

Thousands of film workers protest Academy's refusal to defend *No Other Land*'s Hamdan Ballal: The new “apology” explains nothing

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The refusal of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) leadership to come to the immediate and unconditional defense of award-winning Hamdan Ballal (Palestinian co-director of *No Other Land*), savagely attacked by Israeli settlers and soldiers Monday, has provoked a significant crisis in the filmmaking world.

A full two days after the beating and arrest, and only in response to criticisms from *No Other Land* co-director Yuval Abraham, the Academy leadership broke its silence on the brutal episode and issued a perfunctory comment. That elicited an angry international reaction.

The size and character of the angry opposition to the Academy management's kowtowing to the Zionist lobby and the Trump administration demonstrate the depth of the worldwide opposition to the mass murder and accompanying criminality going on in Gaza and the West Bank.

On Friday, the Academy's board of governors was obliged to hold a “hastily-convened” (*Screen Daily*) emergency meeting to deal with the crisis following its miserable response to the assault on Ballal. After the meeting yesterday, AMPAS issued the following apology in the form of a letter to its 11,000 members:

On Wednesday, we sent a letter in response to reports of violence against Oscar winner Hamdan Ballal, co-director of *No Other Land*, connected to his artistic expression. We regret that we failed to directly acknowledge Mr. Ballal and the film by name.

We sincerely apologize to Mr. Ballal and all artists who felt unsupported by our previous statement and want to make it clear that the Academy condemns violence of this kind anywhere in the world. We abhor the suppression of free speech under any circumstances.

The statement, like Wednesday's, was signed by Academy CEO Bill Kramer and President Janet Yang. The apology fails to explain anything of importance. Why didn't the Academy strenuously come to Ballal's defense in its first public response to the events? Why was it unable in that initial comment even to mention his name or the title of the film that won the Academy's best feature documentary award March 2?

In Wednesday's statement, by way of justifying the organization's previous silence, Kramer and Yang had blandly and misleadingly noted:

We are living in a time of profound change, marked by conflict and uncertainty—across the globe, in the U.S. and within our own industry. Understandably, we are often asked to speak on behalf of the Academy in response to social, political and economic events.

Astonishingly, they had gone on:

In these instances, it is important to note that the Academy represents close to 11,000 global members with many unique viewpoints.

In other words, the Academy officially went on record Wednesday as recognizing the essential legitimacy of those “unique viewpoints” that condone (or actively support) the assault on Palestinian filmmakers who dare to oppose the murderous aggression of Zionist settlers and soldiers. To repeat, the new apology offers no explanation whatsoever as to how such an outrageous position was arrived at.

In reality, it was not rank-and-file members of the Academy with their many “viewpoints” to whom Kramer and Yang were responding but powerful supporters of Israel within the Hollywood hierarchy and in the Trump White House gang of fascists, which has declared war on critics of US imperialist policy.

The Academy's non-defense of Ballal infuriated documentary filmmakers, writers, actors and others. Nearly 700 Academy members signed an open letter, “AMPAS members respond to the lack of support for filmmaker Hamdan Ballal from AMPAS leadership.”

It reads in part:

We stand in condemnation of the brutal assault and unlawful detention of Oscar-winning Palestinian filmmaker Hamdan

Ballal by settlers and Israeli forces in the West Bank. ...

It is indefensible for an organization to recognize a film with an award in the first week of March, and then fail to defend its filmmakers just a few weeks later.

To win an Oscar is not an easy task. Most films in competition are buoyed by wide distribution and exorbitantly priced campaigns directed at voting members. For *No Other Land* to win an Oscar without these advantages speaks to how important the film is to the voting membership. ...

We will continue to watch over this film team. Winning an Oscar has put their lives in increasing danger, and we will not mince words when the safety of fellow artists is at stake.

The appeal has been signed by many well-known figures in the film community, including Mark Ruffalo, Alfonso Cuarón, Jim Jarmusch, Olivia Colman, Sandra Oh, Riz Ahmed, Ruth Negga, Javier Bardem, Penelope Cruz, Natasha Lyonne, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Peter Sarsgaard, Emma Thompson, Elizabeth Olsen, Tony Kushner, Joaquin Phoenix, Richard Gere, Adam McKay, Jonathan Glazer, Marisa Tomei, John Cusack, Susan Sarandon, Todd Haynes, Michael Almereyda, Andrea Riseborough, Barbara Kopple, Pamela Yates, Ramin Bahrani, Raoul Peck, Stanley Nelson, Errol Morris and others.

In particular, hundreds of AMPAS documentary branch members added their names to the open letter.

In an email sent separately to Kramer and Yang, AJ Schnack, a documentary filmmaker and Academy member, wrote:

It's hard for me to adequately express my deep disappointment and anger at the profoundly bad statement that was just sent to Academy members in your name. I am shocked and angry that you are now letting us, your members, know that you view the abduction and beating of a recent honoree as something that members will have "many unique viewpoints" of. With respect, it's a truly heinous suggestion.

Nearly 19,000 people have signed a petition, "Global Filmmakers Stand with Hamdan Ballal & Call to Protect the NO OTHER LAND Film Team."

In the original petition, posted online before news of Ballal's release from Israeli custody was known, the signers

urgently appeal for the immediate release and safety of filmmaker Hamdan Ballal, co-director of *No Other Land*, the recipient of this year's Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

Reports that Mr. Ballal was forcibly removed by the Israeli army from an ambulance following a brutal attack by settlers, and subsequently detained without clear information regarding his whereabouts, deeply alarm us. Such treatment of an internationally acclaimed filmmaker gravely undermines artistic freedom, human rights, and freedom of speech—core values vital to democratic societies.

The petition includes the names of Guy Pearce, Annie Lennox,

Maya Rudolph, Dawn Porter, Rory Kennedy, Christine Vachon, Ava DuVernay, Melissa Barrera, Liz Garbus, Ivy Meeropol (granddaughter of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg), Fisher Stevens, James Schamus and thousands more.

Following Ballal's release Tuesday by the Israeli authorities, in part due to the international outcry, the organizers of the "Global Filmmakers" petition announced that

Given Hamdan's recent release and hospitalization, we welcome new signatures as they continue to pour in. We have decided to keep the petition growing and we've updated its title to reflect the current situation and ongoing needed support.

Meanwhile, audiences in the US continue to turn out to see *No Other Land* wherever they are able, despite the film's lack of a distributor, the result of the pressure of pro-Zionist forces who do not want audiences to witness Israel's illegal and cruel ethnic cleansing in the West Bank. The filmmakers are self-distributing the movie, organizing showings at individual theaters.

On Wednesday, the *New York Times* noted, in "How *No Other Land* Became an Unlikely Box Office Success," that although

the filmmakers rolled out the movie without the marketing muscle and prestige of a typical release, it has flourished. By the admittedly parched standards of post-pandemic theatrical releases of topical documentaries, it is a hit.

The *Times* article continues:

No Other Land has been a top 25 film each of the past three weeks since its Oscar win, according to the film database Box Office Mojo, with ticket sales set to eclipse \$2 million domestically by the end of next weekend. It was playing on 130 screens across the country last weekend, a small number when compared to the thousands of a studio blockbuster, but robust given its circumstances.

Sonya Chung, president and director of Film Forum, the well-known independent cinema in Lower Manhattan, told the *Times* that *No Other Land*, which sold out seven shows its opening weekend at the venue in February and a week of evening screenings after the Academy Awards ceremony, "is shaping up to be among the highest-attended films in our 55-year history."



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