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OP-ED | PRISONS &amp; POLICING

## When Abolitionists Say “Free Them All,” We Mean Palestine Too

We must fight militarism and oppression abroad as fiercely as we do at home.

By Nadine Naber, TRUTHOUT

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Demonstrators holding Palestinian flags and banners, gather to stage a demonstration in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on December 23, 2023.

WOLFGANG SCHWAN / ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

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*Note: Nadine Naber developed the ideas and analysis in this piece through ongoing conversation and editorial collaboration with Clarissa Rojas and the INCITE! movement.*

**W**ith every escalation of United States wars — whether the post-9/11 war *of* terror or Genocide Joe Biden’s current war on Palestine — we witness an escalation in policing and the militarization of the U.S. border. It is no coincidence that the Senate is currently discussing changes to the U.S. migration system (<https://truthout.org/video/will-biden-cave-on-gops-immigration-demands-in-ukraine-funding-request/>) as part of a military aid package related to Israel and Ukraine, in the name of “national security.” Israel purchases more than 80 percent of its weapons and military technology from the U.S., using the billions of dollars of military assistance it receives from the U.S. annually. The U.S. in turn supports Israel to operate as the police of the Middle East, North Africa, and the world over. Leftists, abolitionists and antiwar activists need to understand that our struggles against policing, prisons and U.S. empire are inseparable. (<https://truthout.org/articles/to-abolish-prisons-and-militarism-we-need-anti-imperialist-abolition-feminism/>). As my INCITE! Comrade Clarissa Rojas and I have written, (<https://www.abolitionfeminisms.org/volume-1.html>) just as U.S. empire has always relied upon policing and containment as interconnected strategies for securing global power, it has always been militarist, existing in a permanent state of war and expansion, obsessively concerned with the extractive accumulation of land, resources, cultures and the people it commodifies into power and capital.

During this profoundly terrorizing moment of Palestinian genocide, we need to acknowledge how the structures of incarceration, anti-migrant violence and U.S. conquest have always gone hand in hand.

The INCITE! Movement (<https://incite-national.org/>) has been a network of radical feminists of color that began organizing at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, during the year preceding the launch of the U.S. global war of terror. It was driven by the idea that the existence of the U.S. nation-state is based on colonialism, empire-building, war-making and enslavement. We understood that the first European settlers to arrive on Turtle Island captured Indigenous people to use them as chattel; that carceral systems have emerged in the context of periods of colonial land settlement; and that European colonization of Turtle Island included securing borders to strengthen the power of the U.S. nation-state.

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FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ VIA INCITE!

Rojas taught me that the institutional inheritance of vigilante settlers and the U.S.’s genealogy of colonial violence formalized into *la migra* (Border Patrol), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the detention and deportation regime. Queer abolitionists Joey Mogul, Andrea Ritchie and Kay Whitlock teach us that systematic policing and punishment of gender and sexual variance were integral to colonization in the Americas. Indigenous feminist Luana Ross also teaches us that since European contact, Indigenous peoples in the Americas have always been imprisoned, “confined to forts, boarding schools, orphanages, jails and prisons and on reservations.”

If we are going to strive for prison abolition, we must also strive for the abolition of the military. Here are five reasons why we cannot abolish one without the other.

## 1. Militarization of the Police

The militarization of the police is an outgrowth of the “war on drugs,” first declared by President Richard Nixon and expanded by Ronald Reagan, that has been propelled forward through the post-9/11 “war on terror.” Especially in this post-2001 context, military contractors such as Blackhawk Industries have gained broader markets by selling their equipment — including stun grenades, armored tanks and counterattack vehicles — to police agencies with massive Department of Homeland Security (DHS) grants. Military contractors are also paid to train cops and SWAT teams, binding the military, policing and profit closer together.

Many of us remember the summer of 2014, when activists in Ferguson, Missouri, faced the military-grade weapons of four city and state police departments — tear gas, smoke bombs, stun grenades and tanks — while at the same time Palestinians were confronting Israel’s heavy artillery shelling, massive use of cannons, mortars and half-ton to one-ton missiles. The same U.S. company, Combined Systems Inc. (<https://investigate.afsc.org/company/combined-systems>), made the tear gas canisters fired in both Ferguson and Gaza. This is why it would be a mistake to forge solidarity from Ferguson to Gaza based only upon the idea that our struggles are “similar” (i.e., both communities faced tanks, tear gas, etc.) — because our struggles are also interconnected. The same institutions that attacked Black protesters in Ferguson had been sharing military technology and strategies with the Israeli army.

Indeed, (<https://theintercept.com/2017/09/15/police-israel-cops-training-adl-human-rights-abuses-dc-washington/>) thousands of U.S. police officers, sheriffs, border patrol agents, ICE officers and FBI agents have trained with Israeli military and police forces (<https://theintercept.com/2017/09/15/police-israel-cops-training-adl-human-rights-abuses-dc-washington/>). The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a so-called civil rights group (<https://truthout.org/articles/its-time-to-break-with-the-adl-as-a-source-for-news-and-research-on-extremism/>), in fact contributes to the militarization of U.S. policing by bringing U.S. law enforcement agents to visit Israeli checkpoints and military prisons (<https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-more-than-1-000-senior-u-s-police-officers-visited-israel-here-s-what-they-learn-1.9008561?ts=1646157232126>), all while helping both Democrats and Republicans to expand systems of surveillance, racial profiling and the repression of public protests through the use of force (<https://deadlyexchange.org/deadly-exchange-research-report/>). Every presidential administration has supported the Israeli settler-colonization of Palestine not only to strengthen the U.S.’s global interests, but also to strengthen the power of white capital and elites. They do this, in part, through the expansion of policing.

**The structures of incarceration, anti-migrant violence and U.S. conquest have always gone hand in hand.**

The links between militarism and policing (<https://rampantmag.com/2023/10/from-palestine-to-chicago-the-circuits-of-imperial-policing/>), are especially clear in Arab and Muslim communities. Consider the DHS campaign, “If You See Something, Say Something.” As the Arab American Action Network (AAAN) (<https://aaan.org/media/cerp-report/>), has revealed, this program works through Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs). As the AAAN explains, SARs recruit community members to surveil those around them during everyday moments, and report anything that “doesn’t seem quite right.” We end up with random community members reporting, say, a man who looks “Muslim” sitting on a bench at a train station or taking a picture of a bridge. Deemed “suspicious,” Arab and Muslim people end up on government watch lists. Through the Countering Violent Extremism (<https://afsc.org/newsroom/new-report-shows-cve-program-profiles-muslims-and-arabs-il>), program, DHS also provides funding (<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/suspect-communities>), to local groups such as teachers, cops or mental health professionals to train community members to report other community members who show signs of “extremism.” Yet these “signs” — like growing a beard or praying five times a day — provide a blueprint for the racial profiling Muslims.

## 2. Privatization

The U.S. and Israel both outsource surveillance technologies to private companies, a practice often called cyber or surveillance capitalism. The U.S. helps Israel test these technologies (<https://truthout.org/audio/israels-tools-of-occupation-are-tested-on-palestine-and-exported-globally/>), and strategies of policing and repression on Palestinians. The U.S. then imports these technologies back for domestic use. Every time the U.S. launches a new war “abroad,” it imports its violent technologies of surveillance, the torture of prisoners, or its repression of activists back home to the U.S. Scholar Ila Ravichandran refers to this as an “import/export” approach to surveillance. Notably, the U.S.’s repression of pro-Palestinian activism helps rationalize the repression of all of our BIPOC movements. This enables the U.S. to target activists, especially members of the movement for Black lives with terrorism charges (<https://theintercept.com/2020/08/27/black-lives-matter-protesters-terrorism-felony-charges/>). For example, after the police-perpetrated killing of George Floyd — may he rest in peace and power — DHS collected intelligence on protesters (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/new-report-shows-department-of-homeland-security-gathered-intel-on-portland-black-lives-matter-protestors>) who were arrested for trivial criminal infractions having little to no connection to domestic terrorism. More of us should be outraged and deeply concerned that the Department of Homeland Security is surveilling protesters and collecting lists not only of activists but also their friends, family members and social media associates — whether or not these associates engage in any political activity themselves.

This surveillance continues the legacy of programs like the FBI’s COINTELPRO between 1956–1971. Since the ‘60s, the ADL worked closely with the FBI to place under secret investigation not only neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups like the KKK, but also tens of thousands of left-leaning groups, including anti-apartheid, Black



Power (<https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2022/12/18/694690/Anti-Defamation-League-attacks-black-movements>), Chicanx and Indigenous movement activists. They especially sought to paint the Black Power movement as antisemitic, which helped disrupt support for the Black Panthers. Zionist pressure groups like the ADL have always understood that controlling and containing BIPOC movements is integral to repressing Palestinian resistance. In this sense, we need to be clear that U.S. empire understands that it will fall when our movements learn to refuse a “Progressive except for Palestine” politics. We cannot strive for racial justice aims such as abolition while remaining silent on U.S. imperial wars.

### 3. Border Violence

The military-industrial complex (MIC) depends on the policing of borders, including both U.S. state and vigilante violence against migrants. The U.S.’s murderous practices on the Mexican border borrow from Israel’s border policing and the U.S. and Israel use their borders as laboratories (<https://theintercept.com/2019/08/25/border-patrol-israel-elbit-surveillance/>) for new forms of militarized police enforcement and control. For example, on the Tohono O’odham Nation’s reservation, (<https://theintercept.com/2019/08/25/border-patrol-israel-elbit-surveillance/>) near the Arizona-Mexico border, the company Elbit Systems of America, based in Israel, has built surveillance towers that increase police and border control’s capacity to surveil and track people’s everyday lives, contribute to the militarization of Native lands and reinforce false militarist ideas about “protecting” borders from “enemy” migrants who “threaten” the U.S.’s economy and security. The U.S. leans on Elbit especially since it has already “tested” its practices on Palestinians through its work on Israel’s separation wall and the border of the Gaza Strip. (<https://theintercept.com/2019/08/25/border-patrol-israel-elbit-surveillance/>)

Let us also not forget how the U.S. relied on 500 pages of documents from the Israeli military in the federal U.S. deportation case of beloved community activist Rasmea Odeh (<https://truthout.org/articles/tortured-and-raped-by-israel-persecuted-and-imprisoned-by-the-united-states/>). In 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice, in collaboration with Israel, put Odeh, leader of the Arab Women’s Committee, on trial (<http://electronicintifada.net/tags/rasmea-yousef-odeh>) for allegedly lying on her naturalization application 10 years earlier. Here, the U.S. went on a fishing expedition to target a 69-year-old Palestinian American activist (<https://jacobin.com/2015/01/rasmea-odeh-verdict-organizing>), and then used her immigration papers, filed a decade earlier, to build a deportation case against her. The U.S. claimed that she failed to indicate that she had previously been incarcerated. While Odeh was indeed incarcerated for 10 years in an Israeli prison before immigrating to the U.S., she was a political prisoner. An Israeli military sweep had picked her and 500 other Palestinians up in 1969. They sexually tortured her for 45 days, coerced her to confess to two bombings and incarcerated her for the next 10 years before exiling her from her Palestinian homeland. Before her immigration trial, the judge, Gershwin Drain, ruled that Odeh was forbidden from mentioning her imprisonment in Israel in court. Reifying U.S. rape culture, while he silenced her from telling her story of sexual assault at the hands of the Israeli military, he allowed the U.S. prosecutor to rely on Israeli military documents to portray her as a “bomber” — which he repeated at least 50 times throughout the trial, leading the jury to deem her guilty of immigration fraud, sending her into a second exile from the U.S. back to Jordan.

## 4. Dispossession and Disinvestment

The MIC depends on moving resources from working class people of color and migrant communities into the U.S. war machine. Cuts in local resources our communities need have everything to do with Genocide Joe currently pushing to give <https://www.axios.com/2023/10/20/biden-budget-request-ukraine-israel-border> **at least \$14.3 billion** <https://www.axios.com/2023/10/20/biden-budget-request-ukraine-israel-border>, in aid to Israel. Nearly every mass uprising against police violence has been about much more than the cops. Ferguson rose up against the killing of Mike Brown *and* growing gentrification, segregation, the denial of social services to Black communities and the poverty created by defunding communities to fund militarism. Currently, local and state institutions have insufficient resources **to care for migrants** <https://truthout.org/articles/talk-of-border-crisis-is-misleading-the-real-crisis-is-us-imposed-poverty/>, in cities like Chicago as police budgets only continue to grow.

If we are going to strive for abolition and create alternatives to policing, we are going to need to do the same in relation to militarism. Can we imagine alternatives to military recruitment of young people of color who are sent to die as fodder on the front lines of U.S. wars in service of white supremacist capital? Or of our BIPOC women, queer and trans siblings who face disproportionate acts of sexualized violence in the military? In Black, Latino and Native American communities, people have a far greater chance of going to prison than of getting a decent education, and some young people are choosing the military to avoid what they see as an inevitable trip to prison. **As Angela Davis puts** <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2003/03/abolish-prisons-says-angela-davis/>, it, young people of color should not have to choose between prison or the military.

## 5. Heteropatriarchy

The military-industrial complex *requires* heteropatriarchal violence and the enforcement of a gender binary. Sexualized violence is not a mere impact of, or secondary issue to, policing and militarism. It is essential to it. These connected systems rely on rape and sexual assault as a form of control and punishment and a fear tactic.

Gender-based violence has been a **core component** <https://truthout.org/articles/palestinian-feminists-are-resisting-colonization-by-fighting-sexual-violence/>, of the ongoing colonization of Palestine. For more than 75 years, Israeli military officers have used systemic rape, **sexual assault** <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/urgent-interventions/israel-inhuman-and-degrading-treatment-including-sexual-harassment-of-palestinian-women-and-girls-detained-in-neve-tertz-womens-prison-ramle>, and **the threat of rape** <https://www.middleeasteye.net/live-blog/live-blog-update/female-prisoners-threatened-sexual-assault-subject-naked-beatings>, of **Palestinians** <https://jordantimes.com/opinion/ramzy-baroud/untold-story-abuse-palestinian-women-hebron>, as **a tool of colonization** <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cerd/docs/ngos/OMCT.pdf>, and control. Given that the U.S. finds its perfect ally in Israel, it is no surprise that U.S. cops have also enacted sexualized violence on Black and Brown bodies. According to the report **“Shrouded in Silence** <https://abolitionist.tools/Shrouded-in-Silence>,” police sexual violence includes sexual harassment like “cat calling,” forcible touching, unlawful strip searches and physical cavity searches, as well as rape and sexual assault. To be sure, sexualized violence has been a tool used in nearly every context involving militarization, colonization and war. Yet when the survivors are Palestinian (or people of color more broadly), courts and popular discourse cover it up and invisibilize it. We should be asking why then, only after Israelis have reported experiences of rape, are the U.S. state, corporate media and Zionists the world over finally wanting to talk about sexualized violence and rape in

Palestine/Israel? If we really want to end gender violence, we must, all at once, stand against all instances of sexualized violence while refusing to be manipulated into the U.S. and Israel’s colonial feminist instrumentalization of sexual violence to justify genocide.

As corporate media sensationalize the idea of colonized “Arab Muslim men” raping predominantly “white Israeli women,” let us turn to decolonial feminists (<https://palestinianfeministcollective.org/shut-down-colonial-feminism-2023/>) and feminists of color to guide our responses. The INCITE! Movement ([https://web.archive.org/web/20160614074129/http://incite-national.org/sites/default/files/incite\\_files/resource\\_docs/8459\\_leaflong.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20160614074129/http://incite-national.org/sites/default/files/incite_files/resource_docs/8459_leaflong.pdf)) and the Palestinian Feminist Collective (<https://palestinianfeministcollective.org/shut-down-colonial-feminism-2023/>) teach us that manipulating feminist efforts to end gender violence has been a key white supremacist and colonial strategy for centuries. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the British (<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.12987/9780300162714-011/html?lang=en>) relied upon the false idea of the “white man’s burden” to justify colonization, so they manufactured stories about white European women needing to be “saved” from alleged sexual savagery of Arab and Muslim men. Palestinian feminists like Islah Jad (<https://press.syr.edu/supressbooks/134/palestinian-women-s-activism/>), teach us that (<https://breakingdownpatriarchy.com/episode-14-palestinian-womens-activism-with-author-dr-islam-jad/>) the Israeli settler-colonial state, born out of this context of European expansion, and its promoters, have relied upon this European colonial feminist legacy (<https://palestinianfeministcollective.org/shut-down-colonial-feminism-2023/>), to justify the ongoing colonization of Palestine.

Such myths were also used against Indigenous peoples to legitimize the colonization of Turtle Island, and anti-Blackness emerged through similar racist-sexist tropes. These convergences become especially clear when we consider 1492 (<https://merip.org/1992/09/rethinking-jews-and-muslims/>), when Europeans, in their conquest of Turtle Island, targeted Indigenous people using the same sexist-racist tropes they used against Muslims and Jews in Spain. The idea that white women are damsels in distress, in need of “protection” from Black and Brown men has long reinforced white supremacist violence. During periods of enslavement, the U.S. used accusations that Black men raped white women to justify lynching, while white men were emboldened to sexually assault Black women, who had no protection from their attacks. Until today, (<https://www.brandeis.edu/projects/fse/slavery/united-states/kennedy.html>), the way courts are more likely to charge Black men compared to white men in sexual violence cases reinforces the same moral panic about Black men and Black communities that enables intensified policing.

Arab and Muslim feminists across the globe were therefore not surprised when the U.S. borrowed these colonial feminist strategies in the Wars on Afghanistan (<https://www.scribd.com/doc/231263296/do-muslim-women-really-need-saving-pdf>) and Iraq as they rationalized the incredibly racist and sexist idea that bombing these countries is a viable feminist strategy. We were especially concerned that weaponizing gender violence for the purpose of war contributes to patriarchal efforts to disavow it. However, recent months have seen a revival of anti-militarist, decolonial, abolitionist-feminist organizing that culminated in forging the INCITE! Palestine Force (<https://incite-national.org/>). In collaboration with the Palestinian Feminist Collective, (<https://palestinianfeministcollective.org/>) we have been circulating public art (<https://incite-national.org/>) as part of a call to BIPOC movements in the U.S. to take daring public art actions to disrupt the flow of weapons and capital funding the Palestinian genocide and to help grow mass protests and boycotts. While our movement strives to uplift



the connections across Palestinian liberation and U.S.-based BIPOC struggles, we also insist on resisting all forms of sexualized violence and the colonial feminist U.S. and Israeli strategy that uses racist arguments about alleged sexual assault to justify and intensify genocide. Let us affirm that when we say no one is free until Palestine is free, we mean no one. Here’s to a free Gaza, a free Palestine, and the affirmation of life, love and rage from Turtle Island to Palestine.

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