

In flagrant attack on free speech, Miami Beach mayor threatens cinema that showed award-winning documentary *No Other Land*

David Walsh
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Miami Beach mayor Steven Meiner has proposed to cancel the lease of a cinema that screened the award-winning, pro-Palestinian documentary *No Other Land*. The O Cinema, a nonprofit theater that shows art and foreign films, operates out of a city-owned building in the South Beach neighborhood of Miami Beach. Meiner's move is a flagrant assault on free speech and constitutional rights.

On March 5, in response to the news that the O Cinema was planning to present *No Other Land*, Meiner wrote the movie theater management. In the letter, cited by *Deadline*, Meiner claimed, among other things, that the "film director's comments at the Oscars prove the antisemitic nature of the film using Jew-hatred propaganda and lies such as 'ethnic cleansing.'" This is a slanderous reference to comments, which received boisterous applause, made by one of *No Other Land*'s co-directors, Basel Adra and Yuval Abraham, at the March 2 awards ceremony.

The film became the first work in history to win in the Best Documentary Feature Film at the Academy Awards without a distribution company attached to it in the US. The American political and entertainment establishment have made it their business to suppress *No Other Land*, for fear of its impact on public opinion. *Screen Daily* recently noted that

In the US, the filmmakers opted for self-distribution in partnership with Cinetic Media, which facilitated theatrical bookings [including at the O Cinema], and the film has grossed more than \$1m in North America to date—more than double the grosses of the other four Oscar-nominated documentaries combined.

The O Cinema initially caved in to Meiner's pressure and cancelled the scheduled showings. However, Vivian Marthell, CEO of O Cinema, and the movie theater's board reversed themselves and eventually went ahead with the sold-out screenings.

In a statement sent to *Deadline*, Marthell explained, "My

initial reaction to Mayor Meiner's threats was made under duress. After reflecting on the broader implications for free speech and O Cinema's mission, I (along with the O Cinema board and staff members) agreed it was critical to screen this acclaimed film."

In retaliation, the mayor issued a draft resolution calling for the city to end the cinema's lease. The resolution is to be debated at a city commission meeting March 19. The mayor's proposal would also eliminate some \$40,000 in grants to O Cinema.

In a newsletter distributed to Miami Beach residents, Meiner claimed that he had watched *No Other Land* and it "can best be described as a false one-sided propaganda attack on the Jewish people that is not consistent with the values of our City and residents."

The claim that the documentary is "one-sided" comes directly from the propaganda arsenal of the fascistic Netanyahu government, whose culture minister asserted similarly that the film failed to present "the complexity of Israeli reality."

In the type of comment for which the term "Orwellian" was surely coined, Meiner continued, "I am a staunch believer in free speech." He went on to argue, however, that "normalizing hate and then disseminating antisemitism in a facility owned by the taxpayers of Miami Beach ... is unjust to the values of our city and residents and should not be tolerated."

No Other Land documents the brutality of the Israeli military and fanatical settlers against the Palestinian population in the illegally occupied West Bank. The film demonstrates clearly that ethnic cleansing is the official, guiding policy of the Zionist regime. *No Other Land* was directed by a Palestinian-Israeli collective, including Adra, Abraham, Hamdan Ballal and Rachel Szor.

The non-fiction work has won recognition and dozens of prizes at film festivals and events throughout the world. The Toronto International Film Festival, among the largest in the world, in its official 2024 catalog description, wrote

One of the most urgent films of the year and winner of

jury and audience prizes at the Berlin Film Festival, *No Other Land* offers an essential and unflinching look at life under Israeli military occupation. Basel Adra has been documenting the expulsion and decimation of his community in the small mountain village of Masafer Yatta in the southern West Bank since childhood. ... By picking up his camera, Adra continually speaks truth to power as he tirelessly documents his reality: impending forced removals, bulldozers destroying homes, and the violence that inevitably follows. ... This film would stand out in any year, but now it feels even more urgent.

No Other Land was ranked third among the top 25 European works of 2024 by *Cineuropa*. It was included on *Screen International*'s list of top documentaries of 2024, and on *Deadline*'s top ten documentaries of 2024.

None of this has prevented the ignorant Meiner from describing the film as "antisemitic" and attempting to block its showing.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Florida told *Axios* that the mayor's retaliation against O Cinema is unconstitutional. "The government does not get to pick and choose which viewpoints the public is allowed to hear, however controversial some might find them," Daniel Tilley, legal director of the ACLU of Florida, said in a statement.

Alan Levine, a constitutional lawyer and South Florida Jewish Voice for Peace member, told *Axios* that traditionally Miami Beach had welcomed dissent. Now, "the mayor is sending a message that, at least with respect to Israel and Palestine, the city will do what it can to suppress opposing ideas," Levine remarked.

The Coral Gables Art Cinema, housed in a building owned by the nearby city of Coral Gables, is screening the documentary this weekend through Tuesday.

Meiner, born and raised in Brooklyn, is a lawyer who has served as an enforcement officer with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), "handling high-profile cases for prestigious international law firms," according to an official biography. He was elected Miami Beach mayor in 2023 after serving four years as a city commissioner.

Meiner has been a consistent defender of the Israeli genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza, as well as a consistent foe of elementary democratic rights. In March 2024, following protests in Miami Beach against the mass murder, the mayor called for the city to set "parameters for reasonable time, place and manner restrictions" for protests, in other words, to find means of cracking down on them.

According to the March 14 *Miami Herald*,

To support his proposal, Meiner cited pro-Palestinian protests at which he claimed "our laws have been

violated." During a public comment period, the mayor cut off one speaker who referred to the Israeli government's war in Gaza as a "genocide" and suggested that Meiner's proposal was aimed at restricting free speech related to Israel. "I'm not going to sit here and allow you to make accusations about the Israeli government," Meiner said, calling the statements "antisemitic."

The attack on *No Other Land* demonstrates that the arrest and threatened deportation of Columbia graduate and pro-Palestinian activist Mahmoud Khalil is not an isolated episode, nor are such actions restricted to the Trump administration and its thugs. The South Florida political establishment, dominated by the Democratic Party, is fully supportive of anti-democratic and essentially authoritarian measures.

Deadline published a strong statement from co-director Abraham—a Jewish Israeli—responding to Meiner's threat to close the O Cinema:

When the mayor uses the word antisemitism to silence Palestinians and Israelis who proudly oppose occupation and apartheid together, fighting for justice and equality, he is emptying it out of meaning. I find that to be very dangerous. Censorship is always wrong. We made this film to reach U.S. audiences from a wide variety of political views. I believe that once you see the harsh reality of occupation in Masafer Yatta in the West Bank, it becomes impossible to justify it, and that's why the mayor is so afraid of *No Other Land*. It won't work. Banning a film only makes people more determined to see it.



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