



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Lebanon

Lebanon – LBN38710 – Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender – Discrimination

16 May 2011

1. Please provide an update on the situation for homosexuals in Lebanon.

There has been little obvious change with regard to the situation for homosexuals in Lebanon. The United States Department of State (USDOS) reported that in 2010, as in previous years, discrimination against homosexual activity persisted throughout the year. Lebanese law prohibits ‘unnatural sexual intercourse’, which can be punishable by up to one year in gaol. As in the past, the law was sometimes applied to men, but rarely to women. In December 2009, Lebanese NGO Helem (from the Arabic acronym for Lebanese Protection for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders) reported that a judge in the Batroun District ruled that ‘unnatural sexual intercourse’ did not apply to homosexual activity, which he deemed to be a part of nature.¹ One source states that, on average, less than ten men a year are prosecuted for ‘unnatural sexual intercourse’.²

According to USDOS, in January 2009 Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) soldiers allegedly discovered two men engaged in homosexual activity in an uninhabited building in Beirut. The men were dragged to Sassine Square, and soldiers reportedly punched, kicked and struck the men with rifle butts until bystanders interjected. The LAF reportedly detained the men at the police barracks on order of the attorney-general for several days.³ Helem organised a demonstration in Beirut in reaction to this attack, and against the homophobic provisions of the law. No violence was reported against the demonstrators.⁴

There are indications that the situation for homosexuals in Lebanon is continuing to gradually improve, with Beirut in particular having developed a reputation as a gay-friendly tourist destination. In October 2010, the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) Symposium was held in Beirut. The symposium was reportedly the first of its kind in Lebanon, and indeed in the Arab world, to be organised and hosted by Arabs. According to IGLTA, the symposium would provide the opportunity for participants to meet wealthy LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) Arabian, Cypriot and Maltese communities.⁵ In addition to the symposium, the IGLTA Ambassador to Lebanon, Bertho Makso, coordinated the first familiarisation tour to Lebanon for travel professionals working in the gay and lesbian market. According to Makso, “Lebanon is a very liberal country...[o]nce you’re here, you’ll be surprised”. An April 2010 IGLTA press release stated that “the buzz is building

¹ US Department of State 2011, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2010 – Lebanon*, 8 April, Section 6 – Attachment 1

² ‘Gay tourism booms despite social norms’ 2010, *Now Lebanon*, 23 November

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=217949> – Accessed 9 May 2011 – Attachment 6

³ US Department of State 2011, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2010 – Lebanon*, 8 April, Section 1.c – Attachment 1

⁴ US Department of State 2011, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2010 – Lebanon*, 8 April, Section 6 – Attachment 1

⁵ ‘2010 IGLTA Symposium – Beirut, Lebanon’ 2010, International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association website <http://www.iglta.org/calendardetail.cfm?ID=3279> – Accessed 6 May 2011 – Attachment 2

around Beirut, Lebanon as a gay destination”, and claimed that the winter 2010 edition of Dutch *Wing* magazine cited Beirut as the gay “party capital of the Middle East”.⁶

In a February 2011 interview, Helem executive director Ghassan Makaram said that despite the legal restrictions on homosexuality in Lebanon, there had been a decline in state interference around LGBT social life. He noted, however, that this was only in the central parts of Beirut, where the government and police no longer raid or attack nightclubs. Makaram claimed that the law was often applied on a class basis for LGBT people, with those who can “afford to pay for and enjoy these clubs and open space, and those who cannot afford to come to these places and have no space”. The latter group, Makaram believes, are often those who are targeted, whether it be in cruising areas or other situations. Makaram added that for many LGBT people, the biggest challenge remained the family, claiming a lot of young men are victims of family violence as they do not conform sexually or by gender to their families.⁷

Despite the popular view that Lebanon is the “gay-friendliest country in the Arab world”, some activists say that behind closed doors, sexual minorities often suffer physical and psychological abuse. According to Helem founder Georges Azzi, the LGBT community often fear for their safety, and at times are “forced to stay at home, forced into marriage, or beaten by their families, or physically or verbally abused by their families or someone in the neighborhood”. Members of the LGBT community who are attacked rarely seek legal protection, as homosexuality remains technically illegal in Lebanon. According to an article from the Lebanon Matters website, abuses still happen on the streets and in the workplace. One individual claimed that if an employer finds out that a worker is gay, the worker is likely to lose his or her job, while on the streets gay men are subjected to constant verbal abuse, and sometimes physical attacks. The article further claims that transgender people are often attacked, while LGBT people are “followed, watched and sometimes even battered with stones”. Violence against LGBT people reportedly worsens at certain times, particularly when the local media “vilifies sexual minorities, running programs that treat homosexuality as a disease or a dysfunction”.⁸

In November 2010, *Now Lebanon* reported that while Beirut is popular for gay tourism, LGBT activists claim there are a lot of improvements that need to be made in terms of social tolerance. According to Helem executive director Ghassan Makaram, the perception of Lebanon as a ‘gay friendly’ country can be misleading. Makaram was concerned that people are still being prosecuted for their homosexuality, although he acknowledged the relatively low rate of an estimated ten prosecutions per year. He also believes that Lebanese society is neither “entirely accepting of nor understanding toward the LGBT community”.⁹

In February 2010, Helem released a report on institutional discrimination against LGBT people in Lebanon, consisting of two studies. The first study, titled ‘The Right of Gays and Lesbians to Universities’, found that homosexuals had difficulty integrating into social and

⁶ Destination: Gay Beirut (and Beyond) 2010, International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association website, 15 April <http://www.igltatourism.org/pr/12.%20April%2015%2010%20IGLTA%20Lebanon%20Symposium.pdf> – Accessed 6 May 2011 – Attachment 3

⁷ ‘Fighting for LGBT rights in Lebanon’ 2011, Act Up website, 2 February <http://www.actup.org/forum/content/fighting-lgbt-rights-lebanon-3157/> – Accessed 9 May 2011 – Attachment 4

⁸ ‘Lebanese Gay Rights Activists Call for Legal Reform’ 2011, Lebanon Matters website, 21 March <http://lebanonmatters.com/2011/03/voa-news-lebanese-gay-rights-activists-call-for-legal-reform/> – Accessed 9 May 2011 – Attachment 5

⁹ ‘Gay tourism booms despite social norms’ 2010, *Now Lebanon*, 23 November <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=217949> – Accessed 9 May 2011 – Attachment 6

emotional communities, sometimes due to Lebanese society's "limited acceptance of their orientation or identity in general, and others due to discrimination against them going as far as ostracization, marginalization, and psychological as well as physical abuse". The report claimed that by virtue of universities' ideologies and structures, and in the absence of proper codes of conduct, homosexuals are subject to discrimination, including harassment, insult and ostracization.¹⁰

The second study, titled 'Homophobia in Clinical Services in Lebanon', found the medical system was another place in which LGBT people found it difficult to integrate or be accepted in as the "people in charge of these systems adopt positions that are based on inherited cultural traditions that still reject and oppose homosexuality". According to the study, which was based on 120 medical practitioner responses, 60 per cent and 72.9 per cent of physicians respectively viewed homosexuality as a disease requiring medical assistance and psychological counselling, suggesting "extreme homophobia in the medical profession". Less than 13 per cent of physicians viewed homosexuality as an acceptable behaviour, 28.6 per cent considered it a personal preference, while 15.7 per cent believed it was a natural sexual orientation. Only 50 per cent of physicians said they would attend to homosexuals.¹¹

A July 2010 article published on the Menassat website reported that the first book on gay life to be translated into Arabic from English was due to be published in Beirut. The translation, however, reportedly led to controversy when the Lebanese publisher in charge of the Arabic translation chose to translate "gay" as "*shazz*", which in Arabic means "pervert" or "deviant". To wit, the English title 'Gay travels in the Muslim world' was translated into Arabic as 'Pervert travels in the Muslim world'. According to the article, gay rights organisations have lobbied Arab media to refrain from using the term *shazz*, which is considered to be derogatory. While the broader Arabic media have appeared reluctant to apply neutral terminology when referring to homosexuals, and reportedly continue to demonise homosexuals, Lebanese media have increasingly started to abandon *shazz* in favour of less demeaning terms such as *mithly*, which loosely translates as "same".¹²

Attachments

1. US Department of State 2011, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2010 – Lebanon*, 8 April.
2. '2010 IGLTA Symposium – Beirut, Lebanon' 2010, International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association website <http://www.iglta.org/calendardetail.cfm?ID=3279> – Accessed 6 May 2011.
3. 'Destination: Gay Beirut (and Beyond)' 2010, International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association website, 15 April
<http://www.iglta.org/pr/12.%20April%2015%2010%20IGLTA%20Lebanon%20Symposium.pdf> – Accessed 6 May 2011.

¹⁰ 'Helem Launches Report on Institutional Discrimination against LGBT People in Lebanon' 2010, Bekhsoos website, 15 February <http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2010/02/institutional-discrimination-against-lgbt/> – Accessed 14 July 2010 – Attachment 7

¹¹ 'Helem Launches Report on Institutional Discrimination against LGBT People in Lebanon' 2010, Bekhsoos website, 15 February <http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2010/02/institutional-discrimination-against-lgbt/> – Accessed 14 July 2010 – Attachment 7

¹² 'Pervert travels in the Muslim world – does "gay" equal "shazz"? 2009, Menassat website, 27 July
<http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/6942-pervert-travels-muslim-world-does-gay-equal-shazz> – Accessed 14 July 2010 – Attachment 8

4. 'Fighting for LGBT rights in Lebanon' 2011, Act Up website, 2 February <http://www.actup.org/forum/content/fighting-lgbt-rights-lebanon-3157/> – Accessed 9 May 2011.
5. 'Lebanese Gay Rights Activists Call for Legal Reform' 2011, Lebanon Matters website, 21 March <http://lebanonmatters.com/2011/03/voa-news-lebanese-gay-rights-activists-call-for-legal-reform/> – Accessed 9 May 2011.
6. 'Gay tourism booms despite social norms' 2010, *Now Lebanon*, 23 November <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=217949> – Accessed 9 May 2011.
7. 'Helem Launches Report on Institutional Discrimination against LGBT People in Lebanon' 2010, Bekhsoos website, 15 February <http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/2010/02/institutional-discrimination-against-lgbt/> – Accessed 14 July 2010. (CISNET Lebanon CX246218)
8. 'Pervert travels in the Muslim world – does “gay” equal “shazz”?' 2009, Menassat website, 27 July <http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/6942-pervert-travels-muslim-world-does-gay-equal-shazz> – Accessed 14 July 2010. (CISNET Lebanon CX246215)