



Periodically Queer Episode – Homan: A Beacon of Hope – With Albert Maghbouleh and Payam Ghassemlou

Audio Transcript

Erik Adamian ([00:04](#)):

Hello, I'm Erik Adamian. I use he/him pronouns. I'm the Director of Education at ONE Archives Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to telling histories and stories around LGBTQ+ communities. You're listening to Periodically Queer, a podcast that explores the stories around LGBTQ+ periodicals, such as magazines and organizational newsletters as a way to learn about queer community building. This episode is a part of our pilot season with a focus on LGBTQ+ communities of color. This season is made possible by a grant from the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and special thanks to ONE Archives at the USC libraries for providing research materials for this podcast.

Erik Adamian ([00:58](#)):

In this Periodically Queer episode, I'm taking you on a journey to learn about Homan, an organization and magazine that were formed to defend the rights of Iranian gays and lesbians living abroad. Between 1991 and 2002, Homan published 18 print issues of Homan Magazine, a magazine of cultural and sociopolitical studies of Iranian gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. A few months ago, I had a wonderful opportunity of speaking with Albert Maghbouleh and Payam Ghassemlou, who co-founded Homan Los Angeles. We talked about their involvement in the magazine and how it created a community. We also talked about its impact and how it served as a beacon of hope for the Iranian LGBTQ community.

Erik Adamian ([01:43](#)):

As someone who's of Armenian Iranian descent and identifies as queer, this magazine holds a lot of personal significance for me. Talking to Albert and Payam made me feel like I was able to connect with the legacy of Homan for putting Iranian homoerotic content, gender expressions, and everything LGBTQ on paper before the time I was coming of age. I've never felt this way before, and I'm eager to share with you how this conversation unraveled my sense of self, identity, and place within the larger queer community. Before we dive in, I'd like to provide some content warning about self-harm and suicide. Please take care while listening.

Payam Ghassemlou ([02:28](#)):

Hello, my name is Payam, pronouns he/him. I'm a cisgender gay man. I was born in Tehran, Iran, and I escaped the country in 1982, came to Europe, and then came to United States. There was a time as a gay Iranian I was extremely isolated and there was no internet and in desperate need for connection and sense of belonging. I ran into other gay Iranians.

Albert Maghbouleh ([03:03](#)):

My name is Albert Maghbouleh. I was born in Tehran, Iran. I moved to Eugene, Oregon in 1975. I went to high school there for a year and college for five years. Then I moved to Los Angeles and I use he and him as gender.



Erik Adamian ([03:21](#)):

I was so curious about how Homan came together. They explained to me the difference between Homan, the organization, versus the Homan Magazine.

Albert Maghbouleh ([03:31](#)):

Homan actually started in Europe, the organization. In 1990s, I attended a LGBTQ event for Arab organizations. There I met two other Iranians and after a few meetings, we decided to have our own Iranian LGBTQ gathering. There was no concept of Homan at the time. I believe after a few months, we thought that it would be great to have an organization that would support the Iranian LGBTQ and the family. We had meetings and we decided to join the existing Homan group in Europe. We contacted them and they agreed, and we joined them as Homan Los Angeles.

Payam Ghassemlou ([04:28](#)):

We decide to create a magazine to create a sense of community and sense of belonging.

Erik Adamian ([04:35](#)):

When I was talking to Albert and Payam, I got the sense that it was not easy to do what they were doing in their time. I asked them about any challenges or obstacles that they faced.

Payam Ghassemlou ([04:46](#)):

Picture a time when we were being humiliated and shamed because of HIV out there. They were blaming gays. There was extreme oppression. We didn't have all these rights we have today. There was no internet. The concept of internalized homophobia wasn't being addressed as much. We are talking about an era that was we were very oppressed and some of us were brave enough that we wanted to promote gay agenda, if you will. We wanted to promote rights for lesbians, for gays, for transgenders, for bisexuals and questioning people. We got together. We had a lot of debates and we decided to move forward and do what we can. We did confront homophobia within the Iranian community and larger community, but it was a scary time.

Albert Maghbouleh ([05:47](#)):

I would say half the people were against it, half of our friends. They just say, "You're wasting your time. The Iranian community is not coming around. Don't do it." The other half they said, "No, we should try it and see how it will work out." And that's how we started it. Even within ourselves, there was the ambiguity as if this is going to go or not.

Payam Ghassemlou ([06:13](#)):

As a psychotherapist, when I came out, I started my profession in my really early twenties, and many Iranians didn't want to work with me because I was gay. We're talking about a time where it was very, very difficult to be open and fight for gay rights, especially in a community like Persian community. Very conservative. Very traditional. I'm very proud of our members, what we tried to do in a time that we were so oppressed.



Erik Adamian ([06:50](#)):

Homan Magazine contains a lot of political content. I was surprised to find out how much of this community and magazine work was done internationally.

Albert Maghbouleh ([06:59](#)):

The way Homan Magazine worked and it was published, each publication of the magazine came out once a year. For that publication, they picked an editor, one person to be in charge. That person would be contacted or contacting other writers who would be interested in submitting an article and he or she, the editor, will actually put the magazine together. The editor of each publication was the person who decided what should go in and what should not. We, as members, we will contribute or find people who knew would be interested in having their writings or poetry submitted. We will connect them together because we had a lot of resources here. We're able to help even people from Iran or from Europe or anywhere to connect them together.

Albert Maghbouleh ([07:59](#)):

The money for the publication of the magazine actually came from Sweden. They had a grant from the government of Sweden that was supporting the publication. Even though maybe the editor was in London, for example, or somewhere else, we ended up doing the printing in Los Angeles because it was much easier to do it here. If our Editor was not in US, we got everything together and published it in Los Angeles, and then send it to Europe for them to distribute. Also, we did the distribution from Los Angeles throughout the United States. In Los Angeles, actually we had a mailing list of people who had already purchased from us. Also, we had it on our gatherings on the table so people could pick it up or purchase.

Albert Maghbouleh ([08:53](#)):

Also, we went around a few times to different bookstores in Los Angeles, in Westwood, to have them to display the magazine and sell them. Actually, none of them would take it except one, and that was Sherekate Ketab. The owner of the store was very progressive, and he was the only one who accepted to display the Homan Magazine and sell Homan.

Erik Adamian ([09:21](#)):

With all the political content. I saw a continuity between magazine distribution and political organizing. It felt like political actions were translated into magazine pages and vice versa, what's in the magazine was translated into political actions. I was also curious about how Homan was received in the US, so I asked Albert and Payam about how people reacted to the magazine.

Albert Maghbouleh ([09:46](#)):

A husband and wife who owned the bookstore, when we went and introduced who we are and what we asked them to do, they asked us, "Please leave the store right now." But the others said, "We're just not interested." They just didn't want to face it.



Erik Adamian ([10:03](#)):

As I was looking through the magazine, I couldn't help but notice that there are a lot of striking images, images of homoeroticism from the Iranian cultural context that I haven't seen in any other magazines. There are very powerful, very beautiful images. There are also book recommendations and readings about queer cultural things.

Payam Ghassemlou ([10:23](#)):

The magazine, regardless of the content, it was a symbol that something exists, that written for Persian Iranian community. And just having that magazine, one of the stores, the Ketab Bookstore, just me walking in there and seeing that was like, wow, fresh breath of air. It was so validating. Just having that out there was very meaningful. Unfortunately, because of homophobia, we couldn't distribute it to a lot of places, but we did deliver the magazine to as many people as we could. This was like a beacon of hope for some people. That's the only thing they had that made them feel like they're okay. Look, you have a magazine that talks about you being gay in a positive way. And that was very important to have that.

Erik Adamian ([11:24](#)):

I know firsthand from being born and raised in Iran that this beacon of hope looks a little different in Iran. LGBTQ politics have a different history there. I wondered about the reception of Homan in Iran. I gathered that it was not safe to distribute the magazine officially in Iran.

Albert Maghbouleh ([11:42](#)):

When I went to Iran in year, I think the first one was 2004, after my second visit, I took some of the magazine with me and I was able to pass it on to few people I had met. Had it my suitcase. Anyway, I just had it covered up. Taking it to Iran was risky for me, but I had decided to do it. I wrapped it like two or three layers of wrapping in case they opened the suitcase, but nothing happened. When I started working with Homan, and for many years after that, I had not come out. I was more concerned about having my name because people again knew my name. You never know, because you hear all these rumors that they have a list of people because of the homophobia within the Iranian community.

Albert Maghbouleh ([12:34](#)):

I really was only out to my siblings, but somehow my name was out there because we were getting calls. It was very odd for me, honestly, if I think about it, that here I was active with a group of friends trying to run an organization that is promoting LGBTQ rights and I was not out.

Payam Ghassemlou ([12:57](#)):

What Albert described, first of all, was extremely brave act to take that magazine to Iran. Basically, he took extreme risk. That's how committed we were when we started this. I remember I published an article called Gay Iranian Los Angeles Struggle to Come Out, and that article got published in many places. And then people in Iran received it. Then I started getting emails from Iran. I got some life threatening emails, which I forwarded to FBI, but I got emails from Iran from young people wanting to know more. I didn't want to send them anything because I didn't want to jeopardize their lives, but there was definitely interests from people in Iran wanting to learn more about our activities, what we are doing here.



Payam Ghassemlou ([13:49](#)):

I would share as much as I could and encourage them to stay safe and be careful, at the same time, not to give up hope and normalize for them being gay is okay. It's about love and there's nothing wrong to love.

Albert Maghbouleh ([14:05](#)):

We were getting calls actually from Iran from the gay and lesbian people, transgender, or even some parents who did not know how to handle their son or daughters being gay or lesbian. Their kids was gay, came out, found out, and they didn't know what to do. They were reaching out to get some more information. Here in the United States, we're getting a lot of calls from people. There was an Iranian psychologist at the time. She was working with the LGBTQ Iranians' parents and some of the LGBT people. We were referring them to get help from her. There is a mother of a very active Iranian gay man who actually had a symposium or a conference or a lecture about homosexuality in Iran at the Tehran University many, many years ago.

Albert Maghbouleh ([15:10](#)):

I don't think he was out, but as a sociologist he had that. He came to United States and his mom was very involved with promoting LGBTQ rights of Iranians and in general.

Erik Adamian ([15:24](#)):

From Albert and Payam, I gathered the sense that Homan was not just a magazine. It was like a cultural space or a community hub for LGBTQ Iranians. Its influence was both local and global.

Albert Maghbouleh ([15:38](#)):

Homan had few seminars, symposium in Los Angeles. The first panel discussion was at Khanoom Sokhanm which it means the book club. Actually, that was attended very well. It was in Santa Monica. There were people in the audience that raised their hands and they were kind of rude sometimes, or the way they were asking the questions, or said, "You guys don't belong here." The second panel discussion was at UCLA and that was attended by more people. There were people in the audience that did not want this. They were questioning having that panel. That was kind of surprising to me that they were out there in front of everybody.

Albert Maghbouleh ([16:27](#)):

Because in Iranian cultures, we do things behind each other, but they're actually out there expressing their feelings, "Why are you guys here? Why are you trying to change our kids to become gay or lesbian?"

Erik Adamian ([16:43](#)):

It's surprising to hear how much of this kind of backlash is still going on. And nowadays we're hearing these sentiments from conservative lawmakers in the United States.

Payam Ghassemlou ([16:52](#)):

When Homan was getting this negative reaction, it showed we're doing something right. We are becoming more visible. We are provoking. We are getting people to react. We were on the right track. We were getting under the skin of homophobic people. It was working. What people don't realize, Persian literature is based on homosexuality. There was a book published in Iran by a researcher called Shahed-bazi. He uncovered through all his extensive research that a large percent of Persian literature, Persian poetry is based on homosexuality. We are from a country where honoring same sex love has been around.

Payam Ghassemlou ([17:41](#)):

A lot of translation of Persian poetry is done by heterosexual people and they do translate in a way that make it seem like this is a heterosexual love affair but is not. You don't always get the right translation.

Albert Maghbouleh ([17:56](#)):

One of our members who has passed away, Hassan Haghani. He was really out there within the Iranian community. He went on Persian TV show many years ago. There was only like one or two at the time. He was interviewed. Actually, they did cover up his face. I think mainly it was because of his safety. He didn't have any problem with it. Then he went on a couple of radio interviews as well. That's really when the movement started by him in terms of getting the exposure.

Erik Adamian ([18:29](#)):

The Homan community was an activist center to organize for LGBTQ rights. It also provided LGBTQ community services and social support. It practically functioned as a resource center for Iranian LGBTQ people.

Payam Ghassemlou ([18:44](#)):

We provide a wonderful resource, a helpline, a phone number people could call and they could talk to someone who would be... In Farsi we call that sang saboor. It's like someone who's able to handle and tolerate listening to what you have. Somebody who's strong enough can handle it. That was just unheard of in the Iranian community, in Persian community. You have a phone number out there for people call and receive support. One of our members, she was gracious enough to help with that. Our focus was visibility, which was enormous task at that time. When I was a kid, I was faced with something very challenging. I had to understand what these feelings were about.

Payam Ghassemlou ([19:40](#)):

I knew I was different. I knew there was this homoerotic feeling going on, but I had no concept, no ability to self-reflect, and no support to help me to understand it. You can imagine a child has to come to terms with such a complex matter with help of no one. It becomes overwhelming, and couple that with derogatory name callings. One of the people used to attend Homan meetings, he developed suicidal thoughts. I remember I personally took him to Thaliens, part of Cedars-Sinai Mental Health at the time. I helped him to get situated there and get the support he needed. So yes, we had members or followers who thought about killing themselves because of level of oppression, level of self-hatred.



Payam Ghassemlou ([20:30](#)):

As you know, the rate of suicide is very high in LGBTQ community. Having visibility helped people not feel so hopeless and alone, and hopefully, maybe we save lives.

Erik Adamian ([20:46](#)):

It absolutely has had the effect of saving lives and showing us to be brave. I can speak for myself as an Armenian Iranian LGBTQ person. When I showed pictures of the magazine to my parents, I had to find a way to sneak this into the conversation with them. I told them, "Oh, look what I found at ONE Archives today." When they saw the magazine, they were able to understand that Iranian LGBTQ culture is actually a topic that's talked about among a community of people worldwide. It has been talked about for decades and millennia even. Precisely that visibility piece has been missing in everyday conversations, and visibility is, in many ways, the first step to fostering acceptance in the community.

Erik Adamian ([21:31](#)):

I haven't had a deep discussion about being Iranian and LGBTQ in the longest time. It was an honor to be able to speak with Albert and Payam, who have been pioneers in the community. Homan has greatly affected the lives of LGBTQ Iranian people in a positive way. It has for me.

Umi Hsu ([21:57](#)):

Which magazines have moved you to action? How do you build your queer community? Share with us on social @onearchives. We have posted some pictures and excerpts from the Homan Magazine that Erik has selected on our website. To read more, go to onearchives.org/periodicallyqueer. This episode of Periodically Queer is hosted by Erik Adamian. Produced by Umi Hsu. Edited and engineered by Quincy Surasmith. Music by Analog Tara. Research support by Jaime Shearn Coan and Ambika Nuggihalli. Graphic design by Maxwell Fong. Production support by Shei Yu and Fati Zulaikha. Periodically Queer is a project by ONE Archives Foundation. Available on Spotify, Apple Podcast, or anywhere you get your podcast.