

Why LGBT Safety in the Middle East Exists Only in Israel

Tel Aviv just hosted its 15th annual Gay Pride Festival, attended by a record-breaking 100,000 spectators and participants, including some of Israel's most powerful politicians. Here is the *Times of Israel* report on the event:

"Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai kicked off the festivities with a speech that reflected on the journey since the first annual Pride Parade, which he emceed in 1998. The finance minister said that every couple, gay or straight, has the right to get married and have children and mentioned his ... party's 'deep indebtedness' to the LGBT community.

"Also addressing the crowd, US Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro said, 'There's no better place to celebrate than in Tel Aviv, the friendliest city in the world to the LGBT community,' he said. 'We learned from Israel to let our troops serve in the military without having to hide who they love.'

"Thousands of tourists flocked over the past week to Tel Aviv, which has featured large-scale parties and functions all leading up to Friday's main event. Among the notable foreign visitors, the first gay couple to legally marry in France arrived to celebrate their nuptials and join in the festivities."

The event demonstrates that Israel's culture of tolerance equals (and often surpasses) that of North America and Western Europe. It's astounding that such a liberal society could survive in a Middle East so violently contrary to Israel's democratic values. To understand just how unlikely Israel's Gay Pride Festival is, consider how LGBT individuals fare in the rest of the Middle East.

Sexual minorities are as unwelcome in the Middle East as are

religious minorities. Just as the Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East are generally hostile to Christians, Jews, Bahá'ís, Zoroastrians and other religious minorities, they are even less welcoming of non-heterosexuals. Except in Israel.

And yet it is Israel—absurdly enough—that is consistently singled out for excoriation by human rights groups, college campus activists and other ostensibly well-meaning individuals.

Where was their outrage after Lebanese police attacked and beat LGBT clubgoers last May only because of their sexual orientation? Of course, such abuse is hardly surprising when even in Turkey (which calls itself a democracy), Islamists last May attacked a group of couples in a Turkish metro station staging a “kissing protest” against the “morality campaign” by their government. One person was stabbed when about 20 Islamists chanting “Allah Akhbar”—some carrying knives—attacked the demonstrators.

One can only imagine the protesters' fate had they been same-sex couples kissing. Given that Turkey used to be a staunchly secular country, the creeping Islamist trends fostered by the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan help to explain the recent unrest in Turkey.

What else did the politically correct detractors of Israel fail to protest in the Middle East last month? How about the two young Moroccan men who were jailed by a court in Temara for four months for being homosexuals? Indeed, in most of the Middle East, homosexuality is a crime. Where are the protests and divestment movements?

According to a 2012 report on state-sponsored homophobia by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), 78 countries criminalize consensual sexual acts between adults of the same sex. The ILGA notes that such acts are punishable by death in five countries, including

Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Iran (which has executed over 4,000 people for homosexuality since 1979).

The Pew Research Center just released a report titled “The Global Divide on Homosexuality.” The study asked people in 39 different countries for their views on homosexuality and found that Sub-Saharan African and Muslim-majority countries are the least accepting of gays.

For anti-Israel bigots, these inconvenient facts don’t matter because only Israel is worth criticizing and Israel can never do anything good unless there is some evil motive involved. Thus, these Israel-haters claim that Israel is “pinkwashing” its conflict with the Palestinians by highlighting its progressive treatment of sexual minorities (as if doing so had any chance of diminishing the media’s boundless obsession with Palestinian victimhood).

Israelis long ago stopped caring what these perpetual haters say and instead focuses on building a better society within the confines imposed by the brutally intolerant and backward region in which they live. When the pinkwashers find their true moral compass and courage, they can organize large flotillas of LGBT members and sail toward Iranian and Saudi ports, where they can vociferously protest for the rights of sexual minorities. Good luck with that.

The rest of the world should recognize Israel for the miracle that it is: an oasis of progressive tolerance, civil liberties, and true diversity—all protected by democratic traditions and institutions—despite the desert of oppression, hostility and intolerance surrounding the tiny country.

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gays in the Israeli navy.