

82nd Venice International Film Festival: Thousands protest against the genocide in Gaza

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Thousands of protesters, including festival participants and members of the public, took part in a large demonstration in Venice last Saturday to express their opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza. The demonstration, called by a collection of Italian and international film professionals under the name of Venice4Palestine, was timed to take place in the opening days of the Venice Film Festival, which continues until September 6.

Organizers of the anti-genocide rally described it as “possibly the largest protest ever seen at a major film event.” The main roads of the Lido, the barrier island in the Venetian Lagoon where the festival is held each year, were closed off by police as the march forcefully made its way to the principal festival area. Bearing a sea of Palestinian flags, protesters chanted “Free, Free Palestine” and “End the Genocide,” accompanied by blasts from foghorns and music playing from speakers.

Another 700 protesters sailed from Porto Marghera to Venice’s Lido Beach to meet up with the demonstration and express their solidarity with the Global Sumud [Arabic for “steadfastness” or “resilience”] Flotilla, a flotilla of dozens of small civilian vessels carrying volunteers and humanitarian supplies that has set off to sail to supply urgently needed aid to Gaza.

Prior to Saturday’s demonstration, organisers issued a statement declaring:

The Venice Film Festival must not remain an event isolated from reality, but rather become a space to denounce the genocide being carried out by Israel, the complicity of Western governments, and to offer concrete support to the Palestinian people.

It continued:

In Gaza, hospitals, schools and refugee camps are being bombed; civilians are being deprived of food and water; journalists and doctors are being killed;

humanitarian ships such as the Freedom Flotilla are being seized. At the same time, in the West Bank, apartheid and settler violence continue unabated. The permanent occupation of Gaza by the Israeli government marks an escalation that has gone beyond every limit of humanity and international law.

The statement went on to denounce the role of the Italian and European governments for their complicity in the genocide through the continuance of arms supplies, economic agreements and diplomatic cover. The statement concluded: “It is time to stop the massacre: stop the genocide, stop arms sales, stop Western complicity.”

Prior to the festival Venice4Palestine had issued an Open Letter urging the organisers of the festival to take a “clear and unambiguous stand condemning the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the ethnic cleansing across Palestine carried out by the Israeli government and army.”

Among the 2,000 signatories to the Open Letter are many Italian film personalities, among them actors Toni Servillo and Valeria Golino, Italian actress and director sisters Alba and Alice Rohrwacher, and veteran directors Marco Bellocchio and Matteo Garrone. Other signers include French directors Céline Sciamma and Audrey Diwan, British filmmaker Ken Loach and actor Charles Dance and Mexican director Guillermo del Toro. Additional signatories include the Palestinian directorial duo Arab and Tarzan Nasser (twin brothers) who made the film *Once Upon a Time in Gaza*, which won best director prize in Cannes this year.

The Open Letter argues in part:

As the spotlight turns on the Venice Film Festival, we’re in danger of going through yet another major event that remains indifferent to this human, civil, and political tragedy. ‘The show must go on,’ we are told, as we’re urged to look away—as if the ‘film world’ had nothing to do with the ‘real world.’

The group urges the festival to avoid becoming “a sad and empty showcase” and take a “clear and unambiguous stand,” to provide “a place of dialogue, active participation, and resistance, highlighting Palestinian narratives to address “ethnic cleansing, apartheid, illegal occupation of Palestinian territories, colonialism and all the other crimes against humanity committed by Israel for decades, not just since October 7.”

When asked at the jury press conference to respond to the horror in Gaza, festival director Alberto Barbera declared that while the festival was not prepared to deny invitations to certain artists, “We have never hesitated to clearly declare our huge sadness and suffering vis-à-vis what is happening in Gaza and Palestine. The death of civilians and especially of children, who are victims, the collateral damage of a war which nobody has been able to terminate yet.” The situation in Palestine was unacceptable, he continued, and declared that the festival was “absolutely open to any kind of debate.”

As evidence of their readiness to address the situation in Palestine, festival organisers cited the world premiere of *The Voice of Hind Rajab* by Tunisian director Kaouther Ben Hania. The film, which features in the festival’s main competition, centres on the killing of Hind Rajab, a five-year-old Palestinian girl, along with six of her family members and two paramedics who came to her rescue, by the IDF in January 2024.

Deadline explains:

Rajab and her family had been fleeing Gaza City when their vehicle was shelled, killing her uncle, aunt, and three cousins. Rajab and another cousin initially survived and contacted the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) by phone from the car seeking aid. The car was later found with Rajab and the paramedics who had come to help all dead. The incident sparked global protests, including at Columbia University, where students renamed Hamilton Hall as Hind’s Hall.

Forensic Architecture, in its detailed analysis of the Zionist slaughter, concluded that the

proximity of the holes to one another helped us identify the volleys of shots fired. The sizes and shapes of the holes helped us to differentiate between entry and exit holes. We mapped a total of 335 bullet holes on the body of the Kia [the automobile carrying the victims].

They also determined

that the shooter [in the Israeli tank] would have had a clear view of the car and its passengers. In other words, they would have been aware of the presence of two children.

Executive producers of *The Voice of Hind Rajab* include prominent cinema figures such as Brad Pitt, Joaquin Phoenix, Rooney Mara, Alfonso Cuaron and Jonathan Glazer. The film will also feature at the upcoming Toronto International Film Festival.

Festival director Barbera noted the lack of other Palestinian films at the festival. In fact, in addition to killing at least 197 journalists and imprisoning 90 more (according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, which writes that “Israel is engaging in the deadliest and most deliberate effort to kill and silence journalists that CPJ has ever documented”), the Netanyahu regime, its military and its far-right supporters have also engaged in systematic attacks on filmmakers in both Gaza and the West Bank.

The most recent example was the case of the Palestinian activist Odeh Hathalin (aka Awdah Hathaleen) who worked on the Academy Award-winning documentary film *No Other Land* and was shot down in cold blood and in broad daylight by a far-right Israeli settler. In March, Hamdan Ballal, one of the film’s four co-directors, was beaten by a mob of Israeli settlers and detained by the military.

Palestinian photojournalist Fatima Hassouna, the subject of a documentary (*Put Your Soul on Your Hand and Walk*) shown at the ACID (Association du cinéma indépendant pour sa diffusion) parallel section of this year’s Cannes film festival, was deliberately murdered in Gaza by the IDF the day after news of the film’s acceptance at the festival was made public.

Despite the best efforts of the Israeli army aimed to suppress evidence of its war crimes by murdering journalists, filmmakers and cameramen, pictures of the horrors taking place in Gaza are being shared on social media on a daily basis. These images of starving and defenceless civilians in the ruins of Gaza have had a profound impact on hundreds of millions across the world who are increasingly mobilising to express their support for the victims and opposing their own governments’ continuing support for the Israeli genocide.

The mass demonstrations and protests by filmmakers in Venice testify to the fact that broad layers of the population are not prepared to accept that events such as the film festival on the Lido remain “isolated from reality.”



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