

## **“Pinkwashing” — Wash Delicately!**

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The process to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is stuck. Direct negotiations seem far off. The Palestinian leadership is split between Fateh and Hamas, and President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) is trusted less and less to have the political capital to be able to enter into a historic compromise with Israel. The Israeli government is assumed to be uninterested in compromise as well as satisfied with the “status quo”— which, of course, does not exist because the developments on the ground in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) are detrimental to the Palestinians — and a two-state solution appears to be less and less possible.

In this intractable situation, Palestinians are searching for alternative strategies. New attempts to bring movement into the blocked negotiating process include seeking international recognition through the United Nations, nonviolent resistance, boycotts, divestments and sanctions (BDS) and anti-normalization. Anti-normalization requires the halting of governmental as well as civil cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis because such projects are considered to serve a fig-leaf function as long as the occupation-oriented Israeli government is in power. BDS and anti-normalization are receiving international attention and find allies mostly among the global left.

The campaign against so-called “pinkwashing” is along similar lines. The Israeli government is accused of advertising to the world a gay-friendly Tel Aviv as a hallmark of Israel, portraying itself as the only true democracy in the Middle East while diverting attention from the occupation and emphasizing homophobia in Palestinian and other Arab societies.

### **Self-Whitewashing and Excessive Criticism**

The accusation of “pinkwashing” needs to be treated delicately, washed in the gentle cycle. Nothing in the Middle East is black and white, nor is anything simple. The truth is, as Sarah Shulman writes in her much-acclaimed *New York Times* article (“Israel and ‘Pinkwashing,’” Nov. 22, 2011), that for several years now the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has conducted an international advertising campaign of gay-friendliness in Tel Aviv and identifies such with all of Israel. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu spoke about it at the UN and also Israel’s ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, praised Israel’s tolerance toward Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people at a conference, while contrasting it with the terrorism during the second intifada. Israel hosts and participates in international gay pride events, and Tel Aviv was recently named the world’s best gay destination on [www.gaycities.com](http://www.gaycities.com). Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman are less interested in the well-being of LGBT people in Israel, or even across the Middle East, than they are in seeking a better international image for an increasingly isolated Israel. When Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai spoke of “Israeli gay heaven” at an international conference for LGBT youth, it didn’t seem sincere. Despite a city-funded gay center in Tel Aviv, the horizon of this “heaven” stays within the city limits. Moreover, some homophobic attacks happen even in Tel Aviv.

The accusation of “pinkwashing” is understandable when a large Israeli lesbian and gay organization presents itself as the only lifeline for persecuted Palestinian lesbians, gays and transsexuals, as in Gil Yaron’s recent article on the German news site Spiegel Online, “It is better that you die” (“*Es ist besser, du stirbst*”). Yaron ignored Palestinian organizations such as Al-Qaws and Aswat, two courageous and important NGOs that are fighting for gender and sexual rights as well as diversity in Palestinian society in Israel and the OPT. There are

several hundred LGBT Palestinian refugees in Israel, and hundreds of LGBT people meet and organize in Haifa, Jaffa, Jerusalem and Ramallah, and many hundreds come to Tel Aviv for a monthly Palestinian LGBT party.

Support for “pinkwashing” criticism has its limits, however, when Israeli LGBT organizations are generally accused of being agents of the government and active supporters of the occupation. They are accused of legitimizing the Israeli government’s policies with their concentration on LGBT rights work. The Israeli Gay Youth Organization (IGY), the educational project Hoshen or the parent network Tehila all have the right to limit themselves to their own goals and objectives. Other NGOs, such as the Jerusalem Open House from which Al-Qaws emerged, deliberately present a comprehensive understanding of LGBT and human rights. As human rights organizations, they should be trying to raise awareness of the complicated and unequal situation of LGBT people in Israel and Palestine, and solutions should be presented for debate. The issues of Palestinians should not be ignored, nor should Palestinian LGBT issues be exploited. At the same time, it is too high of an expectation that all groups make ending the occupation their main task, notwithstanding that it must be an overarching goal.

NGOs that receive funding from the State of Israel are being criticized as generally collaborating with the occupier, but this should be considered in a differentiated manner. It is an achievement that Israel’s LGBT community receives state support to fund HIV/AIDS prevention and civic education on LGBT issues. Funding for international travel for Israeli LGBT organizations should not be declared taboo per se. NGOs should, however, consider carefully what delegations and activities they participate in, and check whether they are able to openly criticize Israeli policy during government-funded trips. And they should speak up if they are being instrumentalized. International opponents of state-funded trips should consider, in turn, whether they would be willing to donate money to help cover travel costs for Israeli LGBT activists.

### **Only Sophisticated Arguments Work**

The “pinkwashing” criticism is practiced predominantly by Palestinian and international groups. On the Israeli side, it is led by queer<sup>1</sup> activists. Israeli LGBT organizations like IGY, appear on the defensive, and thus provide little space for deeper debates and self-critical analyses. They should indeed be bolder. However, as long as some of the international queer activists consciously avoid clarifying whether they are speaking about the end of the occupation of 1967 or of 1948 (i.e., the very existence of the State of Israel), they can expect little support from Israelis and must also be challenged to clarify this point by the international community.

The international resonance of the “pinkwashing” campaign against the IGY International Youth Summit in December 2011 and the Seattle LGBT Commission’s cancellation of an LGBT reception funded by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 2012 show that these activists have had some success at the international level. However, it is doubtful that it will reach a critical mass of support inside Israel. Indeed, an alternative arrangement to the IGY summit took place in Tel Aviv’s alternative Rogatka Club, including a number of international summit participants, but the arguments presented seemed to convince only a minority of guests in attendance.

It also remains open whether a wider debate on the manipulation of LGBT rights can originate from the queer protests against the occupation. For example, Sarah Shulman and Jim Hubbard’s remarkable film *UNITED IN ANGER: A History of ACT UP* on the history of the

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<sup>1</sup> “Queer” is not just a synonym for “gay.” It stands for a specific theory and ideology formulated by Judith Butler aimed at overcoming the gay/straight divide. Queer activists are considered to be on the left, and many of them seek to shake up the whole system.

American HIV/AIDS movement of the 1980s successfully shows an example of nonviolent and mass resistance — but it was shown in the Rogatka Club before a small audience of only 25 people. An Israeli premiere before possibly hundreds of viewers in the Tel Aviv Cinematheque would have been possible, but it was rejected by the organizers for political reasons, because the Cinematheque is partially funded by the Israeli government and the Tel Aviv municipality.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation has the goal, as part of its democracy and human rights work worldwide, to work for LGBT rights. LGBT rights are human rights, and yet at times, in realpolitik, they appear contradictory, or at least in a very complex relation with each other. The aim of the work in Israel and Palestine is to contribute to resolving the Middle East conflict, as well as to advocate for open and democratic societies on both sides. In the context of the conflict and the asymmetry between Israelis and Palestinians, this is a complicated undertaking. In the LGBT work in Israel this should not mean, however, completely avoiding cooperation with Israeli NGOs that receive money from the Israeli state.

Those who criticize the Israeli government for “pinkwashing” are right to do so, insofar as there is still much to do for LGBT equality even in Israel. The support of Palestinian lesbians and gays remains just as important in the struggle for both sexual human rights and for Palestinian self-determination. What the Heinrich Böll Foundation can do, in this situation, is conduct a critical debate and a dialogue with LGBT organizations in the context of the Middle East conflict.

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