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Syrian and Iraqi members of LGBT community have found a haven - of sorts - in Istanbul

Bissam recently fled Damascus, under threat from Isis death squads. His 'crime'? Being gay. So he made his way to a city where fellow Arab members of the LGBT community have been gathering to seek a new life – and fellowship – in exile...

Bradley Secker | Sunday 16 August 2015 00:00 |



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Istanbul's best-known gay club.

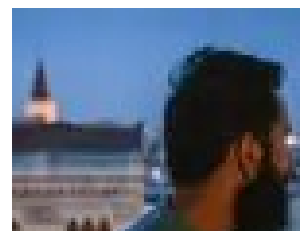
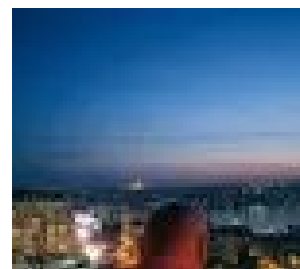
You may think of Istanbul as a place of postcard-pretty mosques, winding markets and exotic spices. Or you may recently have heard it mentioned in the news, as a gateway for foreign jihadists headed to Syria and Iraq. Among all of these realities sits Tek Yön, where you'll find gay exiles from every sect and ethnicity in the Middle East. Elsewhere, they might be enemies; here, they dance together. "Istanbul is a bubble of freedom and gay rights in the region, and Tek Yön is a good meeting point for gay Syrians and gay Arabs in general," explains Subhi, from Syria.

While those waving flags of black head south from the city, another community has trickled in from the opposite direction, carrying the rainbow banner: LGBT refugees from across this volatile and conservative region have found in Istanbul a sanctuary of sorts.

A native of Maarrat al-Nu'man in north-west Syria, Subhi witnessed the rise of extremism and violent homophobia in the early stages of the insurgency. "Back in 2012, there was an announcement from the mosque speakers about cleansing the city of gays," he recalls.

Istanbul's LGBT community

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