

WEST OF MIDDLE EAST

A podcast by Neda Nobari Foundation

Interview transcript

Subhi-Nahas

TITLE: An LGBT Syrian Refugee Escapes Homophobia in Syria, Finds Xenophobia in the U.S.

SUMMARY: A Syrian refugee in San Francisco works to educate communities in the Middle East about LGBT rights issues, while teaching people here in the West about what it means to be a Middle Eastern refugee.

WEB: [Subhi Nahas](#) and I are in the Castro District in San Francisco. Subhi lives down the street and comes here often. He loves the Castro. He feels safe here. His life's not at risk. Not like in Syria, where he was born.

Subhi came here as a refugee in 2015 to flee persecution for being gay. Subhi tells me that Harvey Milk, the first gay man to hold public office in California, started his LGBT revolution a few blocks away from where we're standing.

Subhi is a LGBT rights activist. He escaped Syria in 2012 and spent a few years in Turkey doing activism work before coming to the U.S. [[PAUSE]] Subhi says it's important to teach people in the West about LGBT rights issues in the Middle East.

"At the time when I was here, ISIS publicized in videos and pictures all over the news about how they're executing gay people," Subhi says. "To my surprise when I went out and started to do training and talking with people about immigration issues and refugee issues and stuff...people sometime approach me and say, 'Oh that's so cruel. Is the government doing anything about it?' And I was like, 'Ha, our government in the first place are those who made the laws who want to kill us, or imprison. So how would they do something about it?' And from there I understood...We need to raise the awareness about the issue. We need to tackle this first and then make a safer haven for people to escape so they can survive and escape death."

Subhi started [Spectra Project](#) when he came to the U.S. to help raise this awareness. Spectra Project provides support and education to LGBT communities in the Middle East while also doing advocacy work in the US. One main goal of Spectra projects is to help countries like Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan better support and understand their LGBT citizens. The other goal is to get the U.S. to pressure those Middle Eastern countries to treat their LGBT communities with dignity and humanity. That's why one of Subhi's first tasks in America was to be the first openly gay man to address the United

Nations Security Council about these issues.

“To me, as an activist, I want people to know and I want people to understand what's going on and I want them to know why it's happening,” Subhi says, “I was scared because it's going to be a lot of publicity and it may hurt a lot of people, but I was like, ‘This is my endgame, as an activist I want to do something to change the way think and behave.’ But what I didn't know is that I was the first ever openly gay person to address the Security Council about any issues related to LGBT community internationally, not just refugees. And I was just so surprised, because I know that in America they talk about these issues they have a lot of laws, and they have a lot of entities, like Human Rights Campaign and the Human Rights Council, they talk about LGBT, but I never that that nobody brought it to the Security Council before. So that added a lot of pressure on me because to be the first ever to address the Security Council about gay issues was a lot of weight on my shoulders. So I told my story. I told them what happened and how it got there. I told them about the government treatment for the gay people before the militia. I told them about Al Nusra. I told them about what ISIS is doing. And then I implored them to do something about the refugees in general, to open the doors to everybody who's coming, not just to open it for gay people, but for everyone. Because most refugees are escaping from those people. Are escaping for their lives, for their children. They leave everything behind to seek safety.”

Subhi's story, at least for us, starts when he was 15 years. That's when his parents sent him to a psychologist because students at his school in Syria bullied him for being different. The therapist diagnosed Subhi as a homosexual and immediately called his parents.

“He painted the picture that gay people were sexual deviants and [[were like]] deserved to be in prison,” Subhi says. “Killed. Either cured or killed if they don't get cured. I was scared, I didn't know. I was 15 years old. I believed I was sick and need to be treated. That's what I believed, because he said it and he's pretty knowledgeable person to me at that time.”

Ten years later the war in Syria began. Subhi paid a taxi driver to drive him to Lebanon and take care of all the checkpoints. Subhi pretended like he couldn't speak. He said he was afraid his voice would give away his homosexuality. After a few months in Lebanon, Subhi started working with an Arabic LGBT newspaper. From there he went to Turkey and then the U.S., continuing his advocacy work along the way.

“So I entered a stage or a phase what I call ‘detoxification,’ where I started to let go of everything that I learned about myself and my sexuality,” says Subhi. “Everything I learned in Syria about anything. And started to question everything that I learned until I started, ‘Oh, ok. I was right! They were wrong and I have nothing wrong with me, they were wrong all along. But that took me years.”

Subhi says for years he didn't speak in Syria for fear of being persecuted because of the sound of his voice. So speaking at the United Nations Security Council about being

gay, was one of the biggest transitions of his life.

“That was one of the hardest thing that I have ever done,” Subhi says. “Because I was not able to speak at all before, and I didn’t want to speak because I would be identified and killed and targeted for that. But to be here in the States and to stand up for governments and talk about how I am gay and refugee and experiencing those things, it was pretty liberating experience. After that I started to have more confidence. I started to talk to more people about it. I started to feel more comfortable in my body, in my skin. I still don’t feel comfortable hearing my voice. I don’t think that’s gonna change anytime soon. But it’s a process, and it started when I started speaking loudly about the issues, and that started with the Security Council.”

Subhi tells me in San Francisco, especially in the Castro District, you don’t get judged for being gay. But the funny thing is, Subhi now gets judged sometimes for being from the Middle East.

“Even in the gay setting, in the gay community it becomes more obvious,” Subhi says. “For example when I go to bars or something and I want to start a conversation with anybody, of course they’re going to ask where you’re from because I don’t look American. When I say, ‘Syria,’ many of them just like, the conversation just ends. But I don’t know why. I think they either don’t know anything about the country and cannot continue the conversation, or they know about the country and assumed I would be like a terrorist or some kind of serial killer or something. But that has happened a lot of times. Now I don’t go into the bars unless I’m with a group of people.”

Subhi is one of over [10,000 Syrian refugees](#) that the U.S. has admitted in the past two years. Not a single one of these refugees has committed a terrorist attack. In fact according to the Cato Institute, the chance of an American being murdered in a [terrorist attack by a refugee is 1 in 3.6 billion a year](#). But when many people look at Subhi, an Arab man in America, they think ‘terrorist.’

“It’s the same,” Subhi says. “It’s identical to be like, persecuted for being gay. There’s no difference at all. So it makes it a little bit more, I wouldn’t say dangerous, but I would say, sad. Because coming all the way, escaping from all the persecution to come here and feel safe for being gay and not safe for being who I am. Being gay and being from the Middle East are the same identity to me. I identify as a gay Middle Eastern man, and to be persecuted for any of these traits or personality things, it just makes me really sad.”

Subhi believes things like speaking about LGBT issues in the Middle East at the UN Security Council can help change perspectives. That’s also why he agreed to be the Grand Marshal at the New York Pride March in 2016. Grand Marshals lead gay pride parades. They’re considered heroes who have made significant contributions to the LGBT communities, or to society at large. Subhi says didn’t want to be a part of the pride parade at first because of the attention it would draw.

“But I ended up saying yes, because it would not just send a message to myself that it is ok to be who you are, it would send a lot of message to a lot of people,” Subhi says. “Especially gay youth who are still stuck in Syria, gay youth who became refugees because their families felt ashamed of them or wanted to kill them because they are gay. I felt like if they could see this, then it’s going to be message to them. It’s going to be a message of hope, it’s like, ‘There is hope. You will one day reach a place where you will be celebrated for who you are and you will be loved for who you are. It’s not the end of the road. Yes, you’re in a very dark place at the moment, but you will find a place that you will belong later.’ That’s the message I wanted to send for people. Especially gay youth who are still stuck in Syria or Turkey or Lebanon.”

Three of Subhi’s sisters back in Syria never talked to him again after that. But Subhi says if he got the chance, he’d agree to be grand marshal at the New York pride parade again.

Back on Castro Street in San Francisco, Subhi and I walk past Harvey Milk’s old shop, the place where he created a safe haven for LGBT Americans. Like Harvey Milk, Subhi wants to promote safety for LGBT Middle Eastern people.

“I wouldn’t compare myself to Harvey Milk,” Subhi says. “I was inspired by his actions especially in the political movement and I wanted to give a voice to the voiceless, especially the LGBT community in the Middle East is marginalized. Nobody admits that we even exist.”

But LGBT people do exist in the Middle East. There are millions of people like Subhi looking for safety, at home and abroad. Subhi wants these people to stand up and share their stories, like he is.

“I think that we need as a Middle Eastern and North African people to come together and start to actually push back and start to fight and start to say, ‘No. You’re wrong. We’re your sons and daughters. We’re here to stay. We’re not going to leave.’ Especially for people whose first generation and second generations in countries like the States or places where they can ask for their rights. And I think we need to start this movement where we become like one international community.”

Subhi Nahas says if the LGBT Middle Eastern people come together across the globe, they’ll can teach their home countries that there’s nothing wrong with being homosexual, and they can show communities here in the West that there’s nothing wrong with being from the Middle East diaspora.

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