

More than 5,500 writers pledge to boycott Israeli cultural institutions

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Thousands of writers and publishing professionals around the world have signed a pledge not to work with Israeli cultural institutions complicit in the murderous mass assault on the Palestinians. The statement accuses the Zionist state of “apartheid,” “ethnic cleansing” and “genocide.”

The open letter, circulated by the Palestine Festival of Literature (PalFest), based in London and the West Bank, continues to attract signatories. PalFest explained October 29: “Since launching 24 hours ago, this has risen to a total of 4,500 writers and publishing professionals pledging to boycott all complicit Israeli institutions. Names are coming in faster than we can process them.” The total has since topped 5,500, with “more names of authors, publishers, and book workers added every few minutes.”

The letter, “Refusing Complicity in Israel’s Literary Institutions,” begins:

We, as writers, publishers, literary festival workers, and other book workers, publish this letter as we face the most profound moral, political and cultural crisis of the 21st century. The overwhelming injustice faced by the Palestinians cannot be denied. The current war has entered our homes and pierced our hearts.

The letter continues:

This is a genocide, as leading expert scholars and institutions have been saying for months. Israeli officials speak plainly of their motivations to eliminate the population of Gaza, to make Palestinian statehood impossible, and to seize Palestinian land. This follows 75 years of displacement, ethnic cleansing and apartheid.

It identifies the current situation as an “emergency” that “has made Gaza unlivable.”

“We will not cooperate with Israeli institutions,” the letter goes on, “including publishers, festivals, literary agencies and publications that:

“1. Are complicit in violating Palestinian rights, including through discriminatory policies and practices or by whitewashing and justifying Israel’s occupation, apartheid or genocide, or

“2. Have never publicly recognized the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people as enshrined in international law.”

A small sampling of the signatories includes Nobel Prize winners Annie Ernaux and Abdulrazak Gurnah, prominent figures such as best-selling Irish novelist Sally Rooney, well-known British authors Hari Kunzru, Isabella Hammad and Hisham Matar, science-fiction writer China Miéville, award-winning US writers including Mary Gaitskill, Percival Everett, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Rachel Kushner, Jhumpa Lahiri, Jonathan Lethem, Valeria Luiselli, Jia Tolentino, Justin Torres, Junot Díaz, Kaveh Akbar, Téa Obreht, Susan Abulhawa and Raven Leilani, and the major Australian novelist Peter Carey.

Such an unprecedented outpouring speaks to more than the reaction of a layer of writers and professional workers. The open letter gives voice and focus to the anger and horror felt by millions, as the Israeli war of extermination is livestreamed before a global audience. The homicidal outburst is not an aberration, although it is clearly linked to the previous three-quarters of a century of oppression of the Palestinians. The response of Netanyahu, Biden, Harris, Scholz, Macron, Starmer and the rest of the gang of bandits reveals what imperialism intends to mete out to any expression of popular resistance.

However, their “success” in slaughtering mostly innocent civilians, including tens of thousands of women and children, comes at a cost. The wanton, depraved killing is having a serious impact on popular consciousness globally, especially among young people. This is part of a wider popular radicalization. These earthshaking, traumatic events will neither be forgotten nor forgiven by masses of humanity.

As should be clear, it is not only Israel and its institutions that should be in the dock. The political-military apparatuses in the US, Britain, France, Germany, Canada and every imperialist power, full partners in the Gaza annihilation, deserve the same fate. Nonetheless, this is an important first step. And it is not directed toward the exclusion of individual Israeli academics, which the WSWs has opposed in the past, but toward the Zionist political and cultural establishment as a whole in the midst of an ongoing genocide.

The Gaza boycott pledge and other protests like it collectively represent a turning point. For decades, artists have found it difficult to work through the strong pressures thwarting genuinely critical, oppositional creative efforts: the enrichment of upper-middle-class layers through parasitic operations (the stock market, the media boom, etc.) that came at the expense of the working class; the residue of the right-wing, post-Soviet claims about the “fall of communism” and “the end of history”; the cynical, subjectivist role played by postmodernism and its variants, directed toward disintegrating coherent and rational thought.

Change is in the air. Capitalism deserves much of the credit, for, as Lenin once explained, it does “the lion’s share” of the work. A system for which there are no longer any “red lines,” which allows tens of millions to die in a preventable pandemic, which declares that it will no longer be “deterred” by the prospect of civilization-ending nuclear war, which arms and supervises a war of extermination in Gaza and a bloody, brutal conflict in Ukraine, which spawns fascist demagogues in every corner of the “free world”—such a system must provoke mass hostility and opposition. This is now developing.

As *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board Chairman David North argued last December, the mass murder in Gaza

has opened the eyes of the world. It has exposed the Zionist regime and its imperialist accomplices for the criminals they are. It has set into motion a tidal wave of outrage that is sweeping across the world and will sweep across those responsible for this genocide.

The authors’ anti-genocide letter correctly notes,

Culture has played an integral role in normalizing these injustices. Israeli cultural institutions, often working directly with the state, have been crucial in obfuscating, disguising and artwashing the dispossession and oppression of millions of Palestinians for decades.

This could be extended to many efforts of intellectual endeavor in Israel from journalism to archaeology, and other sciences to history. Although there are noted Israelis in all these fields who have combated this trend, it remains the case that Zionism has largely dragooned art and culture into the defense or excusing of ethnic cleansing and mass murder.

But this is also widely the case with many US, British, French and German cultural institutions. One only has to recall the slew of cowardly and reactionary acts of censorship that began last October. It was just days before the 92nd Street Y, the famed cultural venue in Manhattan, canceled an appearance by writers, including Pulitzer Prize-winning Viet Thanh Nguyen, because of their opposition to the Israeli operations.

Indeed, the list of Western cultural institutions that have been, like their Israeli counterparts, as the letter notes, “complicit or have remained silent observers of the overwhelming oppression of Palestinians” is a long one.

They include, to name only some of the more prominent episodes:

- The “shutting down” of Palestinian author Adania Shibli at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October 2023.
- The McCarthyite campaign in the film industry against actress Melissa Barrera.
- The silence of the Brooklyn Museum, stocked with pro-Zionist members on its Board of Trustees, on the genocide.
- The firing of workers at the Noguchi Museum in New York City for wearing keffiyehs in solidarity with Palestinians.
- The attempt by “Hollywood professionals” to prevent Gazan journalist Bisan Owda’s nomination for an Emmy award.
- The case of outright censorship of a pro-Palestinian lecture at the

Barbican Centre in London.

- The cancelation of an artistic residency by the city of Vail, Colorado, for painter Danielle SeeWalker for work that compared the genocide of Palestinians to the genocide of Native Americans.
- War propaganda by cultural institutions such as the exhibit at the Seattle Museum identifying anti-Zionism with antisemitism.
- The silence of the unions in the entertainment industry on the genocide and McCarthyite persecution of their own members.
- The disgraceful demand by the German Society for Photography that awardee Shirin Abedi apologize for uttering the phrase “Free Palestine” during the awards ceremony.
- Perhaps most notorious of all has been the refusal of PEN America, the most prominent writers’ advocacy organization in the United States, to condemn the targeted killing of Palestinian journalists by the Israeli murder machine and to oppose the cultural genocide in Gaza.

These are only a few of the outrages committed by cultural institutions outside of Israel in repressing knowledge and representation of or opposition to the genocide. Editors have been fired from magazines or have resigned because of the foul lies their publications circulate, which facilitate the murder of thousands of children, the torture of Palestinian prisoners and the systematic starvation of a civilian population by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

To this must be added the especially insidious role of institutions of higher education. Pro-Palestine sentiment on the campuses has been all but illegalized. Students are beaten or arrested by the police and faculty are fired or forced into silence for the expression of their anti-genocide views. K-12 educators have been harassed in the right-wing media, doxed and threatened.

All of these acts of repression have been met by artists, writers, actors, students and faculty in struggle. Artists have submitted petitions, demanded the resignation of particularly reactionary “cultural leaders,” or even defaced their own creations.

Mass demonstrations have closed museums. In some cases, censorship has been rescinded. PEN America had to cancel its awards ceremonies and World Voices Festival this year because of mass resignations by writers.

But many artists are still shy about addressing the question of questions: the root cause of the genocide and its media-institutional cover-up itself is one and the same—world capitalism.

Official culture is directly or indirectly controlled by the same class that controls the banks, corporations, military and the major political parties, the Democrats and Republicans in the US, the Tories and Labour in Britain, the CDU and SPD in Germany, etc., who are shipping weapons to the Israeli state and preparing for a vast expansion of the war across the Middle East and the globe. That problem, the need to do away with capitalism, will increasingly preoccupy the most serious artists.



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