

Award-winning Iranian-German photographer asked to apologise for saying “Free Palestine”

Stefan Steinberg
26 October 2024

In an utterly disgraceful action, Iranian-German documentary photographer Shirin Abedi has been asked to issue an apology for uttering the phrase “Free Palestine” at an award ceremony organised by the German Society for Photography (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Fotografie, DGPh).

Abedi is a respected photo-journalist whose work has been exhibited in Germany, France, Finland, Estonia and Bangladesh. In the course of her career, she has worked on assignment for leading German and English-speaking media outlets.

At a gathering October 12, the Photographic Society presented its annual awards, including one to Abedi for her planned project aimed at exploring the consequences of the theft and trafficking of cultural artefacts from Southwest Asia.

Accepting her award, Abedi made a minute-long speech, declaring: “If you are too lazy to study history, to understand colonialism, just look at Palestine and the Zionist apartheid state of Israel, committing genocide in Palestine.” Abedi, wearing a Arab keffiyeh headscarf, continued with an appeal: “Stay resistant and keep educating yourselves.” She then made a peace sign and ended her remarks with the call to “free Palestine.”

Just days later, Abedi received a scandalous letter from the chairman of the DGPh’s Art, Market and Law Section, Thomas Gerwers, accusing her of “political propaganda” “dogmatic fanaticism” and “anti-Israeli agitation.” This in the face of the murder of tens of thousands of Palestinian men, women and children in Gaza, a war crime of unprecedented proportions.

In his letter Gerwers declared: “As a German cultural society, we have a special responsibility for the right of

the State of Israel to exist. Without ifs and buts,” he continued. “We have been abused by you here, no more and no less.” The miserable Gerwers and his colleagues “abused” by Abedi!

Stating that Abedi’s short speech left him “speechless,” Gerwers asked the artist to issue an apology. Again, one has to rub one’s eyes at the hypocrisy, stupidity and blindness to human suffering.

Commenting on Gerwers’ vile response, Ahmed Zidan, the deputy director of Audience at Freedom of the Press Foundation, told *Hyperallergic* that his letter was “emblematic of what we have seen from various German cultural institutions, the federal and local governments toward pro-Palestine voices and their allies over the past year.”

Zidan added: “Shirin’s work highlights colonialism and the letter from the German institution, which supposedly awarded her for this body of work, reinforces the very thing she critiques.”

Defying the attempts to silence her, Abedi told *Hyperallergic* that she had made her remarks at the DGPh ceremony to highlight the Israeli violence in Gaza and the West Bank under conditions where the German government is continuing to ship weapons to Israel, funded by the country’s taxpayers.

“I feel concerned about my industry [of photojournalists and documentary photographers] because it seems to me that the institution abuses its power,” Abedi said.

“If we don’t discuss, argue, and debate about human rights violations and the society we are building ... who else shall do it?” she continued. “We are the ones who tell visual stories and work with representations of communities. This silence is scary.”

The intensified effort to silence critics of Israeli mass murder in the Middle East has its roots firmly in official German government policy.

The Netanyahu government, with the full support of the imperialist powers, is currently extending its genocidal offensive in Gaza into the West Bank and Lebanon while planning war against Iran. The German government is doubling down on its support for Israel.

Refuting recent media reports that Germany would restrict its supply of weapons to Israel, chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD) has emphasised that German support for Israel would continue unabated.

His comments were supplemented by those of foreign minister Annalena Baerbock (Greens) who, in a reactionary rant in the German parliament October 10, gave a green light for the Israeli extermination of Palestinian civilians, declaring, “I clearly conveyed to the UN that civilian areas could lose their protected status because they are being abused by terrorists.”

The campaign to suppress any opposition to Israel embraces all of the country’s political parties. In Berlin the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) culture minister Joe Chialo has called for public funding to be cut from all arts groups critical of Israel, in particular those backing boycotts over the conflict in Gaza.

Also, in order to nip pro-Palestinian support in the bud, the interior ministry announced at the end of September that it planned to tighten up Germany’s already restrictive citizenship law. Those seeking citizenship in the country must already answer a number of questions about the state of Israel in their applications.

Now, going farther, according to the NDR (North German Radio and Television), the interior ministry has decreed that any foreign national who posts pro-Palestinian slogans such as “From the River to the Sea” on social media will be denied German citizenship.

Back in August, a protester who chanted the latter entirely legitimate slogan at a Berlin rally was fined €600 [\$US648] by a German court.

Commenting on the new citizenship law back in March, interior minister Nancy Faeser (SPD) warned in *Der Spiegel* magazine: “If you don’t share our values, you can’t get a German passport. We have drawn a crystal clear red line here.”

Abedi’s speech at the German Photographic Society

was courageous and is to be applauded but—as the events of the past year clearly show—the response of the political elite in Germany to such shows of principle is to intensify its campaign to silence all opposition to Israel’s campaign of terror in the Middle East.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)