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DECONSTRUCTING “CHICKENS FOR KFC”:

*Israeli Pinkwashing,
Homonationalism, and
Contemporary Backlash Toward
Queers for Palestine*

By KAITLYN KIRKPATRICK

Abstract

This paper seeks to problematize contemporary backlash against queer solidarity with Palestine. It scrutinizes current discourses that argue queerness and Palestinian liberation are incompatible. Drawing on the concepts of homonationalism and Orientalism, the paper argues these discourses are manifestations of Israeli pinkwashing and a reactivation of the “clash of civilizations” thesis. By boasting tolerance, Israel maintains a progressive international image while simultaneously portraying Palestinian society as homophobic and essentially regressive, thereby justifying Israeli colonial violence and occupation. At the same time, the essentialized Palestinian society (homophobic) and queer Palestinian subjects (victims of homophobia) diminish and neglect the social, cultural, and political complexity of Palestinian queerness. Thus, the paper challenges the idea that queer solidarity with Palestine is contradictory, pointing out its racist and Orientalist foundations and the potential for coexisting queer/Palestinian identities.

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Introduction

There is a popular idea that queer and Palestinian liberation are incompatible based on essentialized notions of sexual and gendered oppression in Arab and Muslim societies. Thus, groups like *Queers for Palestine* are said to incorporate supposedly self-evident contradictions, jokingly comparable to “chickens for KFC.”¹ The logic is that since there is homophobia and LGBTQ+ persecution in the Arab world, queer activists aligning themselves with Palestine is irrational, contradictory, or misguided. This argument relies on a particular orientalist ideology that can be understood best as a manifestation of Israeli homonationalism, “a historical convergence of state practices, transnational circuits of queer commodity culture and human rights paradigms, and broader global

¹ *Queers for Palestine = Chickens for KFC*, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKIZI2vjhxO>.

phenomena such as the increasing entrenchment of Islamophobia.”² Commonly known as pinkwashing, this discursive foregrounding of LGBT acceptance or tolerance serves to position Israel as a beacon of progressiveness in the Middle East, simultaneously ‘washing away’ its neocolonial brutality toward Palestinians.³ Substantial literature in this area has shown how Israel has baked sexual diversity and tolerance into its national branding.⁴ This works to legitimize Israeli civilization and culture as liberal, Western, and progressive, concomitantly characterizing Palestinian/Arab society as backward, regressive, or uncivilized for “lacking in this crucial criterion of ‘tolerance of sexual diversity.’”⁵

In this paper, I demonstrate the usefulness of homonationalism for understanding contemporary backlash toward LGBTQ+ activism for Palestine. I seek to problematize contemporary political discourse that contends there are contradictions self-evident to pro-Palestinian queer activism. First, I explore the theory behind homonationalism and summarize some examples of Israeli pinkwashing, exposing how this practice serves to

² Jasbir Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (2013): 337, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074381300007X>.

³ Sarah Schulman and Karma Chávez R., “Israel/Palestine and the Queer International,” *Journal of Civil and Human Rights*, Palestine on the Air, n.a., no. 5 (2013): 139-157, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jcivihumarigh.2019.0139>.

⁴ See, for example, Leila Farsakh, Rhoda Kanaaneh, and Sherene Seikaly, “Special Issue: Queering Palestine,” *Journal for Palestine Studies* XLVII, no. 3 (2018): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2018.47.3.7>; Tommaso M. Milani and Erez Levon, “Sexing Diversity: Linguistic Landscapes of Homonationalism,” *Language & Communication*, Discourses of Diversity, n.a., no. 51 (2016): 69-86, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2016.07.002>; Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism.”

⁵ Milani and Levon “Sexing Diversity,” 2.

obfuscate the potentially genocidal settler-colonial violence of Israeli occupation. I then demonstrate how contemporary backlash toward queer/Palestinian solidarity relies on a homonationalist ideology (of which pinkwashing is the public face) that is insufficient for understanding the complexity of sexual and colonial oppression and depends on the impossibility of coexisting queer Palestinian identities. The idea that queer solidarity with Palestine is self-contradictory is problematic because it employs orientalist sensibilities, serves to (re)produce Israeli settler-colonialism, and invisibilize queer Palestinians.

Homonationalism and Israeli Pinkwashing

In her 2006 article, Jasbir Puar introduced the concept of homonationalism, arguing that the “Orientalist invocation of the ‘terrorist’ is one discursive tactic that disaggregates US national gays and queers from racial and sexual ‘others,’ foregrounding a collusion between homosexuality and American nationalism.”⁶ Puar demonstrated how, in the years following September 11, 2001, the United States (US) bolstered its national image as a progressive, sexually liberal society.⁷ Evidenced by the “eager proliferation of homophobic and racist images” of ‘terrorists’ following September 11, this served to redirect global attention from neocolonial US policy in Arab and Muslim countries while characterizing these societies as

⁶ Jasbir Puar, “Mapping US Homonormativities,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 13, no. 1 (2006): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09663690500531014>.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 67-88.

homophobic and regressive.⁸⁹ Linking sexual deviancy and perversion to bodies that were racially and culturally discernable from US national gays and lesbians helped form a ‘terrorist’ subject that was deserving of colonial violence without damaging the patriotic normalization of homosexuality within the US nationalist landscape. Thus, the US was able to carry out neo-colonial projects against Arab and Muslim ‘others’ while maintaining a progressive reputation by incorporating LGBTQ+ acceptance into its public image. Indeed, multicultural settler-colonial states like the US and Israel frequently justify 21st-century civilizing missions through discourses on sexuality, Arabophobia, and Islamophobia.¹⁰

Since Puar published her thesis on US homonationalism, a body of literature has emerged that applies this concept to the Israeli case.¹¹ For instance, Milani and Levon have examined how Israel has intentionally fostered queer friendly national image through

⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁹ For example, in the weeks following September 11, midtown Manhattan was populated by posters of a turbaned caricature of Osama bin Laden being anally penetrated by the Empire State building. The captions read either “The Empire strikes back” or “So you like skyscrapers, huh, bitch?” These images along with racist and hypermasculine rhetoric from American officials and its public suggest that retaliation for the attack does not only aim to kill bin Laden but turn him into a queer. Jasbir Puar, “Towelheads, Diapers, and Faggots: Reviving the Turban,” *City University of New York (CUNY) Academic Works*, 2001, 2.

¹⁰ Jasbir Puar and Maya Mikdashi, “Pinkwatching And Pinkwashing: Interpenetration and Its Discontents,” *ezine, Jadaliyya - جدلية*, August 9, 2012, para. 3, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26818>.

¹¹ Milani and Levon, “Sexing Diversity,” 69-86; Jasbir Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” 336-339; Sarah Schulman and Karma Chávez., “Israel/Palestine and the Queer International,” 139-157; Puar and Mikdashi, “Pinkwatching and Pinkwashing.”

the Brand Israel¹² campaign and by marketing Tel Aviv Pride.¹³ As Puar and Mikdashi contend, this strategy cannot be separated from Israeli settler colonialism and the occupation of Palestine. If we recognize that “the quality of sovereignty is now evaluated by how a nation treats its homosexuals,” Israeli pinkwashing can be perceived as a vehicle for both concealing and perpetuating settler colonialism in Palestine.¹⁴ By portraying itself as a beacon of LGBTQ+ acceptance in the Middle East, Israel redirects international attention away from its illegal occupation of Palestine. Israel promotes an image of tolerance within its own society that is supposedly in contrast with Palestinian/ Arab culture, enabling it to escape international scrutiny.

Pinkwashing Post October 7 and Backlash Toward Queer/Palestinian Solidarity

Israel’s hostile bombardment of Gaza has inspired incredible popular protest across the world, including within Israeli-allied Western states like the US and Canada. LGBTQ+ resistance groups like Queers for Palestine—an international queer activist bloc supporting direct action for Palestine through Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS)—have been consistently at the frontlines of these actions. Queer solidarity with Palestine is by no means a new phenomenon, as evidenced by the multiple queer Palestinian organizations that have been fighting for

¹² The Brand Israel campaign was a marketing project launched in 2005 by the The Israeli Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister’s Office, and the Finance Ministry along with American marketing executives. The campaign sought to modernize the countries image. In A documentary guide to ‘Brand Israel’ and the art of pinkwashing Sarah Schulman illustrates how pinkwashing was explicitly and deliberately incorporated into this campaign.

¹³ Milani and Levon, “Sexing Diversity,” 10-22.

¹⁴ Puar and Mikdashi, “Pinkwatching and Pinkwashing,” para. 2.

liberation from Israeli apartheid for years.¹⁵ However, many outlets in the US, Israel, and the West have argued queer people advocating for Palestinian liberation is contradictory. In November 2023, The Jerusalem Post even boldly printed that these groups represent “how stupid our society is.”¹⁶¹⁷ This rhetoric is the logical conclusion of Israel’s decades-long pinkwashing campaign and the orientalist logic underlying homonationalism.

The notion that queer/Palestinian solidarity is inherently contradictory depends on essentialized ideas of Palestinian/Arab culture and society, which in turn reinforce Israeli settler colonialism. In the months following October 7, 2023, much of the political discourse in the West has justified Israel’s hostile bombardment of Gaza by aligning it with a supposedly culturally and socially superior “West.” This reactivation of the *Clash of*

¹⁵ Civil society organizations/groups, like Aswat and alQaws, have been working to bring visibility to the LGBTQIA+ Palestinian community at the grassroots level since the early 2000s.

¹⁶ Jerusalem Post Staff, “Ayaan Hirsi Ali: ‘Queers for Palestine’ Shows How Stupid Our Society Is,” *The Jerusalem Post* | *JPost.Com*, November 29, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/j-spot/article-775631>.

¹⁷ For more examples of this rhetoric, see Billy Binion, “The Contradictions of ‘Queers for Palestine,’” *Reason.Com* (blog), October 27, 2023, <https://reason.com/2023/10/27/the-contradictions-of-queers-for-palestine/>; Linda Dayan, “‘The Biggest Irony Is With Queerness Itself’: LGBTQ Israelis Shunned by Global Community After October 7,” *Haaretz*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-01-11/ty-article-magazine/premium/lgbtq-israelis-describe-being-shunned-by-global-community-after-october-7/0000018c-f92a-dd94-a9cc-fbee4d680000>; *Real Time With Bill Maher* | *S21:E16* | *Episode 16* | *Crave*, 2023, <https://www.crave.ca/tv-shows/real-time-with-bill-maher/episode-16-s21e16>.

*Civilizations*¹⁸ thesis leans into Enlightenment-era philosophy designed to reconcile colonial violence with so-called “liberal values.”¹⁹ Although anticolonial scholars have highlighted the racist orientalism and “downright ignorance” involved with positioning the Western and Islamic worlds as fundamentally oppositional and combative, defenders of Israel have readily legitimized its potentially genocidal attack on Gaza based on the purported superiority of Israeli/Western society over Palestinian/Arab societies.²⁰

For instance, these arguments hold that homophobia is omnipresent within Palestine, insisting that the ‘queer Palestinian subject’ (and, by extension, all Palestinians) would be safer under the supposedly tolerant Israeli occupation. Hence, Israeli pinkwashing becomes the myopic lens under which queer Palestinian existence is rendered discursively impossible, and the cultural complexity of Palestinian society is reduced to a simplistic West vs. East, “civilized” vs. “uncivilized” binary that entrenches settler-colonial power.

Further, the practice of pinkwashing attempts to internationalize homophobia in a way that forces queer

¹⁸ In his (in)famous 1996 book of the same name, American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington argued that post-Cold War era global politics would be defined by an ideological conflict between the global “East” (Indochina, parts of Eurasia and the Muslim world) and “West.” Huntington argued that “Islamic civilization” was problematic and antithetical to the supposedly universal democratic Western values. Anticolonial scholars have critiqued his book for being fundamentally orientalist, reductive, and frankly ignorant in “presuming to speak for an entire religion or civilization.” Edward W. Said, “The Clash of Ignorance,” *The Nation*, October 4, 2001, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/clash-ignorance/>.

¹⁹ Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy, “Colonialism,” May 9, 2006, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/colonialism/>.

²⁰ Said, “The Clash of Ignorance,” para. 3.

39 Palestinians to appear in Israeli/Western terms.²¹ However, neither homophobia, queerness, nor Palestinian struggle can be divorced from their historical, social, and geopolitical contexts. Forming an essentialized queer Palestinian subject that is the victim of the globally agreed upon violence ‘homophobia’ erases the nuance of lived Palestinian and queer Palestinian experience. A myriad of factors might privilege heterosexuality in a given cultural or social space, just as there are countless manners by which colonial and settler-colonial states are privileged over colonized or occupied peoples. Attempts to universalize the experiences of homophobia and colonization reduce this complexity, thereby upholding these interlocking systems of oppression. Thus, homonationalism relies on an orientalist ideology that is insufficient for understanding the intersections between queerness and colonialism in the Palestinian context.

Lastly, much of the backlash hurled towards pro-Palestinian queer activists relies on the idea that being queer in Palestine is undesirable, if not impossible. For example, gay, Jewish-American journalist James Kirschik has called *Queers for Palestine* “a level of masochism” he could not “comprehend.”²² One could argue these ideas stem from homosexuality being criminalized in Gaza, which is connected to an assumed systemic homophobia in Palestinian/Arab culture. However, the law criminalizing homosexuality in Gaza was written by the British and is a remnant of the colonial mandate system. There is little evidence of this law being enforced, save for one notable

²¹ Puar and Mikdashi, “Pinkwatching and Pinkwashing,” para. 8.

²² *Real Time With Bill Maher* | S21:E16 | Episode 16 | Crave, 2023, <https://www.crave.ca/tv-shows/real-time-with-bill-maher/episode-16-s21e16>.

case in 2017.²³²⁴ As such, it is much more likely this idea stems from homonationalist discourses throughout the West that are perpetuated through Israeli pinkwashing.

Conclusion

As the siege on Gaza continues, queer people continue to organize in support of Palestinians. These groups and activists have been met with intense backlash centred around the idea that queer and Palestinian identities and liberation are incompatible. These arguments rely on an orientalist ideology that serves to further Israeli settler-colonial objectives through homonationalism. In this paper, I have highlighted the connection between Israeli pinkwashing and the contemporary discourse surrounding pro-Palestinian queer movements. By exploring the colonial functions of Israeli pinkwashing and breaking down the insufficiencies within homonationalism and orientalist reasoning, I have sought to problematize the idea that pro-Palestinian queer activism is self-contradictory. For, this notion assumes a universalized homophobia exists across Palestinian culture, creating a reductive, orientalist binary between Palestinian and Israeli society that helps secure Israeli colonial power and invisibilize queer Palestinian existence.

²³ “Palestine,” Human Dignity Trust, February 15, 2019, <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/country-profile/palestine/>.

²⁴ In 2017, author Abbad Yahya was prosecuted for publishing *Crimes in Ramallah*, a novel whose themes included politics and religion, which were explored through its homosexual protagonists.

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