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LGBTQ+ RIGHTS IN ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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LGBTQ+ Rights in Israel



*Thousands take part in the annual gay pride parade in Jerusalem on June 2, 2022.
Photo by Yonatan Sindel/Flash90.*

LGBTQ+ Israelis have worked for decades to gain freedom, legal protections, and social acceptance.

Israel is home to:

- LGBTQ+ organizations and community centers
- LGBTQ+ pride parades
- LGBTQ+ ministers, members of Parliament, and diplomats
- LGBTQ+ soldiers who serve openly in the military
- A vibrant LGBTQ+ arts and culture scene
- The city of Tel Aviv—consistently rated among the most LGBTQ+ friendly travel destinations in the world

In Israel, LGBTQ+ Rights Are Protected By Law

- **1963:** Israeli courts rule that sodomy laws should not apply to consenting adults in private.
- **1988:** Israel abolishes the decades-old ban on sodomy of any kind.
- **1992:** Legislation bars discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace.
- **1993:** The Israeli army adopts a policy of allowing openly LGBTQ+ soldiers to serve in any capacity.
- **1994:** The Israeli Supreme Court rules in favor of granting spousal benefits to same-sex couples.
- **1997:** The Israeli Defense Minister announces that same-sex partners would be recognized as family members by the Defense Department. The Israeli High Court rules against censoring an educational TV program for teens about homosexuality.
- **2000:** The Knesset lowers the legal age of consent for same-sex relations from 18 to 16, and the Israeli Supreme Court rules that lesbians can officially become adoptive mothers of their partners' children.
- **2004:** Israeli courts rule LGBTQ+ couples qualify for common-law marriage and LGBTQ+ couples qualify for full inheritance rights.
- **2005:** Israeli LGBTQ+ couples are granted full adoption rights.
- **2006:** Israel recognizes same-sex marriages performed abroad.
- **2014:** Israel passes a law protecting students from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.
- **2015:** Transgender Israelis can change their legal gender without undergoing surgery.
- **2021:** Israel ends restrictions on blood donations from gay and bisexual men.
- **2022:** Former Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz, Israel's first openly gay party leader, issues a directive to ban conversion therapy. Israel lifts restrictions on surrogacy for gay and trans couples and single men.

Influential LGBTQ+ Israelis

Michal Eden, elected to the Tel Aviv-Jaffa city council in 1998, was the first openly lesbian elected official in Israel. She has campaigned for LGBTQ+ causes, including the founding of Israel's first shelter serving homeless and runaway gay and lesbian youth.¹

Professor Uzi Even became the first openly gay person elected to serve in the Israeli Parliament in 2002. A chemistry professor at Tel Aviv University and a nuclear weapons expert, Even led the successful 1993 campaign to end Israel's ban on LGBTQ+ people in Israel's armed services.³

Itzik Shmuli was head of the National Union of Israeli Students, helped lead a massive social protest movement in 2011, and was elected to the Israeli Parliament in 2013.

Amir Ohana became the first openly gay member of Parliament from the conservative Likud Party in 2015. He helped establish an LGBTQ+ caucus within the party in 2011 and now leads the council.

Nitzan Horowitz was Israel's first gay party leader and Health Minister. He was elected to Israel's Parliament in 2009 after a career in journalism. In 2013, he co-founded an LGBTQ+ caucus, or interest group, within the Parliament to promote LGBTQ+ rights and equality in Israel.



Former Minister of Health Nitzan Horowitz speaks during his visit at Tel HaShomer hospital in Ramat Gan, August 3, 2021. Photo by Miriam Alster/Flash90.

Eli Sharon was a top-ranking soldier in the Israeli army who came out of the closet in an army newspaper during his service.

Dana International was born a male named Yaron Cohen to a Yemenite Jewish family in Tel Aviv and came to realize, over time, that her true identity was female. In 1993, Dana underwent sexual reassignment surgery.⁵ The singer was a chart-topping star in Europe and the Middle East for several years. In 1998, she won the Eurovision contest with the song "Diva."



Dana International. Credit: Wiki-Commons.

Einav Zilber is the creator of the lesbian magazine *Pandora*, which advocates for the rights of members of the Israeli LGBTQ+ community.

Yiscah Smith is a trans Orthodox woman, author, and activist. She uses her story of transitioning from life as a male who was active in the Chabad movement to advocate for the rights of other transgender people in Israel.

Idan Roll was elected to the Knesset in 2019 with the Blue and White party and again with Yesh Atid in 2021. That year, he also became Israel's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Offer Nissim is among the most famous Israeli DJs in the world. He produced the song "Diva" by Dana International, which won the Eurovision Song Contest in 1998. He has also produced official remixes for artists such as Madonna and Cher.



DJ Offer Nissim. Credit: WikiCommons.

LGBTQ+ Organizations in Israel



Aguda members hold a press conference in Tel Aviv on July 25, 2018. Photo by Tomer Neuberger/Flash90.

There are at least twenty-five different organizations that exist to support LGBTQ+ Israelis.

The largest is an umbrella group called The Aguda - The Association for LGBTQ Equality in Israel. These organizations lobby the government and take legal action against discrimination, serve local communities in cities across the country, provide housing to LGBTQ+ people in need, promote acceptance in sports and other parts of society, and much more.



Fighting for Equality



Massive protest for LGBTQ+ rights in Tel Aviv, 2018. Photo by Miriam Alster/Flash90.

LGBTQ+ Israelis have fought for their rights for decades and achieved remarkable progress. However, they still experience cases of discrimination and intolerance in Israeli society.

There were two especially traumatic incidents in recent memory. The first was the murder of two people at the Tel Aviv branch of the Aguda in 2009. The second was the 2015 murder of a 16-year-old girl by a religious extremist during the pride parade in Jerusalem. While these hate crimes were strongly condemned by Israeli leaders across the political spectrum, they showed that LGBTQ+ people still face significant threats and challenges in Israel.

As such, the LGBTQ+ community continues to fight for equality through political, legal, and social activism.

LGBTQ+ Rights by Country



Region	LGBTQ+ Organizations	Adoption Rights	Legalized Homosexuality	Anti-Discrimination Laws	Honor Killing Outlawed*	Open Military Service	Spousal Benefits for Same-Sex Couples
Egypt	YES	NO	YES (But prosecuted using other laws)	NO	YES (But weaker punishments than for other forms of murder)	NO	NO
Iran	NO	NO	NO (Lashings or death)	NO	NO	NO	NO
Jordan	NO	NO	YES (But arbitrary arrests, assault, and intimidation)	NO	YES (But weaker punishments than for other forms of murder)	NO	NO
Lebanon	YES	NO	NO**	NO	YES (Since 2011)	NO	NO
Libya	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO
Gaza	NO	NO	NO (Up to 10 years in prison)	NO	NO	NO	NO
West Bank (PA Areas)	YES (Based in Israel)	NO	YES (But no protection from hate crimes)	NO	NO	NO	NO
Saudi Arabia	NO	NO	NO (Death, torture, lashings)	NO	NO	NO	NO
Syria	YES (Since 2022)	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Israel	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

* According to Encyclopedia Britannica, honor killings are, “most often, the murder of a woman or girl by male family members. The killers justify their actions by claiming that the victim has brought dishonor upon the family name.” They are sometimes carried out against people for being LGBTQ+. Some countries have no penalties or only light penalties for this kind of killing.

Sources: - <https://www.equaldex.com/>
 - <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/>
 - https://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA_World_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_report_global_legislation_overview_update_December_2020.pdf

** Some Lebanese courts have ruled that same-sex sexual activity is legal, but there is no final ruling, and the law against it is still in place.

Oppression of LGBTQ+ People in the Middle East and North Africa



Religious extremism, widespread homophobic and transphobic views, and oppressive political regimes often put LGBTQ+ people across the region in danger.

Members of the LGBTQ+ community in Arab states, Turkey, and Iran face discrimination, harassment, violence, detention, torture, or jail time solely due to their sexual or gender identity. This oppression can come from governments, religious communities, and even their own families.

Activists throughout the region are fighting these injustices, working to change government policies, and establishing grassroots organizations that provide lifesaving resources and support for the LGBTQ+ community.

LGBTQ+ Rights in Gaza and the West Bank

LGBTQ+ Palestinians are threatened with violence, harassment, imprisonment, and even death at the hands of their families, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and Hamas.

LGBTQ+ Palestinians have been targeted by PA police forces who threaten to out them to their families or accuse them of being “collaborators,” a term referring to those who secretly work with Israel. Collaborating with Israel is punishable by imprisonment or death. In 2019, the PA banned LGBTQ+ events, citing the preservation of “traditional Palestinian values,” and threatened to arrest anyone involved with such events. Though the ban was later reversed, the PA continues to severely restrict LGBTQ+ rights. The situation in Gaza, a territory ruled by the terrorist group Hamas, is even more dire, as LGBTQ+ rights are virtually nonexistent there.

Some LGBTQ+ Palestinians escape into Israel to avoid persecution. The exact number of LGBTQ+ Palestinians living in Israel, some using a special residence permit, is unclear. Once in Israel, NGOs and community organizations provide assistance.



After a Palestinian artist painted a rainbow flag on the West Bank security barrier, homophobic Palestinian activists erased it in outrage.

One Man's Story

Tayseer, a 21-year-old Gazan, was caught in bed with his boyfriend by his older brother. He was beaten by his family, and his father threatened to strangle him if it ever happened again. He fled to the West Bank, where he was arrested and forced to stand in sewage water up to his neck, his head covered by a sack filled with feces. When he was released, Tayseer fled to Israel.

**“The [Palestinian] police will kill me,” he says.
“Unless my father gets to me first.”**



Want to Make a Difference?

Get involved. Numerous LGBTQ+ organizations and other groups work to advance dignity, human rights, coexistence, and peace in the Middle East.

Build relationships with Israeli, Palestinian, and other Middle Eastern LGBTQ+ rights organizations. Invite speakers from Israel to talk about their experiences. Raise awareness about persecution and torture in the Middle East.

Contact your government representatives. Ask your representatives to hold governments across the region accountable for protecting the rights and safety of LGBTQ+ people.

Check the facts to stay informed. There are a lot of one-sided news reports and articles about the Middle East conflict, so get your news and information from more than one source.

StandWithUs

Through a generous partnership with Evelyn and Dr. Shmuel Katz, StandWithUs has been able to produce cutting-edge print materials for over two decades. Students, community members, and activists worldwide have used our popular booklets and brochures to educate the public about Israel and antisemitism.



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