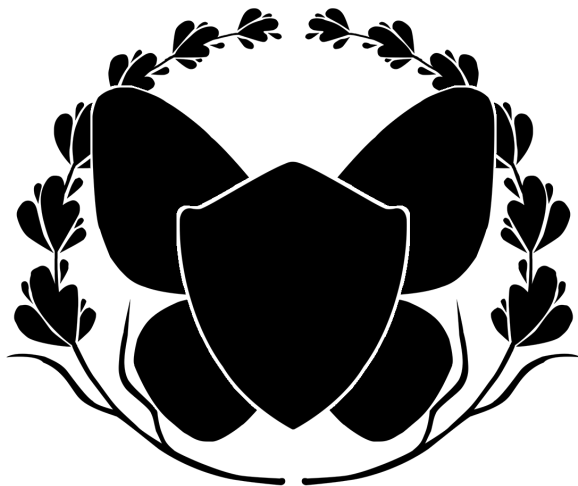


PINKWASHING AND US EMPIRE:

Why queers for Palestine?



BY THE LAVENDER GUARD



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Introduction

While the Palestinian resistance is beginning to win territory, while the IOF is escalating its genocidal reign of terror on Palestinians, and while American media and politicians coordinate to paint Israel as righteous and its enemies as antisemites, terrorists, etc, it is becoming increasingly imperative to ground ourselves in the history of this conflict. We must understand how the queer liberation movement has related to the Palestinian cause before, and understand the connections between their cause and ours.

The first two pieces in this pamphlet will cover the former. The first essay is by Khadir Shafie, the director of Aswat, a Palestinian Women and Queer rights group. Aswat is the only group in Palestine that is entirely composed of queer and trans women and directly works on issues related to women, gender and sexuality — while also emphasizing the primacy of the movement for liberation from Zionist occupation. A delegation of American queers visited them in 2012, then produced the open letter that is the second piece in this pamphlet.

The second and third pieces reflect on the revolutionary character of the Palestinian national liberation movement, the contradiction between imperialism and LGBT liberation, and the relationship between the two liberation movements.

Despite what the reactionary, Zionist media wants us to believe, there is NO CONTRADICTION between the movement for queer liberation and Palestinian liberation!

From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!

Pinkwashing: Israel's International Strategy and Internal Agenda

Khadir Shafie, 2015

Over the past decade, Palestinian queer feminist activism has increased public awareness of Israel's use of "pinkwashing" in its desperate attempt to fight the growing Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Pinkwashing is a deliberate strategy used by Israel's government, agencies, and the Israeli LGBT community to exploit Israel's relatively progressive stance on gay rights, and to deflect international attention from its gross violations of human rights and international law. Israel's cynical use of gay rights aims to obfuscate the reality of occupation and apartheid. Queer BDS activists have therefore urged international queer groups to engage in solidarity actions with all Palestinians, and not confine their solidarity to Palestinian queers. In other words, Palestinian queer feminist activism, which views human rights in a holistic way, calls for and mobilizes active global solidarity around Palestine in general, through the lens of queer activism in the context of Israel/Palestine.

With regard to pinkwashing, Palestinian queer activism is invested in PinkWatching efforts to debunk Israel's pinkwashing propaganda. Israel's use of pinkwashing, among other whitewashing strategies, attempts to divert global attention from maintaining its oppressive regime of occupation, colonization and apartheid against Palestinians. Pinkwashing portrays a democratic, liberal and gay-friendly image of Israel, supported by its relatively gay-friendly laws. As a counterpoint to this idyllic picture of Israel, the pinkwashing campaign also aims to paint a racist and false image of the monolithically homophobic, backward and barbaric Arab/Palestinian.

One of the techniques Israel uses in its pinkwashing campaigns¹ is to fabricate myths about "saving" Palestinian queers from their homophobic and oppressive families and communities by bringing them to live in Tel Aviv – the ultimate gay haven. Tel Aviv may be a gay heaven for Jewish Israeli citizens, or even for the hundreds of visitors who engage in gay tourism. However, it is neither friendly nor a haven for Palestinian LGBTs

1 Many of these campaigns are detailed in Sarah Schulman's book, *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*, notably the "Brand Israel" campaign, documented in full in her Appendix "Brand Israel and Pinkwashing: A Documentary Guide."

and queers.

As a teenager questioning my sexuality, I felt completely estranged and alone. Conversations about sexuality were non-existent, even among professionals working within schools. While school counselors and psychologists addressed controversial issues related to early marriage, domestic and street violence, and the abuse of drugs among teenagers, they refrained from addressing issues related to sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity. Even gay literature in Arabic was rare, so I mostly read in Hebrew. Learning about sexual orientation and gender identity in a foreign language was in itself alienating. The only means of communication available to me was a support line operated by an Israeli organization. After much debate, I called the line and the voice on the other end urged me to move to Tel Aviv. There, he assured me, I would live my life freely “as a lesbian.” It was the first time anyone described me as such, even before I was able to define my own sexuality.

Despite this disconcerting drawback, the thought of moving to Tel Aviv accompanied me through my last years of school, and shortly after graduating, I applied to study at Tel Aviv University.

The move to Tel Aviv was overwhelming. There, I thought, I would explore my sexuality and live freely, without having to hide, to be closeted, to cease to exist in so many ways. I was introduced to early 90s gay life in Tel Aviv through its vibrant bars and late-night gay parties, and made many gay Israeli friends. It didn't take long to realize that they were friendly to me as a lesbian while constantly trying to conceal, even suppress, my Palestinian identity. They affirmed that I did not look and sound Arab – so there was no need for me to embarrass them by bringing up my Palestinian-ness in conversations with others. I protested that my name clearly showed I was Arab. That was when they proposed changing my name for me.

I went home, feeling disgusted at the thought of being “renamed” by colonial oppressors to better fit their definition of the lesbian category of identity, and not offend their racial sensibilities. I had been a Palestinian Arab my entire life, who simply happened to question her sexuality. I had come to Tel Aviv to be who I was, but it became clear to me that I was welcome there as a “lesbian,” not as a Palestinian. In their world of alleged “freedoms” and rights, there was no place for my Palestinian-ness. I had to choose between being “gay” and being Palestinian, but giving up a part of myself was impossible to bear. I had never experienced such rejection,

and the thought of this exclusion made me sick of the Israeli LGBT scene.

At the end of my first year of university, I packed all my stuff and left Tel Aviv without saying my farewells, determined never to look back.

Just like the anonymous voice on the support line, the Israelis who tried to “save” and “help” me were forcing me instead into identifying with their normative, homogenizing LGBT scene. I had never expressed any belonging to that identity or lifestyle, and most importantly, I did not want to adhere to categories that denied me my political struggle.

After leaving Tel Aviv, I started associating lesbianism with “Jewishness,” or even “Zionism,” in opposition to being Palestinian. It took me years to be able to reconcile my same-sex desires and my Palestinianness. At the time, the term pinkwashing had not yet been coined in relation to Palestine², but the practice was pervasive: coming out of the “closet” was already perceived as the pinnacle of the civilizing mission for Palestinian gays, and part of the coming out process also involved leaving their Arabness behind. I came to Aswat – Palestinian Gay Women in 2008. I was a Palestinian feminist activist working on the BDS campaign, and Aswat was just the space I had been looking for all of those years: a feminist queer group, committed to linking feminism, queerness and resistance to all forms of oppression – as Palestinians, as women, and as queers – and to bringing them together into one monumental struggle.

Throughout my years of work and activism at Aswat, I have learned that pinkwashing as a strategy is deeply rooted in the Israeli ideology of racism, hatred, and denial of Palestinian existence. It is not only a cynical exploitation of the issue of gay rights by Israel and its allies to divert global attention from Israel’s constant and egregious violations of human rights and international law. It is also an internal political strategy to contain radical Palestinian dissent and keep Palestinians at a constant disadvantage. Thus when we talk about pinkwashing, we must remember our own experiences: the context and dynamics which have influenced our lives help us make sense of Israeli colonial and apartheid practices. Excluding Palestinians from the “gay haven” Tel Aviv – an experience many of us have been through – is merely symptomatic. Israel’s pinkwashing policies run much deeper, functioning on a systemic level to alienate

2 The word “pinkwashing” was first used by Ali Abunimah in 2010 to describe Israel’s discriminatory practices, as Sarah Schulman mentioned in *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*.

the “gay” Palestinian from their community, neutralize their potentially radical politics in favor of a bourgeois and domesticated “gay” identity, and thereby limit possibilities for radical change and mobilization in Palestinian societies. This internal strategy plays out through discriminatory rules and procedures, most notably, the unequal allocation of resources in favor of Israeli schools and LGBTQI organizations at the expense of Palestinian ones – especially in projects involving Palestinian citizens of Israel.

The pinkwashing strategy received a major boost in 2009, when an attack on an LGBT center in Tel Aviv sparked a flurry of activity and investment around the issue of LGBT rights, particularly in Jewish Israeli schools. The Ministry of Education allotted massive resources to Israeli LGBT organizations to create gay-friendly educational curricula and deliver workshops to students, mandated the commemoration of IDAHOT – International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia – in all schools, and instituted obligatory diversity awareness training for teachers and other professionals working with young people. Palestinian schools, though they also fall within the scope of the Ministry of Education, were excluded from these efforts. Palestinian queer and LGBT organizations simply do not figure in the equation of LGBT resource distribution in Israel.

As part of this campaign, the Ministry of Education has been determinedly sabotaging all efforts made by Aswat – Palestinian Gay Women to provide professionals and service providers with training courses and study days on sexual rights and politics. In fact, over the past five years, the Ministry has been bent on excluding us from any project at all that aims to promote respect for diversity and tolerance within Palestinian societies.

Instead, the Israeli government and many foreign embassies in Tel Aviv – including the U.S. Embassy – allocate funds to Israeli organizations to work with our constituencies in Palestinian communities. On the one hand, Jewish and foreign funding brands sexual rights as a “Zionist” issue, thus hindering even further the advancement of sexual freedoms in Palestinian societies. On the other, Israelis wanting to “educate” Palestinian about gay rights ensures that sexuality education is only delivered condescendingly by non-Palestinians to Palestinians, ignoring cultural, language, and other particularities.

The propaganda aspect of pinkwashing deems Palestinians not “civilized” enough to understand, let alone respect, “gay” rights, while at the same time depriving them access to equal resources and opportunities. For

“gay” Palestinians, “coming out” in this environment restricts their sexual identities to the Israeli Jewish understanding of LGBT, even if and when the parameters of such a narrow spectrum do not apply to their local contexts. Pinkwashing is invested in maintaining backward, racist depictions of Palestinians in order to better justify oppression and unequal treatment of them, and its internal vicious cycle tokenizes “gay” Palestinians, who become not Palestinian enough in their own communities. If anything, these policies and practices highlight the unequal dynamics of power in forcing identities in discriminated communities. It is therefore the moral duty of Palestinian activists speaking in international platforms to understand the dynamics behind Palestinian queer visibilities in our local contexts, and recognize pinkwashing as both an international strategy which concerns Israel’s global brand, and an internal agenda that aims to divide and rule.

The unequal dynamics of power are manifested in every aspect of the lives of “gay” Palestinians and the broader social and political context which surrounds them. Riddled with illegal settlements and checkpoints, the current geopolitical configuration of Palestinian land restricts mobility across borders, even between neighboring villages, dividing Palestinians and containing the potential for mass mobilization. Israel’s pinkwashing strategy alienates queer Palestinians even further from the struggle they share with other Palestinians. It attempts to draw them away from their families and friends, and into the orbit of self-proclaimed LGBT paradise Tel Aviv. The politically neutered discourse and lifestyle of “gay” identity and rights in the Israeli Jewish context offers an exciting insight: that Israel is desperately afraid of Palestinians organizing around the intersecting issues of occupation, apartheid, and sexual and gender-based oppression. Coupled with an effective BDS campaign endorsed in solidarity by international allies, recognizing pinkwashing as a deceptive and deeply colonial propaganda strategy that perpetuates the oppression of Palestinians will allow our queer and local movements to dismantle the structures of Israeli racism and occupation in Palestinian land. It is this kind of political organization that we must work for.

An Open Letter to LGBTIQ Communities and Allies on the Israeli Occupation of Palestine

2012

We are a diverse group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and trans activists, academics, artists, and cultural workers from the United States who participated in a solidarity tour in the West Bank of Palestine and Israel from January 7-13, 2012.

What we witnessed was devastating and created a sense of urgency around doing our part to end this occupation and share our experience across a broad cross-section of the LGBTIQ community. We saw with our own eyes the walls—literally and metaphorically—separating villages, families and land. From this, we gained a profound appreciation for how deeply embedded and far reaching this occupation is through every aspect of Palestinian daily life.

So too, we gained new insights into how Israeli civil society is profoundly affected by the dehumanizing effects of Israeli state policy toward Palestinians in Israel and in the West Bank. We were moved by the immense struggle being waged by some Israelis in resistance to state policies that dehumanize and deny the human rights of Palestinians.

We ended our trip in solidarity with Palestinian and Israeli people struggling to end the occupation of Palestine, and working for Palestinian independence and self-sovereignty.

Among the things we saw were:

- the 760 km (470 mi) separation wall (jidar) partitioning and imprisoning the Palestinian people;
- how the wall's placement works to confiscate large swaths of Palestinian land, splits villages and families in two, impedes Palestinians from working their agricultural land, and in many cases does not advance the ostensible security interests of Israel;
- a segregated road system (one set of roads for cars with Israeli plates, and another much inferior one for cars with Palestinian plates)

throughout the West Bank, constructed by the Israeli state and enforced by the Israeli army; these roads ease Israeli travel to and from illegal settlements in the West Bank and severely impede Palestinian travel between villages, to agricultural land, and throughout a territory which is and has been their homeland;

- a system of permits (identification cards) that limits the travel of Palestinian people and functionally imprisons them, separating them from family, health care, jobs and other necessities;
- militarized checkpoints with barbed wire and soldiers armed with automatic rifles and the humiliation and harassment the Palestinian people experience daily in order to travel from one place to another;
- the reconfiguration of maps to render invisible Palestinian villages/homelands;
- harmful living conditions created and enforced by Israeli law and policy such as limited access to water and electricity in many Palestinian homes;
- violence perpetrated by Israeli settlers against Palestinians, and the ongoing growth of illegal settlements facilitated by the Israeli military;
- homelessness as a result of the razing of Palestinian homes by the Israeli state;
- home invasions, tear gas attacks, “skunk water” attacks, and the arrest of Palestinian children by the Israeli military as part of ongoing harassment designed to force Palestinian villagers to give up their land;

While travel restrictions prevented us from directly witnessing the state of things in the Gaza Strip, we believe the blockade of the Gaza Strip has produced a humanitarian crisis of monumental proportion.

Our time together in Palestine has led us to understand that we have a responsibility to share with our US based LGBTIQ communities what we saw and heard so that we can do more together to end this occupation. In that spirit, we offer the following summary points in solidarity with the Palestinian people:

1. The liberation of the Palestinian people from the project of Israeli occupation is the foremost goal of the Palestinian people and we fully support this aim. We also understand that liberation from this form of colonization and apartheid goes hand in hand with the liberation of queer Palestinians from the project of global heterosexism.
2. We call out and reject the state of Israel’s practice of pinkwashing, that is, a well-funded, cynical publicity campaign marketing a purportedly gay-friendly Israel to an international audience so as to distract

attention from the devastating human rights abuses it commits on a daily basis against the Palestinian people. Key to Israel's pinkwashing campaign is the manipulative and false labeling of Israeli culture as gay-friendly and Palestinian culture as homophobic. It is our view that comparisons of this sort are both inaccurate – homophobia and transphobia are to be found throughout Palestinian and Israeli society – and that this is beside the point: Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine cannot be somehow justified or excused by its purportedly tolerant treatment of some sectors of its own population. We stand in solidarity with Palestinian queer organizations like Al Qaws and Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (PQBDS) whose work continues to impact queer Palestinians and all Palestinians. (<http://www.alqaws.org>, <http://www.pqbds.com/>)

3. We urge LGBTIQ individuals and communities to resist replicating the practice of pinkwashing that insists on elevating the sexual freedom of Palestinian people over their economic, environmental, social, and psychological freedom. Like the Palestinian activists we met, we view heterosexism and sexism as colonial projects and, therefore, see both as interrelated and interconnected regimes that must end.
4. We stand in solidarity with queer Palestinian activists who are working to end the occupation, and also with Israeli activists, both queer and others, who are resisting the occupation that is being maintained and extended in their name.
5. We name the complicity of the United States in this human rights catastrophe and call on our government to end its participation in an unjust regime that places it and us on the wrong side of peace and justice.
6. We support efforts on the part of Palestinians to achieve full self-determination, such as building an international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement which calls for the fulfillment of three fundamental demands: (<http://www.bdsmovement.net/call>)
 - The end of the Occupation and the dismantling of the Wall (jidar).
 - The right of return for displaced Palestinians.
 - The recognition and restoration of the equal rights of citizenship for Israeli citizens of Palestinian descent.
7. We call upon all of our academic and activist colleagues in the US and elsewhere to join us by supporting all Palestinian efforts that center these three demands and by working to end US financial support, at \$8.2 million daily, for the Israeli state and its occupation.

Signed, January 25, 2012:

Katherine Franke — Isidor and Seville Sulzbacher Professor of Law and
Director, Center for Gender & Sexuality Law, Columbia University;
Board Member Center for Constitutional Rights
Barbara Hammer — Filmmaker, Faculty at European Graduate School
Tom Léger — Editor, PrettyQueer.com
Darnell L. Moore — writer and activist
Vani Natarajan — Humanities and Area Studies Librarian, Barnard College
Pauline Park — Chair, New York Association for Gender Rights Advocacy
(NYAGRA)
Jasbir K. Puar — Rutgers University, Board Member Audre Lorde Project
Roya Rastegar — Independent artist and scholar
Dean Spade — Assistant Professor, Seattle University School of Law and
Collective Member, Sylvia Rivera Law Project
Kendall Thomas — Nash Professor of Law, Columbia University
Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz — intersections/intersecciones consulting
Juliet Widoff, MD — Callen-Lorde Community Health Center

*All organizational affiliations are listed for identification purposes only and
in no way indicate a position taken by such organizations on the issues raised
in this statement.*

Why Queers For Palestine?

Rachel Nagant, 2023

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

On various occasions, the Zionists have accused the revolutionary queer liberation movement of being in some way hypocritical or naive for supporting the Palestinian resistance. Ironically, it is typically the most chauvinistic, the most homophobic of Zionists, who accuse Hamas — and Palestinian society generally — *of sharing their own values*. They cannot comprehend that our solidarity with Palestine is *unconditional* and rooted in materialist analysis.

We do not expect or require something in exchange for solidarity, because we understand the *objectively revolutionary* character of the Palestinian national liberation movement, because we stand against imperialism, because we recognize the shallow hypocrisy of the pinkwashing exhibited by both the Zionist regime and the American Empire. The bombs, guns, and tanks produced by American companies and deployed by the IOF on civilian populations kill indiscriminately, *straight and gay alike, man and woman alike, cis and trans alike*. In the **25 days** from October 7th to November 1st, the Zionist regime is confirmed to have killed **at least 8796 civilians and injured 24,000**. If we take an average of 4% for LGBT population, we estimate that **Israel killed over 350 LGBT Palestinians and injured almost 1000**. Who is the greater threat to gay Palestinians, then, the IOF or Hamas?

The same IOF that is committing genocide against the Palestinians is training American police officers; the “knee-on-knock” tactic that infamously killed George Floyd in 2020 was pioneered by the IOF. The same police officers in West Hollywood who defend fascists, who beat and threaten transsexuals, who surveil and raid gay cruising hotspots at the behest of gentrifiers, are defended by gay members of the city council — who both defend Israel and accept free vacations to Tel Aviv! And all of this is purportedly fine, WEHO is purported to be a progressive bastion

of queer rights. Why? Because they hang pride flags once a year, and allow corporate-run pride parades to advertise for Raytheon once a year, because there's rainbow-imperialists in office!

We recognize the pinkwashing perpetrated by the Zionist regime because we see the same tactics deployed in Western media. We oppose the violence of the IOF without equivocation because the same tactics are deployed against us! **To oppose imperialism is to support LGBT liberation. To support the Palestinian resistance is to oppose imperialism.** That is precisely what makes it a revolutionary policy! And that is why we must be queers for Palestine!

Two Faces of Empire

Rachel Nagant, 2023

The specter of rainbow-imperialism, in lieu of any comprehensive analysis, has allowed various opportunist “lines” and distortions to proliferate without rectification. The confusion has been caused by the contemporary division of the American imperialists into two camps: those who opportunistically support the democratic rights of LGBT people *in rhetoric*, and those who maintain a more traditional line on opposing them. The former camp, while openly tailing the general mood among the masses for support of queer rights, nevertheless spend money behind closed doors which exposes their words as shallow and hypocritical. The latter camp, in the more orthodox tradition of bourgeois moral hypocrisy, privately engage in all manner of sexual exploits and ‘perversions’ which they simultaneously condemn the masses for. The effect has been a schizotypal division of Western imperialism, on the one hand vocally condemning anti-LGBT oppression, and on the other, clandestinely supporting Christofascist initiatives to oppress LGBT people. These are the two faces of the Western empire: hypocritical support for the LGBT community, and hypocritical condemnation for ‘those sinful pederasts.’ The former provides cover for the latter; the latter provides justification for the former.

And this is precisely what we mean when we call America rainbow-imperialist: *rainbow in words, but imperialist in deeds*. The American Empire continues to oppress LGBT people at home, bomb LGBT people abroad, and to support anti-LGBT governments as long as they will partner with NATO. The American Empire has never once brought “human rights” (let alone queer rights) to an occupied territory. In point of fact, the vulgar thesis that opposition to the democratic rights of LGBT people is itself opposition to Western imperialism is precisely backwards: it is predominantly because of Western imperialism that former or current colonies have institutionalized the oppression of LGBT people. Certainly, one would be a fine “anti-imperialist” indeed to accept the imperialist’s propaganda at face-value, to confound their words with their actions, yet all too many of our would-be anti-Western warriors propagate this very distortion of the facts.

With this in mind we can identify two distinct strategies for countering imperialist propaganda: reflexively staking the opposite position, or

thoughtfully deconstructing it. To stake the position of being anti-LGBT is to accept that the American Empire is truly invested in the rights of LGBT people, when by all accounts this is false. At the same time, the use of rainbow propaganda indicates that the authorities believe the public to be so invested; hence, to be truly persuasive to the public, one would have to instead explain how supporting American imperialism is not the way to support LGBT rights. Conversely, insisting that being anti-imperialist means being anti-LGBT will not only *reinforce* the imperialist's propaganda, but turn the public *against anti-imperialism*. And this precisely what has happened: opposite to the anti-LGBT anti-imperialists one will indeed find ardently pro-NATO homonationalists. And how can we be shocked by this when avowed proponents of anti-imperialism declare their rights imperialistic at the same time that imperialists proclaim intervention in the name of a queer crusade? The two are in agreement! One would have to assume that the broad public is already interested in anti-imperialism and disinterested in LGBT rights for such rhetoric to be effective. Either these vulgar anti-imperialists are woefully ignorant of the facts, or else we shall have to question: Who are the vulgar anti-imperialists really trying to persuade? Obviously, it can only be those who already consider themselves anti-imperialists — otherwise, what is or is not anti-imperialistic would have no persuasive force. And why should one be interested in turning anti-imperialists against LGBT rights? Why should one be interested in promoting discord and disunity among the people? Comrades, I'm sure we don't need to spell it out.

The true resolution to the contradiction of rainbow-imperialism is to recognize that imperialism is nothing more and nothing less than a vehicle for exploitation and extraction; that ideological justifications do not accurately reflect the actions taken by the imperialists, only the need to swindle their working classes. The true resolution must be to recognize that siding with Western imperialism is decisively an anti-LGBT policy, and that Christofascism is the real, substantive policy of Western imperialism.

