

POPULAR: Radio Beirut in the Mar Mikhael area of the city draws a mixed crowd

SMALL STEPS TOWARDS QUEER RIGHTS ARE BEING TAKEN IN LEBANON BUT VIOLENCE AGAINST LGBT+ PEOPLE STILL GOES UNPUNISHED, WHILE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WITH POLITICAL POWER CONTINUE TO RAIL AGAINST HOMOSEXUALITY. CONFLICTING IDEOLOGIES WITHIN THE GAY COMMUNITY ARE NOT HELPING EITHER...

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# A ray of light

While at Amsterdam Pride last year, Hadi Damien knew it was time his home celebrated its inaugural Pride. But the city he had in mind isn't in Europe, America or any other part of the world known for its wide-ranging liberal attitudes.

However, 10 months later, about 4,000 people attended Beirut Pride's eight-day programme of poetry readings, fashion workshops, drag performances, film screenings and parties. Bars in the hip Mar Mikhael neighbourhood raised the Beirut Pride flag in support and by halfway through the week all the event's official wristbands had gone.

"I was astonished to see people so supportive," Hadi says. "I knew it

would be a success but I never knew it would be this successful."

One might wonder why Pride had never been celebrated in Lebanon before. After all, Beirut is often hailed as a liberal oasis in the Middle East, home to a vibrant gay scene, vocal activists and LGBT+ organisations that function much more openly than in many neighbouring countries.

But at the centre of Lebanon's queer struggle is Article 534 of the penal code, which prosecutes "sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature."

This ambiguous wording might suggest sexual activity for any purpose other than procreation (oral sex, masturbation, sex with contraceptives) could be considered a criminal offence,

but invariably it is Lebanon's gay community that suffers.

Prosecutions made under Article 534 are becoming less common and several courts have ruled recently that the article should not apply to consensual same-sex activity.

However, the lack of defined legal protection means LGBT+ people are still vulnerable to discriminatory interpretations of the law, while violence against its members — often perpetrated by or on the behalf of the authorities — goes unpunished.

A report recently published by the civil rights group Proud Lebanon documents alarming levels of mistreatment and abuse by police and other national authorities, with queer people repeatedly targeted, arrested

on insubstantial grounds, bullied, humiliated and physically hurt in police custody.

**FURNITURE DESIGNER NAJI RAJI** tells me how he was held by the police in 2008 when a gay pornographic movie was found on his laptop. It took five years of legal battles and a \$4,000 (£3,000) fine for him to avoid a prison sentence, with the help of a gay rights group called Helem. The incident continues to leave a "stain" on 29-year-old Naji, affecting his professional life.

In another case, 25-year-old bar manager Léa Freiha and her girlfriend were victims of an attempted rape in November 2016. The assailant escaped, stealing their car. But rather

than trying to find and convict the attacker, the police mocked, intimidated and sexually harassed the couple. "They didn't even bother looking for the car," says Lea, "they were only interested in our sexuality."

Even more recently, just a month after Beirut Pride, Sasha Elijah was

detained by police who claimed that, as a trans woman, she was unlawfully concealing her true identity.

Sasha, 20, knows being trans is not a crime and after several hours at the police station, lawyers sent by Proud Lebanon and Helem secured her release.

She is encouraged by the fact that the rights group and lawyers were able to help her. It's a sign of progress, she says. "But we still have a lot of work to do," she adds. "We have to work on changing the law because there is still zero protection for LGBT+ people."

Sasha is now using her modelling career to help advance the movement. By gaining visibility as a trans model across Lebanon, the Middle East and Europe, she is proud to act as a positive

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HADI



**BATTLE:** Naji fought the law for five years after gay porn was found on his laptop

ambassador, reaching out to and empowering others. But visibility is not without its risks. “I’m very exposed,” she says. “There aren’t many trans people in the Middle East doing what I’m doing. I never know when I might come across some transphobic people.”

**SASHA FELT THIS ACUTELY** on International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia this year, when a conference at which she was speaking, organised by Proud Lebanon and falling at the start of Beirut Pride week, was cancelled by its host venue following pressure from religious groups and a lack of protection against protestors.

This incident turned out to be one of the pivotal controversies to emerge from Beirut Pride — organiser Hadi was criticised for failing to speak out against the security forces that refused to protect Proud Lebanon’s conference.

The criticisms are part of a wider concern from the LGBT+ community that Beirut Pride did not send a strong enough political message to the country’s decision makers about how dissatisfied and impatient queer people are for change.

The initial wording of Hadi’s mission statements used the word “apolitical” in outlining the intentions of the event, which sat uncomfortably with many.

But Hadi insists you don’t have to describe something as political for it to be political. “You can’t really organise a protest,” he says. “A protest has to evolve from the momentum of the people. And there is no Pride in the world that is not political, or not a protest in itself.”

**“You can’t really organise a protest. A protest has to evolve from the momentum of the people. No Pride in the world is not political” HADI**

Indeed, a Gay Pride event is not itself necessarily a signal of progress. Activists in Uganda have managed to hold similar events for many years, in spite of a poor human rights environment for LGBT+ people. India also sees significant Pride marches, despite same-sex relations being illegal. And, on the flip side, even though Turkey does not actually criminalise homosexuality, Istanbul’s Gay Pride in June was violently shut down by police. So, it’s normal to want to ensure the political effectiveness of Beirut Pride. Moreover, many in Beirut want to avoid mimicking a certain model

of Pride — revolving around drinking, dancing, drugs and nudity — not to mention so-called pink-washing by some corporations and governments in cities around the world. But parties and sex are largely what drive the reputation of Beirut as the gay paradise of the Middle East. This glamorisation of ‘Gay-rut’ in the eyes of Western tourists is ultimately driven by consumption and associated with privilege, failing to recognise the persisting social and legal vulnerability of many queer people, particularly the less economically fortunate.

It’s a view shared by Hamed Sinno, the gay lead singer of Lebanese indie band Mashrou’ Leila, who believes that “once you start defining queer liberation as your ability to consume, you’re limiting the thing.”

Hamed has quickly become one of the country’s most prominent LGBT+ spokesmen. He tells me how bad his Arabic was when he was younger, which is surprising, given that today the band sings exclusively in that language.



**DISCRIMINATION:** Police claimed that as a trans woman, Sasha was trying to hide her true identity

**“We still have a lot of work to do on changing the law because there is still zero protection for the LGBT+ community” SASHA**



**ATTACKED:** The police were less interested in finding the man who tried to rape Léa Freiha than her sexuality

Growing up, Hamed didn’t listen to much Arabic music. “A lot of it was hard for me to access or relate to. It was at college that I realised this was a bit of a class marker.”

Lebanon’s division between French and Arabic speakers is intrinsically linked to socio-economic class. Hamed (the son of a Jordanian mother, raised in Italy and Germany, and a Lebanese father, who spent a large part of his life in America) attended a school where “everyone was disgustingly wealthy” and where Arabic was not just poorly taught but actively discouraged.

Hamed reacted against Lebanon’s language divisions by choosing Arabic as the language of his songs. “I didn’t

want to make music that would just be listened to by the bourgeoisie of Beirut,” he explains.

**UNDERSTANDING THESE SOCIAL DELINEATIONS** is crucial to the LGBT+ rights movement. They are among the key concerns of Proud Lebanon and groups such as Helem and the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality. Getting ready for Proud Lebanon’s weekly community meeting, about 20 of us squeeze into the small front room of a building nestled between car dealerships and big residential blocks in Jdeideh, a working-class suburb of Beirut.

Proud Lebanon’s director, Bertho

Makso, tells me that the location of this community centre is essential to its mission because it allows easier access for people from other parts of Lebanon and those who don’t spend time in central Beirut.

This helps ensure that gay freedom and solidarity aren’t afforded only to certain classes of people: either tourists on holiday, or the affluent middle class of the capital.

Hadi too, as he now prepares for Beirut Pride 2018, reflects that cutting across social divisions was one of his proudest achievements at this year’s event. Some of the teenagers from poorer backgrounds were there even if it meant their families kicking them out of the house,” he explains.

“These people don’t have money but they have nerves. These people change the world. They are the fuel of Beirut Pride.”

These concerns about socio-economic inequality indicate that the freedoms which the LGBT+ movement is fighting for are intertwined with the region’s broader political questions — class, security and gender — and their associated civil rights. It cannot be ignored, for example, that the gradual decline of gay bars in Beirut has correlated with the escalation of the war in Syria, or that, as Human Rights Watch (HRW) confirms, gay Syrian refugees are most at risk of persecution by Lebanese authorities.

Kicking off the Proud Lebanon meeting, Bertho says: “Remember the two rules here: no religion, no politics.” These are a clear rejection of Lebanon’s system of national governance; a system which is seen to be the root of many of the LGBT+ community’s problems.

Through the larger part of the 20th century, Lebanon was at the centre of conflicts involving Israel, Syria, Palestine, France, the US and various rebel militias, as well as civil unrest between the country's own Muslims and Christians.

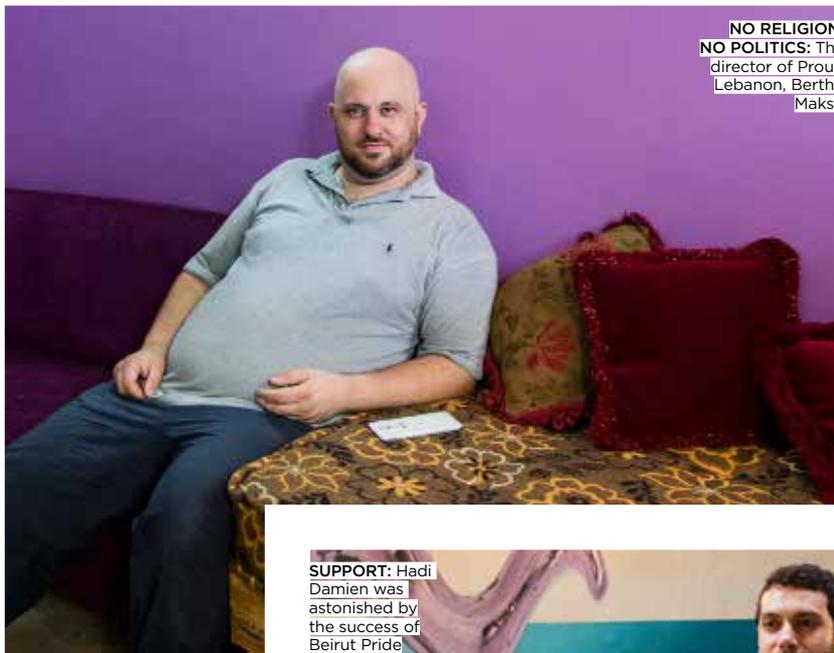
Today, a system of sectarian factionalism rules the country, comprising Shi'a, Sunni and Christian institutions. This system's main purpose is to maintain peace, following the devastation of religious conflicts; any derailing of it could, therefore, be ideologically catastrophic. And given that Christian and Muslim leaders are united in condemning homosexuality, the LGBT+ movement is "terrifying" precisely because it requires a deviation from the upheld sectarianism that has for so long seemingly stabilised a chaotic past. Ultimately, this illustrates how victimising a group as vulnerable as the queer community is one of the easiest, most powerful tools in silencing political dissent.

It is no coincidence that abuses against LGBT+ people in Lebanon often surge after the state is seen to have lost credibility elsewhere, such as in national security matters. As rock star Hamed puts it: "We can't protect the country from Islamic State but we can keep the homos in jail."

**BEIRUT IS A CITY WHOSE SPIRIT** of revolution and hunger for justice are palpable and infectious. However, HRW admits that it is still unclear what additional effect Beirut Pride will have on Lebanon, especially given that the city has, for decades, been marking

**"[The view is] we can't protect the country from Islamic State but we can keep the homos in jail"**

**HAMED SINNO**



**NO RELIGION, NO POLITICS:** The director of Proud Lebanon, Bertho Makso

International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia with events, despite not actually calling them Pride.

So, rather than considering Pride in isolation, HRW senior researcher Neela Ghoshal says that real change comes about most often through a combination of grassroots activism, legal reform, alliance-building and the support of high-profile opinion leaders. Lebanon is no exception, she adds.

Mainstreaming LGBT+ rights within broader human rights movements has already proved instrumental in Lebanon's progress on queer rights, as have the agency of the country's independent courts and the support of professional classes such as lawyers and medics. So, by continuing to mobilise a broad civil rights revolution to topple the systems that oppress, marginalise and persecute the vulnerable, Lebanon's LGBT+ movement could be on the verge of something of which to be truly proud. **2**



**SUPPORT:** Hadi Damien was astonished by the success of Beirut Pride