

THE LAST WORD

WITH STEPHEN MEYLER

IS IT ALRIGHT TO GO ON A GAY PRESS TRIP TO TEL AVIV WHILE DE FACTO APARTHEID IS BEING PRACTICED THERE?

#Pinkwashing



In June there was criticism a group of media people, including some from Ireland, who went on a press trip to Israel. They were there courtesy of the tourism promoter for Tel Aviv, which has been spending a \$90 million budget on marketing the seaside city as a destination for LGBT travel from the UK, Germany and latterly, Ireland. Israeli media often describes us as one of the least friendly European countries – apparently we're more often pro-Palestine.

Tel Aviv is the focus of Israel's gay community, more tolerant than conservative Jerusalem, with a scene centred on the so-called 'Bubble', a modern, fun-loving, frappuccino sort of place, albeit one that's just 70km from Gaza.

These initiatives are supported by the influential International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA), which held a tourism conference in Tel Aviv in 2009. It's part of a long-running campaign, 'Brand Israel', that aims to change perceptions of the country, especially in the US, which supports Israel to the tune of \$3 billion or so in military aid each year. Unsurprisingly, pollsters commissioned by Brand Israel found a perception of Israel as a militarised Middle Eastern state that most Americans wouldn't choose to visit.

Targeting gays to help change that has been christened 'pinkwashing', with the suggestion that the portrayal of Israel as a gay-tolerant destination distracts from other, less positive images: Look! We have gay rights, therefore we must be a progressive place in other respects – a notion that many gay people seem receptive to and willing to disseminate among their friends.

Israel appears a more gay-friendly place than any of the Muslim majority countries around it – Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt and indeed, Palestine. It has equality legislation; doesn't go in for religious-inspired persecution and murder of gays; tolerates them in its military; and in Tel Aviv at least, there's an active gay scene.

Pride was celebrated in Tel Aviv in early June, attended by quite a few Irish gays, who looked like they were having a great time with all those sexy Israeli boys. It might seem, in fact, that promoting Israel to the gays is an easy sell, and anyone carping about press trips is just bitching about journalists getting freebies or are anti-Semitic. Our willing co-option by Brand Israel can only help with promoting gay rights in that part of the world in the long-term, right?

Of course, that story runs smoothly only if you choose to ignore how Israel treats Palestinians, both the ones who are nominally its citizens and the Palestinians who live in zones defined by walls, checkpoints, land clearances and military patrols – homelands, really. The apartheid analogy has been made by many,

from Desmond Tutu, Alice Walker and Jimmy Carter, to Irish peace activist Máiread Maguire.

There are plenty of people in Israel who make the comparison too. In 2003, following a number of suicide bombings by Islamist and Palestinian terrorists, a law was passed to stop citizens of states the Israeli government said had helped the bombers – the likes of Afghanistan, Syria and Pakistan – from gaining citizenship or residency permits on the basis of marriage to an Israeli citizen, whether they be Arab or Jewish. That might seem reasonable, when people are blowing themselves up on buses and in cafés, but the law has been massively used to restrict the freedoms conferred by the Israeli Constitution on Palestinian Israelis.

Although it was an emergency measure, it's been extended every year since. After a 2006 extension vote was passed, the Chief Justice, Aharon Barak, who voted against it, said: "This violation of rights is directed against Arab citizens of Israel. As a result, the law is a violation of the right of Arab citizens in Israel to equality."

Many other Israeli politicians, commentators and activists compare this citizenship law, as well as their government's policies regarding land ownership, mandatory ID cards, restriction of movement and education – all of which impact in discriminatory ways on Palestinians – as evidence of a de facto apartheid system.

Not many gay visitors leave the 'Bubble'. They have a week or two of harmless fun in the sun that serves a notion that Israel is an oasis of liberal tolerance surrounded by a 'desert' of violent, homophobic enemies.

Is that true? Yes, homophobia is pervasive in Palestine, but there are gays and lesbians there, many of them involved in organisations striving to achieve the same freedom from persecution that we've so quickly come to take for granted here. If, as Palestinian citizens of Israel, they want to go to Pride events in Tel Aviv, their access is at the discretion of the IDF and its heavily armed, jumpy conscripts at security checkpoints. Palestinian gays are ignored in the Israeli 'oasis of tolerance' story.

How true is that, anyway? Outside the trendy parts of Tel Aviv, Israel is a conservative society. Although conservative Orthodox Jews – collectively known as Haredi – are a minority in Israel, their political parties have been an essential support to the Netanyahu government. Their views on homosexuality are extreme and a law that allows them to pursue religious education instead of military service is a growing source of tension.

Is it right to go on press trips to gay Tel Aviv? Perhaps, if it includes a visit to Palestine, perhaps via one of those checkpoints and the freedom to meet Palestinian gays. Otherwise, it seems like a questionable PR exercise.