

# International filmmakers demand end to Israeli ban on Mohammad Bakri's *Jenin, Jenin*

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Filmmakers around the world have denounced an Israeli court decision outlawing the screening and distribution of the documentary film *Jenin, Jenin* and called for the ban to be lifted.

The 54-minute film was made in 2002 by the renowned Palestinian film maker and actor Mohammad Bakri. An Israeli citizen, Bakri has won numerous awards for his acting and filmmaking, which often reflects the plight of Palestinians inside Israel and in the occupied territories. He has appeared in around 70 films as an actor, including *Wajib* in 2017. His sons Saleh (*The Band's Visit*, *The Time that Remains*, *When I Saw You, Wajib*), Ziad (*Miral*, *Screwdriver*) and Adam (*Omar*, *Official Secrets*) are all distinguished actors and/or directors.

Despite heavy pressure from Israel to censor it, *Jenin, Jenin* won two international film awards. Bakri's documentary is available to watch here: as well as on Vimeo.

Bakri called his film *Jenin, Jenin* after the calls Palestinian taxi drivers make touting for fares at Israeli checkpoints. It deals with the incursion by Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in April 2002 during the second intifada into the Palestinian refugee camp in Jenin in the West Bank, illegally occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab Israeli war. Israel's declared aim was "cleansing known areas that harboured terrorists."

Jenin was subject to a strict lockdown and curfew, with no media, medical or human rights personnel allowed near the city. Israel's prime minister at the time was Ariel Sharon, who as defence minister was found responsible for the massacre of Palestinians in the refugee camps at Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon in September 1982 at the hands of Israel's Phalangist allies. There were fears of another atrocity on the scale of the 1982 massacre.

Israeli forces killed at least 52 Palestinians in Jenin,

including women, elderly people and children, injuring scores of others, and shelled 150 buildings, leaving 450 families homeless. The fighting was so fierce that 23 Israeli soldiers died in the operation.

Bakri courageously decided to film what was going on inside Jenin when an Israeli soldier opened fire on the protesters, injuring a friend of Bakri's, a young actress who was standing next to him. He entered the refugee camp before the curfew ended and interviewed dozens of witnesses, capturing with his camera the wanton death and destruction perpetrated by Israeli forces.

After journalists and human rights groups entered the camp and spoke to survivors, they accused Israeli troops of war crimes. A Human Rights Watch report found "prima facie evidence" of Israeli war crimes during its assault on the Jenin refugee camp.

Bakri's film begins with a dedication to Iyad Samoudi, the film's executive producer who was shot dead by the IDF at the end of the filming. It does not use any commentary or voice-over, leaving the Palestinian residents of Jenin's refugee camp to tell their story of the 11 days of carnage carried out by the Israeli military.

Among those supporting Bakri are British film directors Ken Loach and Asif Kapadia, Finnish screenwriter and director Aki Kaurismaki, Palestinian filmmakers Michel Khleifi and Annemarie Jacir and Israeli director Eyal Sivan, who said they had received the news of the ban with "consternation and outrage." The Palestine Film Institute has started an online petition calling on the Israeli state to lift its ban on the screening of the film.

The film has been subject to lawsuits and censorship efforts ever since its release more than 18 years ago. In 2016, Nissim Meghnagi, a reservist soldier who appears on archival footage in the film alongside two other soldiers for just a few seconds and is not named, filed a

defamation suit. He claimed he was accused in the film of stealing money from an elderly Palestinian man, an allegation he denied, that his “good name has been harmed, his honour has been smashed,” and that the film libelled Israeli soldiers by presenting them as war criminals.

In a highly unusual move, Avichai Mandelblit, the Attorney General and a former Military Advocate General, announced he had decided to support the civil suit against Bakri because of public interest in the case. It followed requests from Meghnagi and from the then IDF Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, the author of the infamous Dahiya Doctrine that advocates the destruction of the civilian infrastructure of regimes deemed to be hostile to Israel.

Bakri denied that his film made any accusation against Meghnagi, saying, “The camera panned the plaintiff for mere seconds, and he cannot be identified as the person behind the deeds described in the movie.” The purpose of the suit was persecution and political silencing.

Last week, the Lod District Court Judge Halit Silash ruled in Meghnagi’s favour, ordering Bakri to pay more than \$50,000 to Meghnagi and another \$15,000 in court fees. He said Meghnagi had been “sent to defend his country and found himself accused of a crime he did not commit” and that some of the statements in the film were untrue. Silash ordered a ban on the screening of the film in Israel and the confiscation of the 24 copies of the film.

Announcing his intention to appeal, Bakri said the decision was “unfair” and that the judge had acted on instructions “from above.” Hussein Abu Hussein, his lawyer, said the ruling was a “political decision” aimed at “silencing any voice that differs from the Israeli narrative.”

Palestinian Authority Minister of Culture Atef Abu Seif denounced the court’s decision, saying it was an attempt to fight the Palestinian narrative and hide “racist and fascist” practices of the “occupation.”

Writing about the film in *Ha’aretz* in October, Bakri explained that ever since the release of *Jenin, Jenin*, “I have been wandering the corridors of Israeli courthouses—years of harassment and tendentious persecution that can only be explained by the fact that I am an Arab, who is forbidden to touch sacred cows such as the Israel Defence Forces or national security. An Arab who must be a good Arab and tell only the Israeli story, otherwise he is a traitor and an enemy of Israel who pisses into the well from which he drinks.”

He added, “I am 66 years old. I have devoted most of

my life to making a better life for everyone. I’ve told the stories of the oppressed—the Armenians, the Kurds, the Italians, the Jews and the Holocaust, and of the Palestinians. I don’t have much left. Time is short and the work is long, the coronavirus looms, the lunatic right rules the world and has tried to lead us astray. So if not now, when?”

The court’s gross infringement of Bakri’s freedom of expression is part of Israel’s broader attacks on cultural efforts to portray the realities of Palestinian life. Finance for Palestinian cultural and artistic work is sparse, with Palestinian Israelis, who constitute 20 percent of the population, receiving just 3 percent of the government’s culture budget. The Rabinovich Foundation for the Arts, one of the largest film funds in Israel, makes funding conditional upon signing a “declaration of loyalty” to Israel.

The court’s ban on *Jenin, Jenin* is bound up with Israel’s efforts to outlaw all efforts aimed at exposing its brutality and flagrant violations of international humanitarian law in the occupied Palestinian territories. Any such exposure is completely unacceptable to Binyamin Netanyahu’s right-wing government. That Bakri has faced 18 years of harassment, intimidation and legal actions, including criminal prosecution, expresses Israel’s determination to provide immunity for those involved in violating Palestinians’ rights.

Earlier this week, the Education Ministry summoned the principal and the managing director of a Haifa high school for a disciplinary hearing. This followed a lecture to students by Hagai El-Ad, the director of B’Tselem, the human rights organisation that had for the first time referred to Israel as practicing “apartheid.” The lecture was given despite a ministry order barring schools from hosting representatives of organisations “that treat IDF soldiers with contempt and call Israel an apartheid state.”



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