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Israel and 'Pinkwashing'

By SARAH SCHULMAN

"IN dreams begin responsibilities," wrote Yeats in 1914. These words resonate with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who have witnessed dramatic shifts in our relationship to power. After generations of sacrifice and organization, gay people in parts of the world have won protection from discrimination and relationship recognition. But these changes have given rise to a nefarious phenomenon: the co-opting of white gay people by anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim political forces in Western Europe and Israel.

In the Netherlands, some Dutch gay people have been drawn to the messages of Geert Wilders, who inherited many followers of the assassinated anti-immigration gay leader [Pim Fortuyn](#), and whose Party for Freedom is now the country's third largest political party. In Norway, Anders Behring Breivik, the extremist who massacred 77 people in July, cited Bruce Bawer, a gay American writer critical of Muslim immigration, as an influence. The Guardian reported last year that the racist English Defense League had 115 members in its gay wing. The German Lesbian and Gay Federation has issued statements citing Muslim immigrants as enemies of gay people.

These depictions of immigrants — usually Muslims of Arab, South Asian, Turkish or African origin — as "homophobic fanatics" opportunistically ignore the existence of Muslim gays and their allies within their communities. They also render invisible the role that fundamentalist Christians, the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Jews play in perpetuating fear and even hatred of gays. And that cynical message has now spread from its roots in European xenophobia to become a potent tool in the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In 2005, with help from American marketing executives, the Israeli government began a marketing campaign, "Brand Israel," aimed at men ages 18 to 34. The campaign, as reported by [The Jewish Daily Forward](#), sought to depict Israel as "relevant and modern." The government later expanded the marketing plan by harnessing the gay community to reposition its global image.

Last year, the Israeli news site Ynet reported that the Tel Aviv tourism board had begun a campaign of around \$90 million to brand the city as "an international gay vacation destination." The promotion, which received support from the Tourism Ministry and Israel's overseas consulates, includes depictions of young same-sex couples and financing for pro-Israeli movie screenings at lesbian and gay film festivals in the United States. (The government isn't alone; an Israeli pornography producer even shot a film, "Men of Israel," on the site of a former Palestinian village.)

This message is being articulated at the highest levels. In May, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Congress that the Middle East was “a region where women are stoned, gays are hanged, Christians are persecuted.”

The growing global gay movement against the Israeli occupation has named these tactics “pinkwashing”: a deliberate strategy to conceal the continuing violations of Palestinians’ human rights behind an image of modernity signified by Israeli gay life. Aeyal Gross, a professor of law at Tel Aviv University, argues that “gay rights have essentially become a public-relations tool,” even though “conservative and especially religious politicians remain fiercely homophobic.”

Pinkwashing not only manipulates the hard-won gains of Israel’s gay community, but it also ignores the existence of Palestinian gay-rights organizations. Homosexuality has been decriminalized in the West Bank since the 1950s, when anti-sodomy laws imposed under British colonial influence were removed from the Jordanian penal code, which Palestinians follow. More important is the emerging Palestinian gay movement with three major organizations: [Aswat](#), [Al Qaws](#) and [Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions](#). These groups are clear that the oppression of Palestinians crosses the boundary of sexuality; as Haneen Maikay, the director of Al Qaws, has said, “When you go through a checkpoint it does not matter what the sexuality of the soldier is.”

What makes lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their allies so susceptible to pinkwashing — and its corollary, the tendency among some white gay people to privilege their racial and religious identity, a phenomenon the theorist Jasbir K. Puar has called “homonationalism” — is the emotional legacy of homophobia. Most gay people have experienced oppression in profound ways — in the family; in distorted representations in popular culture; in systematic legal inequality that has only just begun to relent. Increasing gay rights have caused some people of good will to mistakenly judge how advanced a country is by how it responds to homosexuality.

In Israel, gay soldiers and the relative openness of Tel Aviv are incomplete indicators of human rights — just as in America, the expansion of gay rights in some states does not offset human rights violations like mass incarceration. The long-sought realization of some rights for some gays should not blind us to the struggles against racism in Europe and the United States, or to the Palestinians’ insistence on a land to call home.

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