 2003), the “good gay” is typically white, affluent, cisgender, and non-disruptive. Homonormativity thus celebrates those LGBTQ+ individuals who contribute to national reproduction through gay marriage, gay consumption, and gay patriotism. Therefore, as Puar (2007) argues, homonationalism depends on homosexual subjects who endorse ethnic chauvinism and religious nationalism, affirming state power rather than challenging it.

Following the broader context, Puar (2010) insists that pinkwashing should not be seen as a parallel phenomenon to homonationalism, but rather as its byproduct, simply put, pinkwashing is only possible because homonationalism exists. The historical intersection of global forces such as human rights discourse, Islamophobia, immigration policy, capitalism, and neoliberalism, thus lays the groundwork for homonationalism, which in turn drives states to implement soft power policies like pinkwashing.

### **1.2.2 Counterinsurgency**

*Counterinsurgency* is often understood as a form of warfare carried out by a powerful military force against insurgent combatants. Central to counterinsurgency strategy is the effort to secure support for a civilian population in order to isolate insurgents and pressure them through their own communities (U.S. Army, & U.S. Marine Corps, 2007)<sup>5</sup>. In this process, civilians are encouraged to collaborate with military operations, not through force alone, but by appealing as the “soft” and “civilized” alternative. As Khalili (2011) argues, counterinsurgency is embedded in gendered practices that mobilize femininities and masculinities as tools of persuasion.

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<sup>4</sup> “Global South” is used in this paper as a broadly accepted geopolitical and economic classification. While not without critique, this term offers a contemporary alternative to outdated terms like “Third World,” highlighting structural inequalities shaped by colonial histories and global power dynamics (Dirlik, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Since I critically engage with counterinsurgency in this paper, I am drawing on military documents to establish a working definition of counterinsurgency strategy. As I remain critical of referencing such sources’ ideological and material effects, I understand it as necessary to trace how counterinsurgency justifies itself through civilian governance narratives.

Khalili's (2011) gendered lens breaks down the binary logic that counterinsurgency relies upon, wherein the civilian is framed as feminine and passive, while the combatant is inherently masculine and aggressive. Counterinsurgency strategies thus require population categorizing, distinguishing between combatants and civilians, enemies and allies, through markers such as gender, class, and race.

One such strategy is constructing the "civil society" myth, which implies a neutral space separate from the "evil party" that is the resistance itself. Since women are expected to participate in this "civil society" and are presumed to be less likely to resist modern warfare, they are instrumentalized to pressure men into compliance (Khalili, 2011). Within this framework, women are viewed as mediums through which the resistance is dismantled. This logic is captured by counterinsurgency expert Kilcullen, who stated: "Win the women, and you own the family unit. Own the family, and you take a big step forward in mobilizing the population" (Kilcullen, 2006, p. 124). Ultimately, this framing encourages civilians, mainly women, to view the resistance as a destabilizing force, fracturing solidarity and turning a certain population, in this case women, into local allies to the occupying power (Khalili, 2011).

When analyzing counterinsurgency as a strategy of control through fragmentation and co-optation, sexuality and LGBTQ+ issues emerge as key intervention sites in this process. Mirroring the way women are used as pressure points in civil society, in this paper I argue that Palestinian queer individuals are similarly targeted through pinkwashing strategies. Unlike women, who are often perceived as a key to "owning the family unit," queer individuals do not hold structural power; however, since queers are perceived as more vulnerable, easier to isolate, discredit or co-opt, weakening the insurgency can be achieved using LGBTQ+ individuals using different tactics than those deployed to "win the women". In this context, queerness becomes a weaponized site of division, positioning Palestinian queers as potential allies of the occupying force against their own communities.

Building on this, it is critical to recognize that media itself, particularly digital media, functions as a terrain of political struggle (Gregory, 2004), as Mirzoeff (2011) argues, media platforms and visual campaigns actively shape political consciousness, normalize state power, and mediate inclusion within nationalist and settler-colonial frameworks. Therefore, positioning media as a counterinsurgency tool, alongside understanding counterinsurgency more broadly, is crucial for analyzing how The Aguda and Beit El-Meem participate in strategies that fragment Palestinian society and undermine collective resistance.

### 1.2.3 Necropolitics

Drawing on Foucauldian and decolonial theories of power, this paper critically examines how queerness is weaponized within settler-colonial regimes. Foucault's concept of *biopower* (1978; 2003), which serves as the starting point, refers to the governance of populations through regulating life, including managing birth, health, sexuality, and mortality, even those regularities that appear to be accidental. Within this framework, the right to kill becomes subordinated to the power to "make live and let die" through techniques like health policies, legal control, and warfare.

Extending Foucault's insights, Mbembe's (2003) theory of *necropolitics* foregrounds sovereign power's ability not simply to "let die" but to actively define who may live and who must die. In the colonial occupation, power is exercised through the creation of "death worlds" where entire populations are subjected to conditions that confine them to a liminal state between life and death. These spaces are governed not by the rule of law but by the logic of the "state of exception," in which legal norms are suspended under the justification of security, emergency, or counterterrorism (Mbembe, 2003). Expanding on this, Morgensen (2010), argues that settler colonialism produces "settler sexuality," a formation aligned with nationalist, heteronormative whiteness that disciplines Indigenous' gender and sexual practices. Within this regime, native communities are cast as deviant, backward, and disposable, legitimizing their exclusion and death<sup>6</sup>. In the context of Palestine, Mbembe's analysis finds brutal materialization. The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is characterized by the fragmentation of territory, the construction of militarized borders, and the sealing of Palestinian communities into isolated cells (Mbembe, 2003).

In this colonial regime, sovereignty is exercised through the classification of populations, "deciding who is disposable and who is worthy of protection" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 27). Israel's practices can, thus, be analyzed through two intertwined dimensions of classification. First, at the level of racialized governance, Israel's management of life and death is organized through a division: the life of the Israeli is to be preserved, while the death

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<sup>6</sup> These narratives do not simply erase Native presence; they produce knowledge systems that naturalize settler colonialism and situate queers of color at the racialized margins of whiteness (Morgensen, 2010). In this context, homonationalism supports settler formation; for when non-Native queers align with the settler state and become entangled in colonial biopolitics, they risk acting as regulatory forces over Indigenous queers that seek decolonization.

of the Palestinian is rendered inevitable or even necessary<sup>7</sup>. Second, the fragmentation of Palestinian society itself reflects Israel's necropolitical logic. The politics of disposability not only operate across colonial lines but are also weaponized internally: when the equation is between an Israeli and a Palestinian, it is the Israeli who is deemed worthy of life, yet when the equation is between a queer Palestinian and a cis-heterosexual Palestinian, the queer Palestinian, in some cases, is selectively deemed more deserving of protection<sup>8</sup>. In both cases, life and death are allocated according to strategic divisions designed to fracture solidarity, produce compliant subjects, and sustain colonial domination.

Therefore, analyzing counterinsurgency without situating it within broader frameworks of biopower and settler sexuality would be incomplete. Counterinsurgency, at its core, depends on the biopolitical processes defining who counts as a threat and who deserves protection; it is a project of classification, surveillance, and control. The powerful state determines who the Other is, framing acts of resistance as terror while legitimizing its own violence as counterterrorism. Drawing on Mbembe's (2003) insights, I understand the classification of the Palestinian people as essential to the fragmentation of society and, thus, to the function of counterinsurgency.

#### **1.2.4 Intersectionality**

*Intersectionality*, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), is a framework for understanding how race, gender, sexuality, and other axes of identity intersect to produce complex and specific forms of oppression through overlapping systems of power. In the context of Palestinians, and building on Crenshaw's framework, I use intersectionality as a foundational analytical tool that goes beyond the identity trinity of race, class, and gender, but one that acknowledges how power operates across interlocking structures, including nationality and sexuality, that shape lived experiences in complex ways.

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<sup>7</sup> Ritchie (2014) recalls a series of incidents that took place in 2006, which exemplify the necropolitical tool. On 8 November 2006, the Israeli forces attacked a village in Gaza, killing 19 Palestinians and wounding more than 40, later describing it as a "technical failure" (Macintyre, 2006) as cited in (Ritchie, 2014). Two weeks later, the Israeli High Court of Justice ordered the government to recognize same-sex marriages conducted abroad. This leads Ritchie to argue that "Queer life: formally recognized in the invitation [...] (Whereas) Palestinian death: so complete that an accidental massacre of those deemed innocent even in the twisted logic of the state can be justified in the name of security and the fight against "terrorism" (Ritchie, 2014, p. 112).

<sup>8</sup> Examples will be given later in this paper, particularly when addressing Asylum-Seeking, showcasing the unauthentic process of the valorization of the queer.

This approach is not merely about highlighting differences embedded in the lived experiences of queer Palestinians and other queer/LGBTQ+ subjects,<sup>9</sup> but instead, this is essential to analyze the points of intersections that relate to systems of oppressions. Queer Palestinian subjectivities are shaped at this nexus: their oppression cannot be reduced to heteropatriarchy or national oppression alone but must be understood as the outcome of entangled systems that racialize, sexualize, and govern.

Furthermore, this lens is crucial for analyzing pinkwashing as a settler-colonial counterinsurgency strategy, since pinkwashing does not simply target, whether celebrate or attack, queerness in a vacuum, but rather operates through fragmenting communities and assigning value to queer lives differentially. As previously discussed, Israeli Jewish LGBTQ+ individuals are celebrated, while queer Palestinians are selectively recognized or strategically erased depending on their utility to the settler project.

Beyond its role in analyzing identity and state strategies, intersectionality also informs my understanding of decolonial queer reconfiguration, as practiced by groups such as alQaws. As Alqaisiya (2018) argues, decolonial queerness in the Palestinian context entails more than opposing homonationalism; it redefines queer liberation as inherently tied to, and even identical with, anti-colonialism and anti-Zionism. This is because dismantling Zionism depends on undoing the colonial sexual order. Intersectionality, then, grounds queerness in material relations of power and informs my broader approach to decolonizing queerness. In that sense, decolonial queerness is not just about resisting colonial control but also about the possibility of re-existence, a refusal to be subsumed by colonial categories and a reassertion of the right to live, love, and resist on their own terms (Abualsaid, 2023).

Taken together, these frameworks provide the analytical lenses for this paper. They allow for a reading of LGBTQ+ discourse not simply as identity representation, but as a terrain of political warfare, one where visibility, inclusion, and even survival are conditioned by state power, settler-colonial structures, and neoliberal calculations. These frameworks will guide

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<sup>9</sup> In this context, Puar (2007) critiques how intersectionality has been increasingly appropriated within liberal multicultural frameworks, often reduced to a checklist of static identity categories such as race, gender, and sexuality. This reduction, she argues, limits intersectionality's ability to account for the fluid, affective, and geopolitical operations of power. Building on this critique, I approach intersectionality not as a fixed schema of identity but as a critical framework for interrogating the interlocking systems of power that shape queer Palestinian subjectivities.

the analysis of discursive practices in the media content produced by The Aguda, Beit El-Meem, and alQaws.

### **1.3 Contextualizing the Neoliberal Terrain of Pinkwashing**

While the previous section established the conceptual tools that guide this study, this section turns to the broader structural terrain in which these concepts operate. The aim is not simply to describe the ideological backdrop of pinkwashing, but to demonstrate how sexuality becomes embedded within the material logics of neoliberalism, securitization, and settler colonial governance.

By unpacking how militarization, borders, and consumer capitalism function as intersecting mechanisms of power, this section situates LGBTQ+ rights discourse within a global neoliberal project. Each of the following subsections explores one of these interlocking domains. Together, they reveal how LGBTQ+ visibility is mobilized as soft power and counterinsurgency: to justify militarized state violence, to discipline racialized bodies at the border, and to project an image of modernity through pink capitalism. This context is essential for understanding the discursive strategies employed by the organizations analyzed in the following chapters. In other words, this section provides a brief comparative prelude to understand how pinkwashing operates transnationally and show that the strategies that Israel and its affiliated parties employ, don't exist in a vacuum.

#### **1.3.1 Militarization and Security**

A key manifestation of homonationalism lies in the way liberal definitions of LGBTQ+ rights are aligned with national military forces and are being used in glossing over crimes and injustices committed by these forces. For instance, public support for same-sex marriage in the West is often accompanied by uncritical praise of the military. A striking example is an Australian radio anchor who, while confronting a conservative politician who opposed same-sex marriage, stated: "Didn't the diggers fight for us to be free—so that we can all have gay sex?" (Dreher, 2016). Here, "diggers" refers to the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC), a force historically implicated in colonial violence against Indigenous populations, as well as ongoing military operations across the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific (Lake & Reynolds, 2010).

By invoking military operations<sup>10</sup> as a justification for LGBTQ+ rights, national rhetoric mobilizes militarist values in support of state expansion and dominance (Delatolla, 2020). One should not forget that such rhetoric also misrepresents crucial aspects of historical realities, for example, in the Australian context, Australian religious institutions are involved in supporting conversion therapy abroad, such as in Uganda (Williams, 2014), or the fact that the last decriminalization of homosexual sex in Australia took place only in 1997 (Dreher, 2016). Evidently, these facts fundamentally undermine the claim that the support of same-sex marriage represents a natural continuation of the ANZAC legacy. This homonationalist narrative relies on selective memory, deliberately sidelining the founding violence of the military.

In this context, it is thus essential to conclude that homonationalism is incompatible with queer liberation that aims to abolish oppression radically; rather, it celebrates a liberal version of LGBTQ+ that ultimately serves imperialist goals and aligns with neoliberal governance, which recode LGBTQ+ politics into symbols of state efficiency, tolerance, and modernity (Dave & Narrain, 2017).

### **1.3.2 Asylum-Seeking and Borders**

In the context of asylum-seeking, the West often frames itself as a “safe haven” for LGBTQ+ refugees, drawing on Orientalist assumptions that portray homophobic violence as endemic to the Global South while positioning the West as a beacon of tolerance (Butler, 2008). Consequently, this perception is embedded in asylum policies, where being subject to violence as a queer individual in one’s home country has become a criterion for asylum in many Western countries (Butler, 2008)<sup>11</sup>. This “safe haven” logic fits neatly within neoliberal paradigms where states position themselves as managers of life, selectively including “desirable” refugees who align with liberal values while excluding those deemed politically inconvenient (Bhagat & Soederberg, 2019).

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<sup>10</sup> Here framed as a noble sacrifice.

<sup>11</sup> In practice, the instrumentalization of secularism is manifested in practices of coercive immigration processes. For instance, in the Netherlands, applicants for immigration, mainly those from the global South, are asked to express how they feel when shown photos of same-sex couples. Their responses, whether “positive” or “negative,” can directly influence the outcome of their asylum application, signaling their alignment with Western liberal values. In contrast, applicants from the EU are exempt from this process, implicitly presumed to be “modern” by default (Butler, 2008).

In a review of the UK Supreme Court case *HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon) v. Secretary of State for the Home Department* (2010), Heimer (2019) shows how the asylum process often forces LGBTQ+ individuals into narrow Western ideals. The UK's tribunals apply a test distinguishing between those who live "openly gay" and those who are "discreet" about their sexuality, with the latter often deemed less worthy of protection, for they are naturally repressed and cannot be saved from their cultural backwardness, hence is not a celebratory subject of the West<sup>12</sup>. This test reflects a neoliberal logic that ties protection to the subject's ability to perform identity in legible, consumer-friendly, and non-threatening ways (Murray, 2014). In this sense, the refugee is turned into a subject of cost-efficiency: either an assimilable liberal citizen or an unworthy other.

Nevertheless, beyond this vivid orientalist agenda, Puar (2013) argues that dominant Western LGBTQ+ politics show the paradox of presumably being inclusive to LGBTQ+ individuals while also aligning with orientalist and homonationalist motives, thus being a complicit actor in the repression of some under the guise of liberation. In addition to the reflection of the West's values, the focus on visibility, then, subtly reinforces a hierarchy of queerness that excludes those who do not conform to the "openly gay" ideal. Drawing on Foucault's (1978) concept of *biopower*, where power operates through the regulation and optimization of life, the asylum regime potentially disciplines queer to internalize standards of visibility, meaning, as only those who perform queerness in ways that align with liberal norms of individuality are recognized as worthy of protection.

In the case of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza<sup>13</sup> who seek asylum in Israel due to their sexuality, similar dynamics are at play. Israel often frames these individuals as victims of their own society (Ritchie, 2014). In this sense, I argue that Israel selectively offers "benefits" to some Palestinians in order to weaken collective resistance, and pit Palestinians against one another, for when one group is seen as benefiting from the occupier, it inevitably comes at the expense of broader solidarity. This dynamic fits within the theoretical frameworks of homonationalism and counterinsurgency, where inclusion becomes a tool of

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<sup>12</sup> Not only is this individual not a celebratory subject, but Shakhsari (2014) argues that such a queer potentially fits in Agamben's (1998) concept "Homo Sacer", as they are relegated to a state of bare life, excluded from the rights and protections afforded to others. I understand this argument as an extension to Butler's (1993) theory in *Bodies that matter*, according to which bodies that fail to conform to normative expectations of sexual identity, here, homonormative, are not considered worthy of protection, saving, or grief.

<sup>13</sup> Today seeking asylum from Gaza is nearly impossible.

domination. As queer Palestinians are encouraged to distance themselves from their communities and align with the settler state, neglecting in this process the fact that the oppressive conditions prompting their asylum-seeking were created by the same regime.

This conditional inclusion reflects Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics, as some Palestinian queers become more valuable than other Palestinians; for example, while some Palestinian queers from the West Bank are granted asylum in Israel, other Palestinians are deemed disposable. It is important to note that this is not because they, in and of themselves, are more valuable in the eyes of the colonial state. Instead, it is because they could be of strategic utility. In this context, it is essential to address the essence of the "benefits" queers get, for these "benefits" are neither unconditional nor genuinely protective; rather, they are partial and ultimately weaponized. Even when LGBTQ+ individuals from the West Bank or Gaza face mortal danger, whether through torture by local communities or persecution by governing authorities such as the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank or Hamas in Gaza<sup>14</sup>, Israel often refuses to even allow them to file asylum applications solely because they are Palestinian (Kagan & Ben-Dor, 2008)<sup>15</sup>. Real cases, such as those documented by Kagan & Ben-Dor (2008), reveal how queer Palestinians, even after seeking help through Israeli NGOs, the police, or the courts, are still subjected to deportation, mistreatment, or bureaucratic neglect.

Building on the motive of "strategic utility," queerness could be abused as a double-edged sword. While the example of asylum-seeking reflects the identity being a reason for valuing some queers, other examples showcase how sexuality and gender identity are used as tools of surveillance and coercion. For example, Palestinian queers have been targeted for blackmail by Israeli authorities, threatening to expose them to their communities in case of refusing to collaborate with the authorities (Alqaisiya, 2018).

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<sup>14</sup> The Palestinian Authority governs parts of the West Bank, while Hamas controls the Gaza Strip.

<sup>15</sup> While this citation engages with the documentation produced by Israeli human rights organizations regarding the dangers faced by LGBTQ+ Palestinians, I am aware that such narratives risk being instrumentalized to reinforce colonial discourses that portray Palestinian society as inherently barbaric while framing Israel as a democracy that is obliged to be the savior. For example, this document criticizes Israel for helping draft refugee law and signing the 1951 Refugee Convention, while continuing to violate its provisions regarding Palestinians. This, however, is not the line of argument I adopt, as I hold no expectation for a settler-colonial state to adhere to international obligations. Nevertheless, due to the limited availability of decolonial resources that fully capture the layered realities of queer Palestinian experiences, I use this material critically, drawing attention to its insights while acknowledging its limitations.

This layered reality is central to my later analysis of how pinkwashing, counterinsurgency, and selective inclusion operate not merely through the extension of rights, but through the strategic management of Palestinian vulnerability.

### **1.3.3 Consumerism and Tourism: Pink Capitalism**

Expanding on the instrumentalization of sexuality and its intersection with global powers, this section examines how consumerism and tourism operate as key arenas for pinkwashing and homonationalism.

In recent years, neoliberal economic frameworks have fueled the rise of *pink capitalism*, which is a system where LGBTQ+ identities are leveraged as profitable markets and sources of symbolic capital (Duggan, 2002). This logic plays out through two powerful, interconnected sites: tourism and corporate branding. Countries and companies alike participate in constructing “gay-friendly” spaces, selling marketable versions of queerness to affluent, primarily white consumers (Collins, 2009). Through this commodification, LGBTQ+ inclusion becomes a tool of branding, image management, and soft power, often masking violence, exclusion, and exploitation behind a rainbow-colored façade.

Rao (2014) expands on this, introducing the concept of *homo-capitalism*, where elite LGBTQ+ activists and technocrats in International Financial Institutions promote the idea that embracing LGBTQ+ rights signals a prosperous and productive future. States that brand themselves as “gay-friendly” use this image to attract investment and tourism, reinforcing neoliberal agendas, where LGBTQ+ recognition is tied to profitability; framing LGBTQ+ politics as a form of symbolic capital. This commodification is particularly evident in the global rise of LGBTQ+ tourism, where destinations such as Tel Aviv, Sydney, Cape Town, London, Madrid, and Buenos Aires are marketed as queer-friendly havens for travelers and their “pink money” (Burchiellaro, 2024).

However, this branding often requires investment in highly commodified LGBTQ+ spaces, typically at the expense of marginalized local communities. These spaces frequently exclude or exploit racialized and Indigenous queers, who are symbolically included in the national image yet continue to face poor labor conditions and systemic violence (Burchiellaro, 2024). With that in mind, the cost of the “rosy” picture of LGBTQ+ tourism should not go unnoticed, as it perpetuates class inequalities and imperialist relations, overlooking and exploiting marginalized identities, cultures, and lifestyles (Wahab, 2021).

A striking example is Tel Aviv, heavily promoted as a gay-friendly destination through the 2010 *Tel Aviv Gay Vibe* campaign by the Israeli Tourism Ministry and the Tel Aviv Municipality. As part of Brand Israel, branding Tel Aviv as “the world’s most gay-friendly city” (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019) serves as a tool of pinkwashing, obscuring Israel’s ongoing occupation, apartheid, and settler colonialism. As Alqaisiya (2018, p. 35) recalls, Tel Aviv is only “an hour away from the world’s largest open prison, Gaza,” built on stolen land, where many LGBTQ+ Zionist figures profiting from its global image are complicit in the daily oppression of Palestinians.

This same logic of branding underpins the rise of corporate LGBTQ+ activism, where companies capitalize on LGBTQ+ visibility to enhance their progressive reputations while maintaining the structural inequalities they benefit from (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). This often includes sponsoring Pride events, producing rainbow merchandise, and temporarily rebranding company logos to display rainbow colors (Rudnicka & Reichel, 2024). However, these symbolic gestures rarely challenge the systemic conditions that produce inequality and harm. Instead, they allow corporations to align with progressive causes without disrupting the neoliberal order. This contradiction is sharply illustrated by companies like Toyota, AT&T, Amazon, and Comcast, which publicly support Pride Month while simultaneously donating over \$1.1 million to candidates with anti-LGBTQ+ agendas (Rusch, 2023).

To conclude, both the tourism industry and corporate actors depend on a neoliberal discourse of visibility that prioritizes marketability over liberation. Queerness is, thus, stripped of its radical and political dimensions and rebranded into consumable, self-actualizing experiences tailored to the privileged few. This framework not only erases marginalized queer communities but also legitimizes violent state practices through a politics of inclusion.

#### **1.4 Concluding Synthesis: Pinkwashing as Counterinsurgency**

Building on the theoretical and structural frameworks outlined above, this section conceptualizes pinkwashing as a form of colonial counterinsurgency deployed through discourse. Building on the frameworks introduced in 1.2 and 1.3, I read media narratives through the lenses of homonationalism, counterinsurgency, and necropolitics, I trace how

LGBTQ+ visibility becomes weaponized to fragment Palestinian resistance and sustain settler-colonial power.

The homonational project of Western sexual exceptionalism in the U.S., where “progressive politics” centered around gay liberation was utilized to win support for the War on Terror, resulting in gaining support from American gays who viewed war as a means of liberating the oppressed Arab and Muslim LGBTQ+ community (Carson, 2013). This logic relied on the broader Western narrative of sexual exceptionalism, in which the West is seen as the enlightened protector of gender and sexual minorities. In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, Abu-Lughod (2013) further unpacks how liberal feminists in the U.S. framed the war on Afghanistan as a feminist cause, where the belief in women’s rights became entangled with support for military intervention.

This same mirrored logic underpins Israel’s pinkwashing project. Like the American narrative of “White men shield gays from men of color,” Israel claims to protect Palestinian queers from their “homophobic” culture (Carson, 2013). This savior discourse, however, deliberately erases the settler-colonial structure of Israeli violence and obscures the role of colonial occupation in shaping Indigenous cultural norms (DeLatolla, 2020; Elia, 2012). By framing domination as protection, Israel recolonizes Palestinian queers.

At this point, it is important to clarify that this critique does not aim to deny or minimize the magnitude of patriarchal violence imposed on queer Palestinians by their own communities, nor does the critique seek to excuse it. However, I intend to challenge the framing of “problem” and “solution” as this mechanism upholds existing power structures and persists in marginalizing the complex entanglements that shape the lived realities of Palestinian queers.

In fact, within Palestinian resistance movements, heteronormativity plays a significant role as a biopolitical tool, for the ideal image of the combatant is straight, male, and committed to the national struggle (Elia, 2012). Biological metaphors are embedded in nationalist narratives, such as celebrating the figure of the hero and *his* duty to defend Palestine- the “motherland” (Khalili, 2007) or referring to the colonization of Palestine as the “rape” of the land (Rubenberg, 2001). The shaping of the resistance and nationalist symbols by patriarchal norms marginalizes and reinforces the stigmatization of those who do not abide by the heteronormative identity (Massad, 1995). In this setting, such individuals become

perfect targets for blackmail and recruitment as informants by the Israeli authorities, which links queerness, particularly homosexuality, with collaborationism (Alqaisiya, 2018).

It is essential here to reflect and observe the vicious cycle that this dynamic creates; on the one hand, Israel exploits the exclusion of Palestinian queers from mainstream nationalist discourse, but on the other end, queer identities are considered a threat to the unity of the nation, leading to fueling Palestinian resistance to non-normative identities. This leads to further “stigmatization and disqualification [of queer identities] from the nationalist struggle” (Alqaisiya, 2018, p. 37).

Through pinkwashing, coupled with co-optation, Israel separates queerness from the entirety of the identity of the Palestinian queer individual, positioning sexuality as a “depoliticized” pillar of freedom that can be traded with political disentanglement from the local society. As the next chapter will show, these logics are embedded within the practices of civil society organizations such as The Aguda and Beit El-Meem. By examining The Aguda and Beit El-Meem’s public discourse, campaigns, and political alignments, the following chapter examines how the language of LGBTQ+ rights can be mobilized in service of nationalist and colonial projects.

## Part II- Research Design and Analytical Framework

### 2.1 Methodology

This research examines how counterinsurgency operates through queer discourse and digital media within Israeli and Palestinian LGBTQ+ organizations. Specifically, I selected these three organizations:

1. *The Aguda*, the Association for LGBTQ Equality in Israel, an Israeli LGBTQ+ organization closely associated with state-sponsored pinkwashing narratives
2. *Beit El-Meem*, which operates under the Aguda's auspices, specifically targeting Palestinian citizens of Israel
3. *alQaws* for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, a Palestinian grassroots organization that actively challenges these narratives and situates queer liberation within a broader anti-colonial and anti-Zionist framework.

These organizations were chosen due to their active involvement in queer discourse within Israel and Palestine, and because they reflect the political divisions and discursive formations at the heart of this study. The Aguda promotes a homonationalist narrative that aligns LGBTQ+ visibility and inclusion with militarism and Zionist nation-building. Beit El-Meem, as a daughter organization of the Aguda, depoliticizes queer Palestinian identity through culturally specific yet neutral language, refraining from being “too political”, which by itself is a political endeavor. In contrast, alQaws actively resists both by employing an intersectional and decolonial approach.

It is important to note that I observed that the content produced by The Aguda and Beit El Meem functions in a complementary manner; while the Aguda directs its narrative outward, aligning LGBTQ+ with Israeli state power to bolster Brand Israel, Beit El Meem turns inward, depoliticizing Palestinian LGBTQ+ identity and distancing it from the broader liberation struggle; together, these strategies form a dual mechanism of counterinsurgency aimed at both external image-making and internal fragmentation.

### 2.2 Data Collection

The primary source material for this study consists of Instagram posts published on the official accounts of the organizations, the Aguda ([https://www.instagram.com/the\\_aguda/](https://www.instagram.com/the_aguda/)), Beit El-Meem (<https://www.instagram.com/beitelmeem/>), and alQaws

([https://www.instagram.com/alqaws\\_org/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/alqaws_org/?hl=en)). I reviewed the full set of posts published by each organization from October 7, 2023, the beginning of ongoing genocide in Gaza in particular, and military aggression in Palestine in general, to March 2025, the time of completing the data collection. The time frame was chosen not only because it marks the beginning of an escalation in hard power (overt violence) but also because it allowed me to track how LGBTQ+ organizations responded with (or failed to respond with) soft power tactics, such as public messaging, branding, and silence.

This selection was guided by the understanding that media, especially digital platforms, have become central arenas for both settler-colonial pinkwashing and queer resistance. As Mirzoeff (2011) argues, digital media are not merely spaces of representation, but mechanisms through which power is exercised and counterinsurgency tactics are operationalized. In this sense, Instagram posts and campaign visuals are not neutral reflections of community work; they are curated artifacts structured by political agendas, shaped by neoliberal logics of inclusion, nationalism, and settler authority.

A total of 394 Instagram posts were reviewed:

- 272 from the Aguda, of which 30 were found relevant to this analysis
- 96 from Beit El-Meem, of which 17 were selected
- 26 from alQaws, of which 25 were included in the analysis

It is important to clarify how relevance was determined. In contrast to a purely thematic selection process, I focused on posts that explicitly or implicitly engaged with pinkwashing narratives, political visibility, national identity, affective responses to genocide, and framings of sexual identity in relation to broader sociopolitical structures. For example, many of the Aguda and Beit El-Meem's posts focused on individual achievements or apolitical community events, while these posts contribute to an overall branding strategy, only those that intersected with discursive strategies outlined in my theoretical framework (such as homonationalism, counterinsurgency, and necropolitics) were selected for analysis.

In addition to Instagram content, I analyzed three formal reports: one from each organization. These were longer-form media outputs that either appeared as an Instagram thread or as downloadable reports on the organizations' websites. I also drew on supplementary textual and visual materials available through their websites, including "about us", mission statements and announcements. The selected content varied in length and

format, ranging from single-image posts with short captions to multi-slide threads and infographic-based reports.

Out of the reviewed materials, 15 posts were chosen to be directly quoted and analyzed in the empirical chapters to provide grounded, illustrative examples of each discursive strategy. These were selected for their thematic relevance as well as their rhetorical clarity, visual symbolism, and discursive weight.

The decision to focus on Instagram was both methodological and practical. As the primary platform used by all three organizations, Instagram functions as a key site of public engagement and digital storytelling. It is where these groups construct narratives, project solidarity, and negotiate political identities, making it a particularly fertile space for analyzing how queer discourse is co-opted or reclaimed in the service of state power or resistance. My choice was also informed by accessibility; these posts are publicly available, and the platform's interface facilitates both visual and textual analysis.

### **2.3 Discourse Analysis Approach**

The collected data was then examined through the theoretical lenses of Homonationalism (Puar, 2007), Khalili's (2011) analysis of gendered practices of Counterinsurgency, Necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). I employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing particularly on Foucault's (1978; 2003) concept of discourse as a site of power production and regulation. These frameworks allowed me to examine how linguistic, visual, and symbolic choices intersect to construct or resist dominant narratives.

Importantly, not all instances of pinkwashing were treated as equivalent to counterinsurgency. Following the theoretical framing established earlier, I distinguish between pinkwashing as a broader project of state branding, and pinkwashing as a tactic of counterinsurgency. In this analysis, I identify pinkwashing as counterinsurgency when queer visibility is strategically mobilized to fragment Palestinian solidarity and depoliticize liberation narratives. However, while analytically distinct, pinkwashing and counterinsurgency are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I understand that they operate in tandem: the former projects an international image of liberal modernity, while the latter fractures resistance and manages dissent from within. This methodological approach enables a nuanced tracing of how queer

discourse is weaponized: not simply through representation or erasure alone, but through the complex politics of life and death, inclusion and abandonment, while tackling the intersection of sexuality, nationality, and colonial violence.

## **2.4 Coding and Discursive Formations**

The next phase focused on identifying recurring discursive patterns and the constructive components of the discourse. Through a process of selective coding, I tracked thematic clusters across the data, including:

- depoliticization and emotional neutralization
- alignment with state power and settler structures
- queer visibility as soft power
- resistance grounded in collective liberation and affective labor

These thematic clusters were then mapped onto three overarching discursive formations in the Foucauldian sense as historically contingent systems of meaning that shape and constrain what can be said (1972):

- I. Homonationalist Branding
- II. Internal Fragmentation
- III. Intersectional Resistance to Pinkwashing and Fragmentation

These formations do not correspond evenly across all organizations. Instead, The Aguda predominantly exemplifies Formation I, Beit El-Meem Formation II, and alQaws Formation III.

Within each formation, I analyzed the specific discursive strategies employed by the relevant organization, such as glorifying military service, erasing Palestinian identity, or re-centering queer affect as resistance, and evaluated each's political implications. This strategy-formulation model allowed for internal differentiation within each organizational discourse while maintaining a coherent comparative frame across cases. Each formation is analyzed through the specific discursive strategies used to sustain or resist settler-colonial counterinsurgency.

## Part III- Case Study Analysis

### The Aguda and Beit El-Meem (*Case Study 1*)

*The Aguda*, the Association for LGBTQ Equality in Israel, is Israel's pioneer LGBTQ+ organization, which serves as an umbrella organization for other organizations working on LGBTQ+ matters in Israel (The Aguda, n.d.). According to its own materials, the Aguda operates as a national grassroots organization active in public, governmental, and political arenas for the benefit of the LGBTQ+ community (The Aguda, n.d.).

*Beit El-Meem*, a smaller organization working under the auspices of the Aguda, serves as a center for LGBTQ+ individuals within the "Arab Society" in Israel (Beit El-Meem, n.d.; The Aguda, n.d.). In Arabic, the term "مجتمع الميم" (Mujtama' al-Meem) is commonly used to refer to the LGBTQ+ community. The word "ميم" (Meem) is the Arabic letter M, which stands for "مثلي" (*mithli*, meaning "gay" or "homosexual"). Just like "L" in LGBTQ+ stands for "Lesbian," the Arabic "Meem" serves as a symbolic stand-in for the queer community. Stemming from the Arabic expression "بيت الميم", Beit El-Meem is "the House of Meem," which stands for a safe space or community for queer Arabs.

Although both organizations present themselves as inclusive and apolitical, discourse analysis reveals that they play a strategic role in pinkwashing and counterinsurgency: externally by branding Israel as a modern, tolerant state, and internally by fragmenting and depoliticizing Palestinian queer subjectivities. This section traces how two distinct discursive formations emerge in the digital media of The Aguda and Beit El-Meem: Homonationalist Branding and Internal Fragmentation. Each formation is produced and sustained through specific discursive strategies, which are examined below.

### 3.1 Discursive Formation I: Homonationalist Branding (primarily- The Aguda)

#### 3.1.1 Strategy 1: Zionist and Settler-Colonial Homonationalism

On its official website, the Aguda states, "No matter what color of the rainbow you identify as—we are here for you" (The Aguda, n.d.). While this statement claims inclusivity and unconditional support, a deeper examination reveals that the Aguda operates within Zionist nationalism, amplifying a vision of LGBTQ+ visibility tied to nationalist and militarist agendas, thus masking its exclusivity to specific LGBTQ populations.

Among the organization’s departments that exemplify the Zionist framework is “the Department for LGBTQ Immigrants and Diaspora Jewry,” which was established in partnership with the World Zionist Organization. This department explicitly emphasizes the concept of *settler homonationalism* proposed by Morgensen (2010), wherein LGBTQ+ matters are leveraged to further settler-colonial and nationalist ideologies. The fact that the Aguda’s English-language platform focuses on LGBTQ+ “Aliyah” but downplays or omits this discourse in the Arabic version of the website reveals the audience-specific nature of the messaging. This strategic disparity speaks to the displacement and erasure of Palestinian LGBTQ+ voices in favor of empowering settler-colonial ideologies, essentially reinforcing the idea that LGBTQ+ rights are conditional on support for Zionist ideals (as seen in the promotion of LGBTQ+ immigration to Israel).

### 3.1.2 Strategy 2: Militarized Visibility and Inclusion

On September 17, 2024, the Aguda posted an Instagram post, portraying the front page of



*Haaretz*, an Israeli newspaper, that featured two men kissing, one of them a uniformed soldier in the Israeli military forces, bearing the words “Good Morning, Dani Levi” with the name Dani Levi in rainbow colors (Fig. 1). To provide context, in September of 2024, Channel 12, published recordings of Police Chief Daniel Levi saying homophobic remarks, such as “LGBTQ+ individuals are disgusting” (Jerusalem Post Staff, 2024). In a dissenting act, the Aguda posted this front, deliberately showing a photo of individuals from the LGBTQ community kissing, with the Chief’s name in rainbow-colored typography.

**Fig. 1:** Instagram Post- on September 17, 2024

In my reading of this visual, the combination of rainbow-colored typography with military uniforms is far from accidental; it emerges against the backdrop of a military actively committing genocide. This aesthetic choice merges LGBTQ+ symbolism with the markers of

settler sovereignty. In my broader analysis, which challenges the organization's claims of "inclusivity," this visual constructs a specific audience: liberal Israelis and international supporters who interpret LGBTQ+ militarized bodies as evidence of Israeli modernity, reinforcing a homonationalist framework (Puar, 2007). This pattern even aligns with what Duggan (2002) critiques as homonormativity, a depoliticized, privatized vision of LGBTQ+ rights compatible with neoliberalism and normative ideologies, mirroring heteronormativity in a homosexual context.

However, one cannot overlook what the image omits: there is no acknowledgment of the military's ongoing role in enforcing apartheid, siege, settler colonial violence, and ongoing genocide. In addition, rather than pursuing liberation, the image seems urgently aimed at provoking a military chief who made homophobic remarks, thereby sidestepping any critique of systemic oppression. In this context, Gross (2015) points out that the LGBTQ+ community in Israel is often required to demonstrate its loyalty to the state's militaristic and colonial agendas for full inclusion. This, therefore, illustrates how the Aguda does not challenge the patriarchal, settler-colonial foundations of Israel. Instead, it legitimizes them by highlighting figures who embody the state's power structures, making inclusion contingent upon active participation in colonial violence.

In the same manner, on July 10, 2024, the Aguda's Instagram account celebrated the appointment of the first gay Chief Medical Officer, framing it as a celebratory milestone for LGBTQ+ representation, for this is the first time in the history of the Israeli military forces to have an openly "gay" Chief Medical Officer. Further, on March 1, 2025, The Aguda issued a public appeal to the Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. (res.) Eyal Zamir, demanding that he preserve a unit in the Israeli military that focuses on LGBTQ+ inclusion in military service. In their words: "the IDF is the people's army, and it must continue to be a safe place for everyone!".

In reality, the celebration of the appointment of the first "gay" Chief Medical Officer, along with the demand for inclusion in the military forces, must be read through the lens of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) as well as settler homonationalism (Puar, 2007; Morgensen, 2010). Not only do these posts frame LGBTQ+ visibility within the militaristic sphere as a form of inclusive progress, but they also implicitly justify Palestinian death as acceptable collateral damage. Following Mbembe's (2003) theory of necropolitics, the soldier here becomes a necropolitical figure, celebrated precisely for his participation in structures that render Palestinian lives, including those of queer individuals, disposable. This creates a dissonant

reality where the visibility of the “good Israeli gay” comes at the unspoken erasure of the Palestinian. In a similar manner, when the Aguda praises the Israeli military forces as “the people’s army”, it implicitly but very politically states who is considered the people and whose lives are too disposable to be considered as the lives of “people”. In sum, I read this content of the Aguda’s as homonationalist branding, amplifying neoliberal notions and fully aligning with Zionism.

Although more implicitly, Beit El-Meem also adopts a strategy of aligning LGBTQ+ rights with militarized and nationalist frameworks. For instance, in February 2025, the organization posted an Instagram thread celebrating Lady Gaga’s Grammy win, quoting her speech in support of the trans community. Beit El-Meem contextualized the speech by referencing a series of discriminatory policies issued by the Trump administration, including the ban on trans people serving in the U.S. military and broader attacks on trans healthcare rights.

What is noticeably absent from that post, however, is any acknowledgment of the Trump administration’s direct support for Israel’s military operations. By this, Beit El-Meem falsely presumes that the Palestinian queers’ primary concern about Trump’s policy is the exclusion of the trans community from the military when the Palestinian people are being killed by a military force financed and directly aided by the U.S. military, exactly as the post was produced (PBS News, 2025). Beit El-Meem thus inadvertently centers the military as a legitimate and desirable site of inclusion, echoing the same homonationalist logic critiqued in the Aguda’s alignment with the Israeli military.

It is, however, crucial to situate this omission within the broader context of Beit El-Meem’s potential survival strategy, especially given its affiliation with the Aguda. While this may explain a cautious public stance, it does not justify the absence of critical perspectives in its messaging. What makes this absence particularly troubling is that Beit El-Meem produces its content in Arabic and targets a regional Arab audience. During an active war on Palestine, the failure to acknowledge either the genocide or the direct role of U.S. military aid in sustaining Israeli operations raises serious concerns about complicity and political erasure.

## 3.2 Discursive Formation II: Internal Fragmentation (primarily- Beit El-Meem)

### 3.2.1 Strategy 1: Linguistic Erasure of Palestinian Identity

Building on the earlier observation regarding The Aguda's language-specific messaging, a closer look at its Arabic-language platform further reveals how audience targeting shapes discursive framing. While the English site foregrounds LGBTQ+ "Aliyah," aligning queer identity with Jewish immigration to Israel, this narrative is notably absent in Arabic. Instead, the Arabic version references a "Center of Minorities and LGBTQ+ Asylum-Seekers," which offers assistance with legal status and civil rights in Israel (The Aguda, n.d.). As opposed to the word "immigrants" which refers to people in the "Jewish diaspora," the words "asylum-seekers" imply that the center targets Palestinians living in the West Bank, for they are the asylum-seekers in question. In this sense, the use of the term "minorities" and the refraining from using the word "Palestinian" is particularly telling.

Similar to this deliberate engagement with language and identity, Beit El-Meem's content consistently uses the word "Arabs" instead of "Palestinians." This linguistic choice is not accidental, but rather it constitutes a political act intended to deny the existence of the Palestinian people (Said, 2007). In *the Question of Palestine* Said (1992) further elaborates that in order for the Zionist project to succeed, it had to perpetuate the narrative of "a land without a people for a people without a land"; claiming that the natives did not exist. Keeping this in mind, this linguistic choice is understood a broader attempt to suppress the Palestinian dimension of identity<sup>16</sup>, an erasure that traces back to the legacy of the Nakba and continues to serve the legitimization of Zionist settler-colonial claims.

This linguistic sanitization aligns with a broader Zionist strategy of fragmenting the Palestinian people. It continues the partition of historic Palestine and the occupation that began in 1948, reinforcing the narrative that Palestinians only exist in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza- while those within what is now called Israel are merely "Arabs." By adopting the language produced by the Israeli regime, Beit El-Meem distances itself from the

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<sup>16</sup> I understand identity the same way Maalouf (2003), who emphasizes that identity cannot be compartmentalized into separate categories. As he states, "identity cannot be divided, nor shared in equal parts or defined by distinct, separate boxes." This view challenges the notion of reducing Palestinians to a singular category like "Arabs," which erases the complexity and multiplicity of their identity. According to Maalouf, identity is a dynamic and interconnected construct, shaped by various elements such as religion, nationality, sexuality, and personal experience, which cannot be separated from one another without losing their essence.

history of expulsion and dispossession, hence, not only does it extend The Aguda’s practices but also, it aligns itself with the colonial logic of erasure.

The strategic use of language in the discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ rights by Beit El-Meem reveals a broader pattern of selective inclusion. For instance, Beit El-Meem states that the organization aims to fight against “all” oppressions imposed on LGBTQ+ Arab individuals (Beit El-Meem, n.d.). However, similar to the Aguda’s necropolitical practices, Beit El-Meem’s universalist approach raises the questions about what “all” actually encompasses; given the absence of any critique of the Israeli regime, and who is deemed worthy of protection, considering the lack of explicit support for queer Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. This ambiguity is further reflected in the visual content of the website: for instance, the main image (Fig. 2) presents a generic and universalist portrayal of diversity, devoid of any reference to the specific conditions faced by Palestinians. Such erasure undermines the claimed inclusivity of “all,”- for one seems to be included in the “all” in the condition of revoking one’s Palestinianness (Schotten, 2018).



**Fig. 2:** Main Photo on Beit El-Meem’s Website

### 3.2.2 Strategy 2: Depoliticization of Palestinian Queer Identity

In the case of Beit El-Meem, the organization's emphasis on apolitical content, such as cooking workshops, festive greetings, and the celebration of pop-culture icons like Lady Gaga, illustrates a broader strategy of depoliticizing Palestinian queer identity. While these gestures may appear inclusive or community-oriented, they obscure the inherently political nature of queer existence, particularly under conditions of occupation and settler-colonial violence. For instance, during holidays like Christmas, Eid, or Ramadan, Beit El-Meem posted on Instagram greetings and invitations for cooking workshops or communal gatherings such as Christmas dinner or Ramadan supper, held in Beit El-Meem's office in Tel Aviv. Sometimes these events were co-organized with institutions like "Pride Center," which operates under the municipality of Tel Aviv, engaging in a form of normalization and aligning itself with the Israeli state's broader pinkwashing agenda.

Seeing those posts as part of a broader strategy offers an analysis that goes beyond the technical celebration of a holiday; rather a calculated act to argue that LGBTQ+ individuals exist out of the political stream. As Morgensen (2010) argues, settler colonial projects incorporate sexuality into narratives of modernity precisely by depoliticizing it, detaching it from resistance to colonial violence. Thus, even as genocide is unfolding against the Palestinian people, the narrative presented is one where LGBTQ+ Palestinians are imagined as engaging in cooking workshops, fostering an apolitical, feel-good community. This framing subtly suggests that LGBTQ+ subjects can and should seek belonging outside collective liberation struggles, reinforcing neoliberal and settler-colonial logics of fragmentation and containment. The erasure of their identity as Palestinians, paired with the imposition of conditional inclusion, reduces their struggle to an individual one rather than a collective national one, perpetuating their isolation within both the LGBTQ+ and Palestinian communities<sup>17</sup>.

Another telling example is the adoption of mainstream Western LGBTQ+ icons. For instance, the organization's post following Lady Gaga's speech at the 67th Annual Grammy Awards (Fig. 3) as previously mentioned. In her speech, Lady Gaga expressed: "Trans people are not invisible. Trans people deserve love. The queer community deserves to be lifted.

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<sup>17</sup> In this analysis I was guided by works that understand how queer identity has often been stripped of its political nature in favor of individual rights, like Muñoz's (1999) and Halberstam's (2011).

Music is love.” Beit El-Meem praised this speech, framing it as a powerful affirmation of queer and trans rights.



**Fig. 3:** Posted on February 5, 2025 – Upon the 67th Annual Grammy Awards

While this post attempts to foster a sense of pride and unity around and in the LGBTQ+ community, it inherently assumes that Lady Gaga represents to the Palestinian queers what she represents to the Western world. Such iconography reaffirms the neoliberal framework of pinkwashing, which frames LGBTQ+ matters as an isolated, apolitical matter divorced from the realities of the people under occupation (Rao, 2014). By presenting a Western icon of pride and visibility as universally resonant, Beit El-Meem enacts what Duggan (2002) critiques as the instrumentalization of sexuality that encompasses mobilizing figures like Lady Gaga as symbols of progress while ignoring the cultural and political specificities of Palestinian queer life. These icons, grounded in liberal homonormativity, are thus deployed in ways that reinforce depoliticization and erasure.

### 3.2.2 Strategy 3: Emotional Neutralization of Genocide

Beit El-Meem’s discourse frequently employs vague language that underpins “feel-good” tone, including phrases like “delegates of peace,” “let us stand together,” and “diversity is our source of power.” These statements, framed in a universalist, humanist tone, obscure the structural and material realities of Palestinians’ violence. They displace rage and political

clarity with calls for tolerance, unity, and peace, effectively regulating political speech and sanitizing resistance, while never mentioning either Israel or Palestine in this narrative.

Perhaps most troubling is the emotional framing of the genocide currently committed by Israel. For example, during Christmas 2023, in collaboration with *El Beit El-Mokhtalef* (literally “the house of the different”), Beit El-Meem posted an invitation to a communal dinner in Tel Aviv. This invitation held the words “amidst violence and war happening around us, we are allowed to breathe a little and hope for a better future. Let us meet together in our cozy house” (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4:** Posted December 17, 2024- Christmas

Visually, the festive Christmas motifs and waving pride flag project a mood of celebration and inclusion, not so different that the use of rainbow-colored typography done by the Aguda (as seen in Fig. 1). Rhetorically, this framing positions violence as a vague condition, “around us”, rather than the direct result of military occupation, apartheid, and genocide. What is said in this visual is an appeal to “breathe” and private healing, but what is omitted is any explicit reference to the structures or agents responsible for the suffering and the “suffocating” in the first place. Therefore, the ideological function here displaces violence from a political to a naturalized, almost meteorological phenomenon. Another example appears in a post dated January 21, 2025, in which Beit El-Meem stated:

“In a world that aims to achieve development and equity, violence remains an obstacle... When one is exposed to violence due to their sexuality or identity, this is not just an attack on the individual but an attack on the values of humanity and equality... Respecting the other is not a choice but an ethical and human duty.”

This kind of apologetic universalism reduces structural violence to a general human failing, never naming perpetrators or victims. The repeated use of abstract terms like “violence,” “equity,” “love,” and “tolerance” depoliticizes the context, and perhaps aims to portray

Palestinian LGBTQ+ individuals as peaceful and deserving of international empathy, so long as they remain apolitical.

Aligning with Foucauldian governmentality, where political expression is not directly and strictly censored but instead shaped by norms of discipline and acceptability (Foucault M. , 2007), I understand Beit El-Meem's choice of words as self-regulatory; where expressing concern is done only in non-confrontational and non-specific terms, displacing attention from systemic power and centers an idealized, apolitical community-building discourse and thus reinforcing a neoliberal framing of queer identity divorced from collective struggle (Rao, 2014).

Going back to the early days of the genocide, on October 10, 2023, Beit El-Meem wrote a caption on a post that encapsulated a broader pattern of ambiguity and depoliticization. The caption translates to:

“Most of us are in the same place regarding what is happening. “Confusion and fear”. Confusion on what and how to feel, what is right and what is wrong, and which side we are on. Fear what is coming, what is happening, because we know too well how easily everything can turn against us.”

By framing the genocide as “what is happening” and inviting individuals to reflect on “which side we are on,” the post subtly deflects political responsibility, shifting it to individuals and encouraging a privatized ethical reflection rather than an explicit political stance. This rhetorical move obscures the asymmetry of power and violence, reducing genocide to a vague sense of “hate” or “what is happening” while also raising questions about “the sides”.

While the post frames "sides" as a matter of personal reflection, this framing cannot be divorced from broader political narratives that shape what those "sides" represent. In particular, the Aguda's homonationalist position, which brands Israel as a beacon of democracy and LGBTQ+ rights while implicitly depicting Palestinians as inherently violent and regressive<sup>18</sup>, feeds into this dilemma. Beit El Meem, although more cautious in its language, appears to echo this view by not critically engaging with it. The uncertainty in "we don't know which side we are on" can be read as reflecting an internalized tension: on one hand,

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<sup>18</sup> The Aguda's content does not explicitly describe Palestinians as "backward." However, drawing on the theoretical lenses of Mbembe (2003) and Puar (2007), I interpret the contrast between the portrayal of Israel as a "beacon of democracy" and the implicit construction of the Palestinian other as barbaric. For similar analyses, see (Elia, 2012) and (Stelder, 2018).

identification with the Palestinian people as one's community, and on the other, the perception of Palestinians as violent and Israel as the safe haven and the guarantor of individual freedoms.

Moreover, I observe tiptoeing around the language of genocide, war, and occupation, and in favor of using terms like "violence against us" without clarifying who "us" is, for "us" could be LGBTQ+ individuals who are defined as "Arabs living in Israel", or could even be Palestinians in historical Palestine but for survival reasons Beit El-Meem refrains from stating that, or another group that I fail to identify due to the ambiguity of the used language. Either way, since this post bears many depoliticizing tactics, I view it as a magnifier of the isolation of queers from the broader community. Additionally, in a necropolitical frame (Mbembe, 2003), Beit El-Meem's discourse selectively folds queer subjects into life, on the condition that they abandon political solidarity, while rendering resistant queers and Palestinians at large disposable. In this way, emotional neutralization becomes not merely a rhetorical choice, but a mode of governance that depoliticizes suffering and fragments solidarity.

## **alQaws (Case Study 2)**

*alQaws* for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society operates as an advocacy organization that aims to situate queerness in Palestinian society within a broader landscape of anti-colonial resistance (Alqaisiya, 2018). While "qaws" is the Arabic word for rainbow, *alQaws* clearly states that its rainbow embraces sexual and gender diversity while positioning itself within Palestinian society (*alQaws*, n.d.). The name of the organization implies its challenge in opening space for alternative modes of being other than the dominant paradigms.

### **3.3 Discursive Formation III: Intersectional Resistance (alQaws)**

*alQaws* frames queerness as inseparable from the broader Palestinian struggle for liberation. In contrast to depoliticized narratives, *alQaws* names the foes clearly: the Israeli military, the Palestinian Authority, and the heteropatriarchal nationalist discourse, stating that queer liberation cannot be abstracted from material struggles for land, life, and dignity (Stelder, 2018).

This is a radical disidentification not only from colonial power but also from internal societal norms, creating space for queer politics rooted in liberation rather than assimilation. For instance, in 2020 and 2021, the organization mobilized rallies described as “a Rallying Cry for Queer Liberation” (alQaws, n.d.). The public statement of alQaws regarding the rally produced in 2021, reflects on a year marked by colonial aggression and popular resistance, from Sheikh Jarrah<sup>19</sup> to the Gaza bombardment; the statement denounces Israeli pinkwashing as an attempt to mask state violence and “alienate us from our society”. At the same time, it highlights internal struggles against patriarchal dynamics within Palestinian organizing spaces, including the glorification of hyper-masculinity and the exclusion of feminist and queer voices. Furthermore, alQaws does points out the efforts by the Palestinian authority to “derail the protests” through threats and blackmail of the queer individuals opposing authority; concluding that these experiences only reinforce the interconnected nature of “neo-liberal, patriarchal, and settler-colonial oppression and its agents” (alQaws, n.d.).

Generally, the organization resists homonormative and homonationalist logics that frame LGBTQ+ rights as a marker of civilization. In this context, alQaws questions Western paradigms of liberation that prioritize individual visibility and “coming out” as universal goals. Instead, alQaws asks, “Are pride parades the ultimate celebration of freedom and visibility in a context where millions of Palestinians have no access to water, health care, mobility, work, etc.?” (Alqaisiya, 2018, p. 34) These mark a radical refusal of neoliberal inclusion and instead propose a liberation grounded in collective struggle.

A critical discourse perspective of alQaws' media in the period from October 2023 to March 2025 reveals not only what is said, but who it is said to, and what political imaginaries it constructs. From my analysis, three main discursive strategies emerge: (1) reclaiming space and technology against fragmentation, (2) mobilizing affective solidarity, and (3) deploying symbols of collective identity.

### **3.3.1 Strategy 1: Reclaiming Space and Technology against Fragmentation**

From my observation, alQaws actively reclaims digital platforms as sites of counter-fragmentation, repurposing the same technological infrastructures used by the Aguda and

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<sup>19</sup> Sheikh Jarrah is a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem where attempts to forcibly evict Palestinians from their homes by Israeli authorities in 2021 ignited widespread protests and became a symbol of Palestinian resistance against ethnic cleansing. The events escalated to include an 11-day Israeli bombardment of Gaza, see (United Nations, 2021).

Beit El-Meem to depoliticize and divide. Where those platforms function as instruments of counterinsurgency, alQaws uses them to articulate a political queer presence rooted in resistance and solidarity. This reappropriation of space is a part of a deliberate strategy to subvert settler-colonial technologies of disconnection (Atshan, 2020; Puar, 2007).

A key example is alQaws' public statement published on June 6, 2024 on the organization's website as well as its Instagram account, titled "*Reflecting on Queerness in Times of Genocide*," in collaboration with *Queers in Palestine*, another grassroots organization, advocating for decolonial queering, stating: "Our queerness was diminished during these painful months, [but] our mere Palestinian-ness is undergoing the most brutal forms of literal erasure" (alQaws, 2024).

This challenges the false dichotomy that separates queer and national identities, urging instead a politicized understanding of queerness as inherently tied to resisting settler-colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism. While the phrase "painful months" initially appears vague, the surrounding text names the genocide directly<sup>20</sup>, and by pairing queerness with "Palestinian-ness," the statement refuses the false dichotomy between queer and national identity.

Although the word "Israel" does not appear in the statement, alQaws alternates between "Zionist-entity", "settler colony", "settler-colonial project" and "Zionist colonial enterprise" to refer to the actors in the genocide. I read this rhetorical choice in two complementary ways. First, it reflects a political stance of refusal to legitimize Israel's statehood by, instead of naming it, through its ideological foundations. Second, it may also function as a strategic survival mechanism to reduce the risk of legal censorship and surveillance<sup>21</sup>. In this sense, the language operates as both resistance and protection.

The statement further critiques both the international community's complicity with Israel and the failure of Western frameworks, such as human rights discourse and liberal global LGBTQ+ visibility politics, to address the structural and colonial violence Palestinians face. In addition to the call for the international community to oppose pinkwashing and to

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<sup>20</sup> The word "genocide" appears four times in the statement.

<sup>21</sup> In recent times, Palestinian human rights organizations along with civil society organizations operating under Israeli jurisdiction face increasing legal restrictions, surveillance, and risks of criminalization. For example, not long ago, several NGOs have been designated as "terrorist entities" (Law for Palestine, 2024; Times of Israel, 2023). In addition, to the operational measures, silencing civil society is also manifested in financial restrictive measures, such as proposing an 80% tax on donations from foreign entities (Knesset, 2025). This has created an environment that encourages strategic ambiguity in public discourse.

escalate through local demonstrations and direct actions, alQaws calls queer Palestinian to invest in the abolition of every system of oppression and to “join a queer group in [their] city or create one, join the new demonstrations taking place inside Palestine, the West Bank and 48 territories and take [their] queer friends with [them].” The use of verbs *invest, join, create, take*, infuses the statement with urgency and political agency. Importantly, it frames queer pride not as a refusal to be co-opted by a state engaged in genocidal violence.

In analyzing these statements, the discursive dissonance between Beit El-Meem and alQaws becomes unmistakable. While Beit El-Meem wavers in ambivalence, asking “*which side are LGBTQ+ individuals on?*”, alQaws names the structures of violence directly, identifying settler-colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism as intertwined forces of oppression. This is not simply a matter of tone, but of political orientation. The difference is further highlighted in the calls to action. Beit El-Meem’s invitation to “breathe a little” during the genocide is framed as a retreat into comfort and self-care, devoid of political commitment. In contrast, alQaws urges queer Palestinians to organize, resist, and mobilize.

This political alignment is consistently reinforced through alQaws’ broader social media and organizing work. For example, on October 31, 2024, alQaws joined civil society groups demanding the expulsion of Zionist Israeli LGBTQ+ organizations from ILGA World, refusing any normalization under the pretense of queer solidarity. In addition, alQaws joined a call for a global general strike for Gaza and Lebanon, centering queer liberation within collective struggle against colonial movements.

This disparity marks more than a difference in approach, it reflects a fundamental divergence in ideology. Where Beit El-Meem neutralizes effect and obscures political responsibility, alQaws calls for collective struggle. Together, these examples illustrate how alQaws represents a discursive refusal of counterinsurgency. It challenges the very logics that allow pinkwashing to flourish, insisting that visibility without justice is complicity, and that true liberation cannot be achieved through frameworks that ignore or sanitize structural violence.

### **3.3.2 Strategy 2: Mobilizing Affective Solidarity**

In the context of settler-colonial fragmentation and structural erasure, alQaws mobilizes emotional expression not as apolitical self-care, but as a strategic and collective practice of resistance. Drawing on feminist affect theory, particularly Ahmed’s (2004) work on the

cultural politics of emotion, particularly her notion of emotions as circulating forces that shape collective orientations, I understand alQaws’ emotional discourse as a form of political engagement. Emotions, in this framework, cease to be simply internal and private experiences; and become relational forces that circulate between bodies, shape collective orientations, and generate new forms of belonging. As emotions “stick” to bodies and accumulate meaning through social encounters, they become central to how communities are formed and solidarities enacted (Ahmed, 2004).

Guided by Gould (2009)’s work on ACT UP, which demonstrated how affective bonds, including grief and anger, were central to sustaining queer activism, I interpret alQaws’ mobilization of emotion as similarly strategic, one that is deeply political. Rather than retreating into depoliticized therapeutic language, alQaws constructs communal spaces that encourage affective connection as resistance. To illustrate, a major category of Instagram posts includes invitations for community spaces that vary in types, most notably the “*Salon Query*.” This space, rooted in the Arab cultural traditions of the salon as a place for gatherings, is reimagined through a queer lens. During the sessions, participants explore the intersections of identity, power, and community in the face of fragmentation and erasure. The posts regarding the series of gatherings include a photo of a sofa representing the cozy atmosphere and titles of the topics discussed in each session, such as: “Loss, between the personal and the collective” (Fig. 5), “Identity in times of war” (Fig. 6) “Queer liberation from a decolonial lens” (Fig. 7) and “Our relationship with the body: between domination and liberation” (Fig. 8), linking personal pain to political clarity and communal strength.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig.7



Fig. 8

This affective strategy sharply contrasts with Beit El-Meem’s emotional neutrality, which, following Ahmed’s (2004) critique of “happy objects,” risks reproducing a neoliberal logic that smooths over structural violence. While Beit El-Meem urges LGBTQ+ people to “breathe a little,” alQaws insists on naming pain and mobilizing it toward collective liberation- during the same period. The emphasis on solidarity as an affective relation is also evident in alQaws’ calls to action, such as: “join a queer group or create one,” and “take your queer friends with you” to protests. These are emotionally charged invitations to collective belonging and struggle. Rhetorically, alQaws addresses queer Palestinians not as isolated victims, but as political actors whose feelings are legitimate sites of collective mobilization.

A 10-week online program titled “*Me, my Sexuality and Society*” likewise, centers both introspection and collective analysis, inviting participants to reflect on upbringing, power relations, and communal transformation (Fig. 9). This initiative revolves around the experiences of the queer individuals, their “roles, identities and power relations that control them”, in an aim to explore and develop “personal and collective capabilities”. These initiatives center the emotional lives of queer Palestinians as valid, political, and worthy of communal investment.



Fig. 9: “Me, my Sexuality and Society”

The visual design of the campaign further amplifies this approach: the illustrated interlocking faces and raised hand evoke both multiplicity and unity, signaling resistance through relationality. At the same time, I don’t read the visual strategy without any ambiguities, in fact, the use of abstract faces raises questions about the limits of visual specificity as this visual does not explicitly mark the figures as Palestinian. While the aesthetic evokes a sense of collective identity and fluid subjectivity, it also risks depoliticizing the message by abstracting the Palestinian context. This tension is particularly noteworthy given my earlier critique of Beit El-Meem’s use of generic imagery detached from the realities of occupation and resistance (Fig. 2). alQaws’ choice to use artwork rather than photographs

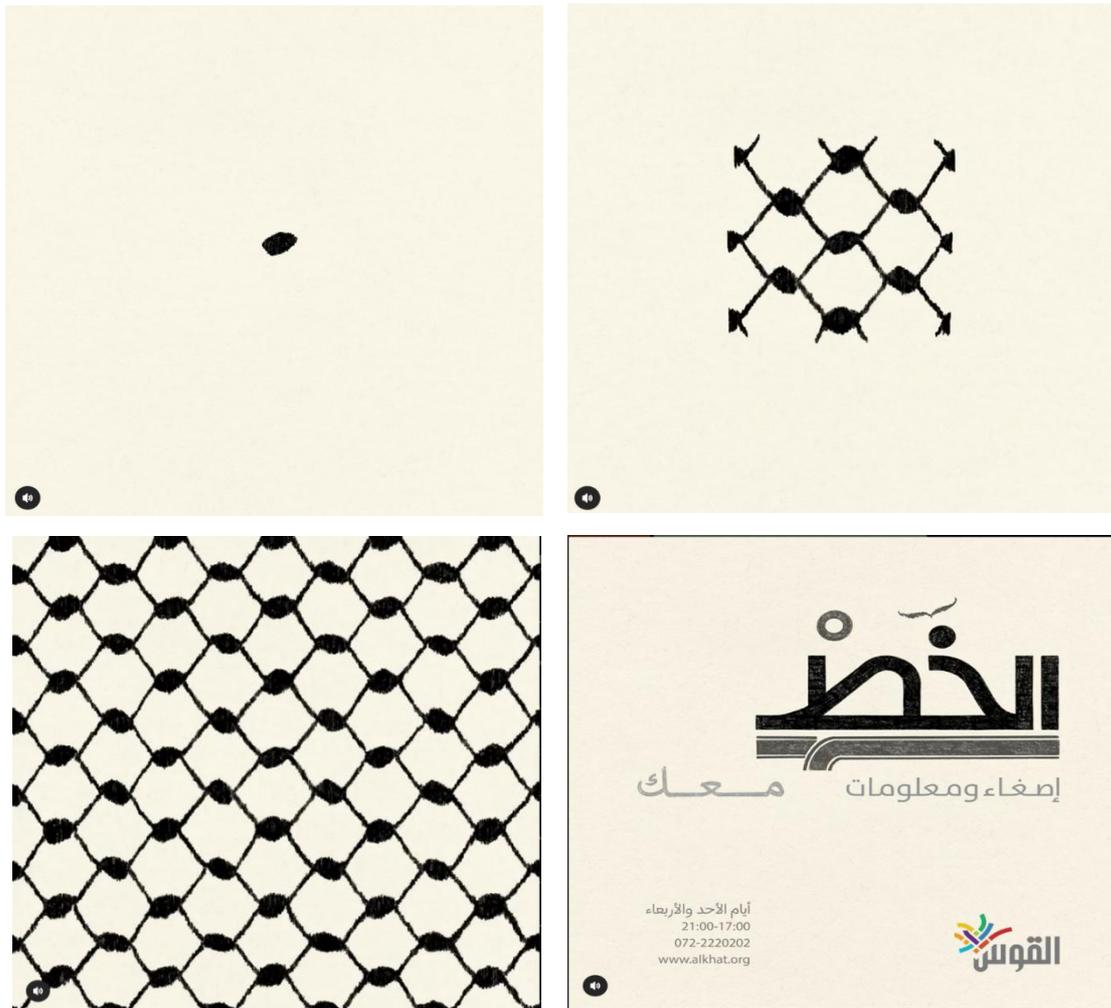
may reflect a desire to avoid surveillance or misrepresentation, but it also opens space for questioning how visual choices mediate the legibility of queer Palestinian subjectivity.

The online format of this initiative is not incidental, instead, in a reality where Palestinian queers are constantly subject to fragmentation due, but not limited, to the physical separation by borders, checkpoints, and legal statuses across the West Bank, Jerusalem, Gaza, and 48' Palestine (Atshan, 2020, p. 50), having online sessions creates a rare space where that fragmentation can be overcome, even temporarily.

Here, alQaws incorporates emotions such as grief, loss, steadfastness, and hope, as shared political forces and not as simply mere personal experiences. Pain becomes a site of insight, and longing transforms into a resource for reimagining queer liberation. In doing so, alQaws counters colonial attempts at emotional erasure and affirms affect as a central terrain of resistance. This emotional discourse fosters solidarity and sustains resistance, particularly in times of genocide and crisis.

### **3.3.3 Strategy 3: Symbols of Identity and Collective Reconnection**

In the context of standing in the face of fragmentation, alQaws's community infrastructure includes *alKhat*, a listening and support hotline offering a forum to explore and connect through culturally aware conversations around gender and sexuality (alQaws, n.d.). Perhaps the most emblematic of alQaws' counter-fragmentation politics is its November 2023, month after the beginning of the ongoing genocide, visual campaign relaunching of *alKhat*. The video began with a single dot, gradually connected to other dots, and ultimately formed the image of a Palestinian Keffiyeh, which Palestinians recognize as a symbol of resistance, that is tied with their own cultural identity and heritage (Milan, 2015; El-Najjar, 2023) (Fig. 10).



**Fig. 10:** A short video of a single dot, gradually connecting to other dots, and ultimately forming the image of a Palestinian Keffiyeh.

Drawing on hooks’ (1995) insights into art as a site of resistance, I understand alQaws’ aesthetic choices and visual deployment of the keffiyeh as a symbolic act of decolonial reclamation. Rather than a decorative motif, the keffiyeh operates as what hooks describes as “a site of memory”, a cultural tool to challenge erasure. This visual narrative of movement from isolation to interconnection transforms the keffiyeh into what Assmann (2008) calls a “carrier of collective memory”, a symbolic archive linking past struggle with present resilience.

Here, the symbolism is both political and affective. The hotline becomes more than a support mechanism, it is a political gesture of solidarity, signaling that in community, the individual finds power and clarity. Building on Ahmed’s (2004) theory that emotions “stick” to objects and circulate meaning, I analyze that alQaws perceives the Keffiyeh as deeply

charged with histories of grief, endurance, and uprising. Its deployment, thus, reorients queer identity away from liberal frameworks of individual visibility, like the rainbow flag, toward collective struggle.

In sharp contrast to Beit El-Meem's emotionally ambiguous message during the same period, asking "which side we are on," alQaws offers affective clarity. Rather than treat queerness as separate from the national narrative, alQaws insists on its rootedness and its ideological alignment with the Palestinian liberation struggle. Furthermore, as hooks' (2009) argues in *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, symbols do not simply represent community, they constitute it. Following this, the use of the keffiyeh in alQaws' campaign can be read as a communal act of re-rooting: a visual strategy to reforge fragmented ties and resist the erasures enacted by Israeli settler-colonialism. Simultaneously, it resists internal forces of marginalization, particularly those rooted in patriarchal norms in the Palestinian society. In this sense, alQaws "talks back", reclaiming symbolic and representational space long denied to queer Palestinians, both globally and locally. As Chodak (2016) notes, symbols and slogans play a critical role in forging collective identity within resistance movements, they serve as points that unite participants ideologically and emotionally. Ultimately, this act also allows queer Palestinians to situate themselves firmly within the national struggle.

In sum, alQaws' strategy of symbolic reconnection transforms emotional and visual language into tools of resistance. It counters both the settler-colonial fragmentation that seeks to isolate and erase, and the depoliticizing tendencies of homonationalist inclusion. Through these symbolic acts, queerness is reclaimed as historical, relational, and inseparable from the broader liberation struggle.

## **Part IV: Beyond the Pink Mirage: Conclusion**

As this analysis has shown, in the context of Israeli settler colonialism, LGBTQ+ visibility and politics must be situated within broader structures of pinkwashing and counterinsurgency, as they are strategies that weaponize queerness to legitimize state violence and suppress national collective resistance.

The Aguda and Beit El- Meem exemplify two distinct but complementary modes of counterinsurgency. While the Aguda's strategies are overt, explicitly branding Israel as a liberal, LGBTQ+-friendly democracy that neatly fits within homonationalist discourse, Beit El-

Meem operates through more covert means. The Aguda primarily targets an external international audience, employing propaganda to position Israel as a modern and tolerant state. Its language is celebratory, nationalist and aligned with state interests. In contrast, Beit El-Meem primarily addresses queer Palestinians themselves, adopting a strategy of emotional neutralization and depoliticized universalism. Its language is vague and promotes concepts like "humanity" and "love" while erasing the political realities of occupation, dispossession, and resistance. Yet despite these differences, both organizations function as instruments of settler-colonial co-optation, for as Khalili (2011) argues, counterinsurgency is not only a military strategy but a cultural one: it seeks to co-opt, divide, and manage indigenous populations through selective inclusion, emotional appeal, and depoliticization.

Against this backdrop, alQaws offers a radically different paradigm. It refuses to separate gender and sexual justice from anti-colonial struggle, insisting instead that queer liberation must be collective, material, and decolonial. Through its grassroots organizing and political clarity, it foregrounds the lived realities of queer Palestinians. In doing so, it transforms queerness from a site of state weaponization into a practice of resistance. In this paper, I presented examples that illustrate how alQaws enacts a discursive and material refusal of counterinsurgency, challenging the very logics that allow pinkwashing to flourish, insisting that visibility without justice is complicity, and that true liberation cannot be achieved through frameworks that ignore or sanitize structural violence.

From the analysis, I conclude that counterinsurgency is not imposed unilaterally; it is made and remade through shared, flexible, hegemonic power structures. As the Aguda and Beit El-Meem contribute to the shaping of these processes, alQaws resists them, emphasizing that queer subjects are not passive victims but also capable of refusing pinkwashing particularly and counterinsurgency as a whole.

What is needed, then, is not more inclusion, but a reorientation of queer politics toward decolonial and collective analyses. True queer liberation demands the dismantling of all systems of domination, settler colonial, imperial, capitalist, and heteropatriarchal, including those within our own communities that suppress dissent and diversity. Resistance must be intersectional, collective, and grounded in ongoing analysis that not only exposes structures of power but also expands the horizon of what liberation can mean.

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