

The 76th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 2

German government declares “no politics” at the Berlinale ... unless it’s the politics of the government

Stefan Steinberg
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German culture minister Wolfram Weimer, with the backing of the pro-Israeli Springer press, is pushing to dismiss the director of the Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale), Tricia Tuttle.

The *Bild* wrote that Weimer was planning to remove Tuttle after the right-wing newspaper published a photo of the latter with crew members of the film *Chronicles from the Siege* by Syrian-Palestinian director Abdallah Al-Khatib. Some members of the film crew wore Palestinian scarves, and a Palestinian flag was visible.

On February 20, Weimer convened an extraordinary supervisory board meeting of the KBB GmbH (Kulturelle Begleitmaßnahmen Berlin). The Berlinale is a division of the KBB, with Weimer as the supervisory board chairman. No final decision was made at the meeting, but the sword of Damocles continues to hang over Tuttle’s head with further discussions planned this week.

In response to Tuttle’s threatened dismissal, an initial group of 700 leading filmmakers and actors signed an open letter in her defence. The number of signatories has now swollen to over 2,800. İker Çatak, the director of *Yellow Letters*, which won the festival’s top prize, the Golden Bear, angrily declared that if Tuttle were fired, he would never again submit a film to the Berlinale.

Weimer’s offensive comes despite the fact that Tuttle and the chairman of the festival jury, veteran German filmmaker Wim Wenders, had resolutely *attempted to avoid* any discussion of the devastation in occupied Palestine and to suppress any criticism of the state of Israel from the outset of the festival.

In mid-January, for example, Weimer met with Berlinale director Tuttle. The only detail to emerge from the meeting came in a brief X post: “The festival is the voice of international cinema, courageous and relevant. One thing is also clear: there can be no place for anti-Semitism here.” This should be interpreted as “no place for criticism of the Israeli genocide in Gaza.”

The hypocrisy of the German government when it comes to the Berlinale is bottomless. Threats are now being made to cancel the federal state’s share of funding for the festival due to the showing of political support at the Berlinale for the cause of the Palestinians. (The government’s real problem is not with the festival officialdom, but with the troublemaking filmmakers who continue to concern themselves with injustice and mass murder!)

Three years ago, of course, the German government had no problem when the Berlinale opened with a speech via video link by Ukrainian

president Volodymyr Zelensky appealing for support for the NATO-led war against Russia.

On that occasion, the festival distributed its own Ukraine solidarity pins and the German culture minister at the time, Claudia Roth (Green Party), praised the political nature of the Berlinale. As we wrote in 2023: “For Roth and her Green Party, a ‘political Berlinale’ means espousing identity politics coupled with the subordination of the festival to the war policy of the German government and NATO in its ‘war against Russia.’”

Not only have the speeches from the stage at the recent Berlinales come under attack, some of the films shown at the festival have been criticised by pro-Zionist groups for daring to defend the rights of the Palestinian people.

The pro-Zionist group “Artists Against Antisemitism” issued a statement echoing comments by Tuttle and others to the effect that the situation in the Middle East was too “complex” and therefore any condemnation of the Gaza genocide was without justification. The right-wing statement went on to criticise the festival for even showing *Chronicles from the Siege*, which won a major prize at the festival.

We will review that film in a subsequent article, but there were a handful of other documentary and fiction films on show at the festival which clearly took a side on behalf of the Palestinians and shed light on decades of Zionist violence and criminality.

Who Killed Alex Odeh?

The documentary *Who Killed Alex Odeh?*, directed by Jason Osder and William Lafi Youmans, traces the history of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim discrimination in America fuelled in particular by Zionist terrorist groups backed or tolerated by the US government.

Alex Odeh was a teacher and western regional director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. In 1985, he gave a television interview in which he commented on the hijacking of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro by members of the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF). Odeh condemned the hijacking, but at the same time raised the plight of Palestinians at the mercy of the repressive politics of the Israeli regime with the support of the US.

Odeh had always argued in favour of peaceful relations between different groups of the population, but the very fact that he raised the problems facing Palestinians in the interview was enough for some US media outlets to brand Odeh a terrorist. Days later he was killed by a bomb rigged to the door of his office in Southern California.

In addition to Odeh's widow Norma and his daughter Helena, one of the main figures to feature in the film is Israeli journalist David Sheen. He identifies those suspected of carrying out the bombing, all linked to the Jewish Defense League (JDL), an extremist Zionist organisation founded by radical Rabbi Meir Kahane in 1968.

The film names three suspects—Robert Manning, Andy Green and Keith “Israel” Fuchs. A police officer active at the time of the murder acknowledges that the FBI, which had designated the JDL as a terrorist group, had knowledge of the suspects soon after the assassination. The FBI, however, did nothing, allowing the men to flee to Israeli settlements in the West Bank. The US government could still have demanded the extradition of the three men back to America but failed to do so.

Having encouraged violent racist attacks in the US, Kahane moved to Israel in 1971 and founded the virulently anti-Arab Kach party. Kahane pursued his campaign of manic racism up until his assassination in 1990. Today, a former member of the Kach party, Itamar Ben-Gvir, is Minister of National Security in the coalition government of Benjamin Netanyahu and one of the main architects of the genocide in Gaza.

Manning, a JDL member and one of the three suspects in Odeh's murder, was convicted in 1993 for a separate bombing offence, but was never held to account for his role in the 1985 attack. The two other suspects tracked down by Sheen have been able to live comfortable lives in Israel under the full protection of the Tel Aviv regime.

The documentary underlines the fact that the current fascist coalition in Israel is by no means an aberration. It is, on the contrary, the end product of a prolonged campaign of terrorist violence directed against Arabs not just in the Middle East but also in America—with the tacit support of the US authorities.

Collapse

The documentary *Collapse* begins with a quote from the Hungarian writer and Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész: “Yet we regarded all this with indifference.” In the background, we witness an Israel Defence Forces bomb exploding and causing havoc in Gaza. The film's director, Israeli Anat Even, grew up in the Nir Oz kibbutz on the border with Gaza, which Hamas attacked, and from which it took hostages on October 7.

In the attack, the director lost friends and acquaintances in the kibbutz who had taught her about “history and cinema.” Her sympathies lie, however, not just with her Israeli friends but also with her defenceless Arab neighbours on the other side of the barbed wire border established by Israel in what the film describes as “this great war of vengeance” against the Palestinian people. The film consists of a series of snapshots taken by Even depicting the activities of the IDF along the border with Gaza, interspersed with her correspondence with a friend and colleague in France (Ariel Cypel, credited as script co-writer).

Even seeks to film the devastation occurring in Gaza, but is continually turned away by the arrogant IDF troops patrolling the border. We witness a gathering of Israeli families with women speaking from a stage to an audience in front of them. The speakers relish the prospect of taking over the Gazan territory after the expulsion of the Palestinians. One large banner at the event reads “Occupy, Expel, Settle.” One would-be settler rants on about the necessity to “Judaize” Palestinian territory. Another speaker refers to the inhabitants of Gaza as “rats” who, once expelled, must not be allowed to return to their homes.

Another scene shows tourists being shown around the Nir Oz kibbutz as part of the propaganda offensive by the Israeli government to justify its murderous onslaught against Gaza. We also see a propaganda visit by Netanyahu to what remains of the kibbutz, surrounded by bodyguards, cameras and journalists. One protester shouts out “Destroyer of Israel!” as the prime minister walks by. Other scenes show isolated small groups of Israeli activists with protest placards demonstrating valiantly but fruitlessly against the activities of the marauding Israeli military.

Meanwhile life in the region goes on, with harvesters reaping crops on the Israeli side while the devastation of Gaza continues in the background. The film refutes the notion that the Tel Aviv government's genocidal war is unanimously supported by the entire Israeli population. Lacking, however, is a political perspective on how to fight Zionist nationalism and the Israeli war machine and unite with the oppressed Palestinian and Arab masses.

Where to?

The feature film *Where to?* directed by Assaf Machnes centres on two characters, Hassan (Ehab Salami), a Palestinian Uber driver living and working in Berlin for many years, and a young Israeli, Amir (Ido Tako).

The film opens in 2022 with Hassan picking up Amir and his German boyfriend from the airport and driving them to the centre of Berlin. Learning the name of his passenger, Hassan enquires if Amir is in fact an Arab. Amir hadn't realized his name could be either Jewish or Arab. Young and gay Amir has left the stultifying atmosphere in Israel to enjoy life in Berlin.

Through a coincidence, Amir finds himself again in Hassan's cab and their conversation develops. Having asked Amir where he lived in Israel, Hassan concludes they are “neighbours” with roots in Galilee. Hassan's own parents were originally from Galilee before moving to Jenin.

Warming to Hassan, Amir seeks out the cab driver for his future trips, and shares the ups and downs of his love and social life in Berlin. The mood changes after Israel begins a full-scale war against Gaza in October 2023. Amir asks Hassan why he wants someday to return to his homeland. Hassan replies he finds it problematic answering that question from someone who grew up in the region stolen from his parents.

The film is based on the Israeli director's own experience of sharing a cab with a Palestinian driver. Explaining the concept behind his film, Manches said in one interview at the Berlinale: “When you leave Israel or Palestine, you leave an idea—you don't just leave a ‘place’ ... Because they are both out of their homeland, it becomes a narrative about people detached from their identity, whether Palestinian or Israeli.”

All the films reviewed above are collaborations between Israeli and Arab filmmakers and actors seeking to come to grips with the disastrous consequences of Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people. In this respect, they share common ground with the award-winning film *No Other Land*, also a joint product of Israeli and Arab cineastes.



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