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Australia: Furor over Palestinian festival speaker highlights a deeper crisis

Antony Loewenstein

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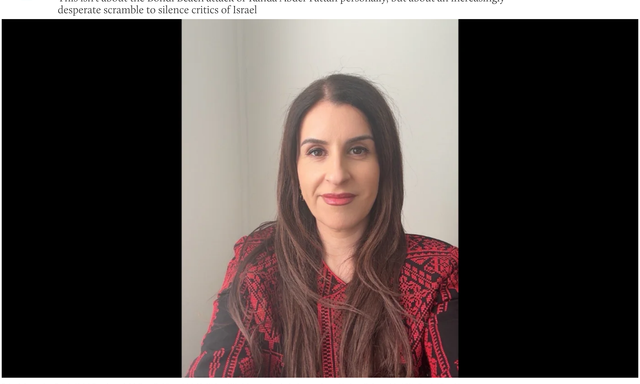
This isn't about the Bondi Beach attack or Randa Abdel-Fattah personally, but about an increasingly desperate scramble to silence critics of Israel



Palestinian author Randa Abdel-Fattah was initially pulled from Adelaide Writers' Week because her inclusion was deemed 'culturally insensitive' (X/@RandaAFattah)

In early January, the board of the Adelaide Festival in Australia sent a letter to Palestinian author Randa Abdel-Fattah to convey a shocking decision.

A longtime critic of Israel, Abdel-Fattah was told her inclusion in the forthcoming Adelaide Writers' Week would apparently be "culturally insensitive". She was told that, in light of the public atmosphere after the recent terror attack at Bondi Beach in Sydney, her appearance had been cancelled.

It was a shameful letter, a word salad of vague insinuations and clear intent. Being a public Palestinian - explicitly stating opposition to Israel and Zionism - was deemed beyond the pale.

Abdel-Fattah has been writing about these issues for many years, and her positions on the Middle East are well known. As a Palestinian whose people are being slaughtered and starved in Gaza and beyond, she has every right to reject the notion that's perpetuating this carnage and even to call for its dismantling.

But as Palestinian writer Mohammed el-Kurd explains in his 2025 book, *Perfect Victims and the Politics of Appeal*, mainstream media turns Palestinians "into criminals of thought, guilty of our rage and grudges, of our natural responses to brutalisation".

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The impact of Abdel-Fattah's cancellation was swift. Within days, most of the more than 180 local and international writers who were to participate in Australia's biggest literary event had withdrawn in solidarity, forcing the event to be scrapped.

The saga went global and caused a cultural storm in Australia, pitting the pro-Israel lobby, Murdoch media, political leaders and social conservatives against free-speech activists and the pro-Palestine movement. In the end, a newly appointed Adelaide Festival board apologised to Abdel-Fattah and invited her to next year's event.

Antisemitism allegations

This story matters beyond the shores of Australia, a nation with a long history of supporting Israel, including through continued shipments of F-35 fighter jet parts to the Netanyahu regime, which uses them over Gaza.

Since 7 October 2023, in Australia and beyond, countless events, exhibitions and talks have been quashed by galleries, festivals and corporate boards due to the supposed explosion of antisemitism in the arts.

Among the latest examples is famed photographer Nan Goldin falling foul of administrators at Canada's Art Gallery of Ontario for daring to criticise Israel's actions in Gaza. The result was the gallery not purchasing a work by Goldin.

Her supposed speech crimes? She'd condemned the "genocide in Gaza and Lebanon" during a speech in Berlin in late 2024 and opposed Israeli actions.

Goldin did not make any antisemitic remarks. Her case is yet another example of how false allegations of antisemitism are used to silence critical voices on Palestine. It cheapens the battle against the surge in real antisemitism, especially among the Maga crowd and the Nazi-loving far right in the US, which is a huge problem - and yet most of Israel's rabid supporters say little about this, obsessing instead about policing students who wave "Free Palestine" flags.

> Such bullying tactics aim to distract and disorient; anything to avoid talking about the dark realities in Palestine

Furthermore, the Israeli government recently welcomed some of Europe's most virulent far-right politicians, some with a history of Jew hatred and association with Nazis, for a conference on "antisemitism".

The result of this dangerous posturing is a shrinking of the public square, to allow only certain Zionist-approved speech, such as praising Israel as the "only democracy in the Middle East".

It's wholly legitimate - as a Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu or non-religious - to say that apartheid Israel doesn't have an inherent "right" to exist, and the same principle applies to any nation on earth.

If readers want to see real extremism, take a look at the Israeli "comedian" and former soldier Guy Hochman, who has spent the last two years filming content with the Israeli army and calling for the destruction of Gaza. He was recently briefly detained and questioned in Canada over alleged incitement to genocide.

I'm still waiting on pro-Israel forces, who are desperate to police speech over Palestine, to disassociate from Hochman. It'll never happen because the sanctity of Palestinian life and liberty doesn't matter to them. Protecting Israel at all costs is the mission.

Character assassination

Back in Australia, Abdel-Fattah has experienced a litany of abuse, mischaracterisations and defamation because of her positions on Palestine. Palestinians are to be mocked and smeared, not heard and understood.

Palestinians, like all peoples, can be challenged or questioned on their positions - but this latest saga wasn't a good-faith interrogation of Abdel-Fattah's public statements. It was an attempted character assassination, aiming to make any fulsome support for Palestine politically and culturally untenable.

I'm not convinced that it was successful. Although this year's Adelaide Writers' Week was ultimately cancelled, the huge number of artists who stepped away in solidarity with Abdel-Fattah speaks to the unpopularity of the festival's decision.

A recent poll found that more than half of Australians support imposing sanctions on Israel over its actions in Gaza. Many Australians have written to me in recent years, saying they had never really thought much about the Middle East before 7 October 2023 - but today, they are furious that Israel is live-streaming a genocide and seemingly getting away with it, with western backing.

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This is the hidden agenda of those who want to curtail or silence dissenting voices. It isn't about the Bondi Beach terror attack, or even about Abdel-Fattah personally. It's about fears of growing public opposition to Israel, its Jewish supremacist regime and its endless occupation of Palestine.

Such bullying tactics aim to distract and disorient; anything to avoid talking about the dark realities in Palestine.

But it's not working. Global citizens can't unsee what they've witnessed in Gaza since late 2023. It's arguably the moral cause of our time, one that can't be stopped by shadow-banning or deleting social media accounts.

As authoritarianism surges around the world and Israel partners with fascists and far-right activists in plain view, the real threat stems from political actors who cheapen the necessary battle against anti-Jewish hate by deploying desperate smears against anyone who believes in a free Palestine - one where all citizens, regardless of race or religion, can live in freedom.

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Middle East Eye.

Antony Loewenstein is an independent journalist, best-selling author, filmmaker and co-founder of Declassified Australia. He's written for the Guardian, the New York Times, the New York Review of Books and many others. His latest book is The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World. His other books include Pills, Powder and Smoke, Disaster Capitalism and My Israel Question. His documentary films include Disaster Capitalism and the Al Jazeera English films West Africa's Opioid Crisis and Under the Cover of Covid. He was based in East Jerusalem from 2016 to 2020.

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