

PEN America president resigns over organization's pro-Zionist statement

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On July 9, Ethiopian-American novelist Dinaw Mengestu, the president of PEN America, an advocacy organization founded to defend free speech and the democratic rights of writers, resigned in protest over what amounts to a pro-Zionist statement officially published by the organization.

The article, “A Silent Moratorium,” written by ranking PEN staff members and published on PEN’s website, promotes the conception that there is growing prejudice and unfair censorship against Israeli and Jewish authors, partly by publishers in the United States, but also on social media and in person.

It purports to defend Jewish and Israeli authors from discrimination, which it blames on boycotts of Israeli cultural institutions by such organizations as Boycott, Divest, Sanction (BDS), particularly since the beginning of the Gaza genocide on October 7, 2023.

In a statement on Instagram, Mengestu explained the reasons for his resignation:

It is not about different opinions. It is not about anyone’s experiences. It is about PEN America’s ongoing failure to defend free expression fairly and equitably, and about its production of work that supports suppression through bigotry and indifference.

Here are the facts. This piece is about trying to suppress constitutionally protected speech. That is why PEN America changed its position on boycotts shortly before the piece was published. PEN America wants to try to retroactively justify both this report and its decade-long failure to defend a constitutionally protected right from government censorship.

He concludes:

The writers who boycotted [PEN America] in 2024 wanted change, and they returned when they believed that such change was possible. I insisted and believed that it was, and I argued that the organisation would defend free expression equitably and equally. This report makes clear that will not happen.

I am not boycotting PEN America. Like many other writers who have reached out to me, I am walking away from it permanently, and I will do everything I can now to help make something better.

Prominent writers, including Viet Thanh Nguyen, Sarah Schulman, Benjamin Moser, Angela Flournoy, Jess Row and Lucy Sante have publicly supported Mengestu. Writers against the War in Gaza have also given him their support.

The leadership of PEN America, however, sought to justify the article on Wednesday. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Summer Lopez (who spent eight years working “as a democracy specialist at the United States Agency for International Development,” according to PEN), and Clarisse Rosaz Shariyf, the co-CEOs of PEN America, said that the article was part of “a decade and more of our work defending free expression.”

The *Times* article in which the interview was conducted shows that the article went through a vetting process and was distributed for discussion to the organization’s leadership. That is, it is a product of PEN America’s top, full-time staff, which is connected in a myriad of ways to government agencies and major media organizations. Two of the authors of the document, Lisa Tolin and Geraldine Baum have long histories at major media outlets such as NBC, the Associated Press and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Since October 2023, PEN America has been plunged into an escalating crisis that has exposed the organization as a pro-imperialist appendage of the US State Department, fundamentally hostile to the defense of free expression it claims to uphold. The catalyst was Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza, which PEN America—under the leadership of then-CEO Suzanne Nossel, a former State Department official and avowed Zionist—refused to condemn.

Beginning in early 2024, writers mounted an unprecedented rebellion. In February, over 600 authors signed an open letter demanding that PEN “take an actual stand against an actual genocide,” pointing out that Israel had murdered poets, bombed libraries, and destroyed every university in Gaza—the ultimate book ban.” Signatories included Jesmyn Ward, Maaza Mengiste, and Angela Flournoy. The letter highlighted the grotesque contrast between PEN’s energetic campaigns against schoolbook bans in Florida and its silence as Palestinian writers, journalists and cultural institutions were systematically annihilated.

The revolt intensified through March and April. Authors including Naomi Klein, Michelle Alexander, Hisham Matar and Lorrie Moore withdrew from PEN’s flagship World Voices Festival. The organization attempted to suppress dissent internally as well—its staff union, PEN America United, exposed management efforts to insert contractual language limiting workers’ freedom of speech on Gaza. By late April, the crisis reached a breaking point: PEN America was forced to cancel both the World Voices Festival and its annual literary

awards ceremony after 28 of 61 award nominees withdrew, including nine of the ten contenders for the prestigious Jean Stein Book Award. In total, over 70 writers publicly shunned the organization.

Nossel's response—smearing the boycotting writers as participants in a campaign of intimidation—echoed the slanders that university administrators and Democratic Party politicians were simultaneously deploying against anti-genocide campus protesters. PEN likewise issued a statement condemning “antisemitic harassment” at Columbia University, a foul falsehood against pro-Palestinian students.

This crisis did not emerge out of the blue. It was prefigured by PEN America's conduct regarding Ukraine. In May 2023, three Ukrainian nationalist writers—two of them on active military duty—refused to appear at the World Voices Festival if any Russian authors participated at all, regardless of their political views. PEN Ukraine declared it “immoral” for Ukrainian and Russian cultural figures to share the same event “before the Russian regime is defeated.” PEN America capitulated entirely, canceling a panel featuring Russian dissident writers—including Masha Gessen, PEN America's own vice president—to satisfy the Ukrainian ultranationalists' demand for a total ban on Russian participation. This embrace of ethnic exclusion and anti-Russian chauvinism, consistent with PEN's broader role as the cultural arm of NATO's proxy war, laid bare the organization's real function: not defending artistic freedom, but policing it on behalf of American imperialism.

“A Silent Moratorium” is a return to these practices. It is a carefully written document, responsibility

The horrors of the Hamas-led terrorist attacks and the devastation of Israel's war and what human rights organizations and experts have determined to be genocide in Gaza, have had catastrophic human costs.

The document seeks to put on an equal footing opponents of the genocide and those who support it: “The political and cultural debates around the war have fractured communities and families and spurred conflict in institutions worldwide, from corporations and cultural organizations to campuses.”

This foul statement claims that certain Israeli and Jewish writers are being targeted simply for being Jewish, not for their support for or refusal to oppose the genocide. A pretend “even-handedness” is the *modus operandi* here. “Israeli and Jewish writers and artists on all sides of the conflict have been silenced and faced a range of threats and repercussions,” it asserts.

The statement makes no reference to the hundreds of Palestinian journalists, poets, scholars, filmmakers, visual artists and intellectuals who have been *deliberately* liquidated by the IDF as part of its genocidal policies. Nor does it comment on the destruction of Palestinian universities, schools, libraries and other institutions.

In the finest traditions of McCarthyism—here in the defense of artistic freedom, no less!—the PEN statement does not bring in a single statistic or documented instance of discrimination. It is content to repeatedly use these sorts of formulations:

“Writers and others in the Israeli and Jewish literary community ... reported event disinvitations and cancellations, and new and growing barriers to publication,” “Writers PEN

America interviewed shared that they have been told by their agents to remove Jewish characters and references to Israel from their novels,” “‘I can tell you unequivocally, I am surrounded by writers who are telling me that (they are being fired by) their editor, their publisher, their agent, their publicist,’ said the writer Elissa Wald,” “One translator who has been involved with trying to bring 20 to 30 Hebrew-language projects to international markets said he did not know of a single project that sold,” etc.

Vague insinuations, unsubstantiated claims, lurid, witch-hunting language—this is what PEN America has produced.

The article is utterly pernicious, as we indicated, a document worthy of a State Department or CIA “disinformation” campaign. It throws the moral weight of PEN—already much diminished and discredited—behind Zionist and other right-wing organizations that have sought to silence pro-Palestinian, anti-genocide speech. While writers and artists have, for the time being, the First Amendment right to advocate for a boycott of institutions that facilitate genocide, 38 US states have already passed laws that require companies, contractors, or sometimes even individuals seeking government contracts to sign a certification stating they are not currently participating in a boycott of Israel.

Nowhere does the document point the finger at the root cause of the difficulties of Israeli artists: the Zionist regime itself and its determination to exterminate hundreds of thousands of Palestinian men, women and children in as short a time as possible with the most brutal means at its disposal.

“A Silent Moratorium” must be seen as a part of larger effort, with the fascist Trump administration in the lead, by the American ruling class to wage imperialist war with its ally Israel—and establish a dictatorship at home.

The other side of this process is the leftward movement of wide swaths of the American population, in this case, writers and artists, against the bloody consequences of US imperialism's attempts to reestablish its hegemony.

When Suzanne Nossel resigned as CEO of PEN America, many writers hoped that this would be the end of its nauseating display of support for war crimes under the guise of free speech. The organization had a brief respite. “A Silent Moratorium,” followed by Mengestu's resignation, should really be the final straw.



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