

71st Berlinale opens public festival with Kevin Macdonald's *The Mauritanian*

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The second stage of the 71st Berlin International Film Festival, known as the Berlinale, opened with a screening of Kevin Macdonald's powerful film *The Mauritanian* about the case of Mohamedou Ould Salahi. Salahi, guilty of no offence, was imprisoned and subjected to severe torture by American authorities for over 14 years in the notorious Guantanamo detention camp.

Human rights lawyer Nancy Hollander, who helped secure Salahi's release, attended the Berlinale opening ceremony in person and introduced the film. Video greetings were also sent by actors Jodie Foster, Hollander in the film, and Benedict Cumberbatch, who plays a military prosecutor, along with Macdonald. Salahi himself was unable to attend. Immigration authorities denied his application for an entry visa to enable him to reunite with his family in Berlin.

In a moving speech, Hollander described Salahi's ordeal, which began under George W. Bush and continued under the Obama administration. She urged the German authorities to allow him to enter Germany and not to continue his previous "inhuman treatment."

The world's largest public festival, the Berlinale, is taking place in two stages this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of March, the majority of the festival films were presented online for movie industry and select media representatives, and the principal prizes, the Golden and Silver Bears, were awarded. In the second stage of the festival, held from June 9 to 20, the public has been able to see a large portion of the festival's more than 160 films in the city's parks and squares, in accordance with health regulations. An additional audience award has been created for the films shown in the competition section.

The Mauritanian

The Mauritanian is an American-British co-production currently being shown in German cinemas. It is based on Salahi's devastating memoir *Guantanamo Diary* (2015). Salahi was arrested in Mauritania following the September 11, 2001 attacks, transported to the Guantanamo detention camp in Cuba in 2002 and held there until 2016 without ever being formally charged.

As the WSWS commented in its March 8 review, Macdonald's film exposes the reality of America's "war on terror," attacks on democratic rights and the illegal practices, including torture and murder, carried out since 9/11 by successive US governments, Republican and Democrat alike, in collaboration with the CIA and the US military.

Salahi was born in 1970 in the former French colony of Mauritania in Northwest Africa and received a scholarship to study engineering in Duisburg, Germany in 1988. In 1991, he stayed briefly in Afghanistan and expressed sympathy for Al Qaeda, which at that time still enjoyed American support. He returned to Germany after the fall of the Afghan central government in 1992 and since then has had nothing more to do with Al Qaeda. Somewhat later, he lived for a time in Canada working as an electrical engineer.

The film begins at the point when Mohamedou is asked to report for questioning at a police station in Mauritania two months after the events of September 11. This marked the start of his ordeal. Falsely accused of being in contact with Osama bin Laden, he was imprisoned in Jordan and then in Afghanistan, and finally shipped to Guantanamo in chains with a bag over his head.

As Salahi writes in his published diary, the US government began “a secret operation aimed at kidnapping, detaining, torturing or killing terror suspects—an operation without any legal basis. I was the victim of such an operation, although I had done nothing of the sort and had never been involved in such crimes.”

In an interview with the WSWS, Salahi described the torture methods he was subjected to, including sleep deprivation for 70 days, non-stop interrogation in shifts, stress positions, waterboarding, sexual assault and beatings in which his ribs were broken. The film accurately portrays these experiences, he told the WSWS.

The fact that the Guantanamo film was shown at the beginning of the public portion of the Berlinale is significant. The notion of America as a haven of democracy and freedom, prevalent after the end of the Nazi dictatorship, faded long ago. Since the 1990s, the world’s population has experienced one criminal war after the next led by the US—up to and including the recent murderous campaign waged by Israel in the Gaza Strip, a campaign largely directed and financed by the American government. The far-right coup attempt in Washington on January 6 also demonstrated in shocking fashion the extent to which the role of the US has changed.

At the same time, social conflict and attacks on democratic rights have intensified across the globe and also in Germany during the coronavirus pandemic.

This is underlined by the fact that Salahi has been trying in vain to join his family in Germany since 2019. In support of his effort, the human rights lawyers of the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) filed a lawsuit against the German federal government at the end of April.

At the conclusion of her speech, Hollander declared that the actions of the German authorities, the delay in giving him his visa, were “really a continuation of the inhuman treatment” that Salahi has suffered for over 20 years. And she stressed: “So I ask, I demand that Germany do the right thing, stand for human rights, not stand against the rule of law, but stand for the rule of law, stand for human rights and grant him his family reunification visa.”

Politically turbulent times for the Berlinale

The Mauritanian failed to gather a single nomination during the recent Academy Awards process in the US. The decision to show the film at the Berlinale had political significance. On the one hand, it represented an accommodation to a growing anti-capitalist, anti-militarist sentiment in the population; on the other, it was an expression of increasing trans-Atlantic tensions and an attempt to take a more independent position vis-à-vis Hollywood.

It was all the more striking that Hollander’s appearance at the opening ceremony was decidedly undermined and weakened.

To the surprise of those participating in the official ceremony at Berlin’s Museum Island, and contrary to the event’s protocol, Hollander was only able to take the stage after a break and following the video greetings, i.e., shortly before the film began. Many journalists had already left the ceremony due to the late hour, and the ZDF television crew failed to record her remarks as part of the channel’s live coverage of the event. There also was no prior press conference with Hollander.

This meant that the lawyer’s important remarks were not covered by the media. The film’s representatives, who had gone to considerable lengths to ensure the personal presence of the famed human rights lawyer, expressed their disappointment to the WSWS.

Whether Hollander’s rude and censorious treatment was the result of political interference behind the scenes is unknown. What is clear, however, is that *The Mauritanian*—an indictment of American imperialist crimes over the last quarter century—is also disturbing to the German ruling elite, which is currently flexing its own military and neo-colonial muscles. The assault on democratic rights is taking an increasingly aggressive form in Germany.



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