

# The Weaponization of Sexual Violence

## Genocide and Terror in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

**Author: Carmela Marie Torreon**

**Keywords:** Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, Necropolitics, Feminist Security Studies, Genocide Studies, Settler Colonialism

**Trigger Warning:** Discussions of sexual violence, settler colonialism and dehumanization narratives in the context of armed conflict

### Abstract:

*This research investigates the weaponization of sexual violence as a strategic tool within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, emphasizing its role in perpetuating terror, dismantling social structures, and amplifying genocide. Sexual violence in conflict extends beyond individual harm, functioning as a mechanism of control that fragments societies and suppresses resistance. The study situates this phenomenon within theoretical frameworks of settler colonialism, necropolitics, and biopolitical control, arguing that sexual violence is deliberately embedded within systemic structures of oppression. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature, human rights reports, and firsthand accounts, the paper highlights the calculated use of sexual violence by Israeli forces to destabilize Palestinian communities, suppress resistance, and reinforce domination.*

*Key findings underscore the normalization of sexual violence within settler colonial frameworks, its profound psychological and social impacts on Palestinian women, and its strategic use to instill fear and suppress resistance. This study frames sexual violence as an extension of necropolitical governance, asserting control over Palestinian lives through psychological trauma and societal fragmentation. By exposing the systemic nature of this violence, the research underscores its broader implications for understanding state-sanctioned oppression and its genocidal dimensions. Future research and advocacy are vital for amplifying survivors' voices and fostering accountability within the international community.*

## Introduction, Background and Significance

Sexual violence functions as a mechanism of terror, extending its reach beyond immediate victims to affect entire societies. The trauma inflicted during war resonates across generations, leaving deep scars on the social fabric (Medien, 2021, p. 710). In conflict-ridden landscapes, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war perpetuates a cycle of suffering that extends far beyond the immediate battleground (Baaz & Stern, 2009, p. 506). This phenomenon is not merely an unfortunate consequence of conflict but a deliberate strategy soldiers employ to instill fear, subjugate communities, and weaken the resilience of adversaries (Buss, 2009, p.149). The primary objective of war rape is to cause trauma and disrupt familial bonds and group cohesion within an adversary's society (Diken et al., 2005, p. 111). Thus, rape must be understood not just as another side effect of war but as a literal weapon of war (Diken et al., 2005, p. 112).

Within the Israeli Palestinian conflict, where the dynamics of power, occupation, and resistance are deeply entrenched, the strategic use of violence—including sexual violence—emerges as a mechanism to amplify the suffering of the oppressed (United Nations, 2024). This conflict has seen numerous documented and alleged instances of sexual violence, which intersect with broader efforts to undermine Palestinian social cohesion and reinforce domination (United Nations, 2024). By weaponizing intimate trauma, such acts contribute to the disintegration of familial and communal bonds, intensifying the genocidal dimensions of systemic oppression (Amnesty International, 2023). In examining the ongoing plight of Palestinians, scholars and human rights organizations have highlighted how the exploitation of sexual violence functions not only to degrade individuals but also to perpetuate cycles of dehumanization and dispossession (Mbembe, 2019, p. 80). For example, the reported use of sexual humiliation and assault during detentions and interrogations reveals the calculated nature of such violence as a tool for dismantling resistance and enforcing submission

(Abdulhadi, 2019, p. 547). These patterns mirror the deliberate strategies observed in other genocidal contexts, underscoring the broader framework within which sexual violence serves as a weapon of war.

This research paper aims to investigate sexual violence as strategically employed as a weapon of war to perpetuate control, terrorize communities, and dismantle social structures, often serving as a mechanism to amplify genocide. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this paper argues that the systematic use of sexual violence against Palestinians functions as a deliberate tool to further oppressive agendas, undermine resistance, and deepen the socio-political and psychological impacts of genocide.

## Research Question

The central focus of this research is to explore how and why sexual violence is employed as a weapon of war and its role in amplifying genocide. Specifically, this research aims to investigate the strategic use of sexual violence in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in the context of the genocide faced by Palestinians.

## Literature Review

The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war is a well-documented strategy in various conflict zones, deployed not only for its immediate physical impacts but also as a tool of physiological warfare and structural oppression. This literature review focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It examines how sexual violence has been systematically employed to further the objectives of settler colonialism and genocide, synthesizing recent scholarly analyses that highlight its intersections with state violence and necropolitics.

## Sexual Violence as a Tool of Settler Colonialism

Abdulhadi (2019) situates sexual violence within the broader framework of Israeli settler colonialism. The author argues that gendered violence, including sexual assault, is normalized within the project of erasure and control over the Palestinian population (Abdulhadi, 2019, p. 550). Abdulhadi links this normalization to a celebration of Palestinian death and the strategic use of fear to dismantle resistance (Abdulhadi, 2019, p. 549). Sexual violence becomes a way to reinforce power hierarchies, not just physically but symbolically, serving as a form of biopolitical control over Palestinian bodies (Abdulhadi, 2019, p. 550). At the same time, Medien (2021) furthers this argument by examining the role of "humanitarian warfare" in legitimizing such violence (p. 705). Medien argues that Israeli state rhetoric often couches its military actions in terms of human rights and security, obscuring the systematic use of gender-based violence as a strategy of domination (Medien, 2021, p. 702). The sexual assault of Palestinian women, particularly in detention centers, is framed as an "inevitable" consequence of security operations, effectively erasing the agency and humanity of its victims (Medien, 2021, p. 702). This convergence of arguments underscores how sexual violence operates not merely as an incidental byproduct of conflict but as an intentional mechanism of settler colonial control, normalizing dehumanization under the guise of security and humanitarian rhetoric.

## Sexual Violence in Detention Centres

Al Issa and Beck (2021) and Madar (2023) collectively illuminate the systemic use of sexual violence as a tool of oppression within the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Al Issa and Beck emphasize how Israeli forces reportedly employed sexual violence as a deliberate strategy to instill fear and facilitate the expulsion of Palestinians, contributing to the mass displacement of approximately 700,000 people during the Nakba (Al Issa & Beck, 2021, p. 169). Historical accounts,

specific incidents, and testimonies highlight the systemic nature of this violence, portraying it as a calculated tactic rather than a series of isolated acts (Al Issa & Beck, 2021, p. 168). The ongoing use of sexual violence and its threats within the Israeli Palestinian conflict underscores its role as a tool of suppression and coercion, mainly targeting women (Al Issa and Beck, 2021, p. 168). This narrative critique attempts to downplay such acts as the work of "bad apples," instead framing them as manifestations of broader structural forces tied to militarization, patriarchy, and state policy (Al Issa & Beck, 2021, p. 170). Through documented cases, statements by influential figures, and personal accounts, the examples reveal the profound psychological and social impacts of sexual violence in conflict, connecting it to enduring themes of humiliation, control, and resistance (Al Issa & Beck, 2021, p. 169).

Similarly, Madar (2023) situates sexual violence as a systemic feature of the occupation, transcending isolated misconduct by soldiers to function as a state-sanctioned mechanism of enforcement (p. 79). Madar argues that this violence serves dual purposes: directly subjugating women and symbolically threatening the broader Palestinian community, reinforcing patterns of submission and control (Madar, 2021, p. 74). Furthermore, Madar highlights how the administrative and legal frameworks of the occupation create conditions of vulnerability and dependency, making Palestinians susceptible to exploitation and sextortion (Madar, 2021, p. 75). For example, Palestinian women face implicit and explicit sexual threats when seeking to access fundamental rights, such as visiting imprisoned relatives or passing through checkpoints (Madar, 2021, p. 80). These power imbalances often lead to situations where victims are coerced into compliance, with their silence reinforced by fear of retaliation or community condemnation (Madar, 2021, p. 79). Together, these analyses reveal sexual violence not as an aberration but as a deliberate, gendered tactic embedded in the machinery of occupation.

## Necropolitics and the Governance of Palestinian Lives

Building upon Foucault's biopolitics, as coined by Mbembe, necropolitics refers to exercising political power through controlling and regulating mortality and asserting sovereignty by determining who may live and who must die (Mbembe, 2019, p. 80). In essence, necropolitics involves the deployment of power to dictate not only the conditions of life but also the conditions of death within a society or a particular group (Mbembe, 2019, p. 80). By rendering certain bodies vulnerable to extreme violence, including sexual assault, the Israeli state asserts control that extends beyond physical survival to psychological subjugation, ensuring the continued compliance and fragmentation of Palestinian resistance (Mbembe, 2019, p. 79).

Puar introduces the concept of maiming to expand the scope of biopolitics beyond merely administering life and death (Puar, 2017, p. 136). The notion of maiming intertwines with necropolitics and offers insight into Israel's exerting power over Palestinian life. Biopolitics traditionally involved strategies for overseeing human populations, encompassing decisions and practices that affect all life and death (Puar, 2017, p. 137). Puar, however, highlights the limitations of biopolitics, particularly concerning colonialism. Under colonialism, biopolitics underscores the significance of maiming, debilitation, and stunning as components of population management (Puar, 2017, p. 137). Hence, Puar's concept of the "right to maim" signifies a deliberate shift in state authority. Instead of solely asserting the "right to kill," claimed by states of warfare, the "right to maim" can be seen as an extension or distortion of "the right to kill" (Puar, 2017, p. 135). In other words, Puar suggests that maiming inflicts injury or disability without causing death, thereby becoming a significant tool of biopolitical control, especially under colonized spaces (Puar, 2017, p. 136). By viewing sexual violence as a form of maiming, it becomes clear that such acts are not incidental but integral to colonial domination, aiming to weaken resistance and maintain control over oppressed populations. This perspective shifts the focus from isolated acts

of violence to their role within the broader machinery of settler-colonial power.

The reviewed literature collectively demonstrates that sexual violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not incidental but deeply embedded within the structures of settler colonialism and state governance. This violence functions to disrupt Palestinian social cohesion, impose psychological terror, and reinforce the dominance of the Israeli state. Future research should explore resistance strategies against such forms of violence and the role of international advocacy in holding perpetrators accountable.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research paper is rooted in the intersection of settler colonialism, necropolitics, and biopolitical control, emphasizing sexual violence as a deliberate weapon of war (Al Issa & Beck, 2021, pg. 150). It draws upon Mbembe's necropolitics to conceptualize how power is exercised by regulating life, death, and suffering in colonized spaces. Sexual violence is framed as a strategic mechanism embedded within broader systems of oppression, used to disrupt social cohesion, instill fear, and dismantle resistance within Palestinian communities (Al Issa & Beck, 2021, p. 168). Settler colonialism provides the foundation for understanding the systemic and intentional nature of this violence. Scholars like Abdulhadi (2019) and Medien (2021) argue that sexual violence is normalized within the Israeli settler-colonial project, functioning as a tool to assert control over Palestinian bodies and lives. This is achieved through direct acts of violence and fear to suppress resistance and reinforce hierarchical power dynamics.

The research paper also integrates Mbembe's necropolitics, focusing on how the Israeli state employs sexual violence to assert sovereign control over Palestinian lives, extending beyond physical survival to psychological domination (Mbembe, 2019, p. 70). This complements Puar's concept of maiming, which shifts the lens from outright killing to harm that debilitates and ensures compliance (Puar, 2017, p. 134). Sexual violence is framed



Illustration by Sophia Grace Foder

as an act of maiming, designed to weaken resistance and perpetuate domination without necessarily resulting in death. By synthesizing these perspectives, the framework positions sexual violence not as an incidental byproduct but as an integral tool within the machinery of settler colonialism and systemic genocide (Diken et al., 2005, p. 112). It highlights the deliberate use of intimate trauma as a mechanism of socio-political control, contributing to the dehumanization and dispossession of Palestinians while reinforcing state power (Baaz & Stern, 2009, p. 506). This theoretical approach situates the phenomenon within broader patterns of violence in colonial and genocidal contexts.

### Methods

This research employs a qualitative methodology, integrating critical analysis of secondary data, discourse analysis, and case studies to explore the weaponization of sexual violence within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The study synthesizes existing scholarly literature, human rights reports, and firsthand accounts to identify patterns and contextualize the systemic use of sexual violence as a deliberate mechanism of oppression (Abu-Sittah, 2023). The interdisciplinary frameworks mentioned in the previous section situates sexual violence within broader structures of settler colonialism, necropolitics, and biopolitical control, illuminating its role as a tool of terror, subjugation, and genocide (Abu-Sittah, 2023). Additionally, the research employs a comparative analysis of sexual violence in other genocidal and colonial contexts to draw parallels and deepen the understanding of its strategic use. By integrating theoretical perspectives, such as Mbembe's necropolitics, the methods elucidate how sexual violence intersects with broader governance mechanisms, resistance suppression, and socio-cultural destruction (Mbembe, 2019, p. 60).

## Preliminary Findings

The ongoing investigation into the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has yielded several compelling observations. These findings underscore the systemic nature of sexual violence in this context, revealing its function as a tool for domination, dehumanization, and control. Three key observations emerge: the normalization of sexual violence within settler colonial frameworks, the psychological and physical impacts of sexual violence on Palestinian women, and the strategic use of sexual violence to instill fear and suppress resistance.

## Normalization of Sexual Violence within Settler Colonial Frameworks

The data reveals a disturbing pattern of normalization of sexual violence as an inherent aspect of Israeli settler colonialism. Abdulhadi (2019) highlights how gendered violence, including sexual assault, is deliberately embedded within the broader colonial strategy (p. 555). This normalization is not accidental but is supported by institutional policies and societal narratives that devalue Palestinian lives (Abdulhadi, 2019, p. 560). For example, Medien (2021) discusses the role of "humanitarian warfare," which often obscures or justifies acts of violence against Palestinians by framing them as security measures (p. 710). This framing not only legitimizes the violence but also erases its gendered and sexualized dimensions, allowing these acts to persist unchecked (Medien, 2021, p. 711). Such findings suggest that sexual violence is not merely incidental but a calculated mechanism to sustain colonial dominance.

## Psychological and Physical Impacts on Palestinian Women

The data also points to the profound psychological and physical impacts of sexual violence on Palestinian women. Al Issa and Beck (2021) document the experiences of women who endure sexualized harassment and intimidation during visits to incarcerated

family members (p. 178). This violence extends beyond the immediate victims, affecting their families and communities (Al Issa & Beck, 2021, p. 179). For instance, one testimony from their study describes how invasive body searches and sexually charged verbal abuse leave women feeling humiliated and powerless (Al Issa & Beck, 2021 p. 179). These experiences underscore the dual function of sexual violence: it operates as a personal violation and as a method of collective psychological warfare. The long-term trauma inflicted on these women reinforces their communities' sense of vulnerability and despair.

## Strategic Use of Sexual Violence to Instill Fear and Suppress Resistance

Perhaps the most striking finding is the strategic use of sexual violence to instill fear and suppress Palestinian resistance. The Middle East Monitor (2024) reports on testimonies from survivors who describe how rape and other forms of sexual violence are used by Israeli soldiers to terrorize entire communities (MEM, 2024). Such acts are not isolated incidents but part of a broader campaign to destabilize Palestinian society (MEM, 2024). The reports reveal that the threat of sexual violence is often as potent as the act itself, creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear that discourages resistance (MEM, 2024). This observation aligns with Mbembe's (2019) concept of necropolitics, where the state exerts control over life and death to maintain power (pg. 70). In this context, sexual violence becomes a tool of governance, subjugating not only individual bodies but entire populations.

These preliminary findings illustrate the multifaceted role of sexual violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The normalization of this violence within settler colonial framework, its devastating impact on Palestinian women, and its strategic use as a means of fear and control highlight the urgent need for further investigation (MEM, 2024). By situating these acts within broader systems of oppression, this research aims to shed light on the intersectionality of gender, colonialism, and state violence.

## Discussion

The findings of this research highlight the deliberate and systemic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, underscoring its broader role within the machinery of settler colonialism and genocidal oppression. Far from being incidental or isolated, acts of sexual violence are revealed as integral tools in the exercise of power, aiming to dismantle resistance, impose fear, and fracture the socio-cultural fabric of Palestinian society (Amnesty International, 2024). This analysis situates sexual violence within a nexus of biopolitical and necropolitical control, offering a nuanced understanding of its role as both a physical and symbolic weapon. A key insight emerging from the study is the dual nature of sexual violence: it operates both directly—through physical and psychological harm—and indirectly by perpetuating fear and shame across communities (Al Issa & Beck, 2021, p.173). As seen in detention centers and during military operations, sexual violence targets individuals while also symbolically assaulting the collective identity of Palestinians (Al Issa & Beck, 2021, p.176). The use of sexual violence in such contexts mirrors patterns observed in other genocidal regimes, where bodily harm extends to societal destruction. By framing these acts within Mbembe's (2019) necropolitics and Puar's (2017) concept of maiming, the research illustrates how sexual violence not only seeks to harm but also to subjugate and debilitate populations under colonial rule.

as an instrument of state power. Future research must focus on amplifying the voices of survivors, exploring avenues for accountability, and examining resistance strategies within affected communities. International advocacy and legal mechanisms also play a crucial role in addressing these violations and ensuring justice for victims (United Nations, 2024). Recognizing sexual violence as a weapon of war is a critical step toward dismantling the structures that perpetuate such violence and fostering a more just and equitable global response to conflict and occupation.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature that frames sexual violence as a strategic and systemic tool of war and oppression. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the weaponization of sexual violence emerges as a deliberate effort to assert dominance, dismantle resistance, and deepen the socio-political impacts of genocide (MEM, 2024). By situating these acts within theoretical frameworks of necropolitics and settler colonialism, this research underscores the structural and symbolic significance of sexual violence

# Works Cited

---

- Abu-Sittah, Ghassan. (2023, October 30). Shoot To Maim: *The Harvesting of Palestinian Bodies*. Security in Context. <https://www.securityincontext.com/posts/shoot-to-maim-the-harvesting-of-palestinian-bodies>.
- Abdulhadi, R. (2019). Israeli Settler Colonialism in Context: Celebrating (Palestinian) Death and Normalizing Gender and Sexual Violence. *Feminist Studies*, 45(2–3), 541–573. <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.45.2-3.0541>
- Al Issa, F. A.-R., & Beck, E. (2021). Sexual Violence as a War Weapon in Conflict Zones: Palestinian Women’s Experience Visiting Loved Ones in Prisons and Jails. *Affilia – Feminist Inquiry in Social Work*, 36(2), 167-181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109920978618>.
- Amnesty International. (2024, February 5). *Shocking spike in use of unlawful lethal force by Israeli forces against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank*. <https://www.amnesty.ca/human-rights-news/shocking-spike-in-use-of-unlawful-lethal-force-by-israeli-forces-against-palestinians-in-the-occupied-west-bank/>
- Baaz, Maria Eriksson, and Stern Maria. (2009). Why Do Soldiers Rape? Masculinity, Violence, and Sexuality in the Armed Forces in the Congo (DRC). *International Studies Quarterly*, 53(2), 495–518.
- Buss, D.E. (2009). Rethinking ‘Rape as a Weapon of War.’ *Feminist Legal Studies* 17(2), 145–163. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-009-9118-5>.
- Diken, B., & Laustsen, C. B. (2005). Becoming Object: Rape as a Weapon of War. *Body & Society*, 11(1), 111-128.
- Johnson, Daniel. (2024, April 17). *Israel/Palestine: ‘Staggering’ violence in occupied West Bank must end, says UN rights chief*. United Nations News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1148891>.
- Madar, R. (2023). Beyond Male Israeli Soldiers, Palestinian Women, Rape, and War: Israeli State Sexual Violence against Palestinians. *Conflict and Society*, 9(1), 72-88. Retrieved Dec 1, 2024, from <https://doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2023.090105>.
- Mbembe, A. (2019). Necropolitics. In *Necropolitics*, translated by Steven Corcoran. (pp. 66–92). Duke University Press.
- Medien, K. (2021). Israeli Settler Colonialism, “Humanitarian Warfare,” and Sexual Violence in Palestine. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 23(5), 698-719. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1882323>.
- Middle East Monitor (MEM). (2024, August 13). *Restoring fear: That's Why Israeli soldiers use rape as a weapon of war*. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240813-restoring-fear-thats-why-israeli-soldiers-use-rape-as-a-weapon-of-war/>.
- Puar, J. K. (2017). *The Right to Maim: Debility, capacity, disability*. Duke University Press.