

# 'Stop using Palestinian gays to whitewash Israel's image'

Tuesday 6 October 2009, by [BERTHELSEN Morten](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2009).

At the recent 'Gay Olympics' - the World Outgames in Copenhagen, Denmark - Tel Aviv was crowned one of the exclusive gay capitals of the world and proudly celebrated by the Israeli ambassador in Denmark.

Five days later, a still unidentified gunman killed two people and wounded a dozen more in a gay drop-in center in that very same Tel Aviv.

The attack was followed by a myriad of articles on the homophobia haunting Israel and a *Haaretz* poll showing that nearly half of the Israeli population believes homosexuality is a perversion.

For Palestinian gay rights activist, Haneen Maikey, the latter events are an expression of the known reality in Israel.

*"It's really pathetic that the Israeli state has nothing besides gay rights to promote their liberal image," says Maikey. "Ridiculous, and in a sense hilarious, because there are no gay rights in Israel. There are specific court cases that, when won, allowed certain individuals for instance to adopt a child. What is worth noting is that these decisions are case-specific, in the sense that they are made for this specific case, for this specific child and for these two mothers. You cannot build a human rights campaign on court cases that are not ratified."*

Maikey, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, is a 31-year-old feminist with a Master's degree in community organizations management and co-founder and director of *Al-Qaws* ("the rainbow" in Arabic) for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society.

As part of the World Outgames, Maikey participated in a conference bringing together queer activists from all over the Middle East. Activists from various Arab countries exchanged experiences and laid the foundation stones for the future struggle for liberation - one that has to be fought differently in each Arab country.

She deems it obvious that the State of Israel disapproves of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community, and believes it only uses it as a means of laundering the country's tainted image in the Western world.

She asks what other issues Israel is proactively promoting to fuel the process of goodwill: The feminist cause? The health care system? The moral army?

But the main problem, she says, remains that Israel presents itself abroad as a gay refuge, by exploiting tales of terror of oppressed Palestinians, thus increasing Israel's own sense of self-righteousness. In the words of the Israeli ambassador to Denmark:

*"Most of us take for granted the equality of sexual minorities and the struggle for their rights. Unfortunately reality is different for the majority of homosexuals in most other places in the region (the Middle East), where gays and lesbians suffer from persecution, violence, and murder."*

*"I refuse to be a part of your campaign," says Maikey. "Stop speaking in my name and using me for a cause you never supported in the first place. If you want to do me a favour, then stop bombing my friends, end your occupation, and leave me to rebuild my community. I'm aware that my society has a long way to go in terms of human rights and social issues, but it's my responsibility, not yours."*

The struggle for gay rights across the Arab world has many similarities: most live in traditional, closed societies and face similar issues with family, expectations, and norms.

But whereas the Lebanese, for instance, have a very defined cultural center in Beirut, and cooperate with the authorities on gay rights, the Palestinians have none, and thus the fundamental basis is that of radical action and grass root politics.

Maikey believes the Palestinian history of the 1948 Nakba, occupation and discrimination has *"brought something unique to our experience. More complexity. We are in exile. We have no center. Jaffa can't be the center, nor Haifa.*

Jerusalem isn't, and Ramallah? Hah! I'm not trying to get any pity, but it is very important for understanding the struggle and the obstacles to our ambitions."

One of those ambitions is breaking out of the current social structure, the hierarchy of sexuality and gender perceptions in the Arab communities and Palestinian societies inside Israel and the occupied territories.

This is a process that runs parallel to assembling people for joint activism and exchanging ideas. But even though *Al Qaws* has picked up more than 600 members since its establishment in 2001 and is working with local leaderships in Jerusalem, Haifa, Jaffa, Nazareth, and the West Bank, physical and social division are still the most daunting challenges.

For the time being, the only space *Al Qaws* has is its small, well-guarded office in Jerusalem.

*"Activism is driven by passion, and it's really hard not to burn out when you have no physical place to invest your energy. We have to create the buzz even though we don't have the space. But we can't pass the energy when we only connect by e-mail."*

Realizing that the LGBTQ communities in Arab societies are flourishing - yet mostly invisible - *Al Qaws* is now opening up a hotline for gay Palestinians, in coalition with *Aswat* Palestinian Gay Women, simply because people who are isolated from the community need accessible ways to speak about their identities and be supported.

If you want to come out of the closet, have you planned the process? How is your relationship with your family? What other support networks do you have? All of these are steps on the road to dealing with one's identity and its implications - a road that is far more humble for the Palestinians, as coming out of the closet is not necessarily a goal in itself.

*"You can't address the specific needs and conflicts of my community by copy-pasting the Western experience,"* Maikey says. *"You [in the West] have to be fully visible to be accepted, tell your friends, your family, your workplace, go to the shrink."*

But the approach is very different for Palestinians. *"For many people it can be enough coming out to their younger sister - or even just telling yourself. Besides, I don't want to promote coming out to everyone because I don't have a shelter for all of them to hide in."*

An additional obstacle related to visibility arises from the liberal discourse putting sexual behavior

and identity in the hands of the individual. Maikey resents statements like: *"I don't care, who you sleep with - it's your private thing."* For Palestinians, the private is political.

*"Fuck off, it's not my private thing. It's a political issue. I think it's risky and dishonest to ignore subtle expressions of homophobia such as: 'Go do your thing, but don't forget to close the curtains.' People need to take responsibility for their ignorance."*

The annual Pride Parade in Tel Aviv is an object lesson in visibility. It celebrates diversity without shame and is in your face; even if you turn off the TV, it's impossible to ignore. But again, participating as an Arab is a different story.

*"People who go to Pride Parade do so to celebrate their gayness and their sexuality, [but] automatically Palestinians and other Arabs will be busy identifying where the cameras are, busy buying make-up or specific hats to hide. I don't see why participating in the main tool of liberation by hiding yourself is a good and healthy thing for the liberation cause of the LGBTQ community."*

But if only visibility will force a change in perception, gay Palestinians need to alter their strategy; the Pride Parade isn't coming to Ramallah any time soon.

*"We all have to do our individual 'Pride Parades'. Visibility can have different meanings in different groups and societies, and ours should commence by telling the world we're here, broaden our discourse, work across languages, open a discussion about human rights, deliver our messages very, very clearly, and shout louder and more boldly."*

And Maikey shouts: *"We are here, we are active, strong, mature, and we have the leadership to go through with this. We are the only ones who can be sensitive about our needs. The Arab world needs to know that we consider ourselves an integral part of the society, and that we can be everyone. We can be your teacher or your daughter. We are not going to hide any more."*

*"We refuse to be portrayed as oppressed and powerless victims. Yes, the violence is part of our daily lives, but so is the fellowship, the liberation, the joy. I've never seen myself as the oppressed one. I'm aware that I am less privileged, and I know that there is an authority, an institution, a culture that is oppressing me on a daily basis."*

I want to raise my voice and take action to face the oppression and put an end to it. Our identity is more complex than being gay and oppressed. We have many characteristics that we can communicate and engage within ourselves. We need to promote that internally especially, as there is a lot of hierarchy and internalized homophobia in our own ranks."

One of the biggest nuisances Maikey experiences on a regular basis is the superficial approach of the media to a subject that demands an examination of the complex, but instead is immediately sacrificed on the altar of prejudice.

Each time a journalist from the western or Israeli media talks to Haneen, she hears the same questions: *"How many gay people were killed by their families last year?"* and *"Can you help me find an oppressed gay Palestinian that has suffered an attempted honor killing by his family?"*

*"This is why we have a clear policy not to speak to the media. Whenever I meet a journalist, it's obvious that the article is already written. Try Googling stories about Palestinian gays. I swear they are all identical."*

For that reason, Al Qaws has produced a before-you-write-guide for journalists and human rights activists to shed light on the complexity and cultural diversity within the Palestinian communities -

and to try to put a lid on the victimized portrayal.

*"Many Palestinians perceive themselves as hopeless, helpless victims that can't do anything. But you can, and sometimes even without breaking the rules. Change doesn't have to be creating a women's group in the West Bank or telling your parents you are gay. It can be smaller things within yourself and with your friends. Drive a car, drink a beer, and stop blaming the occupation for all your problems."*

You can see and feel the hatred on the streets of Jerusalem, where Maikey lives. You cannot develop a fake fantasy of living in a center of tolerance. People are racist and violent, and it's impossible to miss. *"I really like it, and I think the occupation is in a sense doing this to me. It's a visual suppression that keeps me remembering why I do, what I do."*

As for her work, vision, action, and the human passion for change, Maikey sees the Israeli occupation as the sheer dynamic behind continued resistance, even while she despises it.

*"To be cynical, it would be a major problem for the occupation to end. It's integrated in ourselves and our struggle to the extent that we cannot disconnect from it. I don't mean to romanticize it, but I wonder if in 60 or 100 years the occupation is gone, how I will redefine my struggles and my identities."*

In the same way - beyond the horrible influences - Maikey sees the wall surrounding the West Bank as an empowering element for the people who are shut in. It makes it physically difficult to meet, and the people cannot go to Tel Aviv to party or meet Haneen at her Jerusalem office, and are forced to face reality alone. *"The less convenient you are, the less you are enjoying privileges, the more radical your actions, and the more you want to create change."*

*"It's risky to be in a convenient place, as you can easily forget what the important things are. I really believe that women will fuel the revolution, that the oppressed people will lead it, not the people sitting and talking about the revolution. I know that I will not do it by myself because I'm sitting in the business district of Jerusalem, but our numbers are growing, we are breaking the rules, doing things out of the box, becoming visible, and people want to be in the front. The rainbow train is leaving. Jump in. Yalla."*

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**P.S.**

\* From Haaretz.com:

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1118197.html>