

# More than 100 film artists condemn Berlinale's censorship of opposition to Israel's Gaza genocide

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This year's Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) has witnessed a growing conflict between a layer of artists determined to speak out against the genocide that has taken place and continues until this day in Gaza, and the Berlin festival management, together with its backers in the German government, determined to keep genocide off the agenda.

An open letter released February 17, and now signed by more than 100 film artists, all of whom have attended previous Berlinale, accuses the film festival of "censoring artists who oppose Israel's ongoing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza and the German state's key role in enabling it."

The signatories include Tilda Swinton, Javier Bardem, Peter Mullan, Mike Leigh, Nan Goldin, Adam McKay, Alia Shawkat, Brian Cox, Hany Abu Assad, Joshua Oppenheimer, Ken Loach, Mahdi Fleifel, Mark Ruffalo, Saleh Bakri and Sarah Friedland.

The open letter raises a serious allegation made by the Palestine Film Institute to the effect that the festival has been "policing filmmakers alongside a continued commitment to collaborate with Federal Police on their investigations."

The letter refers to those filmmakers who spoke out on behalf of Palestinians and their rights on the Berlinale stage at the 2025 festival being aggressively reprimanded by senior festival programmers. The letter cites one film worker who told Film Workers for Palestine: "there was a feeling of paranoia in the air, of not being protected and of being persecuted, which I had never felt before at a film festival."

The open letter also deplores the statement made at the opening of the festival that artists should "stay out of politics": The artists write:

We fervently disagree with the statement made by Berlinale 2026 jury president Wim Wenders that filmmaking is "the opposite of politics". You cannot separate one from the other. We are deeply concerned that the German state-funded Berlinale is helping put into practice what Irene Khan, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion recently condemned as Germany's misuse of draconian legislation "to restrict advocacy for Palestinian rights, chilling public participation and shrinking discourse in academia and the arts."

The letter quotes the Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei who described what was happening in Germany as "doing what they did in the 1930s."

The public appeal points to the joint role of the US and German governments in supplying Israel with the weapons (including internationally forbidden US-made thermal and thermobaric weapons) it requires to continue its campaign of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Noting that previous Berlinale had publicly condemned "atrocities carried out against people in Iran and Ukraine," the letter concludes:

We call on the Berlinale to fulfil its moral duty and clearly state its opposition to Israel's genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes against Palestinians, and completely end its involvement in shielding Israel from criticism and calls for accountability.

In another significant development, Kaouthar Ben Hania, director of the award-winning film *The Voice of Hind Rajab*, refused to accept the “Most Valuable Film” award handed out at the Cinema for Peace ceremony in Berlin this week after an Israeli general was recognized at the same gathering. Also in attendance at the “peace” gathering was the former US Secretary of State and war criminal Hillary Clinton.

While Cinema for Peace is not officially a part of the Berlinale, the gathering has been held since 2002 on a yearly basis to run parallel to the film festival and attract the same audience.

In refusing to take her award, Ben Hania said: “The Israeli army killed Hind Rajab; killed her family; killed the two paramedics who came to save her, with the complicity of the world’s most powerful governments and institutions.”

“I refuse to let their deaths become a backdrop for a polite speech about peace. Not while the structures that enabled them remain untouched,” she continued.

Ben Hania added that the death of the six-year-old Hind was “not an exception, it’s part of a genocide,” and she criticized those who described large-scale civilian killings as “self-defense” or “complex circumstances” while repressing all opposition.

“Peace requires justice and accountability, not glossy slogans,” she concluded.

In response to the artists’ open letter directed toward the Berlinale, its management and supporters in the German media have gone into overdrive to defend the festival’s stance.

Festival director Tricia Tuttle issued a statement, evasively declaring: “We are representing lots of people who have different views, including lots of people who live in Germany who want a more complex understanding of Israel’s positionality than maybe the rest of the world has right now.”

In one short paragraph, Tuttle repeats the phrase complex/complexity in relation to Israel three times—the very same words Kaouthar Ben Hania criticised in her award rejection speech!

What is Tuttle talking about! There is no “complexity” when it comes to taking sides on the issue of genocide.

On the one side, are the broad masses of the world’s population who increasingly regard Israel as a pariah state responsible for one of the worst acts of genocidal violence since the Holocaust. This opposition, which has taken the form of numerous mass protests, demonstrations and strikes, also extends to those countries which are the

closest allies of the state of Israel, the US, Germany, Great Britain and France.

On the other side, are the governments listed above, together with bourgeois regimes and nominal opposition parties all over the world that continue to aid and maintain relations with the war criminals in Tel Aviv, thus making a continuation of the genocide possible.

In Germany, it should be noted, it was a Green Party Culture Minister Claudia Roth who in 2024 denounced a Berlinale jury team as antisemitic for awarding a prize to the film *No Other Land*, which documents the crimes of the Israeli army and government against the Palestinian population in the West Bank. More recently, a leading member of the Left Party, Andreas Büttner, raised false claims of antisemitism to close down an art exhibition held in Potsdam defending the rights of Palestinians.

The stirrings of opposition among film workers to the complicity of cultural institutions in supporting genocide is to be welcomed. At the same time, those engaged in the culture industry in Germany should take note. The comment made by a Palestine film worker cited in the open letter, “there was a feeling of paranoia in the air, of not being protected and of being persecuted, which I had never felt before at a film festival,” recalls a similar comment by UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese.

A year ago, Albanese was prevented from holding lectures in Germany on the situation in Gaza. Responding to the threats and intimidation she had faced in Germany, Albanese commented: “I have to admit that about 75 hours in this country have made me pretty nervous and I cannot wait to get back to ‘peaceful’ Tunisia [where she is a resident]. I have never felt this sense of lacking oxygen that I feel here.”

This process is not restricted to Germany. Across the globe, governments and a host of official institutions are using police-state methods, recalling actions taken by fascist governments in the 1930s, to arrest, intimidate, imprison without due process and violently repress opposition to the mass slaughter in Gaza. Genocide is being normalised by these forces in order to justify new wars and new atrocities directed at the broadest layers of the world population.



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