

Roger Waters banned from participating on campus at UPenn Palestinian literature event

Kevin Reed**27 September 2023**

On Friday, international rock music artist Roger Waters reported via a video on social media that he had been banned from participating on campus in a Palestinian literature and cultural festival at the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) scheduled for later that day.

In the video, which was recorded while he was traveling in a car from Philadelphia International Airport to the Irvine Arena at UPenn, Waters explained he was “supposed to be taking part in a panel in a couple of hours’ time this afternoon. But I’ve been told that I’m not allowed into the Irvine Arena because they had made arrangements for me to attend the panel by Zoom.”

The founding member of the iconic progressive rock band Pink Floyd said he was not going to be allowed into the event even though he “came all the way here to be present, because I care deeply about the issues being discussed.” Waters said he was traveling to the UPenn campus for “a quick look around” and would then return to the airport where he “would try and be part of the panel.”

The panel which Waters would then participate remotely in was entitled, “The Cost, Reward and Urgency of Friendship,” and included former editor-at-large of *The Guardian*, Gary Younge, and Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese American professor and novelist from the University of Southern California.

The panel discussion was described in the conference schedule as being about “what it means to live ethically as writers, scholars, or creatives in the midst of empire. This panel of non-Palestinian distinguished personalities, all of whom have publicly expressed solidarity with Palestinian liberation, will talk about what that friendship has meant in their professional and personal lives.”

Roger Waters, 80, has been a consistent and outspoken opponent of attacks on the basic democratic rights of Palestinians living in the occupied territories of Israel. Through his music, live concert performances and interviews, Waters has exposed the Israeli regime’s violence and apartheid repression directed at Palestinians as a violation of fundamental human rights.

While Waters’ efforts have won considerable public support, defenders of the Israeli government have responded by launching a slander campaign against the rock musician, falsely accusing him of antisemitism. This has consisted mostly of identifying all opposition to Zionism and the brutal treatment of Palestinians with hatred for Jews.

At one point during Roger Waters’ “This Is Not a Drill” concert tour in Germany, the US State Department weighed in with its own well-worn variety of imperialist lying by condemning him for “a long track record of using antisemitic tropes” and backing the claims that his show “contained imagery that is deeply offensive to Jewish people...” This was referring to his performance of the song “In the Flesh” from the 1980 theatrical Pink Floyd album *The Wall*.

The campaign to get Roger Waters banned from the UPenn event, and thereby also undermine the entire Palestine Writes conference, was begun weeks ago when various news outlets began denouncing the organizers and the university for hosting it in the first place.

A particularly disgusting example of this kind of reporting was published on September 15 by the *Jewish Chronicle* based in London with the headline, “Outrage over ‘antisemitic’ Pennsylvania University event with Roger Waters on eve of Yom Kippur.”

The author Orlando Radice is unable to point to any

widespread “outrage” over the Palestine Writes festival and quotes instead comments from Twitter activist Noa Tishby, who also happens to be Israel’s former Special Envoy for Combating Antisemitism.

Tishby smears the festival, saying “it has been hijacked by a bunch of racists, and a significant portion of the speakers [have] … a clear obsession against the Jewish state.” She then adds, “This festival has Roger Waters as a speaker for crying out loud. What does Roger Waters have to do with Palestinian literature? This entire event is an antisemitic dog whistle.”

Tishby, of course, is incapable of producing any evidence to back up her lies, because none exist.

The UPenn administration issued a perfunctory statement saying it “unequivocally—and emphatically—condemn[s] antisemitism as antithetical to our institutional values,” adding that “we also fiercely support the free exchange of ideas as central to our educational mission. This includes the expression of views that are controversial and even those that are incompatible with our institutional values.”

This statement did not stop the university from enforcing the ban on Waters’ direct participation in the panel for which he was advertised as being present for.

According to a report in the Philadelphia *City Life*, a representative of UPenn claimed that the university did not ban Waters from appearing on campus. Ron Ozio told *City Life* that organizers of the Palestine Writes event told the school “time and time again” that Waters would be participating remotely.

Ozio then claimed that the organizers suddenly changed their minds 48 hours before the start of the event. He said this would have required “significant changes to event coordination” along with “additional campus safety and security resources that were unavailable on such short notice.” However, festival organizer Susan Abulhawa disputed Ozio’s account, saying she had informed UPenn of the change to in-person closer to 72 hours in advance and that she even raised more money to cover the costs of added security.

During his nine-minute video, Waters defends himself against the accusation of antisemitism—as he has done dozens of times—speaking in the third person that he knows Roger Waters is not an antisemite, “I know he’s not. Shall I tell you how I know? I am Roger Waters, and this is my heart, and it doesn’t have even the slightest flicker of antisemitism in it

anywhere. What it does have in it is a great love for my brothers and sisters all over the world, irrespective of their ethnicity or religion or nationality. So that includes all the people who live in Israel: Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze and atheists.”

Waters also makes an important point about the campaign against him, which was also featured on the front page of the UPenn student newspaper on Friday calling it a campus-wide controversy. Waters says it is clear that “all this ‘we won’t let him come into Irvine Plaza because we care deeply about antisemitism’” is a “diversionary tactic” to make it the big news story.

He points out, “They want to play down the fact that there is a literary festival happening over the next two days, and it is about Palestinian literature, and Palestinian culture, and Palestinian people and Palestinian human rights. And if they can get you thinking and talking about antisemitism, then you won’t be thinking about the fact that Palestinians have no human rights in the occupied territories. And that is what should be center and foremost in everybody’s consciousness and mind.”



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