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Israeli State:

No to ‘Brand Israel’ Pinkwashing

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV452 - September 2012 -

Publication date: Thursday 6 September 2012

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Pinkwashing is a strategic campaign by the Israeli state to rebrand itself as a “safe haven” of tolerance for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people and queers. This is part of a systematic and conscious public relations strategy to attempt to portray Israel as a progressive society and thus to divert attention from its systematic human rights abuses against the Palestinians.

Pinkwashing is a component of “Brand Israel” – launched in 2005 after 3 years consultation between the Israeli Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister’s Office and the Finance Ministry with American marketing executives to appear “relevant and modern” instead of militaristic and religious.

Pinkwashing has attempted to sell Tel Aviv as a top tourist destination for LGBTQ people – aiming particularly at men through graphic pictures of “hot” guys in swim suits on golden beaches. In 2010, the Tourism Ministry and Tel Aviv municipality invested $92 million between them in this project of Hasbara (Hebrew for “explanation” or “propaganda”). Since then the Israeli state has continued to pour financial and political resources into this enterprise.

Isn’t it good that Israel supports LGBT rights?

Israel does have some good laws on LGBT rights. But pinkwashing is not aimed at supporting LGBT rights at all but rather to cynically use our struggles for its own end .It promotes the idea that Israel is a great place for all LGBTQ people to try to enlist LGBTQ people outside Israel to defend it and to counter criticism of its occupation of Palestine.

Pinkwashing also plays on islamaphobia, including islamaphobia within LGBTQ communities. It counterpoises “modern”, “civilised” Israel to the supposed sea of reaction around it. In fact 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.

But this fact was no bar to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu telling the US Congress in May 2011 that the Middle East was “a region where women are stoned, gays are hanged, Christians are persecuted.”

Pinkwashing ignores the Palestinian LGBTQ movement, particularly Aswat, Al Qaws and Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions. It instrumentalises Palestine LGBTQ people who if they appear at all do so only as apparently helpless victims.
As Haneen Maikey, director of Al Qaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, says, “When you go through a checkpoint it does not matter what the sexuality of the soldier is”.

The reality that pinkwashing attempts to distract people from includes:

Palestinian citizens of Israel, whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity, are second-class citizens, who face legally sanctioned discrimination and racism in all areas of life. Apartheid in Israel is reflected in institutions such as racially-based family reunification laws, racially-based municipal development practices, racially-based approval of building permits, non-recognition of Palestinian villages, and racially-based inequalities for Palestinian citizens.

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Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank are subjected to collective punishment, restricted freedom of movement, routine human rights abuses, detentions, and checkpoints.
In the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the manifestations of apartheid include Jewish-only roads; Jewish-only housing (i.e. colonies); and the application of different systems of law for Palestinians and Jewish colonists.

LGBT Palestinians in Gaza are living under siege. LGBT Palestinians living under the illegal Israeli occupation suffer alongside the rest of the community, denied basic human rights that we take for granted – such as the right to walk down the street without fear of being shot, the right not to have your own home bulldozed or your land stolen.

As Haneen Maikey points out: “While Palestinians in Israel, Jerusalem, and the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza constitute one community, our different legal statuses and the different realities of each of these locations – including, for example, restrictions on the freedom of movement of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza – severely constrain our ability to meet as a community.”

No Pride in Israeli Apartheid

But while the Israeli state has enormous financial and political resources to conduct its campaign of pinkwashing, it has not done so unchallenged. LGBTQ Palestinians have obviously been at the forefront of this but they have not stood alone. In 2009, when the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association announced an October Conference in Tel Aviv with the goal of promoting Israel as a “world gay destination”, Helem, a Lebanese LGBTQ organization, responded with a call for a boycott. As their call points out:

“Tel-Aviv’s flashy coffee shops and shopping malls, in contrast with the nearby deprived Palestinian villages and towns, serve as evidence that the Israeli society, just as the Israeli state itself, has built walls, blockades and systems of racist segregations to hide from the Palestinians it oppresses. The intersection of physical and societal separations and barriers have justly earned the term apartheid, referring to an historically parallel racist regime in South Africa against the indigenous Black population of that country. Leisure tourism to apartheid Israel supports this regime. It is not neutral, and it certainly is not a step toward real peace, which can only be based on justice.”

Anti-pinkwashing campaigning has also taken off in other places. For example, In Toronto, Canada queer activists started organising around the issue in 2008 and formed Queers Against Israeli Apartheid. In 2009 they successfully resisted attempts by Zionists to have them banned from the World Pride march which took place in that city. In the US, Queers undermining Israeli Terrorism has been active for around five years.

In Portugal there has been campaigning by LGBTQ and other pro-Palestine activists against the acceptance of Israeli sponsorship for the annual LGBT film festival in Lisbon. In 2010, Canadian film maker John Greyson withdrew his film after learning of the sponsorhip saying:

“As both Palestinian and Portuguese queer activists have pointed out, this funding violates the 2005 call of Palestinian civil society, which urges artists and academics of conscience to boycott the Israeli state, in protest against the ongoing occupation.”
In 2011 the organisers of the festival Queer Lisboa dropped the sponsorship in a victory for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaigners.

In Britain, the fact that World Pride was being held in London in July 2012 was a spur for a number of activists to come together to set up a no to pinkwashing

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group to raise awareness of the issue. The main focus of the group so far has been to make solidarity with LGBTQ Palestinians visible at World Pride – which we did through handing out “No to Pinkwashing” cards and carrying Palestinian flags and anti-pinkwashing placards. Hundreds of people took postcards and the reception we got was overwhelmingly positive. But the highlight of the day came at the festival at Trafalgar Square after the march. As Israeli performers tried to put over classic pinkwashing messages we waved a sea of Palestinian flags and placards – and MC Gok Wan tweeted a photo showing this which was seen by hundreds of thousands. Later, GLF campaigner Frankie Green took the stage together with other veterans of the first London Pride in 1972, wearing a Free Palestine T-shirt.

On an international level, Pinkwashing will be a key focus of discussion at the next World Social Forum on the topic of Free Palestine to be held in Porto Allegre in Brazil in November 2012. This will be an important opportunity for anti-pinkwashing activists to come together internationally and share experiences of our successes and challenges. Say no to pinkwashing and stand in solidarity with Palestinian LGBTQ organizations and with the Palestinian people.

For further information see;

no to pinkwashing

no to pinkwashing britain

Sarah Schulman on the history of pinkwashing

From Socialist Resistance

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