

Düsseldorf Art Academy accused of antisemitism due to performance by Palestinian artist Basma al-Sharif

Sybille Fuchs
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Once again, a German university has come under fire for antisemitism because it takes seriously academic freedom, artistic freedom and freedom of expression. The latest incident of whipped-up charges of antisemitism stem from a meeting featuring the Palestinian artist Basma al-Sharif at the Düsseldorf Art Academy.

The artist was born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents. She grew up in France and the United States. In 2007, she earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She lives in Berlin and works alternately between the Middle East, Europe and North America. Her works have been shown at many festivals and have won numerous awards. In November 2025, she received the highly endowed grand prize at the Winterthur Short Film Festival for her film "Morgenkreis" (Morning Circle).

In the run-up to the event, Zionist circles staged massive protests against the festival, and the academy and its management received violent threats. The artist, known for her quiet, poetic films, was denounced as a "glorifier of terrorism." Artistic freedom meets its limits where other constitutional values are affected, especially human dignity, according to an open letter from the Network of Jewish University Teachers.

The art academy made it clear on its website that the event would take place in any case. It was organized by the student group Sparta and did not represent "the institutional position of the Düsseldorf Art Academy." Unlike the group's previous meetings, however, non-university members of the public were excluded with participation only possible with confirmed registration. Antisemitic, racist or criminally relevant statements would not be tolerated. The press was also not allowed. Nevertheless, there was no stop to the slander and threats.

The artist was not criticized for her works, but for several pro-Palestinian posts on Instagram criticizing the Israeli government, including a call to boycott Israel. Her description of Israel as a "Zionist entity" was interpreted as

a denial of Israel's right to exist. She was also accused of calling the Israeli genocide in the Gaza Strip by its name and posing in a photo with an antiquarian edition of a 1969 publication by the "Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine" (PFLP). The PFLP is classified as a terrorist organization by the EU and the US, but is not banned in Germany.

On Halloween, she also posted photos showing a blurred red triangle, which is also used by Hamas, but according to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, is only banned if it has a specific reference to Hamas.

The university only partially yielded to pressure by barring the public, but refused to cancel the event entirely. It explained that al-Sharif had been invited not because of her Instagram posts, but because of her internationally recognized artistic work. This assessment was supported by her extensive international exhibition activities, festival presence and awards.

The university's rector, Donatella Fioretti, defended the decision: "Two things are crucial for us," she said. "We want to maintain our university as a place of dialogue because it is part of our institutional mission to showcase artistic positions that are complex and can provoke contradiction and criticism. We don't have to share those positions." The university, she said, is a place of complex thinking. "We don't discuss an artist's work based on Instagram posts, but by looking at her works." Students should have the freedom to invite anyone who raises contemporary issues that are important to them, she said.

A ban on the meeting was demanded by the Jewish community of Düsseldorf, the Jüdische Allgemeine, Minister of Economic Affairs of the State Government of North Rhine-Westphalia Mona Neubaur (Green Party), Minister of Culture Ina Brandes (CDU), the Network of Jewish University Teachers (NJH), the antisemitism commissioner of the City of Düsseldorf, the Jewish Forum of the CDU NRW, the mayor of Düsseldorf, and—as always

with the worst kind of hate speech—the blog Ruhrbarone.

Mona Neubaur of the Green Party, who is also deputy minister-president of North Rhine-Westphalia, took part in a demonstration of about 80 people in front of the university on the day of the event. For safety reasons, Al-Sharif was escorted through a back entrance to the university where the meeting was taking place.

The rally's slogan was: "You say controversial opinion—we say antisemitism." One poster read: "It happened, and therefore it can happen again." Antisemitism, fascism and genocide are indeed on the rise again, but not among artists and art students who condemn the genocide of the Israeli government and its supporters in Europe and the US, but rather in mainstream politics.

Mona Neubaur claimed that al-Sharif relativizes violence in her work and public statements and serves narratives that "reproduce antisemitic patterns of interpretation." For her, it is "perfectly clear: the work and the artist cannot be separated." This is a vile slander.

Neubaur is known to be committed to the Zionist state of Israel, whose head of government and former defense minister are wanted on international arrest warrants on charges of genocide. Just last November, she gave a lecture at an event organized by the European lobby organization ELNET at the notorious Düsseldorf Industry Club. ELNET sponsors discussed pro-Israel political "educational work" with "multipliers from business and society" as well as political decision-makers.

Al-Sharif's lecture, the screening of two films, and the discussion then took place as planned behind closed doors. But even after the event, the media and political campaign continued, although the rector insisted that Basma al-Sharif had not made any antisemitic or hateful remarks at the meeting.

A few days ago, al-Sharif posted that she had considered deleting some posts written in "teenage-like anger" about the 'nightmare' for Palestinians because they had "got people I hardly know into trouble."

However, she added that it was important not to duck away at the first sign of "trouble."

Minister of Culture of North Rhine-Westphalia Ina Brandes (CDU) summoned the academy's rector to the ministry for a meeting. In the conversation, she wanted to "formulate the clear expectation that the art academy must take a public stand and enter into dialogue with its critics." Brandes said that the rector's statements to date were "insufficient and incomprehensible" to her.

Brandes called the demand for the rector's resignation both "consequent and understandable." She regretted that, due to university autonomy, she had no legal means to dismiss the rector. On January 21, she told the state

parliament's science committee that she was "extremely frustrated" that her hands were tied.

The rector has received backing from the university's academic senate, which firmly rejected the attacks on the rectorate and calls for her resignation. The academy's student representatives also supported the rector.

However, the dispute with the ministry has a history. Fioretti, who teaches architecture in Düsseldorf, has been in office since 2003. After her election in 2022, the ministry declared the election invalid due to alleged procedural errors. The students supported Fioretti with a protest blockade. She was then re-elected in a new election in 2023, but her relationship with the ministry has been significantly strained ever since.

In view of the upcoming amendment to the Higher Education Act for North Rhine-Westphalia, the scandal has significance that goes beyond the current case. Brandes pointed out in the state parliament that the planned amendment could expand her options for intervening in such cases. In other words, there are plans to politically curtail university autonomy and the freedom of science, art and research, and simply ban events that, in the opinion of the ruling politicians, violate the ominous "reason of state" with regard to Israel. Such bans have already been imposed in some cases, especially in Berlin, even though some courts have ruled against the practice.

Forty-six constitutional law experts from various law faculties at universities in North Rhine-Westphalia have opposed the state government's draft bill and wrote an open letter in December 2024. In it, they complain that, in the name of supposed protection against discrimination, a system of institutionalized mistrust is being implemented that could "seriously and permanently damage" academic freedom. Almost 200 academics joined them in this protest.

Against this backdrop, the dispute at the Düsseldorf Art Academy must be seen as a clear political warning. The attacks on the university make it clear that such attacks and calls for bans are taking place, even though the far-right Alternative for Germany is not yet part of the government.



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