

Boycotting Equality Forum's Israeli Sponsorship

Thursday 6 September 2012, by [ALPERT Rebecca](#), [FRANKE Katherine](#) (Date first published: 10 May 2012).

This week we were scheduled to speak at the Constitution Center as part of the Equality Forum's 2012 LGBT Summit. Instead we, a rabbi and a law professor, have withdrawn our appearances at the event, disturbed that the Equality Forum, a major mainstream gay rights group, chose Israel as the conference's "featured nation" and gained sponsorship for the 2012 Summit from the Israeli Embassy and Ministry of Tourism.

Why boycott a conference that is celebrating the gay rights record of Israel when Tel Aviv was just voted "the world's best gay city"? Lesbians and gay men have been openly serving in the Israeli military for years, same-sex couples' marriages have been recognized by the state for some time, and Israel has much better sexual orientation discrimination laws than we do. The Israeli Ambassador to the U.S., Michael Oren, often notes: Israel "provides shelter to Palestinian homosexuals seeking safety from Islamists in the West Bank," claiming Israel is a "gay mecca." Ambassador Oren was mistaken when he said that Israel gives asylum to gay and lesbian Palestinians. Israel does not grant asylum to any Palestinians, regardless of their sexual orientation, and in fact won't even let an Israeli who marries a Palestinian share their Israeli citizenship with their spouse. Tel Aviv may have a great gay scene, but most Palestinians will never see it since, regardless of their sexual orientation, they are not allowed to pass through the checkpoints and the Wall to enter Israel from the West Bank.

The Equality Forum's partnership with Israel comes as a key moment in the process to create a just end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and a fair resolution to the claims both sides have to land and sovereignty in this region. Just last week, the U.N. Human Rights Commissioner, Navi Pillay, added Israel to a list of countries that restrict the freedom of domestic human rights groups, and the Israeli government has stepped up the pace of settlement construction to unprecedented levels, despite an international consensus that this encroachment into Palestinian territory violates clearly established international law. It is in this context that we have decided to boycott an event that peels off and celebrates Israel's good gay-rights record rather than locating it within the larger problems that plague Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. The one cannot be separated from the other in our view.

Tel Aviv may have a hot and hunky gay bar scene, but the tolerance or acceptance of homosexuality is not as common elsewhere in the country. Israel, like the United States, is a complex place, and is increasingly religiously conservative. A recent report documents that almost half of the out gays and lesbians serving in the Israeli military have been sexually harassed by other servicemembers, and a member of the Knesset who is also an Education Minister recently said that gays "are not people like everyone else," and that "their lifestyle harms the Jewish people." If you talk to gay and lesbian Palestinians, Israel's reputation as a "gay mecca" in the region becomes more of a myth. Since 2000 Shin Bet, the Israeli security service, has had a policy of blackmailing Palestinians who are gay or who are perceived to be gay and threatening to out them unless they become informants against their own people. For this reason, gay people in Palestine have a reputation as collaborators with Israel—as a result some of the homophobia gays and lesbians in Palestine experience is the direct product of the occupation itself.

Palestinian gays and lesbians have urged the gay community in the United States to become more aware of how we have become an unwitting partner in Israel's efforts to improve its much-criticized human rights record—especially with respect to the Palestinians. Through a policy that some have called “pinkwashing,” Israel has self-consciously sought to rebrand itself as less religious, less militaristic and less hostile, and in so doing wants to deflect attention from the International Court of Justice and UN Human Rights Council's findings that many of Israel's policies with respect to the Palestinians violate international law. Through events such as the Equality Forum's celebration of Israel this week they have enjoined the U.S. gay rights community to become cheerleaders for Israel. It's one thing to express our solidarity with gays and lesbians in another country such as Israel, it's quite another to become pawns in that country's foreign policy strategy.

While it may seem natural for gays to side with Israel—after all they have such good gay rights laws—this support reflects a major weakness of so many human rights movements that tend to prioritize their own struggles without considering the ways in which all forms of discrimination are linked. In Israel/Palestine, gay rights and human rights more broadly are necessarily connected to one another, and treating one domestic minority well does not excuse or diminish the immorality of the state's other rights-abridging policies. Had South Africa enacted good gay rights laws during the Apartheid era no one would have seen that as excusing their treatment of black and colored people.

To uncritically celebrate Israel at a conference organized around notions of equality and liberty, and have Michael Oren serve as the keynote speaker at the “international equality dinner,” is taken as a slap in the face by our queer brothers and sisters in Palestine as well as by the queers within Israel who are actively seeking a just resolution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. By avoiding any programming that offers a balanced view of the human rights record of its “featured nation” the Equality Forum lost an important opportunity to be a leader in the international gay human rights movement, and instead allowed itself to be used as a part of Israel's larger efforts to deflect criticisms of its human rights record.

Rebecca Alpert and Katherine Franke, May 10, 2012

P.S.

* <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/boycotting-equality-forums-israeli-sponsorship>

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