



**'You don't know Hamas': What gay Israelis think about anti-Israel protests**

## Israel is a safe haven for LGBTQ in the Middle East. Gay men in Tel Aviv say Western queer activism that glorifies Hamas is wrong

By Adam Zivo

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178 Comments

At a trendy cafe in the bohemian Florentin district of Tel Aviv, Niv Nissim, a 30-year-old gay Israeli, described the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas as “maybe the worst moment for everyone who lives in Israel.” He spoke of an acquaintance who perished at the Nova Festival massacre. “He went to dance and he was murdered. Most of the people that got murdered and kidnapped are people with the same values that I have — peace advocates,” Nissim said.

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He was shocked to see international queer activists glorify Hamas in the immediate aftermath of the Oct. 7 massacre. “They don’t know what Hamas is. They think Hamas is like a group of superheroes — and that’s the thing. It’s a terror organization. Same as al-Qaida,” Nissim said. “For gay people around the world to be pro-Hamas right now is crazy. And it’s wrong.”



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and carried “Queers for Palestine” banners alongside rainbow Palestinian flags. Claiming that queer and Palestinian advocacy are inextricably linked, they minimized the brutality of Hamas, who they portrayed as freedom fighters.

*What are we going to do now? What can we do?  
 How could we fight for human rights (in Gaza)  
 after what happened?*

NIV NISSIM, TALKING ABOUT OCTOBER 7

Their behaviour ignited a global debate about western queer activism. Commentators noted that not only does Hamas murder gay people, Israel is the only country in the Middle East that supports queer rights. Was it not delusional for activists to side with Hamas?

And what exactly did people mean when they shouted, “Queers for Palestine”? For some, the slogan represented a principled commitment to the human rights of the Palestinian people, without supporting Hamas. But for others, it meant the dismantling of the Israeli state, which implies the ethnic cleansing of millions of Jews, and the glorification Hamas’s war crimes.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Throughout this debate, the everyday lives of LGBTQ Israelis and Palestinians — their fears, trauma and triumphs — were largely ignored. In May, I visited Tel Aviv through a trip sponsored by the non-profit Exigent Foundation, a Jewish group that focuses on public education. Arriving a few days early, I independently spoke with queer people in the city to find out what their lives were really like, what they thought of the war and how they felt about western activists’ views on the conflict.

I interviewed four gay Israeli men, each with distinct experiences and perspectives. They were by no means a comprehensive cross-section of Israel’s LGBTQ community, but they opened a window into their world. Amid tight timelines, I was unable to secure interviews with gay Palestinians, who can be notoriously difficult to track down because they fear revealing themselves, so as an imperfect substitute, I asked my Israeli interviewees to share their insights on them.

These are their stories.

## Actors and meteors

Niv Nissim is an actor who gained moderate fame after starring in “Sublet,” a 2020 Israeli film about a gay travel writer who rents an apartment from a film student. Unsparing in its depiction of gay hookup culture, the widely acclaimed film could not possibly have been made anywhere else in the Middle East.

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Nissim said he has not personally experienced homophobia in Israel. “I’m not scared of walking hand-in-hand with my partner,” he said, before clarifying this was likely because he lives in Tel Aviv, which exists within its own cosmopolitan bubble. Homosexuals from across the country, indeed the entire world, flock to the city, with official statistics suggesting that roughly a quarter of the local population identifies as LGBTQ.



Niv Nissim, a 30-year-old actor and a gay Persian-Israeli living in Tel Aviv in May 2024. He says he empathizes with Palestinians notes they are a “big part” of the city’s underground queer scene.

Gay life is different in Israel’s smaller towns, as well as in Jerusalem, which is known for being religious and conservative. In those places, being openly gay could sometimes be “frightening,” he said, because of the possibility that religious Arabs or Orthodox Jews might beat you. Still, he said he felt extremely lucky to be Israeli considering the lethal homophobia elsewhere in the Middle East. His own family had fled from Iran, where being gay is legally punishable by death.

Palestinians are “a big part” of Tel Aviv’s gay community, Nissim said. One of his close friends is a Palestinian fashion designer who organizes parties in the city’s underground voguing scene (voguing is a flamboyant style of dance closely associated with queer culture). “It’s not even a weird thing. We don’t look at them as different or something,” he said.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Many gay Palestinian men, facing violence back home, escape into Israel to live in relative safety. Organizations across the country help them find shelter and get back on their feet (the same services are also provided to queer people fleeing Orthodox Jewish families). “If you are a gay person who needs help, no matter where you come from, you’ll get help,” said Nissim.

He said he was unaware of any serious anti-Palestinian racism in Tel Aviv’s queer scene. “(It is) really weird if someone will be racist here in the gay community.” Nissim is a Persian-Israeli, and while the relationship between the Ashkenazis (European-descent Jews) and Mizrahis (Middle Eastern-descent Jews) may have been fraught decades ago, everyone is now quite “blended.”

*For gay people around the world to be pro-Hamas right now is crazy. And it’s wrong.*

NIV NISSIM, 30, ACTOR

Like many artists, Nissim and his friends are politically progressive and empathize with the Palestinians. “It’s not a real life. They don’t have real rights. They can’t go anywhere. Kind of open-air prisoners,” he said. For much of his life, he advocated for Palestinian self-determination within the framework of a two-state solution. “We wanted to say, enough with the oppression. Enough with the war — both sides — let’s not advocate war. Let’s advocate peace.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Under the leadership of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Nissim said artistic productions that criticized the government or featured positive Israeli-Arab relationships — “impossible love stories,” he described them — faced increasing censorship. Over time, he and other Israelis came to see Netanyahu and his allies as corrupt and autocratic. “It was starting to look like a very Third World country.”

In a bid to stay in power, Netanyahu formed a coalition government with several ultranationalist and ultra-Orthodox parties in November 2022. Two months later, the new government announced its intention to impose controversial reforms that would curtail the independence and influence of the country’s judiciary.

While Israelis rebelled against Netanyahu’s reforms in nationwide protests, many within the LGBTQ community worried their rights would be rolled back. Nissim said it is rare to find gay supporters of the present government; it’s like “shooting yourself in the leg,” he said.

Neither same-sex nor interfaith couples can marry within Israel, as only religious marriages can be conducted in the country. However, Israel fully recognizes international civil marriages, including same-sex marriages, so queer Israelis simply tie the knot abroad. Some of these marriages occur over Zoom, through a legal loophole that allows officiants in Utah to provide virtual ceremonies to couples anywhere in the world — these marriages are quick, cheap and valid under U.S. law. Fearing Netanyahu’s coalition partners might restrict same-sex marriage rights, Nissim and his boyfriend decided to get a “Utah marriage” last year, just in case.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Then Oct. 7 happened, and the political tumult of the preceding months was, briefly, vaporized. In recent weeks, large protests against Netanyahu's coalition government have resumed, especially in Tel Aviv.

Like the rest of Israeli society, a chasm now exists within Tel Aviv's gay community — one side calls for a ceasefire and the other supports Netanyahu's plans to fully eradicate Hamas, whatever the cost. Nissim supports the first camp, though he could see both sides.

His heart was filled with uncertainty. He said he used to chant, "Free Palestine," but now felt he no longer had the right to do so while there were still hostages in Gaza. "What are we going to do now? What can we do? How could we fight for human rights after what happened? How can we do it?" he asked.

He understood the hate by both Palestinians and Israelis. "What happened was the worst thing — for me, for them, for everyone. Killing and raping and burning and taking people. And not only people, like good people, who fight for peace. It's the worst thing ... When gay people wanted our rights to be given to us, we didn't burn buildings or kidnap people. We didn't kill people. We shouted and we went to the streets. We protested for our rights and for peace," he said.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Nissim has learned to adapt to the heightened tensions of war. When Iran launched hundreds of drones and missiles at Israel in April, he and his boyfriend simply sat outside and watched the Iron Dome shoot them down. They looked like meteors or shooting stars. “It’s surreal, but this is our life here. You have to develop some kind of rough skin. And just somehow be cool.”

## A soldier finds his home

Michael Tubur, a 31-year-old gay soldier with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), sits at a sunlit park, recounting his experiences evacuating wounded soldiers from Gaza last October and November. “It’s very difficult to do surgery on the field. Our job was just to give them the first aid, just to stop the bleeding and stuff, and take them outside very fast,” he said, smiling often.

It took two weeks for Tubur’s unit to enter the Gaza Strip, as the IDF had to ensure that the surrounding Israeli land had been cleared of Hamas fighters. By that point, Gaza had been heavily bombed. The destruction was unlike anything he had ever seen before.

One of the first things the IDF did was take everyone’s phones away. Hamas had used fake social media accounts featuring stolen photos of beautiful women, to install spyware on Israeli soldiers’ devices, allowing them to eavesdrop and track their locations. For three weeks, Tubur was completely cut off from the world. The situation was tense and uncertain, and he felt afraid.

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“At the beginning, we thought that we are going to see an actual army. And we discovered it’s not going to be like that. They went into the tunnels. You don’t know where they’re going to come out from,” he said.

Hamas fighters would ambush soldiers with rocket launchers or guns and then melt away. After these attacks, it was imperative for the Israelis to confirm whether they were being lured into a trap. On several occasions, Hamas purposely used smaller assaults to attract medics and then

followed up with larger, lethal bombardments. Tubur's unit would wait on standby, keys in the ignition, ready to race in once they knew the situation was reasonably safe.

*Suddenly you saw gay warriors and commanders, like major commanders, people who were in the intelligence, in the Air Force, in everything. Then you saw gay guys who were killed.*

MICHAEL TUBUR, 31, SOLDIER

“You just act. You don't have time to think. Someone else's life is on the line,” he said. “There were days that nothing happened — and you're just sitting and doing nothing. And days when everything went from zero to 100, and I was just dying to go back inside the sleeping bag and close my eyes.”

He maintained the IDF did its best to minimize civilian casualties amid a “very, very complicated situation.”

At the beginning of the war, Israeli soldiers would automatically attack unknown individuals within a 400-metre radius around them, he said, but the response to anyone further away was scrutinized and debated. To protect civilians, that radius was later reduced to 50 metres. That meant Hamas fighters could freely roam nearby so long as they were unarmed and pretended to be non-combatants. These fighters would then access weapons caches hidden throughout Gaza, launch lone-wolf ambushes, and then abandon their weapons and pretend once again to be regular Palestinians.


STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“So, then the mission became much harder. And the progress was very, very slow — because now you need to move house by house, building by building, and make sure there is no weapons there,” said Tubur. Sometimes the IDF would miss caches or tunnels, which allowed Hamas to attack from behind.

While critics, including the International Court of Justice, claimed that Israel is committing “genocide,” Tubur found this accusation perplexing. If that was true, he said, the IDF could have simply been ordered to “just bomb everything,” rather than commit to a complicated ground operation at the cost of Israeli lives.

“I’m very sad that people got killed — children and mothers. But it’s a war and war is complicated. Everyone wants to do the best and try to make as less casualties as they can.”

Tubur, who has Arab friends, believed that Israelis and Palestinians could peacefully coexist. But this would require Palestinian imams to embrace more moderate interpretations of Islam, he said.

 Michael Tubur, a 31-year-old gay soldier with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), shown in Tel Aviv in May 2024. He spoke about his experiences in Gaza and the effect the war has had on Israel's LGBTQ community.

Michael Tubur, a 31-year-old gay soldier with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), shown in Tel Aviv in May 2024. He hopes the Israel-Hamas war at least helps conservative families broaden their perceptions of the LGBTQ community and be more accepting of their gay sons.

In some ways, he was grateful for the war and how it helped show traditional Israelis that gay men deserve equal rights as they are “equal in death.” Many traditionalists believed that queer people simply party in Tel Aviv, parade naked on the streets and disregard everyone else’s troubles, Tubur said. “Then suddenly you saw gay warriors and commanders, like major commanders, people who were in the intelligence, in the Air Force, in everything. Then you saw gay guys who were killed.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Shattering stereotypes is important for Tubur. He came from a religious family that had never seen a gay person until he came out of the closet. They thought all LGBTQ people were drag queens or transgender, which made it hard for him to accept himself. He struggled to reconcile his homosexuality with his masculine persona and some of the traditional values he cherished, such as starting a family.

When he finally came out at age 26, his parents assumed he was a “special gay,” because he didn’t fit the stereotype. Over time, they met his gay friends, including some in the military, and realized they were just people.

Tubur hoped the war would help other conservative families broaden their perceptions of what it meant to be LGBTQ, and make it easier for them to accept their gay sons. “There was a story about someone (who) was in the closet and got killed. And his boyfriend posted a letter where he said, ‘I cannot tell you your name. But I miss you so much. And I cannot share it with anyone because you’re in the closet.’ When I read it, I was crying, because how can someone bear this kind of pain by himself?”

Military service is mandatory for almost all Israelis, which makes the IDF a microcosm of wider society: progressives and conservatives serve side by side. During the quieter days in Gaza, Tubur and his comrades spent hours talking and learning about their lives. “You are a unit, and you need to sit next to each other, be with each other. You don’t have any other option,” he said.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

He recalled a fellow soldier, an Orthodox Jew, who told him that being gay was unnatural. Rather than take offence, Tubur talked things out with him. They did not agree on many issues, Tubur said, but they developed an understanding.

“He still doesn’t accept the way I live, but now he knows how it is. He knows what it means. He knows how it feels. I think that, in the long term, this thing’s done very good. Because when the war will be over, people will go to their houses, people will go to other places, but they are a different person — you understand?”


“This time, he won’t be so against the gays. He will think a little bit before he will shout,” Tubur said.

## The filmmaker and gay Palestinians

Yariv Mozer, a documentary filmmaker in his 40s, met me at the Haaliya Community Country, a new recreational building that acts as a de facto hub for Tel Aviv’s LGBTQ community. Rainbow flags hung above the pool and the gym was packed with gay men. As we entered, a trans woman who helped manage the place welcomed us warmly.

Ten years ago, Mozer directed a documentary, “[The Invisible Men](#),” which followed the lives of three gay Palestinians who had fled to Israel and then found asylum in the west. Through this film and other projects, he is keenly aware of the challenges gay Palestinian men face.

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 Yariv Mozer, a documentary filmmaker in his 40s, at the Haaliya Community Country in Tel Aviv, in May 2024. He spoke about his experiences being gay in Israel and the effect the war has had on Israel's LGBTQ community.

Yariv Mozer, a documentary filmmaker in his 40s, at the Haaliya Community Country in Tel Aviv, in May 2024. He is in favour of a two-state solution that has nothing to do with Hamas. "Hamas is a brutal, extreme, fundamentalist religious group, which believes in the power of violence to achieve their goals."

Not only is Palestinian culture deeply religious and conservative, Mozer explained, but communities are also organized into sprawling tribes where a family's reputation is paramount. "You can be gay, so long as no one knows about it. But if someone will catch you or see you, or

you will be exposed as being gay, this can harm the honour of the family. So you hear a lot about honour killings and punishments.”

These murders are tolerated by local authorities and occur in parallel to state-backed violence against sexual minorities. One of the characters in Mozer’s film was tied up by his father after his family learned of his homosexuality. The man escaped with his life, but not before his father sliced his face with a knife, leaving him with a permanent scar.

Mozer said both Israeli and Palestinian security forces prey upon the vulnerability of gay Palestinians and blackmail them into acting as intelligence assets. “A lot of men are very much afraid of being openly gay or being suspected as gays, because they will know that they can be exploited by both sides.” Mozer recalled the story of one of his interviewees who the Palestinian Authority had suspected was a gay collaborator. They interrogated him for hours, beat him and held his head in a toilet.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Caught between violent relatives and predatory security forces, many gay Palestinians from the West Bank flee to Israel for safety (those in Gaza, where the borders are sealed, escape to Egypt). But even in Israeli cities, they cannot breathe easily. In 2022, a 22-year-old gay Palestinian man, Ahmad Abu Marhia, was kidnapped into the West Bank and beheaded — he was waiting to emigrate to Canada at the time of his murder.

The Israeli government has historically refused to grant asylum to queer Palestinians, out of fear that could lead to a flood of false claimants, said Mozer. In recognition of the genuine dangers this population faces, the government instead issues temporary residency permits on humanitarian grounds, which must be renewed several times a year.

Approximately 90 Palestinians hold such permits but, until 2022, they were not allowed to legally work, which forced many of them to survive in the underground economy, particularly the sex trade. Those who cannot secure these permits often choose to simply live undocumented, as illegal migrants.

With such a precarious existence, many of these queer Palestinians eventually seek asylum in the West. But in February, the Tel Aviv Court for Administrative Affairs ruled that Palestinians fleeing persecution based on sexual orientation or gender expression are now eligible for full asylum. The wider implications of this decision, including on third-country asylum claims, remains unclear.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

While filming his documentary, Mozer found that gay Palestinians were “very much isolated, with a very small group of people that they could trust.” He said they were often afraid of meeting or dating Israelis because of issues with racism. He speculated that Nissim’s contradictory experience might be a generational difference.

*Hamas represents humanity in the most darkest times of our history. That is Hamas. No freedom for women. No equal rights for LGBTQ.*

YARIV MOZER, DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER

Mozer is empathetic to the Palestinians, but has a scathing hatred of Hamas. “I’m in favour of a two-state solution. That has nothing to do with Hamas. Hamas is a brutal, extreme,

fundamentalist religious group, which believes in the power of violence to achieve their goals.”

Seeing Western queer activists romanticize Hamas in the aftermath of Oct. 7 felt like a betrayal to him. “I see it and I’m amazed. How stupid are you? You are building them to become a legitimate part of this world ... It’s shocking,” he said.

“You’re almost unable to be openly gay in Ramallah. So, you want to be openly gay in Gaza? No way. That’s the most extreme religious society in this area of the world.”

The activists are not helping the Palestinian cause, he said, and in fact, are making the situation worse through their embrace of extreme and polarizing rhetoric. “Wake up to understand that you don’t share values with those people. Hamas represents humanity in the most darkest times of our history. That is Hamas. No freedom for women. No equal rights for LGBTQ. All the things that we value as democratic countries — freedom of speech, freedom of art, music, dance. All of this doesn’t exist there.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Mozer is now working on a [documentary that follows 15 survivors](#) of the Nova Festival massacre, one of whom is gay. Upon reviewing the footage shot by Hamas’s fighters, he noticed that some of the terrorists repeatedly jeered “omo, omo, omo” — homosexual — at captured male Israelis who had piercings or earrings. “It’s a small moment that explains so much about Hamas and the way they treat gay men,” he said.

Mozer did not have kind words to say about Netanyahu, either. He called his far-right coalition “one of the most negative things that happened to our country. It’s a mixture of all the evil and bad things that this country could bring together in one government.”

The pool at the Haaliya Community Country in Tel Aviv, Israel, a new recreational building that acts as a de facto hub for the city's LGBTQ community.

The pool at the Haaliya Community Country in Tel Aviv, Israel, a new recreational building that acts as a hub for Tel Aviv's LGBTQ community.

Mozer came out of the closet in the 2000s, when the Israeli LGBTQ community was bursting into the mainstream. He is grateful for the generations before him who, through persistent legal activism, set the stage for LGBTQ acceptance in the late 1980s and 1990s. “A lot of gay men had to sue the country for their own equal rights,” he said.

While he has seen LGBTQ rights steadily improve, he believed influential ministers in the Netanyahu government wanted to undo some of that progress. “They wanted to make a big legal revolution in Israel and change a lot of things and take them backwards. They didn’t succeed because there were a lot of protests,” he said.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Mozer said that most of Israel's queer community falls within the political centre-left, like himself. While the country's conservatives want to erode LGBTQ rights, the far left is anti-Zionist and does not support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. "I see myself as Zionist. My grandparents came here from the Holocaust. I truly believe that this is the right place for Jews to live independently, but not at the expense of the Palestinian people."


Amid war, debates about social policy have temporarily taken a back seat for many Israelis. "Now, the main goal of all of us is to bring (the hostages) back home, stop the war, go into ceasefire. It's this goal that is above everything," said Mozer.

## A drag legend gives up

Tal Kallai, one of Israel's most famous drag queens, who performs under the name "Talula Bonet," talks on a patio beside the Tel Aviv Municipal LGBT Community Centre, The conversation is repeatedly interrupted by gay men who greet and hug him.

Kallai was born and raised in Jerusalem, where, despite its conservative reputation, had a vibrant gay scene in the early 2000s. He wanted to be an actor as a teenager, but found that theatre roles for women were much more interesting than those for men. At age 16, he saw his first drag show at a gay bar and fell in love with the art form.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

 Tal Kallai, one of Israel's most well-known drag queens, who performs under the name Talula Bonet. He spoke about his experiences being gay in Israel and the effect the war has had on Israel's LGBTQ community.

Tal Kallai is one of Israel's most well-known drag queens, Talula Bonet. He is surprised that there are Western queer activists who support Hamas: "You are supporting a movement that the first thing it will do is kill you because you're queer — you're so stupid."

At first, drag was just a hobby for him — one he continued to develop after moving to Tel Aviv to study at the Nissan Nativ Acting Studio. Then he was scouted by a local producer to do professional performances in the city, so he and three other drag queens from Jerusalem created a troupe called the Holy Wigs.