

The Walls we've built: Recognizing Violence in the Middle East as a Cultural Symptom of Collective Belonging

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INTRODUCTION

Violence in the Middle East tends to manifest in ways other than the Elliot Rodger-esque narrative of a young, entitled man without overt political impetus shooting up whole streets in projection of the anguish of a bottomless sense of alienation. It is nonetheless symptomatic of a parallel underlying cultural oppression, toxically projecting the values of belonging-alienation's more passionate brother. It too is not monocausal. It too is further perpetrated by a fixation on shallow solutions that detract from focus on our collective mindset of violent conquest. Our very adherence to belonging encases us in predefined social spaces, their boundaries structured with a rigidity that is no longer feasible and is often destructive. Ironically enough, this destruction is often couched in terms of maintaining and defending land, religious value, honor, and bodies. It unfortunately belies a sense of duty in staking claim that is entitled in its own way, systematically upheld by a tolerance for violence.

Lebanon struggles to ratify draft laws criminalizing domestic violence against women, facing a tide of cultural sentiment pushing back against attempts to deconstruct the rigidity of familial roles. There is fear, from patriarchal authorities, that protecting women from being battered will threaten the closeness of familial bonds and will undermine the absoluteness of marital claims to sex that transcend will and consent. A sense of duty is deeply interwoven with this resistance to removing the structures that enable a sense of entitlement to the bodies of women and children. To remove the encasings granting unchecked access to the bodies of women is to trouble conceptions of how men ought to carry out their duties to their families.

Throughout the Middle East, we have inviolable laws and social norms that strive to delineate proper bounds but instead radically limit women's control over their sexuality, their choice of spouse, their careers, their mobility, their ability to divorce, to claim full stake in inheritance, to pass their nationalities on to their children. All of these are

measures of human autonomy so neatly circumscribed in order to make meaning of duties and roles as we culturally understand them. Nations with the most conservative dress norms have some of the world's highest indices of sexual harassment, consistent with a cultural language that hashes safety from violation in terms of preventative conduct, requiring women to keep inside the walls and limit their bodies and mobility rather than addressing the violator's sense of entitlement. Our penal codes allow reduced sentences for crimes of "honor" that erupt when people become incensed at women who flout the boundaries boxing them in. And honor "crimes" are projections of a particularly personal sort of anguish that comes from associating the conduct and body of a woman with the honor of the men in her family but not vice versa-as seen by our inability to acknowledge a woman as worthy of passing on national belonging to her children.

This does nothing but further entrench our status as nations that privilege the urge to own, claim and malign the bodies of our women and children. We prioritize a reification of values of protection, belonging and maintenance, building up walls of normativity that we cannot bear to have transgressed. This hierarchy of importance is symptomatic of a sense of entitlement so outrageous it looks upon broken lives and dead bodies with tolerance and understanding if they remain within the structural limitations of our values.

We have laws in our penal codes pardoning rapists who seek to marry their victims, actively rewarding the renewed victimization of raped women-this time for a lifetime-oblivious to the double-crime this poses. This is only makes

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sense if it is not the sexual violation that is viewed as criminal, but the lack of social approval of it, the fact that it occurred out-of-bounds. Hence these laws act to mask over a sense of misplaced social shame derived from violating the tribal covenant of taking a girl from her family that had not yet contracted her away with the proper trappings of dowry, ceremony, and familial gathering—all solid, understood constructions, the proper doors for public entry into sexual relations. And this shallow ‘fix’ restoring the honor of raped girls is nothing but a structural mechanism put in place to re- cement a broken sense of entitlement after the fact, creating official avenues affirming a hierarchy of convenience-honor over rights, the collective over the individual, social shame over individual violation. And indeed, one distinctive brand of honor crime is in violent reaction to elopements and interfaith marriages—which, too, our penal codes condemn by structuring only non-civil spaces for marriage. And for what reason? These unions dare flout our understanding of marriage-as-ceremony, as a familial right rather than an individual one.

This is symptomatic of how impermeable our sense of belonging is. We encase our social spaces in preset molds that resist collusion with one another even as our circumstances evolve to require it. Another symptom of this is our tendency to present sectarian identity as integral to belonging, with our national IDs bespeaking our denominations from birth until death, strengthening and reinforcing the architecture surrounding our religious spaces. Doubtless too the struggles of poverty, imperialism, and the threat of invasion sanctify our need for non-collusive spaces, our paternalistic values of protection and maintenance that spiral wildly into an ultimate privileging of control that is tolerant of destruction and violation. Decades of Palestinian refugee crises in Lebanon have done little to create opportunity or sustainability of livelihood for people now born-and-raised in a country where they are perpetual outsiders so long as they have stake and belonging within the dilapidated walls of refugee camps. Now overflowing with Lebanese-born Palestinians, these camps build themselves upon themselves ever skywards. Clearly, horizontal expansion transgresses the careful limits of sanctioned space, resists the thought of a Lebanese-born Palestinian putting roots down on the Lebanon side.

Identities with footholds in more than one side of a given fence, that intermingle, also transgress proper boundaries, as bespoken by the patrilineal resistance to allowing women to pass on their nationalities to their children for fear of the mixing, the creation of mongrels that challenge the clashing commitments of separate social spaces. If a mother and father are of the same nationality, as heteropatriarchal historicity would dictate they properly should be, they are viewed as sequentially conjoined, as engine and caboose moving along a designated track, unified such that identity rights default to the father while the rights of the mother are redundant and thus unneeded. In accurate reflection of our

traditions, our penal codes refuse to acknowledge such a need, despite our demographic landscape evolving to require more progressive conceptions of the needs of identity and bodily space.

Our girls are taught that they inherently have no such needs, that any rights not ensured by their spaces of belonging are outside their circumscribed roles and thus non-rights—hence the common cultural expression that religious codes dictating correct conduct grant women all their rights. Our boys are taught a sexist language of protection and duty that allows them to trivialize the freedom and autonomy of women who transgress socially drawn bounds. And this cultural language about all things body, space, family, and honor is troubled, self-obsessed with a covenant of belonging. We must recognize it as self-destructive, too, in its self-obsession. We must see that it propagates projection after projection of violation through the vehicle of the very values we uphold as virtues.

This recognition is crucial to a process of healing and growth beyond the bounds that stifle us. It is time to take the walls down.