

Berlinale award winners demand festival and its backers take a clear stand against Gaza genocide

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The support for Israel's genocidal policy in Gaza by the German government and the country's official cultural institutions was the subject of fierce and prolonged protest at this year's Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale).

From the start of the festival, Berlinale management and the head of the festival jury, Wim Wenders, had determinedly sought to evade any discussion of the devastation taking place in occupied Palestine and block all criticism of the state of Israel.

On several occasions, festival director Tricia Tuttle declared that taking a clear position on the genocide in Gaza was not possible due to the "complexity" of situation. Tuttle repeated the phrase once again in her defensive speech at the festival closing ceremony. Wenders had gone even further, declaring at the start of the festival that the correct response by artists was to "stay out of politics." This led to novelist Arundhati Roy's cancelling her appearance at the festival and other expressions of outrage. Wenders later nervously retreated somewhat, asserting that: "Activists are fighting, mainly on the internet, for humanitarian causes, namely the dignity and protection of human life. These are our causes as well."

In any event, to the dismay of Tuttle and Wenders and the German establishment, politics dominated the closing evening of the Berlinale.

One after another, filmmakers awarded prizes for their work publicly criticised the Zionist regime's actions in Gaza and defended the rights of Palestinians.

Lebanese director Marie-Rose Osta, received an award for her short film *Someday a Child*, about an 11-year-old boy with extraordinary powers living with his uncle in a Lebanese village. Osta pointed to the fact that children in Lebanon and Gaza were being killed by Israeli bombs. To applause, she asserted: "In reality, children in Gaza, in all of Palestine, and in my Lebanon, do not have superpowers to protect them from Israeli bombs [...] No child should need superpowers to survive a genocide empowered by veto

powers and the collapse of international law."

Two Turkish films won the top awards in Berlin. Ilker Çatak's *Yellow Letters* won the Golden Bear, while Emin Alper's *Salvation* collected the Silver Bear Grand Jury Prize. In his acceptance speech, Çatak emphasized the need to stand together against autocratic regimes around the world, saying, "Let us fight them, not each other." Alper also highlighted the plight of the victims of repression in Palestine, Turkey and Iran, saying "they are not alone."

Syrian-Palestinian director Abdallah Al-Khatib accepted the Best Feature Debut Award for his film *Chronicles from the Siege*. According to its press notes:

During the siege of their city, a group of ordinary people struggle to survive amid hunger, snipers, and bombardments, while clinging to human connection, love, and small daily pleasures. Faced with impossible moral choices and deep psychological strain, their lives become inseparable from the siege itself.

Al-Khatib based himself in part on his own experience under fire in the Yarmouk refugee camp for Palestinians in Damascus during the Syrian Civil War, which the filmmaker previously turned into the documentary *Little Palestine*.

In Berlin, Al-Khatib unrolled a Palestinian flag and told the audience:

"I'm happy to be here to get this prize, but I'm Palestinian, so I have to use this moment to speak about Palestine." Al-Khatib continued, "I was under a lot of pressure to participate in the Berlinale for one reason only, to stand here and say that Palestinians will be free and one day, we will have a great film festival in the middle of Gaza, in the middle of other Palestinian cities."

"Our festival will stand in solidarity with the people living

under siege, under occupation and under dictatorships around the world.” Clearly referring to Wenders’ earlier comments about “politics,” he added: “We will speak about politics before cinema. We will speak about resistance before art, about freedom before beauty, and about a human being before culture, the long awaited day is coming.”

Al-Khatib then accused the German government, among others, of “being partners in the genocide in Gaza.” To loud applause from the audience, he declared: “We will remember everyone who stood by our side, and we will remember everyone who was against us.”

This was all too much for government representatives sitting in the audience. The German environment minister Carsten Schneider (Social Democratic Party) stormed out of the festival hall on hearing Al-Khatib’s entirely accurate remarks about German complicity in the Israeli genocide. A spokesperson for the minister later stated that the statements by the director were unacceptable. Israeli Ambassador Ron Prosor naturally praised Schneider’s reaction to the speech.

Berlin’s right-wing mayor, Kai Wegner, told the pro-Zionist Axel Springer rag, *Bild*, that those on the stage who presented themselves as pro-Palestinian activists were solely concerned with “hatred of Israel.”

Predictably, culture minister Wolfram Weimer, who worked for many year as a journalist for the Springer group, stated that pro-Palestinian activists at the Berlinale had shown “their ugly face” with their opposition to Israel. Christian Social Union (CSU) regional leader Alexander Hoffmann denounced what he claimed were “repugnant scenes” of “antisemitism” during the ceremony.

In a video statement, Al-Khatib acknowledged that a number of film festivals had wanted to show his film but he had accepted the offer from Berlin precisely because he felt he was not welcome there. For this reason, he says, it was necessary to come to Germany with his film to put forward the cause of the Palestinian people.

In fact, Germany years ago put into place unprecedented structures aimed at silencing criticism of Israel.

In 2008, the conservative government of Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) declared Germany’s commitment to Israel to be a “reason of state” (*Staatsraison*), that is, a foundational principle. This position was reaffirmed by the following national government led by Social Democratic Party (SPD) chancellor Olaf Scholz, with the support of all of the parliamentary parties, including the Greens and Left Party.

In 2017, the German parliament adopted the reactionary International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, conflating the latter with criticism of Israel—once again with the support of all parties apart from the Left Party, which abstained in the vote.

One year later, the government appointed a special Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism. This commissioner has established a network of “antisemitism commissioners” in 15 of Germany’s 16 states. It should be noted that there is no equivalent network of state officials in Germany to oppose racism or anti-Muslim discrimination.

In fact, in 2023 one of these states, Saxony-Anhalt, went so far as to mandate that all those applying for German citizenship in the state had to submit a written declaration affirming Israel’s right to exist.

The aim of these structures and commissioners is to shut down criticism of the state of Israel and in its genocidal policy in Gaza and beyond by smearing it as antisemitism. A list of the prosecutions, bans and censorship measures imposed, often through police violence, on artists and activists who have protested against the genocide and criticised the Israeli state during the past three years would fill dozens of pages.

At the same time, the German government applauds the work being carried out by the fascist regime in Tel Aviv. According to Chancellor Friedrich Merz (CDU), Israel is carrying out the Western world’s “Drecksarbeit”, that is, its dirty work!

Only a year ago, with the avid backing of ambassador Prosor, Mayor Wegner and Culture Minister Weimer were patrons of an exhibition “We Will Dance Again,” centred on the attack on the Nova Music Festival on October 7, 2023. The exhibition celebrated the Israeli fascist and settler Elkana Federman as the “Hero of October 7.” Federman is a member of the far-right group Tzav 9, which is sanctioned by both the European Union and the US for serious human rights violations.

It is against this background of intimidation and repression that courageous artists like Abdallah Al-Khatib and Marie-Rose Osta raise their voices to oppose genocide. They do so in the face of the cowardice and complicity of artists and cultural officials who insist the situation is “too complex” to take sides in or that the best response is to “stay out of politics.”

A series of further articles to follow will deal with some of the most notable films on show at the festival.



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