

Occupier and Occupied

Working from the premise that gender and violence are cyclically related, masculinities' connection to power and violence are frequently simplistically assumed. Yet, amid ongoing colonisation and military occupation, there are other more complex dynamics simultaneously at play across Israel and Palestine. In this book, Chloe Skinner explores these dynamics, untangling the gendered politics of settler colonialism to shed specific light on the ways in which masculinities shift and morph in this context of colonial violence.

Oscillating between analysis of Israeli militarism, colonisation, and military occupation in Palestine, each chapter examines the constitutive performance and negotiation of masculinised ideals across these colonial hierarchies. Masculinities are thus analysed across these settings in connection, rather than in isolation, as gendered hierarchies, performances, and identities that intertwine and intersect with the racialised violence of settler colonialism.

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Occupier and Occupied

*Israel, Palestine, and Masculinities across
the Divide*

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-1-009-37521-4 — Occupier and Occupied
 Chloe Skinner
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CAMBRIDGE
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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
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 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009375214

DOI: 10.1017/9781009375252

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First published 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Skinner, Chloe, author.

Title: Occupier and occupied : Israel, Palestine and masculinities across the
 divide / Chloe Skinner.

Description: 1. | New York : Cambridge University Press, 2024. | Series:
 Cambridge Middle East Studies | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023047337 (print) | LCCN 2023047338 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781009375214 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009375221 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781009375252 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Arab-Israeli conflict—1993—Occupied territories. | West
 Bank—Social conditions—21st century. | West Bank—Politics and government—
 21st century. | Military occupation—Social aspects—West Bank. | Palestinian
 Arabs—West Bank—Social conditions—21st century. | Gaza Strip—Social condi-
 tions—21st century. | Gaza Strip—Politics and government—21st century. |
 Military occupation—Social aspects—Gaza Strip. | Palestinian Arabs—Gaza Strip—
 Social conditions—21st century. | Masculinity—Political aspects.

Classification: LCC DS119.76.S785436 2024 (print) | LCC DS119.76 (ebook)
 | DDC 956.94/2055—dc23/eng/20231221

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023047337>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023047338>

ISBN 978-1-009-37521-4 Hardback

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Cambridge University Press & Assessment
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For Luna

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Preface

As I write this Preface, I wonder how I can articulate the horrors that are taking place as this book is in production. In the words of Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, ‘a genocide and a man-made humanitarian catastrophe are unfolding in front of us’ (OHCHR 2024a). But even those words fail to communicate the sheer devastation, the enormity of grief, the depravity of global hypocrisy, and the rage at the impunity with which Israel’s reign of death and destruction continues – staunchly supported, as ever, by the United States, the United Kingdom, and other key allies of Israel. Each day’s news from Palestine is more disturbing than the last: Israel is annihilating entire Palestinian families (Amnesty International 2023a), besieging, raiding, and attacking hospitals from ground and air (Human Rights Watch 2023b), and *repeatedly* targeting refugee camps, UN shelters, schools, and convoys of evacuees and aid (Mansour 2023; OCHA 2023a; 2024b). Bombing so-called safe zones, Israel is ordering Palestinians to flee, and bombing where it sends them (OCHA 2023b). Meanwhile, there are more amputees; more children, more civilians, more journalists, more aid workers killed; mass graves found – Palestinian bodies blindfolded and hand-tied (Committee to Protect Journalists 2024; Middle East Eye 2023; OCHA 2024b; 2024c). More and more videos and testimonies emerge of rampant sexual humiliation and torture of Palestinians captured or incarcerated by Israel (numbering thousands), while women in Gaza are giving birth in unimaginable conditions (Amnesty International 2023b; 2023c; Beydoun 2023; Doctors without Borders 2024; OCHA 2023d). Israel is rendering Gaza uninhabitable: infrastructure vital to survival is decimated, thousands of homes are destroyed, millions repeatedly displaced. The *Nakba* has reached its most brutal crescendo in contemporary history.

At the time of writing, November 2024, more than 43,665 Palestinians in Gaza and 736 Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem have been killed by Israeli forces in just thirteen months (UNWRA 2024). More than 100,000 more have been maimed, and others remain missing

or uncounted – trapped, or dead beneath the rubble and ruins of Israel’s unrelenting bombardment of the besieged Gaza Strip (OCHA 2024, UNWRA 2024). Israel’s daily raids, incursions, and airstrikes into the West Bank escalated, too, both before and after the events of 7 October 2023. Indeed, by September of that year, 2023 was already the deadliest year in West Bank since OCHA began collecting data, with the first airstrike since the second *intifada* in June, and again in July – in a 48-hour military operation in Jenin refugee camp (OCHA 2023c).

Since 9 October 2023 ‘all sources of access to food [in Gaza have been] systematically undermined’ by Israel, starting with Israel’s imposition of a deadly siege on this date – deliberately creating the conditions for mass starvation, dehydration, and the devastation of essential infrastructure (Devereux 2024, 4; Human Rights Watch 2023c). What the United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee has already described as an ‘apocalyptic’ situation (IASC 2024) is now further compounded by ‘Israel’s long war against UNWRA [the United Nations Works and Refugee Agency]’ – the single largest provider of humanitarian aid in occupied Palestine – culminating, at the time of writing, in a move by the Israeli parliament to ban UNRWA entirely, risking the cessation of ‘already woefully insufficient assistance to Palestinians in Gaza’ (Devereux and Proudfoot 2024, 1). In January 2024, a collective of UN human rights experts stated that ‘Every single Palestinian in Gaza is hungry’ and that ‘a whole generation is now in danger of suffering from stunting’ (OHCHR 2024a). By November 2024, the observer for the state of Palestine told the UN General Assembly, ‘children in Gaza are dying of starvation and severe malnutrition’, stressing that this ‘is not a quiet or painless death [...]’. As children get hungry, their bodies weaken, their vision blurs, their immune systems and organs fail, and their hearts stop. At this stage, children are too weak to cry’ (United Nations 2024, 1).

Israel’s 75-year project of erasure and elimination waged against the Indigenous Palestinian people is the necessary context to understand these devastating statistics. So, too, are the global contours of race, imperialism and capitalism that function to sustain, fund, legitimate, and profit from it – unhindered by the machinations of international law. And yet, it is the events of 7 October 2023 – when Hamas and other armed Palestinian factions breached Israel’s debilitating blockade of Gaza, killing 373 Israeli forces, 695 Israeli civilians, 71 foreigners and taking 239 hostage (France24 2023) – that are all-too-often presented as the ‘start’ of this ‘war’ in hegemonic narratives across the West. In the UK, US, and elsewhere, even the suggestion that 7 October constituted an act of resistance amid a trajectory of violence ongoing from before 1948 to the present is vilified, and, increasingly, criminalised. Similarly deemed

‘extremist’ is the assertion that Israel’s current spate of heightened violence is an inevitable corollary rather than an aberration of the Zionist project, predicated on the wholesale expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland. As Nivedita Menon (2023) aptly writes, since 7 October, ‘We are expected to begin every discussion on the latest phase of the ferocious 75-year-old war Israel has been waging on the Palestinian people, by answering the question – “But do you condemn the Hamas action?”’, continuing, ‘To justify Israeli occupation of Palestine, start with and end with the freeze frame, the close-up. Obliterate the ongoing off-screen scene.’

Contributing to the body of work that seeks to understand and to dissect Israel’s settler colonial project, this book engages precisely with this ‘ongoing off-screen scene’. Words I wrote in the Introduction of this book, long before this catastrophic moment, ring horrifyingly true; the *Nakba* – the violent dispossession, and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their homes and lands – ‘did not end in 1948: it continues to this day’. Just as 750,000 Palestinians were forcibly expelled from their homes by Zionist militia and then the Israeli armed forces from 1947 to 1949, 1.9 million Palestinians are now displaced in Gaza amid Israel’s relentless onslaught, with an increasing number of these now with no homes to return to (NRC 2024, OCHA 2024a).

How does gender, and specifically masculinities – the focus of this book – relate to the brutality of this current moment? The answer is: in many complex ways, as this book will contextualise – delving into masculinities as a moving set of processes, shaped, constructed, and reformulated at the intersections of overlapping dynamics of violence and power. How masculinities are specifically being made and unmade, and more broadly, how contemporary and extreme forms of violence are gendered across the hierarchical divide of occupier and occupied, coloniser and colonised, will be the focus of future research. Yet I posit here some initial thoughts, drawing links between the past and the increasingly deadly colonial present – illustrating further the ‘off-screen [gendered] scene’ that undergirds it.

As with all colonial projects, dichotomies of ‘civilised vs. savage’, ‘moral vs. immoral’, ‘conquerors vs. terrorists’ underscore the material violence of Zionist colonisation – mapping on to broader imperial and racial power structures that ‘sanctify both settlement and empire as noble and worthy endeavours’ – the ‘bas[e]s of rationality in an otherwise nihilist and “savage” world’ (Schotten 2018, xii–xiii). Artificially dividing the world into a ‘moral/civilised West’ and a ‘barbaric/savage Middle East’, such discourses have become acutely imbued with anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia in the post 9/11 landscape, fuelling the

indefinite violence of the so-called War on Terror, while simultaneously, and relatedly, bolstering existing notions of Israel as ‘the only democracy in the Middle East’, a ‘villa in the jungle’ of animalised and blood-thirsty Arab peoples (Israel’s former prime minister Ehud Barak, in Becke 2019, 875). The enduring potency of these binaries was laid bare in Israel’s Minister of Defence, Yoav Gallant’s, declaration of the ‘total siege’ on Gaza Strip on 9 October 2023: ‘There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed. We are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly’ (Human Rights Watch 2023c). Imposing a potential death sentence upon millions, Gallant makes possible and imaginable their murder through (re)establishing their status as ‘less than human’.

As I discuss in this book, these processes of demonisation are profoundly gendered, centralising Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern/Palestinian men as ‘the principal purveyors of fundamentalism, violence, and war-mongering’ (Beydoun 2023) – *always and wholly* terrorist, *always* misogynistic, *always* homophobic – Arab women as silenced, docile and submissive, and queer Arabs as either completely invisible or hyper-visible, framed only ‘within a limited range of spurious and racist archetypes’ (Schotten 2018, 23). Circulating across media representations to foreign policy decisions, the spectre of the ‘Arab terrorist’ and his oppressed gendered Others have long served as potent caricatures to manufacture consent for imperialism, war, occupation, and repression in the Middle East. Particular horror stories surrounding 7 October 2023 played directly into these stereotypes, and have been and continue to be weaponised to justify the systematic use of overwhelming violence against the Palestinian collective. Without evidence, grotesque imagery of beheaded babies and reports of systematic mass rape were instantly disseminated and amplified, by the Israeli state and propaganda outlets, mainstream media and allied governments (Abdel-Fattah 2024; Scahill 2023; Shah 2024; Speak Up 2023).

To be clear, while the chilling tales of scores of beheaded and burned babies have now been entirely debunked and retracted, sexual violence and rape allegations on 7 October remain to be, and must be investigated thoroughly – as any sexual violence claim must, and often are not in a violently patriarchal world. Yet, as Abdel-Fattah (2024) powerfully writes, it is ‘emphatically not anti-woman, anti-feminist, or anti-Semitic to name the political context in which [these] systematic rape allegations are being made’, rooted in a long history in which rape atrocity propaganda ‘has historically been one of the most potent weapons used by White power to discredit, demonize, diabolize, and destroy Black and Brown men [...] to deflect sympathy from those resisting oppression to

the actual oppressors, and finally to justify lethal responses'. As feminist politics are co-opted – and the trauma of sexual violence exploited – to legitimise one of the most brutal military actions in contemporary history, Zionist propagandists are meanwhile operationalising deeply embedded racist and Orientalist imaginings about Palestinian men, as so wholly unhuman, that, as lawyer Raja Shehadeh observed long before 7 October, 'we [...] can be killed, disposed of like flies by the army's big machines without a second thought' (in Gregory 2004, 121).

In these ways and more, Palestinian masculinities are narrated, performed, and reformulated at the intersections of race, gender, and imperialism, while the morality of the Israeli soldier is venerated in supposed contrast – their masculinities defined and constructed in hierarchical relation: as this book untangles. This false bifurcation is fatal in effect, functioning to desensitise to the war crimes being actively and daily committed by Israel against the Palestinian people, ostensibly enacted – as one viral image of an Israeli soldier holding the alleged 'first ever pride flag raised in Gaza' shows – '*in the name of love*' (Dabbous 2023). Behind this soldier, an emblem of the alleged 'morality' and 'inclusivity' of the Israeli army (a narrative that I dissect within this book), lay an apocalyptic landscape of death and destruction, the bright colours of the rainbow in sharp and jarring contrast. How does he navigate this contrast? What compels him to comply with and participate within Israel's war machine? Analysing such questions, I hope this book will offer an insightful perspective also on the interplay of masculinities, Zionism, and militarisation in Israel, indicating the complex ways in which these phenomena intersect to sustain the violence of the Israeli state through its conscripted hands – an interaction that is essential in understanding the ongoing 'off-screen [gendered] scene' from which the contemporary extremity of colonial violence continues to unfold.

I draw this Preface to a close by underscoring the fact that the horrors of the last year have not passed without resistance – both within and outside of Palestine. As Palestinians bear the murderous weight of the colonial present, streets and cities across the world have been seething and screaming, calling first for an immediate ceasefire, and secondly for decolonisation and a dismantling of what has been designated as Israel's 'apartheid regime' (Amnesty International 2022; Human Rights Watch 2021). Moreover, as of January 2024, the charge that Israel is committing genocide has been heard, not only in the streets, but, in a formal hearing before the International Court of Justice, led, significantly, by South Africa, whose legal team affirmed that 'Israel's acts of genocide' must be understood within the broader context of 'Israel's 75-year apartheid' (Human Rights Watch 2024). While the ICJ stopped short of calling for

an immediate and permanent ceasefire in its interim ruling, the court ruled that Israel is plausibly committing genocide in Gaza, and ordered Israel to obey the Convention that it is already bound to follow – explicitly ordering the Israeli military to stop killing Palestinians (Murray 2024). The initial response of Israel’s far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir? ‘Hague schmague’ (Queally 2024), while human rights group Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (2024) subsequently reported that the Israeli army killed more than 345 Palestinian civilians and injured hundreds more in the 48 hours following the ruling. At the same time, the defunding of UNWRA was put into motion, ‘com [ing] at an existential moment for over two million Palestinians in Gaza’ (OHCHR 2024b).

Reminding us that ‘the causes of Palestine and Black liberation’ are intertwined, Angela Davis (Al Jazeera 2023) recently cited the late poet June Jordan in asserting that Palestine ‘is a moral litmus test for the world’. While Israel and its allied states fail catastrophically at this test, masses across the globe continue to protest the violence we are all watching – aligning with the Palestinian call for justice and liberation, and forging solidarities across anti-racist, decolonial, and liberatory politics more broadly. Hope it seems, as Mary Oliver writes, ‘is a fighter and a screamer’ (Oliver 2016), and, as Davis continues, ‘we can’t give up. We can’t not hope because hope is the condition of all struggles.’ I hope that this book can contribute to that collective struggle, contextualising this brutal moment for the readers, while shedding light upon how gender, specifically masculinities, interact with Israel’s ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people.

Acknowledgements

Those who have variously supported, encouraged, or loved me as I undertook the work that has culminated in this book are too many to name individually. I will, however, do my best, including, of course, my canine companions who patiently sat at my feet during its actual writing.

My initial thanks must go to Angela Broome, who first made it financially possible for me to visit Palestine in 2011 – to attend the Sabeel conference entitled ‘Challenging Empire’. Thanks to Naim, Nicolas, Omar, and others for organising and hosting that conference, during which the seeds were planted that enabled me to join the collective struggle against colonisation and military occupation in Palestine.

At the same time, lecturers during my undergraduate and Master’s degrees at the University of Sheffield encouraged me academically during a very difficult period of my life, especially Patricia Noxolo and Chasca Twyman. Their critical engagement and warm encouragement was central to my gaining the confidence to apply for the Economic and Social Research Council studentship that funded my doctoral research – without which this book would not have been possible.

My wonderful PhD supervisors – Paula Meth and Jelke Boesten – went above and beyond to engage deeply with my work throughout and following the duration of my PhD – from my initial meanderings to the 20,000-word chapter drafts that would sporadically land on their desks. They each gave so much – kindly, critically, humorously, and honestly – empowering me to dig deeper, craft better, and go further. Without their encouragement, I would not have had the confidence and patience to redraft my doctoral thesis into a research monograph. I am immeasurably grateful for their support, encouragement, kindness, and critical insights – as well as those of Polly Wilding, who joined my supervision team toward the end of my PhD, and my markers, Steven Connelly and Mo Hume. Thanks also to my PhD cohort, without whom the process would have been much less fun – especially Megan, Nick, and Will.

I am grateful to those that shared their stories and perspectives as interlocutors in this research – especially sharing that which must have

xvi Acknowledgements

been challenging to recount. Each met me where they are, and I deeply appreciate their heartfelt openness in engaging with this process. I am also immensely thankful to the two anonymous reviewers of this manuscript whose constructive comments and intellectual engagement certainly improved it remarkably, as well as the editorial team at Cambridge University Press.

Thanks, too, to my friends and colleagues at Community Peacemaker Teams – Palestine, including Stephanie, Mona, Yousef, Rachel, Carole, Chris, and Gabe, among others. Much of the horror and hope I witnessed while working with CPT has informed the analysis in this book, and the relationships I formed in this time were crucial to sustaining my health and well-being.

I am deeply grateful to many of my colleagues and friends at the Institute of Development Studies who have professionally (and more) encouraged and supported me – including Rosie, Tessa, Marjoke, Sohela, Jerker, Deepta, Priya, Philip, Sofya, and Mahdi.

And to my other dear friends, Nikki, Lauren, Stephanie, Naima, Katrina, Priya, Sofya, Annie, and Ruth – thank you for being there for me through the worst, the best, and the banal. Long may it continue.

Shaheen ‘Shaz’ Shahmirzadi: thank you for grounding me in love, and always encouraging me. The next chapter will be together.

Finally, thanks to all of my family – especially mum, dad, Hannah, Tom, and Jim, for loving me, supporting me, and enthusing me – your steadfast commitment to justice and equality in your different areas of work inspires and compels me. Your love and support have been enduring sources of safety and warmth.

Finally, I dedicate this book to Luna, a girl who bears the weight of the many forms of violence explored in this book. I continue in the collective struggle for a better world, so that your light may shine even brighter.