

On the Insidious Discourse of “Terrorism” in the US and How It Functions to Demonize Palestine Advocates and Muslims

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Global Research, May 03, 2021

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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After Heike Schotten, Associate Professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMB), co-organized and moderated a webinar at the University of Massachusetts Boston entitled [We Will not Be Silenced: The Repression of Academic Freedom and Resistance, from Leila Khaled to UMass Boston](#), UMB’s public records access office received a request from the Zionist Advocacy Center in New York “pursuant to the provisions of the Massachusetts Public Record Law” for emails from and to the webinar participants that use the terms “Israel,” “Palestine,” “Leila Khaled,” or “We Will Not Be Silenced” between June 1, 2020-October 25, 2020.

There was and is nothing secretive or illegal about the webinar We Will Not Be Silenced aired at the University of Massachusetts Boston on October 23, 2020. It was part of a Day of Action Against the Criminalization and Censorship of Campus Speech [organized](#) and widely publicized by the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI). Furthermore, the whole webinar was recorded and published on YouTube. [Also see: [Zoom Censorship of Palestine Seminars Sparks Fight Over Academic Freedom](#)]

In the context of USACBI’S [Day of Action](#), the request served under the federal freedom of information law or FOIA by the Zionist group on the university is nothing more than an attempt to silence and erase the Palestinian narrative and liberation struggle by intimidating and harassing Professor Schotten and her colleagues.

Terrorism is a focus of Professor Schotten’s academic inquiry and the subject of her book *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony* (Columbia University Press, 2018), described on the publisher’s [book page](#) as follows: “In *Queer Terror*, C. Heike Schotten offers a critique of U.S. settler-colonial empire that draws on political, queer, and critical indigenous theory to situate Bush’s either/or moralism and reframe the concept of terrorism.”

In the process of this academic inquiry Schotten finds occasion to critique the “contemporary facts of Israeli colonization and apartheid” and expose, as false, “the already-agreed-upon presupposition [and one widely propagated by Israel as a rationale for the existence of the Zionist Jewish state] that the Jews are history’s quintessential

victims—and not, in fact, complicit, in ideological and state forms, with today’s aggressors in a civilizational War on Terror.”

To learn more about the context that drove Professor Schotten to organize the webinar that revolves around Leila Khaled’s censorship by Zoom, I asked her and she was kind to answer the following questions. Her insightful responses throw light on a host of interlocking concepts—the Palestine exception, terrorism, Islamophobia, queerness, colonial power, pseudo-democracy and why solidarity is important. She is remarkable in her honesty and directness and her responses are guaranteed to re-frame your vision of our world:

“Just as it is hard for people to speak out about Palestine when they will find their jobs and academic credentials targeted and destroyed, so too it is hard for activists and everyday people to speak out about Palestine when they will be accused of being ‘terrorists’ or ‘terrorist’-sympathizers.”

Rima Najjar: There have been several examples of Zionist organizations serving harassment FOIAs to academics that tied them up with unnecessary legal wrangling for a long time. The harassment of Professor Simona Sharoni at the hands of Jonathan Slosser comes to mind, as reported in the 2016 Electronic Intifada report [Women’s studies professor harassed by Israel-backed group](#). What do you know about the Zionist organization serving the FOIA in your case and have you made a decision yet on how you will be addressing the request?

Heike Schotten: My understanding is that the Zionist Advocacy Center (ZAC) is essentially a one-man operation run by David Abrams and receives direct funding from the Israeli government. The ZAC and Abrams make it their job to instigate lawsuits against Palestine advocates and movements on campus in order to harass, intimidate, and, ultimately, shut them down entirely. Palestine Legal has a helpful primer on Abrams [here](#).

In total, the ZAC submitted a public records request for emails from three faculty at UMass Boston (myself included) who were involved in the USACBI Day of Action Leila Khaled webinar. We continue to learn more about the nature of this organization and our legal rights to free speech and academics as tenured professors at a public university and as unionized public sector workers.

One thing we clearly decided upon, however, is that we will make all our decisions together and insist on dealing with this harassment and with our university as an indivisible group. We understand all too well that this sort of harassment and intimidation—not to mention potential university discipline and punishment—are more likely to succeed if they can pit us against one another or divide us up. For example, one of us is much more vulnerable to this sort of targeting and harassment because she is Palestinian. We will not allow either the ZAC or the university administration to separate her from us or single her out as either uniquely vulnerable or somehow “problematic” or “troublesome.” Solidarity is our unifying commitment in this case and whatever struggle this entails—and we worry this signals the beginning of a long series of public records requests in a fishing expedition to find something to be cobbled together to issue in a lawsuit—and however long it takes, we have committed to be in it with one another together.

One last thing on this: despite many conversations with our university administration well

before the Day of Action ever existed, there has been a real refusal on the part of the university to take these sorts of right-wing and Zionist attacks on faculty and academic freedom seriously. Most often, university administrators mistake them for accurate portrayals of faculty misconduct, rather than sloppy, misleading, and ideologically-driven attacks that seek to destroy higher education. But as we know, and as Isaac Kamola recommends in his excellent [research](#) on this subject, the best approach for university administrations to take is to go on the offensive: not simply actively defend their faculty from such attacks, but call out the vast, well-funded network of right-wing donors and activists who are organizing these attacks not from an interest in protecting academic freedom but rather in destroying liberatory knowledges and the possibility academic life itself.

In the wake of administrators' failure to do precisely this, our only recourse is one another, which is why solidarity is so important. We also have been very heartened by having the backing of our Faculty Staff Union and amazing support from the brilliant legal minds at Palestine Legal.

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RN: This is not the first time you defend academic freedom or Palestinian rights. In your article titled "Against academic freedom: 'terrorism', settler colonialism, and Palestinian liberation," for example, you write about the work of academic boycott against Israel and situate it within a critique of settler colonialism. How long have you been engaged in this work, and is this the first time you have personally come up against the poisonous and destructive slandering of people and movements advocating justice and liberation for the Palestinian people?

HS: I have been involved in the Palestine solidarity movement since 2006, and thinking in my scholarly work about the connections between settler colonialism, the War on Terror, and queer critique for almost that long. The motivation for the latter project was not simply, as you put it so well, "the poisonous and destructive slandering of people and movements advocating justice and liberation for the Palestinian people," but also the really intractable and insidious discourse of "terrorism" which, in the US at least, functions similarly not only to demonize and punish Palestine advocates, but also to racialize an entire category of people, Muslims, and the thing that ostensibly unites them, a monolith caricature of "Islam" as essentially "radical" or "fundamentalist."

"Islamophobia is not a uniform phenomenon and takes many different forms across the globe: US 'terrorism' Islamophobia is not the same as French secularist Islamophobia, which are surely not the same as the anti-Muslim animus in Gujarat and India vis-a-vis Pakistan and Kashmir, in Russia vis-a-vis Chechens, or in China vis-a-vis Uighur Muslims."

RN: One of the conclusions of *Queer Terror* is that the attack on "terror" levied by George W Bush is so familiar and so entrenched because it is both an echo and a continuation of the kind of ideological position espoused by settler colonialism. Can you speak to that?

HS: Settler colonialists everywhere encounter indigenous inhabitants and characterize them as fundamentally hostile, irrational, and “savage”; i.e., a threat to “civilization” and everything that latter category may entail, whether that’s Christianity, Enlightenment reason, or the rules of private property (usefully called, by 16th and 17th century British rationalizers of colonization, “propriety”).

What’s set up in this bizarre ideological universe is fundamentally (1) a reversal of hierarchy, wherein the oppressors set themselves up as the oppressed and (2) a characterization of the meeting between settler and “savage” as an existential threat that portends the elimination of the settler (when, of course, the reality is that settler colonialism portends the elimination of the native).

This is the exact same ideological logic at work in accusations of “terrorism” and, quite frequently, Zionist fear-mongering around “anti-Semitism.” On college campuses, this takes place when those with the actual money and power smear individual academics—often, but not always, Palestinian—and completely unfunded grassroots movements as the main instigators of racism and aggression against Jewish people. Their aim is the elimination of these academics and movements and, regrettably, they have been very successful in some cases: as I discuss in that article, the firing of tenured Palestinian-American professors Sami Al-Arian and Steven Salaita are premier examples. Others, like Nadia Abu El-Haj and Joseph Massad, managed somehow to survive what were harrowing campaigns against them waged by well-funded Zionist organizations, often with direct support from the Israeli government itself.

“...‘terrorism’ typically designates Arab, Muslim, and specifically Palestinian people... calling any and all acts of political violence ‘terrorism,’ especially if Muslim people are involved, allows for the de-politicization of violence and the smearing of Muslims as fundamentally ‘savage,’ irrational, and inassimilable to Western ways of life, which go unmarked as culturally specific but instead masquerade as a universal recognition of the value of human life.”

RN: Alasdair Soussi, [writing](#) in Aljazeera, explains how the powerful Israeli lobby along with “reporting fatigue and the fear of being accused of anti-Semitism” have harmed coverage of the Israel/Palestine issue, resulting in the publication of reports on Palestine that are consistently inaccurate. Even the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) [letter](#) to New York University president Andrew Hamilton protesting Zoom’s cancellation of a webinar hosted by the NYU chapter of the AAUP, and co-sponsored by several NYU departments and institutes has an inaccuracy right in the first paragraph, as in the reference to Leila Khaled as a “Palestinian activist previously convicted of terrorist activity.” What do you make of that as well as of the unquestioning references to “terrorism” that are constantly being made in the media?

HS: The word “terrorist” has a number of specific functions, all of which are fully on display in the coordinated mass censorship of webinars featuring Leila Khaled. While “terrorism” as a term has been in use for hundreds of years, it has a specific set of contemporary meanings that were manufactured by Israel and the US in the late 20th century and became essential to the War on Terror in the 21st.

First, of course, “terrorism” designates ideologically motivated, irrational, and unjustifiable violence against innocents. Indeed, “terrorism” is a way of talking about political violence

that removes the politics entirely, rendering anyone accused of “terrorism” into a brainwashed tool or an irrational “savage.” Second, however, “terrorism” typically designates Arab, Muslim, and specifically Palestinian people. This is because the depoliticization of political violence that occurs in the first step requires some other, non-political explanation of otherwise incomprehensible violence, and Islam is the racialized placeholder that unifies the otherwise non-homogenous conglomerate of “Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian” and functions ideologically to “radicalize” people into committing these inexplicable acts of violence.

Finally, and more broadly, “terrorism” indicates the “savagery” of all those who refuse or fail to conform to the dictates of American and Israeli imperial and settler colonial hierarchies of human worth. “Terrorism” discourse is thus, to be sure, a form of racism; it is also a continuation of genocidal settler colonial ideologies about native peoples and a rationalization of American imperial military exploits abroad.

“The real problem with ‘terrorism’ discourse, which is not solely its inaccuracy in blaming victims but, more importantly, its insistence that political violence is off the table and anyone who engages in it, talks about it, or defends it is beyond the pale of humanity. That is, ‘terrorism’ discourse functions as a kind of moralism: a social system of valuation and de-valuation that sorts populations into proper, upright, and innocent, on the one hand, and populations deemed irremediably perverse, evil, nihilistic, or ‘savage,’ on the other.”

RN: Would you say, then, that the attacks on Prof. Abdulhadi’s and Prof. Kinukawa’s webinar are important evidence that this form of anti-Muslim racism is alive and well in the US?

HS: Yes absolutely: The primary basis for the attacks was claims about “terrorism”: that Leila Khaled is a “terrorist,” that the PFLP is a “terrorist” organization, or that hosting her in an online classroom constitutes material support for “terrorism.” In all cases, the word “terrorist” was used simultaneously to name Khaled as Muslim, Palestinian, “savage,” and intolerable. “Terrorism” is *the phenomenon* that cannot be tolerated without it threatening to destroy all goodness, decency, morality, and truth. More specifically, of course, the Zionist deployment of this term renders “terrorism” the fundamental threat to Jews and Jewish people, since Zionism is a Jewish supremacist settler colonial ideology that casts Palestinians as “savages” whose very existence poses a mortal threat to Jewish survival. Thus, it was unsurprising to also see the webinar and Khaled’s participation in it cast as an unprecedented and insupportable attack on Jewish people.

RN: You also write about the targeting and punishment (by Zionist and US forces) of Muslims and all those in alliance with “Muslim” goals. What do you make of French president Emmanuel Macron seizing upon the gruesome killings by a young Muslim of a French schoolteacher who had shown caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in a class to denounce terrorism and champion “French values,” such as freedom of speech when at the same time, as Kim Petersen puts it in [Terrorism and French Values- Sowing and Reaping?](#), “21st century France engages in overseas militarism, otherwise known as state terrorism, in places with large Muslim populations—places that never attacked France—such as Afghanistan, Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Chad, Somalia, Libya, North Mali, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen then what is to be expected? Is it okay for France to engage in militarism abroad and expect no blowback on French soil? Must not the French terrorism be condemned?”

HS: The French situation is a specific one, and I am wary to draw too many generalizations from an analysis of “terrorism” discourse and anti-Muslim racism that draws primarily on the US.

Islamophobia is not a uniform phenomenon and takes many different forms across the globe: US “terrorism” Islamophobia is not the same as French secularist Islamophobia, which are surely not the same as the anti-Muslim animus in Gujarat and India vis-a-vis Pakistan and Kashmir, in Russia vis-a-vis Chechens, or in China vis-a-vis Uighur Muslims. Each of these places has their own history of colonization and decolonization, not to mention ethnic and religious conflict, that cannot and should be assimilated into an American narrative.

That said, it is also the case that the War on Terror and the racist “terrorism” discourse that attends it is one of the United States’ most powerful exports. “Terrorism” discourse has been taken up by oppressive regimes all over the world to justify authoritarian crackdowns on their own people, expansive security state measures, and general militarism. It is also the case that France is, like the US and Israel, a settler colonial power that is dealing with Islam and Muslims in the form of an “immigration question” that they persist in seeing as the intrusion of foreigners with anti-European, anti-West, and anti-modern culture that threatens to destroy French values and French civilization. So, in that sense, there are continuities between US and Israeli Islamophobia and what is happening in France. And, to repeat a point I made earlier, calling any and all acts of political violence “terrorism,” especially if Muslim people are involved, allows for the de-politicization of violence and the smearing of Muslims as fundamentally “savage,” irrational, and inassimilable to Western ways of life, which go unmarked as culturally specific but instead masquerade as a universal recognition of the value of human life.

“US ‘terrorism’ discourse is fully of a piece with its democracy-promotion: both are toxic, ideological formations that veil the violent, settler colonial destruction of indigenous lifeworlds, instead passing it off as freedom and the protection of innocent life.”

RN: Would you go as far as to turn the tables and say that it is actually the colonial and imperial states who are the “real” “terrorists?”

HS: While such a statement would be a powerful rhetorical maneuver, I think it sidesteps the real problem with “terrorism” discourse, which is not solely its inaccuracy in blaming victims but, more importantly, its insistence that political violence is off the table and anyone who engages in it, talks about it, or defends it is beyond the pale of humanity. That is, “terrorism” discourse functions as a kind of moralism: a social system of valuation and de-valuation that sorts populations into proper, upright, and innocent, on the one hand, and populations deemed irremediably perverse, evil, nihilistic, or “savage,” on the other.

As we saw, this is fundamentally a settler colonial moralism, since the innocent and upright are existentially threatened by the evil and perverse. (The word “perverse” reminds us that this is also how heteronormative ideologies function, which are premier examples of moralism *par excellence*.) Rather than understanding morality as a social good, I follow Nietzsche in understanding it as the will to power of those who resent and feel victimized by others’ very existence. Hence morality is also, as Nietzsche explains, essentially a punishment project. This is why “terrorism” discourse is inherently tied to the actual policies

of surveillance, disappearance, torture, invisibilization, and demonization of Muslims punishment of Muslims *for the very fact of being Muslims* (or being perceived as such) is both a moral mandate and an existential necessity, if the integrity of good people and the coherence of meaning and truth itself are to be preserved.

However satisfying it may be, then, to flip the script and declare that the US and Israel are “real” “terrorists,” I think doing so implicates us in the moralizing logic of “terrorism” discourse that will keep us tied to resentment and invested in punishment. As Atiya Husain has so powerfully [argued](#), if we are truly committed to an abolitionist politics, then we should not be re-deploying “terrorism” as an epithet but, instead, seeking to abolish the very conditions of social and political life that render it meaningful to begin with. Which means, in effect, decolonizing this place and leaving “terrorism” and its attendant acculturation in the dustbin of history.

RN: In *Queer Terror*, you locate what you call the problem of “terrorism” within the framework of “the moralized value of life,” the idea that “settler life” is the only life “worthy of protection and preservation.” Do you think that if more journalists understood the concept of “terrorism” in the way you do, the result might be more accurate reporting about Palestine?

HS: I’m not sure the problem is one of knowledge or ignorance, really, so I don’t know that education would solve it. Rather, the problem is twofold: (1) the Israel and Zionist lobby is extraordinarily powerful and well-resourced and works very effectively (although this is changing now) to intimidate and silence anyone engaged in critical discourse regarding Israel and (2) the ideological apparatus in place that secures American and Israeli settler colonial empire is quite powerful and difficult to refuse. Just as it is hard for people to speak out about Palestine when they will find their jobs and academic credentials targeted and destroyed, so too it is hard for activists and everyday people to speak out about Palestine when they will be accused of being “terrorists” or “terrorist”-sympathizers. These work hand in hand to ensure not simply journalistic inaccuracy but, even more profoundly, an entire socio-political order that literally renders other views *unthinkable* because they are such a profound offense to decency and human values.

RN: You write about the targeting and punishment of all those who undermine Zionism and US settler-imperialism. Keeping in mind the following headline in The Times of Israel, [After Corbyn, UK Labour elects Keir Starmer, Zionist with Jewish wife](#), what do you make of the punishment in the form of wrongful suspension by the current leader of his own party meted out to former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn for his commitment to the Palestinian struggle for self-determination?

HS: I can’t speak to the specific situation in the UK as I am unversed in British politics, but I can say that the notion that there is a “Palestine exception” even in progressive politics is a very familiar one. The Arab Women’s Solidarity Association [paper](#), “The Forgotten -ism,” makes the case quite powerfully for the oversight of Zionism by feminists—even women of color feminists—as a form of racism that harms Arab and Arab-American and Palestinian women. We saw how this endures in the coordinated campaigns against Linda Sarsour and Zahra Billoo in the US as directors of the Women’s March. Palestine Legal has an invaluable [report](#) on what they call The Palestine Exception to Free Speech. And, in the SFSU webinar held on the Day of Action, Hatem Bazian spoke very powerfully about his experience being part of virtually every liberatory people’s movement in the Bay Area, but how participation in only one of them—Palestine solidarity—consistently results in punishment, attack,

surveillance, and outrage.

RN: As far as Palestine and US policy are concerned, the Biden presidency might produce cosmetic adjustments such as the restoration of US economic assistance to the Palestinians and reopening the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Washington. The irony now, however, is that the US, which allowed the elections of President Mahmoud Abbas for a four-year term in 2005, has been afraid of Palestinian popular will and has not allowed elections since. In 2017, for example, Hillary Clinton was caught on tape boasting about the need of “rigging” Palestinian elections. Do you see a link between the hypocrisy of US rhetoric on “democracy” that the Trump re-election campaign has now exposed to the world and its rhetoric on “terrorism?”

HS: US “terrorism” discourse is fully of a piece with its democracy-promotion: both are toxic, ideological formations that veil the violent, settler colonial destruction of indigenous lifeworlds, instead passing it off as freedom and the protection of innocent life.

Two things attest to the above: (1) the US is not a democracy and (2) hypocrisy is a failing that, while very pleasing to point out in our adversaries, rarely advances our political agendas insofar as it relies on the erroneous assumption that our adversaries actually give a damn about being (or being seen as) inconsistent. The Republicans, for example, have demonstrated quite clearly with the Barrett confirmation hearings that they don’t care one whit about being hypocrites.

Realizing and really reckoning with the fact that the US is not a democracy requires not only a clear-eyed assessment of decades and centuries of voter disenfranchisement, the elitism of the nation’s founding documents, the profound influence of what is anodyne referred to as “money in politics,” and the consistent tethering of all of these to white supremacy. It also demands reckoning with the fact that the US, like Israel, is a settler state and, as such, cannot ever be or become a democracy without decolonizing down to the ground—literally.

In that sense, yes, there is a deep connection between the farcical “democracy” paraded before the world in the form of US exceptionalism and “terrorism” discourse. The “terrorist” is contemporarily imperial America’s version of the settler’s “savage” of an ostensible yesterday. The presumption is that indigenous people are no more—which we know to be false—and they have been replaced by external threats “abroad” to a benign American imperial venture that simply seeks to spread democracy throughout the world.

RN: Your book is entitled *Queer Terror*. Could you explain what queerness has to do with this conversation?

HS: I argue that queerness occupies the same ideological and affective space that “terrorism” does. Not in the sense that we can understand queer people and Muslims (an already ridiculous and reductive formulation that presumes an antagonism between otherwise intersectional categories) as analogously oppressed or stigmatized but, rather, in the sense that both “queers” and “terrorists” are figures of those who are perceived as impossible to be absorbed or accepted within a “civilized” social order without threatening that order’s very survival.

Admittedly, there is a substantial scholarship that persuasively shows the ways that some queer people and lives have been fully incorporated into the life of the community, the state, and the nation—typically through regimes of white supremacy and economic upward

mobility. That said, however, the perhaps outdated but nevertheless not at all outmoded derogatory usage of the term “queer” has the same abjecting echoes as the term “terrorist,” because both are functions of a moralizing agenda promoted by those interested primarily in the policing of propriety and the punishment of indecency.

RN: George W. Bush issued an ultimatum after September 11, 2001: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” What do you make of such rhetoric?

HS: It is the same kind of ultimatum with the same affective, psychic, and material consequences presented to queer and trans people exiled from families, housing, jobs, communities, or countries because of their queerness.

It is a condemnation that exceeds judgment about harmful behavior and bleeds into an absolutist condemnation of people and ways of being that cannot be allowed to stand, because such allowance is an existential threat: we cannot allow you to be queer or trans just as we cannot stand with the terrorists, because health, family, kinship, community, indeed human decency itself are at stake. There is no arguing with such ultimatums, and they entail an impossible choice: side with your oppressor and accept your abjection, or choose to be abjected.

My own argument in *Queer Terror* is that all those so confronted with such ultimatums choose abjection, the only choice that is truly off the table. As with the “terrorism” epithet, we should not take it up or “reclaim” it to name those who truly are anti-social; instead, we need to get out of the moralizing business altogether, and we do so by accepting the one thing that moralizers everywhere agree we cannot accept: unthinkable immorality. This means, then, that we stand with queers, that we are queers, that we stand with the “terrorists,” that we are the terrorists.

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Featured image: Professor Heike Schotten—Still captured from [We Will Not Be Silenced webinar at the University of Massachusetts Boston](#)

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