

A conversation with El-Farouk Khaki - imam, human rights lawyer, and social justice advocate

By Sabat Ismail

I sat down with El-Farouk Khaki in his home in the Church-Wellesley Village to discuss his work and activism as a refugee and immigration lawyer and long-time human rights and LGBTQ+ activist. El-Farouk is a beloved community member, elder and friend who has done pioneering work in the Toronto QTBIPOC/ Muslim communities. He has created innovative inclusive Muslim spaces that have been tremendously important for me and many others. My intention in conducting this interview was that it can be a way of respecting, publicizing and archiving the work he has done.

I also wanted to document some of the work he's done and the initiatives he has started because of what I have heard him say in passing to me in others regarding the Lavender Crescent. The Lavender Crescent—which discusses in this interview— was one of the first recorded queer Muslim organizations in San Francisco in the 1970s. Though upon him and others attempting to find more information on this initiative there was barely anything to be found, which underscored to him the importance of documenting queer Muslim histories. Furthermore, more queer and trans Muslims are imagined as non-existent by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, it is important to also document these histories in defiance of this erasure.

Sabat: Thank you for joining me, El-Farouk. Can you tell us about the work that you do within the queer community in Toronto?

El-Farouk: I do different kinds of work depending on the time of day or my location (laughs). My day job is as a lawyer. [What] I work on these days [is] mostly refugee claims; claims mostly based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender-related issues, intersecting issues with HIV infection, and issues like FGM (female genital mutilation) and so on. As their lawyer, I work with them to adduce a narrative based on their experiences and their fears, that will help them to hopefully get through the refugee system, meaning that they'll get protection as a Convention refugee and get protection here, in Canada. My work is to extract their stories and

their experiences of harm that eventually led them to flee their countries and seek Canada as protection. It's hard work because it's dealing with people's traumas.

Sabat: Do you find that the process can be retraumatizing?

El-Farouk: Oh, people are constantly triggered, constantly. Some stories take way more time than I'll ever get paid for, right. I'll sometimes be frustrated with clients when they're not giving their best effort, or they're not learning from the multiplicity of meetings. Often I give specific instructions on what they need to gather and when they need to do it, and the client sometimes can't bring themselves to look at the material until the day before we are scheduled to meet, and then we have to scramble to do something with the story. That is frustrating for me.

(Timer goes off for his two-year old's dinner. El-Farouk gets up to give him his dinner.)

It can be very retriggering, but it is about avoidance, right. If they don't do what I asked them to do, it's more unnecessary work for us, and at the end of the day, they're not as well prepared for their own hearing.

Sabat: Mhm.

El-Farouk: I give my clients a sheet that has some groups and organizations that may be able to assist them—especially for my female clients and my queer and trans clients. On that sheet there are links that say where you can learn more about the system, and many people don't look at them and that's part of the avoidance. At the end of the day, what they do or do not do, and how they do it, is really up to them. I'm there to facilitate their progress and that's also a part of my work with them, to guide them to where they can get the tools to represent themselves, to advocate for themselves, to acquire some skills, and some awareness about the refugee claim process, and themselves.

Sabat: When your queer and trans clients claim asylum on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity at the Immigration and Refugee Board, is it difficult for them to prove their claim? Especially since they may be closeted in their home countries and that that queerness and transness may not look how the Board may expect?

El-Farouk: Yeah, [the Board] has its gaps. Though there should be no universal generalizations of people who come from certain parts of the world... 15, 20 years ago, most of my client's were from South America as there were queer places and spaces in those countries, yet they experienced a lot of violence and oppression. But in some African and Middle Eastern countries, there was no real queer visibility or very little visible queer community. The internet and smartphones have given access to people in many parts of the world, to Grindr or things like that which could indicate being gay... I would say it can still be a challenge for some people depending on how they live their lives. There are ways to prepare for most people. They're in Canada for a year.. year and a half, sometimes before they have their claim hearing, and that

allows them to integrate themselves into queer communities here. That gives them a chance, I think, to strengthen their case. I think a part of the problem with that strategy, too, is that a lot of folks are traumatized, so at times making those connections is easier said than done.

Sabat: Okay.

El-Farouk: I have seen people who have been through astounding brutality and still come out of it. And I see other people who use every justification for not actually managing, overcoming, or dealing with their abuse. I will get psych assessments and reports done. So that we can use and have some benefit of it in the hearing, but I also share with my clients and sometimes recommend ongoing therapy, or ongoing counselling and some people take it up and some people just don't.

Sabat: Do you have any thoughts on why some people can make it past?

El-Farouk: For many of my clients, it can be retriggering. But mashallah¹, many of my clients have done really well, or done really good things. For whatever reason they were persecuted or harmed, they are able to pick up their pieces again and are able to move forward. So it depends on the person and circumstance. Some people have deep-seated trauma and they can't make it past and I recognize that some people are better equipped to deal with abuse or trauma.

Sabat: El-Farouk, can you talk about your personal connection with borders?

El-Farouk: I'm [from] a diasporic family, a migrant. My family had to leave Tanzania, we lived in England, but we had no secure long-term status in England and we faced the possibility of removal back to Tanzania. Removal would have meant torture, maybe disappearance, or even death, at least for my father, so there was a relief when we got our acceptance letter to Canada. My mother and I being able to get to [one African country to another], that was crossing one border, then from [Africa] to England is another border, and to be able to stay in England... How does the border confine you or open you up to new possibilities? And then when we came to Canada in 1974, and that was a relief, for us that was a welcome border. But now borders are also unsafe, you know.. I remember before 9/11 I would cross a border, I would remove my earrings and my jewelry and so on and so forth, to try to look as non-discrept as possible, and now it's better to be gay than be Muslim when you're crossing a border...

Sabat: Because they usually think you can't be both?

El-Farouk: I guess that's what I'm banking on, right? Or that I don't look like someone who they'd perceive to be a threat. After 9/11 I started to keep all my jewelry on. The last few years, I have not even gone to the United States because it's not a border that Troy (El-Farouk's

¹ An Arabic phrase that means "As God has willed" - is also often used by non-Arabic speaking Muslims - pronouncing joy, appreciation, admiration or gratitude for a person, thing, or event.

husband and long-time partner) or I feel particularly safe to cross as a Black, brown gay Muslim couple. Now the most recent manifestation of borders for us is that Troy and I cannot travel to about 90 different countries because of their anti-sodomy laws. Troy and I are married and we have a son together, and that means that there are certain borders we can't cross. This is a problem, my aunt lives in Africa and she's in her late 80s, and I would love for her to meet our son, but she can't travel because of her age and her health and we don't feel safe going to Africa, so borders have always played this role in my life. I make my bread and butter from borders—my clients are refugees and migrants. I would say that borders have always been significant to me.

Sabat: Do you ever imagine what a world beyond borders would look like or could look like?

El-Farouk: You know my 'what if's' are always based in science fiction. What would a world without borders look like...I can't honestly say I've taken the time to imagine what that would look like because, again, coming back to my lived experience, my life has always had borders. Even from an early age, I knew that our house was being watched, I was privy to a conversation my mother was having with my father telling him not to come back to get us, otherwise none of us could get out. I still remember it, 49 years later.

Sabat: Can you talk about the work that you've done in creating different queer Muslim spaces and coming into your queerness as a Muslim?

El-Farouk: I've always had this sense of displacement. I'm brown from Black Africa, and we lived in England, and there was a sense of displacement. My family faced great uncertainty. At one time, we lived in a one-bedroom with the three of us in a house with other people where we had to share bathrooms and kitchens. Then we get to Vancouver (Canada) and I've got this heavy English accent and people were not used to non-white faces with this accent. My whole life has been on this sort of intersectionality of non-conformist identities or non-dominant cultural identities, including when I started coming to terms with my sexual orientation... I realized that I wasn't the only one. But honestly in Vancouver, I can't say that I knew anyone who was Muslim and queer-identified. There might have been maybe one or two people that you saw and wondered—but keep in mind that this is Vancouver back in the 1970s and 1980s. Canada then, too, was different, it wasn't just that Muslims were a smaller number, but Canadian society was different at that time, too. Queer people didn't have that many rights and protections back then in the early 80s.

When I came to Toronto in 1989, I started to meet other people who were Muslim-identified and queer-identified. Some of them were activists involved in community work. And I remember thinking, wouldn't it be nice if we had some place where we could just be, where we wouldn't have to explain ourselves to anyone else, we wouldn't have to explain about being Muslim or about being gay or queer. So for those of us who straddle both identities even today,

we feel often like we have to explain those identities or justify or rationalize them. So I started Salaam in 1991. I remember calling it a social support group for lesbian and gay Muslims. Even back then, as far as I knew, most of the groups were gay or lesbian, there weren't very many mixed organizations in our community. The bi and the trans weren't very visible..a lot of their issues were not that visible. I called it a lesbian and gay social and support group, because I didn't want to deal with the theology aspect of it, as I wasn't equipped for it at the time. So that was Salaam in 1991.

At the same time, myself and some other Muslim folk in their 20s started an organization called Min Alaq. It was an organization that wasn't necessarily a religious organization, it was an advocacy, social, community-based organization. That lasted a couple of years. I also started the El-Tawhid Juma Circle Unity Mosque in 2009, with Troy, who is Black, Nova Scotian, and Laurie Silvers, a white North American woman with a Jewish background, an academic, so we brought together different elements. El-Tawhid Juma Circle Unity Mosque operates under the concept of radical Tawhid². The mosque is founded on the certainty that all human beings, without exception, are equal to one another socially and ritually and in potential Divine agency. But we all had this need, or this want to be in a space where we didn't have to defend who and what we were. Now the internet has allowed more people to come together, at juma³ today I was talking about the Facebook live (the juma services are live streamed weekly) and the online community that technology has allowed, the possibility of connecting with people around the world. We wouldn't have that if we didn't have the internet and adjacent technologies.

I feel like in some ways I am an accidental activist, that thankfully I had the imagination, the support, the capacity and the privilege of starting spaces. I remember when I started Salaam, organizations in the LGBT community really rose to the occasion, including SOY, the 519, right from the beginning, gave us space for Salaam, and when there were security issues they were vigilant with providing us with protection and security. I was lucky, because I got support from a wide spectrum of people and groups, to help start those spaces, so I can't take all of the credit.

Sabat: You mentioned that you wanted a space where you didn't have to defend yourself. With the growing visibility of queer Muslims do you feel less of a need to defend yourself?

El-Farouk: I try to avoid strategies of confrontation with dominant culture Muslims. Also, I remember what happened, I think it was around the gun violence at Pulse Nightclub [in Orlando, Florida], like 3 years ago, some media sources had contacted me and it took me a while to respond to them. When I did, they said it's okay, we already have other people. I remember thinking that all these years there'd be 1-2 people, and now all of a sudden there are

² Absolute Oneness. Absolute Equality.

³ Muslim Friday prayers.

more people who are willing to speak publicly about queer Muslim identities, and I just have to say mashallah to that, right?

Sabat: Mhm.

El-Farouk: Because it's visibility, telling our stories, sharing our stories that shifts the narrative, and hopefully opens people's minds and people's hearts, because one is the filter to the other. Your heart is a filter. We talk about this at the mosque, right? We talk about how you can choose your Allah right? The Allah you choose is the lens through which you see Islam. When I closed Salaam in 1993, I closed it because I got some threats and I needed support to keep the organization going (Salaam has since reopened). At the end of the day, at that time, no one was willing to step up. So I said, you know, well, "one person does not a movement make." Maybe this is not the right time, not that it's not needed but maybe it isn't the right time for this to manifest.

Hi Johnny, come on up!

[El-Farouk's cat Johnny, a social cat with fluffy grey and white fur, hops onto the desk.]

El-Farouk: So, do we need to still defend ourselves? Yeah, because there's also a global right-wing backlash around the world. The rise of white supremacy, violent and extremist Islamism, the advent of evangelical Christianity, with the same kind of narratives. Even in non-Abrahamic traditions I have all these clients in places like Africa, who tell me about the rise of tribal militant groups, like the Mungiki or like the Sungu Sungu. "Traditional values" are generally manifested as misogynist, xenophobic and generally queerphobic and transphobic.

Sabat: Are these colonial or traditional values?

El-Farouk: I think there is an overlay, though I think many of us have been co-opted. A significant number of Muslim communities have adopted values as their own that were imposed by European colonization. And we've forgotten that maybe our values are different, or that we had these values, language and discourse, but they've been corrupted. I think we need to decolonize our theology, decolonize our assumptions around our traditions as well. I often, from the Muslim context, say we have to decolonize white supremacy, also Arab supremacy, out of our narratives. Or at least be aware of them. Maybe there is growth and maybe there is change. Because I don't think we should romanticize our traditions and histories either, because they also have their own problems with their misogyny, and their homophobia, and their queer- and transphobias, and their xenophobias and so on. I think we need to look at all of that, but I think that our traditions should be used as vehicles for liberation and transformation. That's my theological bent on things.

Can we have enough voices? No, but I think it's wonderful that we have more voices. Is homophobia decreasing? No, I think in some ways it is amping up. Uganda for example, has just

reintroduced its kill the gays bill, people are dying, people are dying around the world because of their queerness or their transness.

Sabat: Through Marvellous Grounds⁴ I was learning about groups like Khush, Desh Pardesh, and other groups that had QTBIPOC presences. I know you spoke to how Salaam paused in organizing, and later began again. Do you have any thoughts on why these groups come and go?

El-Farouk: I think these groups come and go because people also have shifting priorities, as large sections of our communities are newcomers and migrants. These groups, Desh, Khush, and Zami⁵, all of these kinds of groups that were here in Toronto in the 80s and 90s, I think a lot of people in those groups felt like their lives had moved on.

When I came out, too, there weren't many queers of colour, or few queers of colour relatively speaking. Since that time more people have come out, there has been more acceptance. So maybe they don't need these spaces as places of empowerment and so on and so forth or once they receive that, they move on. But as an activist there's always going to be people who are going to need those spaces.

Khush was extremely helpful to me when I was starting Salaam in 1991. At that time, there weren't many Black Muslim folk of African descent in the city. Black populations were mostly Caribbean non-Muslim and the Muslim population were mostly Somalis. Zami was around, and they were a Black queer group, but they had few if any Muslim identifying folk. There was ACAS, Asian Community Aids Services, and Gay Asians of Toronto, which was held for predominantly Chinese-identified and other East Asian folks. There wasn't a large Muslim catchment there, the only one was Khush, being a South Asian group. They were very welcoming and helped me do outreach in the beginning to reach Muslim folks. I honestly didn't have an ingrained or sustained South Asian identity back then, so my involvement with Khush was very minimal, I didn't really see myself as South Asian. In terms of Desh Perdesh, I actually was a host of their queer night one year with Lezlie Lee Kam, a Queer elder now, mixed race, Trinidadian. That year we were the hosts, we were the non-South Asian South Asians hosts at the South Asian cultural festival called Desh Pardesh (laughs). So, I was somewhat involved with that.. Nostalgia and memories.

⁴ Marvellous Grounds is an (counter-)archive that consists of this blog edited by Alvis Choi and Jin Haritaworn, as well as two book collections edited by Jin Haritaworn, Ghaida Moussa and Syrus Marcus Ware called [Marvellous Grounds: Queer of Colour Histories of Toronto](#) and [Queering Urban Justice: Queer of Colour Formations in Toronto](#).

⁵ Founded in 1987, Khush: South Asian Gay Men of Toronto organized monthly meetings for queer South Asians in Toronto (their membership later expanded to include women as well). Throughout the late 80s and 90s, Khush organized a variety of queer South Asian cultural and community events. Desh Pardesh was a Toronto-based queer South Asian arts festival, supported by members of Khush, it ran from roughly 1988 to 2001. Zami was a Toronto-based group for Black and West Indian gays and lesbians--the first of its kind in Canada. For a discussion of these groups and their significance, see also the chapter by Richard Fung in [Marvellous Grounds](#).

Sabat: As someone who has made Toronto their home and lived in the Village for many years can you speak to what this space has meant for you and how it's changed?

El-Farouk: I have lived in Toronto for 30 years and I have lived within like 3 or 4 blocks...from where I live now. *(Pauses.)* Church Street wasn't always the gaybourhood, like in the 70s and in the 80s. I moved to Toronto in 89, but in the earlier 80s a lot of the bars were mostly on Yonge Street. It wasn't necessarily that the gaybourhood was localized around Church Street. By the time I moved here into this home, that was about 21 years ago, Church Street had pretty much been established as the gaybourhood. There were still a lot of bars, I think Comrades, Power, Chez-Moi, Boots, back in the 1980s, and they were not on Church Street.

But I've seen the neighbourhood change all the time. Like Ryerson expanding into it like a world class university with student residences and so on and so forth. The [street](#) is [changing](#). You see a lot of empty storefronts because the rents are so expensive. Because a lot of owners of the property are not members of the community and all they're looking for is their dollar. If you have a bar or a club, you can charge your exorbitant rents for them. I'm not sure if the changes in the Village have always been positive around here. I also see changes around the 519, which has grown over the past few years, as an advocate of LGBT issues. Some buildings are fairly new buildings, that look like they're almost exclusively Ryerson student occupied. That is going to shift the demographics of the neighbourhood, because most of them are not queer, right? So even though the neighbourhood does not only have queers living here, it's the gaybourhood, and a lot of queers live here.

Sabat: Who do you feel is welcome in the Village?

El-Farouk: Now that's an interesting question. I see all kinds of people in the Village. And I've heard racist bullshit. I've experienced homophobia right around the corner. I was talking to someone on Church Street at the corner here. I saw a guy coming, I thought he was a Somali guy I knew (but he wasn't)...It's not like I was standing there with my tongue sticking out or anything. When he walked by me, he called me a faggot and kept going. And that was on Church Street, the Monday after Pride. Troy has also been harassed by Muslim kids from Jarvis Collegiate because he intervened on behalf of a young male student from the ballet school, on a Friday afternoon. Troy eventually asked them: "Aren't you guys Muslim? I'm going to the mosque, where are you going? Why are you standing around with all this time to harass someone you don't even know?" I'd like to think everyone is welcome, but homophobia shouldn't be welcome, racism shouldn't be welcome.

Sabat: I've heard you say before Imams in the GTA have shown support to the work you do, but in private. How do you feel about that?

El-Farouk: I wouldn't say "Imams..." and make it sound like it's too many. But there are people who seem supportive, who are at least you know non-rabid (laughs). My friend Adnan talks about this being bad allyship, and that we don't need bad allies, we need people to be good allies. We need people to stand up for us because it may not always be safe for us to stand up, recognizing that it may not always be safe for them to stand up, either. But I think imams who are not open, for me this is bad allyship. A lot of theology is framed around gender, some people don't come to Unity mosque because we insisted that it be gender equal as well as LGBTIQ affirming, and that we try to prioritize women and femme bodies in the space. We know that there is a problem in the Muslim community around homophobia and transphobia. At some point considering the society that we live in and the religious discourse in our community, you do have to say something. You have to say 'hi, no, we need to look at this differently,' and you need to say it a little loudly, because people have to be able to hear it.

I remember I had a pissing match with a national Muslim organization, where they needed my opinion or help to edit or review a public statement. A few years ago, they contacted me because a billboard for a mosque site in the Ottawa region was vandalized, and it was vandalized with both homophobic and Islamophobic graffiti. They wanted to respond to it, and they wanted me to check over their response to make sure they weren't offending anybody or making any mistakes. So, I said then let's acknowledge LGBT Muslims. And their former ED was stalling, stalling, stalling. The organization never responded to me or to a former Director of the Unity Mosque. So, to me that's bad allyship. When you want something you come to me, when I ask to address something, you make up some bullshit response until you know you need something from me again. That is why I think mosques like ours are so vital, because they are about opening people's perspectives.

Sabat: Yeah.

El-Farouk: I'm a little more patient with bad allies when I see some openness, or where there's potential, some wiggle room. But imams that say one thing to me and act in another way... The higher your position in a community, the more responsibility comes with it. So, I'm not here to judge other people's shortcomings. But at some point, you need to stand up against for what you know to be wrong. And homophobia and transphobia actually literally kill.

Sabat: I recall that you mentioned recently learning a few details about another queer Muslim support Group, Lavender Crescent, that existed in the 1970s, in San Francisco, can you share a bit of what you learned?

El-Farouk: I learned about the group a few years ago through a listserv that Imam Daiyee Abdullah was running. Through that, I met one of the founders of the organization, who told me about the organization. A lot of the people in the organization were Iranian and were foreign students. Some of them had gone back to Iran after the revolution and were killed because of

their visibility as being queer. Some of them have gone into hiding in the United States and elsewhere. If I recall correctly, they first got together because they had to make arrangements for somebody's funeral. When I started Salaam in 1991, there was no way of knowing this. On one hand I thought, "Wow, are we the first queer Muslim organization ever in 1991? But at the same time that's kind of sad." And I'm sure that there must have been informal networks in places over the years as well for reasons other than just hooking up...The hooking up part is the easy part about being queer, right? It's the building of community, support and safety, that's the hard part.

Sabat: That's also interesting, you saying that one of the reasons that Lavender Crescent came together was for a funeral. And you also mentioned when you founded El-Tawhid, one the reasons was also funeral arrangements for your late partner, and having the ability to be able to get that support. But knowing that it's not possible for other queer Muslims.

El-Farouk: You know, now I'm also starting to realize that there's a lot of people that don't want anything to do with a Muslim queer community. Some people really do, but there's also a lot of people who don't, because they're so traumatized by their Islam, or by their experience with Islam. I think Islam has become more conservative and more exclusionary, with oil⁶ and after 9/11, I do. I think even the openness that we [Muslims/the Muslim community] had, has been eroded, particularly in traditional spaces because there have always been queer, trans, non-conformist, or third-gender sorts of people. I have this book on such a community from Kano, Nigeria: *Allah made us Funny that Way*.

Sabat: Last question, I know that you've previously mentioned struggling to come to terms with who you are. If you could, what would you tell your younger self?

El-Farouk: Oh deal with it, because it can be fabulous. Don't waste your time. But honestly, I think my younger self had to go through all of that to come out this way. Because I think we're a sum total of our experiences, and not only what has happened to us but how we respond to what is happening or what has happened to us. So what would I say? Go have fun! I was an uptight kid, maybe because I carried the weight of the world on me.

Sabat: Thank you!

⁶ This references the global Wahabization of Islam. Wahabi Islam is a rigid, intolerant branch of Sunni Islam, which was founded in Saudi Arabia. Its proliferation was aided by British colonization and Saudi Arabian oil wealth, which has funded different conservative Islamic schools, movements, and figures across the world.