

**Palestine**

**Not so glad to be gay**

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**It is getting harder for gay Palestinians to seek refuge in Israel or abroad**

Reuters



ONE time, high heels and a wig saved Imad from prison. The 22-year-old from the West Bank capital, Ramallah, had been caught in Jerusalem without a permit. On the way to the jail, the police asked him and his friend why they had sneaked into town. As his friend shrivelled up with shame, Imad (not his real name) proudly told them he had come to perform at the Shushan, Jerusalem's only gay bar. He opened his bag and flourished his outfit with a bristle of sequins. The police, realising that they had caught a couple of drag queens instead of a couple of terrorists, let them go with a warning never to return. "And two days later," recounts Imad with a gleam in his eye, "I was back, even in the same café where they arrested me."

But getting back is becoming harder. Israel is rapidly filling in the remaining gaps in its West Bank wall-cum-fence. Recently it took Imad some seven hours to make the usual one-hour journey from Ramallah to Tel Aviv. Soon his drag career, which has rocketed at gay clubs all over Israel (see picture), will be cut short.

Gay Palestinians have long been sneaking into Israel to enjoy a freedom unknown in their own, much more conservative, society. And despite persistent rows such as whether to allow gay-pride marches in Jerusalem—legislators this week voted, on a first reading, to let the city ban them to avoid offending ultra-Orthodox Jews—Israel likes to promote its reputation for tolerance. Three years ago the Zionist Organisation of America imported some gay Palestinians, complete with disguises and fake names (or perhaps they were all the same man—it was hard to tell) for a pro-Israel college lecture tour. Israel's main gay-rights group, known as the Aguda, has been working quietly with the government and the tourist industry for three years to promote gay tourism—though a recent newspaper report about the campaign scared the tourism ministry into denying any such campaign.

But despite relatively progressive laws, says Yoav Sivan, a young Israeli gay activist, Israel's liberalism is more selective than its politicians make out. Over the past 12 years some 60 gay Palestinians have asked the Aguda for help getting asylum because their lives are in danger back home. Hardly a flood—but Israel has not granted one request. Nor will it give residence permits to those with steady Israeli partners, as it routinely does to its citizens' same-sex partners from other countries. At best, says the Aguda, it lets the Palestinians stay a while to seek refuge elsewhere.

Other states also show little sympathy. Only 20 of the 60 have won asylum abroad. The rest are in jail or living illegally in Israel, as are hundreds more who have not even sought asylum as it means losing any chance of returning home. Samir (not his real name either) has just run out of time on his latest three-month visa and risks rapid deportation if caught. But after eight years with his Israeli partner, he says, "I'm not going to leave now."

Israel does give asylum to Palestinians whose lives are at risk—for collaborating with Israel's Shin Bet intelligence service. And sometimes the Shin Bet blackmails gay Palestinians into working for it by threatening to expose them—as does Palestinian intelligence, for that matter. So Palestinians known to be gay are invariably suspected of being collaborators too—which puts them in even greater danger.