

TO CRITICIZE ISRAEL IS A DANGEROUS THING IN TODAY'S CANADA

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By Kathy Wazana, [The Toronto Star](#), 11 September 2009

✘ *Documentary filmmaker Kathy Wazana is a translator and an editor, a festival programmer and a budding filmmaker who has lived in Morocco, France, Canada and Israel-Palestine.*

She is currently in transition between all of these spaces and places. A life-long human rights and peace activist, Kathy has spearheaded several joint Jewish-Arab community-building initiatives, including the Playgrounds for Peace Fund, the Just Peace Seder and Mimouna, and Cooks for Peace. Her current work focuses on Jewish-Arab relations in Morocco and in Israel-Palestine.

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Two days ago, I came home to a message from my mother asking: "Why are you attacking Israel?" Once again, I am being tried for treason in the family court, my mother having read the headlines equating the protest letter I signed against TIFF's City to City* spotlight on Tel Aviv with a call for the destruction of Israel.

"It is clear that the script they are reading from might as well have been written by Hamas," wrote Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean and founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre.

Toronto is built on destroyed indigenous villages. By saying this I am not saying Toronto should not exist or calling for its extinguishment.

Likewise with Tel Aviv. Our letter points out historical facts that we stand behind and are backed up by many scholars that we consulted before publishing it.

In the week since the publication of the letter, the authors of the letter have been called hypocrites, censors and, worse, anti-Semites. A ludicrous charge: five of the eight are Jewish and one is an Israeli.

These accusations seek to intimidate us into silence and shut down substantive discussion. This,

ironically, is the very charge that is being levelled at us.

It's hard not to see these attacks as part of a deliberate strategy to divert attention from the real issues, namely Israel's gross violations of human rights and disregard for international law and, in this instance, the hijacking of Toronto's premier cultural event and putting it at the service of Israel's political agenda.

I am Jewish, with deep ties to Israel, and to my family members living there. Speaking out against the State of Israel neither diminishes my Jewishness nor puts Israel at risk of destruction.

It calls on Israel to live up to the standard of Jewish ethics that I grew up with. As though this should exonerate Israel, its defenders are always quick to point to the many countries where human rights are routinely violated, leading, inevitably, to the question: "Why are you singling out Israel?"

We do not deny or condone other countries that oppress their populations. Had Beijing or Tehran been selected as the inaugural City to City spotlight, and presented in an uncritical and largely laudatory manner, there would have been equally outraged protests.

TIFF singled out Israel for a celebratory spotlight, and its timing could not have been worse, in view of the ongoing settlement and colonization of Palestinian lands, of the continued construction of the wall that is enclosing the Palestinian population of the West Bank in a series of claustrophobic, prison-like enclaves, of the daily acts of humiliation and violations of the rights and the dignity of old and young alike, and, most recently, of the lethal assault on Gaza that left 1,400 Palestinian women, men and children dead.

The purpose of our letter was to point to a few things that are left out of the glowing descriptions of Tel Aviv as "a young dynamic city that, like Toronto, celebrates diversity." Many people are excluded from that diversity and Tel Aviv, far from being outside the conflict, is the military centre of Israel, a place fighter jets departed from on their lethal missions to Gaza last December and January.

Asserting these facts in no way argues that Israel should not exist or calls for its destruction. This absurd claim is being circulated with the express purpose of discrediting the letter and intimidating its authors into silence.

The accusations seek to divert attention from the issue at hand: the hijacking of Toronto's premier cultural event and putting it at the service of Israel's political agenda.

When Israel's consul general, Amir Gissin, launched Brand Israel in Toronto in August 2008, he made no secret of the fact that it was to culminate in a major Israeli presence at the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival.

Welcome news in Israel where "the need to have an ongoing campaign that will implant positive emotional associations to Israel has become crucial," wrote Israel author Haskell Nussbaum in the Jerusalem Post. "The Foreign Ministry is beginning to get it."

Under the circumstances, it is hard to escape the connection between TIFF's celebratory spotlight on Tel Aviv and Israel's campaign to cleanse its image, and make it "more attractive," as Gissin told a Toronto conference in May 2008. "Not right, attractive."

Isn't that what the City to City Tel Aviv spotlight is about?

In Canada today, to criticize Israel is a very dangerous thing.



The Toronto Declaration: No Celebration of Occupation

An Open Letter to the Toronto International Film Festival:

September 2, 2009

As members of the Canadian and international film, culture and media arts communities, we are deeply disturbed by the Toronto International Film Festival's decision to host a celebratory spotlight on Tel Aviv. We protest that TIFF, whether intentionally or not, has become complicit in the Israeli propaganda machine.

In 2008, the Israeli government and Canadian partners Sidney Greenberg of Astral Media, David Asper of Canwest Global Communications and Joel Reitman of MIJO Corporation launched "Brand Israel," a million dollar media and advertising campaign aimed at changing Canadian perceptions of Israel. Brand Israel would take the focus off Israel's treatment of Palestinians and its aggressive wars, and refocus it on achievements in medicine, science and culture. An article in Canadian Jewish News quotes Israeli consul general Amir Gissin as saying that Toronto would be the test city for a promotion that could then be deployed around the world. According to Gissin, the culmination of the campaign would be a major Israeli presence at the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival. (Andy Levy-Alzenkopf, "Brand Israel set to launch in GTA," Canadian Jewish News, August 28, 2008.)

In 2009, TIFF announced that it would inaugurate its new City to City program with a focus on Tel Aviv. According to program notes by Festival co-director and City to City programmer Cameron Bailey, "The ten films in this year's City to City programme will showcase the complex currents running through today's Tel Aviv. Celebrating its 100th birthday in 2009, Tel Aviv is a young, dynamic city that, like Toronto, celebrates its diversity."

The emphasis on 'diversity' in City to City is empty given the absence of Palestinian filmmakers in the program. Furthermore, what this description does not say is that Tel Aviv is built on destroyed Palestinian villages, and that the city of Jaffa, Palestine's main cultural hub until 1948, was annexed to Tel Aviv after the mass exiling of the Palestinian population. This program ignores the suffering of thousands of former residents and descendants of the Tel Aviv/Jaffa area who currently live in refugee camps in the Occupied Territories or who have been dispersed to other countries, including Canada. Looking at modern, sophisticated Tel Aviv without also considering the city's past and the realities of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip, would be like rhapsodizing about

the beauty and elegant lifestyles in white-only Cape Town or Johannesburg during apartheid without acknowledging the corresponding black townships of Khayelitsha and Soweto.

We do not protest the individual Israeli filmmakers included in City to City, nor do we in any way suggest that Israeli films should be unwelcome at TIFF. However, especially in the wake of this year's brutal assault on Gaza, we object to the use of such an important international festival in staging a propaganda campaign on behalf of what South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, and UN General Assembly President Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann have all characterized as an apartheid regime.

This letter was drafted by the following ad hoc committee:

Udi Aloni, filmmaker, Israel; Elle Flanders, filmmaker, Canada; Richard Fung, video artist, Canada; John Greyson, filmmaker, Canada; Naomi Klein, writer and filmmaker, Canada; Kathy Wazana, filmmaker, Canada; Cynthia Wright, writer and academic, Canada; b h Yael, film and video artist, Canada

Endorsed by:

Ahmad Abdalla, Filmmaker, Egypt
Hany Abu-Assad, Filmmaker, Palestine
Mark Achbar, Filmmaker, Canada
Zackie Achmat, AIDS activist, South Africa
Ra'anana Alexandrowicz, Filmmaker, Jerusalem
Anthony Arnove, Publisher and Producer, USA
Ruba Atiyeh, Documentary Director, Lebanon
Joslyn Barnes, Writer and Producer, USA
John Berger, Author, France
David Byrne, Musician, USA
Guy Davidi Director, Israel
Na-iem Dollie, Journalist/Writer, South Africa
Igor Drljaca, Filmmaker, Canada
Eve Ensler, Playwright, Author, USA
Eyal Eithcowich, Director, Israel
Sophie Fiennes, Filmmaker, UK
Peter Fitting, Professor, Canada
Jane Fonda, Actor and Author, USA
Danny Glover, Filmmaker and Actor, USA
Noam Gonick, Director, Canada
Malcolm Guy, Filmmaker, Canada
Mike Hoolboom, Filmmaker, Canada

Annemarie Jacir, Filmmaker, Palestine
Fredric Jameson, Literary Critic, USA
Juliano Mer Khamis, Filmmaker, Jenin/Haifa
Bonnie Sherr Klein Filmmaker, Canada
Paul Laverty, Producer, UK
Paul Lee, Filmmaker, Canada
Yael Lerer, publisher, Tel Aviv
Jack Lewis, Filmmaker, South Africa
Ken Loach, Filmmaker, UK
Arab Lotfi, Filmmaker, Egypt/Lebanon
Kyo Maclear, Author, Toronto
Mahmood Mamdani, Professor, USA
Fatima Mawas, Filmmaker, Australia
Tessa McWatt, Author, Canada and UK
Cornelius Moore, Film Distributor, USA
Yousry Nasrallah, Director, Egypt
Rebecca O'Brien, Producer, UK
Pratibha Parmar, Producer/Director, UK
Jeremy Pikser, Screenwriter, USA
John Pilger, Filmmaker, UK
Shai Carmeli Pollak, Filmmaker, Israel
Ian Iqbal Rashid, Filmmaker, Canada
Judy Rebick, Professor, Canada
David Reeb, Artist, Tel Aviv
B. Ruby Rich, Critic and Professor, USA
Wallace Shawn, Playwright, Actor, USA
Eyal Sivan, Filmmaker and Scholar, Paris/London/Sderot
Elia Suleiman, Filmmaker, Nazareth/Paris/New York
Eran Torbiner, Filmmaker, Israel
Alice Walker, Writer, USA
Thomas Waugh, Professor, Canada
Howard Zinn, Writer, USA
Slavoj Zizek, Professor, Slovenia

**TIFF - Toronto International Film Festival*

