

Academy disgraces itself by not coming to the defense of award-winning *No Other Land* co-director Hamdan Ballal

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The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) in Hollywood has steadfastly refused to release a statement in defense of Hamdan Ballal, co-director of *No Other Land*, who was brutally assaulted by Israeli settlers and soldiers in the occupied West Bank Monday night.

Precisely three weeks earlier, Ballal had stood on the platform at the Academy Awards ceremony in Los Angeles and received, along with Basel Adra, Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, the prize for Best Documentary Feature Film.

In an interview with the *Guardian* Wednesday, Ballal described his ordeal. Around 6 p.m., a gang of fascist settlers, armed with clubs, knives and, in one case, an M16 rifle, descended on the village of Susya, in the Masafer Yatta area, south of Hebron.

Masked settlers with sticks started attacking Palestinian residents, including a group of Jewish activists, smashing their car windows and slashing tyres, according to Josh Kimelman, an activist with the Center for Jewish Nonviolence (CJNV). Video provided by the group showed a masked settler shoving and swinging his fists at two activists in a dusty field at night.

One of the settlers, accompanied by two Israeli soldiers, approached Ballal's house. The latter started shooting in the air to prevent anyone coming to his aid.

"The soldiers pointed their rifles at me while the settler from behind began beating me," Ballal said. "They threw me to the ground, and the settler started hitting me on the head. Then a soldier also began beating me; with the butt of his rifle, he struck me on the head. After that, he fired his weapon in the air. I don't understand Hebrew, but I gathered that he said the next rifle shot would hit me. In that moment, I thought I was going to die."

Injured, handcuffed and blindfolded, Ballal and two other Palestinians were moved by the soldiers to a military vehicle and then to a police station in the West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arba, where they spent the night on the floor and were forced to sleep under a freezing air conditioner.

Ballal was beaten while in detention by soldiers. "It was a revenge for our movie," he said. "I heard the voices of the soldiers, they were laughing about me ... I heard [the word] 'Oscar.'"

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that on Monday,

the Center for Jewish Nonviolence posted time-stamped, dashcam footage on Bluesky of the confrontation. The video showed someone shoving three people and punching one member of the group, and another person—whose face is covered by a mask—joined by several others, picking up an object from the ground and hurling it at the vehicle, destroying the windshield. Anna Lippman, a delegate for the activist group, shared video showing an alternate angle of the confrontation and tweeted photos of a vehicle with shards of glass in the passenger seats. She told *The Times* on Monday that Israeli soldiers took Ballal from the ambulance where he was receiving care, and also detained two other Palestinian men.

Ballal was released Tuesday. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) issued a statement full of lies, claiming that "terrorists" had been throwing rocks at Israeli citizens and their vehicles.

The vicious, premeditated attack on Ballal was condemned by various filmmakers and filmmaking bodies around the world.

The International Documentary Association, prior to Ballal's release, reported that

No Other Land co-director Hamdan Ballal was violently attacked and detained in the West Bank. ... We demand Ballal's immediate release and that his family and community be informed about his condition, location, and the justification for his detention.

Similarly, the European Film Academy, in a statement,

called on the Israeli authorities to immediately and unconditionally release the Palestinian director Hamdan Ballal. According to eye witnesses, Hamdan Ballal was beaten up by violent Israeli settlers who surrounded his house in the West Bank.

The European organization "encouraged all film and culture institutions around the world" to demand Ballal's release.

The International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk (ICFR) expressed

its deep concern for, and condemnation of the hostile treatment

of Palestinian filmmakers Hamdan Ballal (*No Other Land*), attacked by Israeli settlers and arrested by the Israeli army on March 24, later released; and Abdallah Motan, arrested on January 13 and currently detained in military detention without charges or trial. The ICFR urgently calls on the international community to guarantee the protection of filmmakers (as well as any other filmmaker, journalist or civilian trying to document and shine light on the brutalities against Palestinians) and hold the perpetrators to account.

Julie Trébaud, Executive Director of the Artists at Risk Connection (ARC), commented:

This latest attack on a Palestinian artist reflects a broader system that enables violence without accountability. Settlers act with impunity, while Israeli soldiers abet such acts through silence or participation. This blatant effort to silence Palestinian voices, especially those who speak truth through art, cannot go unchecked. We are relieved to see Hamdan Ballal released from custody, but urgently call on the Israeli authorities to guarantee his protection and hold the perpetrators to account.

Actor Mark Ruffalo posted the following on social media:

Every filmmaker and academy member should be acting together in protest. No matter where you stand on this issue this is an attack on our beloved art form of filmmaking. Hamden Ballal is a political prisoner and this is an international incident and violation of human rights. Many of us are not surprised by this behavior from the lawless settlers and the IDF at this point. Killing journalists and abducting film makers is not an accident but a design for the eradication of a people and their culture. Free Ballal!

However, the Academy, which hosted its 97th awards ceremony March 2, has been entirely silent on the assault on Ballal.

On social media, *No Other Land* co-director Abraham observed that

Sadly, the US Academy, which awarded us an Oscar three weeks ago, declined to publicly support Hamdan Ballal while he was beaten and tortured by Israeli soldiers and settlers. The European Academy voiced support, as did countless other award groups and festivals. Several US Academy members—especially in the documentary branch—pushed for a statement, but it was ultimately refused. We were told that because other Palestinians were beaten up in the settler attack, it could be considered unrelated to the film, so they felt no need to respond.

The cynicism of this comment hardly needs responding to. Abraham went on,

In other words, while Hamdan was clearly targeted for making *No Other Land* (he recalled soldiers joking about the Oscar as they tortured him), he was also targeted for being

Palestinian—like countless others every day who are disregarded. This, it seems, gave the Academy an excuse to remain silent when a filmmaker they honored, living under Israeli occupation, needed them the most. It's not too late to change this stance. Even now, issuing a statement condemning the attack on Hamdan and the Masafer Yatta community would send a meaningful message and serve as a deterrent for the future.

In reality, the Academy and Hollywood officialdom in general allowed the balloting for *No Other Land* and the eventual awarding of the best documentary award to the film to proceed with the greatest reluctance. If there had been any even semi-plausible means of preventing the prize going to the pro-Palestinian work, Academy officials would have pursued it.

No Other Land, which reveals graphically the savagery of Zionist ethnic cleansing in the West Bank, has been denied widespread viewing in the US for political reasons. It was the first film to win the Academy's documentary feature award without an American distributor attached to it. The filmmakers have been obliged to self-distribute, organizing showings at independent theaters throughout the country, with some success.

The pretentiously named Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, as we have previously noted, has a thoroughly unprincipled history. It was set up in the 1920s by studio boss Louis B. Mayer

to subvert the unionization of film workers. The establishment of a corporatist entity, with different branches, would—Mayer and the others hoped—induce writers and others to feel they were part of the industry and not make any unreasonable demands.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, during the Red Scare and the purges of Communist Party and other left-wing actors, writers and directors, the Academy played a rotten role.

As late as 1957, on the eve of the collapse of the blacklist, the AMPAS passed a by-law decreeing that no one who had invoked his or her Fifth Amendment rights (against self-incrimination) in front of the witch-hunting House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) could receive an Academy Award. It had also stripped award eligibility from anyone who had been a member of the Communist Party. In 1999, the Academy despicably went out of its way to bestow an honorary award on arch-informer, director Elia Kazan.

The Academy's reticence on the Ballal attack reveals its indifference to democratic rights and its tacit support for the genocide-ethnic cleansing in Gaza and the West Bank. It is a tool of the studios, and behind them, the US political establishment, above all, the Democratic Party.

In passing, the Ballal incident exposes the fraud of the Academy's most recent obsession, identity politics and "inclusion." In 2020, in the name of various grand principles, the Academy announced its "equity and inclusion initiative," known as "Academy Aperture 2025." The organization established various reactionary racial, sexual orientation and gender standards (quotas) that a movie had to meet to qualify for the Best Picture award.

As part of its "inclusion" standards, the Academy now requires that at least "one of the lead actors or significant supporting actors submitted for Oscar consideration is from an underrepresented racial or ethnic group in

a specific country or territory of production,” which may include, among others, “Middle Eastern / North African.”

Confronted with a genuinely oppressed and “excluded” inhabitant of the “Middle East,” who, as Abraham pointed out, “needed them the most,” Academy officials fall silent. There is absolutely no surprise here.



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