

# Arab Lesbian Websites: A Brief Overview

Reviewed by Abir Hamdar

Two years ago, Lebanese internal security forces closed a gay and lesbian website and tried to track its owners. The case dragged for sometime and captured the attention of various international human rights organization. A year later, the Egyptian government organized a huge crackdown on its homosexual community. Consequently, the country's websites were shut because their owners were either arrested or feared arrest. Lebanon and Egypt are not alone. Almost all Arab countries prohibit, monitor or ban gay and lesbian chat rooms and matchmaking websites. They believe these sites foster communication among homosexuals, allowing them to become less of a minority group. Nevertheless, the Special Internet Crimes Unit some Arab countries have established have not been able to stop this community from making contact via the internet nor from making it clear that they do exist. After all, many of these websites are being run from abroad. And while an extensive search on the internet reveals that the number of Arab gay websites exceeds that of lesbians, the latter have still been able to establish their own communication forum. Below is an overview of these Arab Lesbian websites. The information does not seek to promote nor undermine the latter. Its main aim is to present a brief overview of them.

## Bint el Nass

As its French, English and Arabic homepage explicitly states, Bint el Nass or daughter of the people is a website whose mission is "to serve the needs of women who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer people in any state of transition ... and who are identified ethnically or culturally with the Arab world, regardless of where they live." And this mission, claims the site, is made possible by the Mujadarra Girls, a sponsored project of the Queer Cultural center that is located in San Francisco. For

both groups, the ultimate aim boils down to one thing: constructing a space that defies the "narrow and twisted images of queers, Arabs, and women," and a space that "creates something new; images of queer Arab women." So far, it appears the website has abided by its mission. After all, it has created a serious online cultural magazine whereby women can explore and focus on a particular issue of particular interest to them – each issue has a guest producer who manages the content material. Some of the issues discussed include dreams, god, sex and the community. Yet, it is their seventh issue – which is also their most recent – entitled "Native Land, Land of Exile: Looking for Our Territory" which is the most interesting. Through personal testimonies and essays - signed by first names and/or anonymous writers - the issue explores what it means to be an Arab Lesbian within familiar and foreign territories. It also tackles the notion of home, exile and land from the perspective of these women. For its eighth issue, Bint el Nass plans to embark upon the theme of "Bridges," one which it hopes will answer questions such as: "How do you experience bridges among the diversity of queer Arab women, across spectra of gender, and with non-Arab identities and worlds? Who else is here? Who, or what, is on the other side of the we that is here?" Finally, the site promises that, in the near future, it will integrate information and material related to film, photography and fine art.

## Sehakia

Like its predecessor, Seahakia ( Arabic word for Lesbian) is a cultural/intellectual website whose target is the Arab and North African Lesbian woman. This multilingual site (French, English, Arabic and Berbere) - a product of a group called the N'DeeSsees - emerged in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. On its homepage, Seahakia explains that

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September 11 started the “rise of arabophobia and islamophobia worldwide.” Thus, in the face of this “international political context and in the context of the dramatic situation of lesbians and gays in Arab countries,” Sehakia has found it essential that Arab and North African Lesbian women make their voice heard. In short, they have thought it crucial to “organize ourselves in a collective as a place for reflection, action, and creation,” and to make the language and culture of Arab and Muslim countries heard. As a result, the site tries to highlight all productions by the women they represent, be it art exhibitions, publications, and audio projects. More importantly, the site offers legal and juridical information “to be used as an interface for Lesbians or women who are in critical condition.”

### Ahbab

Contrary to Sehakia and Bint el Nass, Ahbab is not an exclusively Arab Lesbian website. Rather it is one that targets the gay and Lesbian Arab community as a whole. Supported by the GLAS\*, the site both claims to “educate and entertain”. Thus, it features an archive of articles and news-briefs about homosexuals that were published previously in Arab newspapers and magazines. It also provides a list of the latest publications on the theme of homosexuality as well as information and tips about HIV in the Arab world. Yet, it is their entertainment sections that take up the larger portion of the content material. These entertainment pages fall under various categories: The Radio Station page where visitors can chat with their peers live and can request or listen to a song. A Personals page where

individuals “looking for love, friends or just plain fun” can get in touch with other homosexuals, browse through pornographic pictures (lesbians and gays have separate photo exhibition ) and meet new friends. Of course, the page insists Ahbab must be informed of any success stories about finding Mr. or Miss Right.

### Lazzeeza

Lazzeeza is yet another project of the GLAS. Although it has not been officially inaugurated, the site still manages to offer a very brief synopsis of who and what they plan to be. In general, Lazzeeza appears to be the name of an Arab Lesbian group that hopes to feature cultural and entertainment material for women sharing their identity. Therefore, Lazzeeza has made calls for specialized and interested individuals to help in the actual setting of the site and to contribute with the content material. And in the time that entails to do so, Lazzeeza has provided its visitors with a list of links to other Arab Lesbian sites and to Lesbian resources online. Nevertheless, it is still hard to determine whether Lazzeeza will offer serious content material or will provide cheap entertainment.

\* GLAS stands for the Gay and Lesbian Arabic Society. It is an international organization established in 1988 in the USA with worldwide chapters. It serves as a networking organization for Gays and Lesbians of Arab descent or those living in Arab countries. GLAS explains it is part of the global Gay and Lesbian movement seeking to stop discrimination based on sexual orientation.

# Forthcoming

*Al-Raida Centenary Issue  
on the Arab Women's Movement*