

Israeli authorities censor *Lyd*, a film about the massacre of Palestinians in 1948—and the possibility of a different historical outcome

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On October 10, the Israeli government blocked the screening of *Lyd*, a film co-directed by Rami Younis, a Palestinian journalist, and Sarah Ema Friedland, a Jewish-American artist and educator, at the Al Saraya Theater in Jaffa, part of Tel Aviv. (The official trailer is available [here](#).)

The widely acclaimed, 79-minute film has been described as a “science fiction documentary,” an unusual genre to say the least. The film recounts the expulsion of the Palestinian population from the city of Lyd (now Lod) in 1948 by Israeli military forces, and the Nakba atrocities accompanying that, but it also attempts to imagine what the city would have been like without the Nakba.

“We use the story of Lyd to symbolize the story of the Nakba ... the demolition and expulsion of over 600 villages all across Palestine,” Younis explained on Amy Goodman’s *Democracy Now!*

The police action against the film showing in Jaffa followed a written order from Likud Culture Minister Miki Zohar to Israel Police Commissioner Daniel Levy. In his order, Zohar asserted the film presented “a distorted picture of reality” and that its screening amounted to an incitement to violence that could foment “unrest and tensions in mixed [Jewish-Arab] cities.”

Zohar is an extreme right-wing Zionist politician, who told an interviewer for an ultra-Orthodox Jewish station in 2015 that “Anyone who doesn’t believe in God is delusional.”

Lyd has not been officially banned in Israel, so the police came up with a pretext for blocking the showing, a 1927 ordinance requiring “any institution screening to have approval from the Israeli Film Review Board at the Ministry of Culture,” reported the cinema’s director, Mahmoud Abu Arisha. The latter was summoned for questioning by the police and told that the cinema must now submit its schedule of films to the Ministry of Communications for approval.

As *Hyperallergic* pointed out,

Israel’s Film and Theater Review Board is a council created by an October 1927 ordinance created during British rule now used to block Palestinian films with a so-called anti-Israel narrative. In early 2023, following his appointment by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Zohar pledged to withhold state funding from individuals, institutions, and venues platforming art that “defames Israel.”

At the same time, Zohar proclaimed, in a comment Joseph Goebbels

would have been proud to make, that the “world of culture and art is a world that represents us as a people, as a nation. We will deny funding to those who promote our enemy’s narrative and harm Israel’s good name.”

Zohar complained that *Lyd*, which presents the truth about Israel’s murderous operations in 1948, slandered the Zionist state and its soldiers. In his order, the minister referred to Younis as an “anti-Israel boycott activist” and Roger Waters, one of the film’s producers as “the leader of the global boycott movement,” but made no reference to Friedland.

Zohar hailed the police action in shutting down the screening, which he had set in motion: “The time has come to put an end to the wild incitement against the heroic IDF soldiers who sacrifice their lives for the people of Israel, especially in these days.”

According to the website of the film’s distributor, Icarus Films, as *Lyd* unfolds,

a chorus of characters creates a tapestry of the Palestinian experience of this city and the trauma left by the massacre and expulsion, while vivid animations envision an alternate reality where the same characters live free from the trauma of the past and the violence of the present. Using never-before-seen archival footage of the Israeli soldiers who carried out the massacre and expulsion, the personified city explains that these events were so devastating that they fractured reality, and now there are two Lyds — one occupied and one free. As the film cuts between fantastical and documentary realities, it ultimately leaves the viewer questioning what future should prevail.

In a comment critical of the “heavy-handed” Israeli government censorship, the *Jewish News of Northern California* noted that *Lyd* had been

screened twice in the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival this summer, garnering positive reviews in the local press ... and prompting thoughtful discussions of the film’s subject matter in and outside the theater.

The commentator went on to remark that some of the film's

most damning revelations come from newly uncovered Israeli state archive footage of Palmach [Israeli militia] soldiers describing the massacre and displacement of Palestinians in 1948 in their own words.

In the face of these real life historical horrors, and modern-day incitement and discrimination against Arab citizens of Israel, the film dares to present an alternative timeline in which Palestinians were never displaced. Perhaps even more boldly, it also imagines that Jewish refugees were welcomed in historic Palestine, living side by side with their Muslim and Christian neighbors in peace.

This vision is precisely what makes the film so dangerous to Israel's far-right establishment.

In her interview with *Democracy Now!*, Friedland explained that Lyd was one of the last Palestinian strongholds to fall during the 1948 Zionist takeover:

There were like 50,000 people in Lyd in that moment, because lots of people from different towns that had already been conquered by the Israeli state had come to Lyd and were defending the city.

She went on to describe how the Zionist militia

fired an anti-tank missile into the [Dahmash] mosque and killed around 200 people. Of course, we don't know, because ... the records are kept by the people in power. And so this was a really devastating moment, because when Lyd fell, that was kind of almost like a symbol of the end of the resistance. And so, after that, there was an expulsion from Lyd where about 50,000 people were expelled from the city, and a thousand people were kept in Lyd in a ghetto by the Israeli state in order to keep the infrastructure of the city going.

The film includes testimony of Israeli soldiers who participated in or witnessed the massacre.

As Younis pointed out in the same interview,

you see other soldiers who are actually proud of what they did — I mean, you know, they look at the filmmakers, they look at the filmmaker, they look at the camera, and they described how they fired an anti-tank missile into a mosque and then went in with a grenade. And one of the soldiers even said, "And what the anti-tank missile didn't take care of, the grenades took care of after that."

In response to Zohar's act of censorship, Younis commented sardonically in a press release:

I'd like to thank the Israeli police and Israeli minister of culture for banning our film and getting the word on it out there. If there's one thing I learned as a Palestinian journalist and artist, is that if they go this viciously after your work, it means it's vital to the moment. *Lyd's* worldwide audience will grow, thanks to Miki Zohar, Israeli minister of culture. Thanks Miki!

In her statement to the media, Friedland observed,

Lyd imagines a world where all people between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea live without violence in a shared future. It was made by myself, a Jewish American educator and filmmaker, and Rami a Palestinian journalist and writer. If Israel's Ministry of Culture believes that vision is inciting, then they either have not watched the film, or they have no moral compass left.

Censorship is about hiding truths that are threatening or inconvenient to those that hold power. In his original statement, the Israeli Minister of Culture changed the name of our film from Lyd to Lod and omitted my name as a co-director. The State of Israel does not even want to face the fact that this city has a Palestinian name, Lyd, and that a Jewish person would dedicate 9 years of her life to sharing the Palestinian narrative of this city.

Censorship is nothing new for the Al Saraya Theater (which also stages plays). In 2022, extreme right-wing Israeli Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman threatened the cinema over scheduled showings of Jordanian director Darin Sallam's *Farha*, which dramatizes the experience of a Palestinian girl in 1948 who witnesses massacres carried out by Zionist military forces.

Lieberman blustered, "Israel is a place to present Israeli and international works, but is certainly not the place to slander IDF soldiers and the security forces who are acting day and night to defend and protect all the citizens and residents living here."

Earlier this year, the police banned a screening of Mohammad Bakri's *Jenin, Jenin 2* at the same Jaffa theater. The documentary is the "sequel" to Bakri's 2002 *Jenin, Jenin*, which depicts IDF war crimes and massacres during the Second Intifada in the occupied West Bank city.

According to *The Media Line*, "The 2023 sequel revisits the refugee camp following the Israel Defense Forces' July operation in that year, which lasted 48 hours and led to hundreds of arrests and the deaths of 13 individuals."



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