

OPINION

Why I'm helping to organise a boycott of this year's Sydney Festival

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Contributor

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The acclaimed Sydney Festival, an annual celebration of artists and performers, is an event that many of us excitedly anticipate. I'd been looking forward to a number of gigs, including Indigenous hip-hop artist Barkaa and Arab Theatre Studio's musical ensemble Dandana, but this year, I cannot, in good conscience, attend or support its events, and am part of the coalition organising a boycott of the festival.



Musician Barkaa is among the artists boycotting this year's Sydney Festival.

It recently came to light that this year's Sydney Festival is being sponsored by a brutal regime, a state founded on the massacre and expulsion of the indigenous Palestinian people of the land it occupies. For decades, it has subjected them to a military occupation that controls every aspect of their lives and their freedom to move. It is currently engaged in a 14-year-long illegal blockade against a territory inhabited by 2 million people. It has used drones, white phosphorus and bombs to decimate that territory and its inhabitants from the skies. It's a state that demolishes homes and seizes the property of the people it occupies, has two legal systems, one civilian and one military, and exercises control over an occupied people's water and resources. Despite this, the Sydney Festival sought and accepted \$20,000 of this state's money, and platformed it as a Star Sponsor. In case you hadn't guessed, it is the apartheid state of Israel.

For Israel, the stamp of its state funding on cultural and artistic events is a vital part of whitewashing its brand and deflecting attention from its crimes against humanity. It uses propaganda, including the classic claim that it is "making the desert bloom" (an analogue to Terra Nullius), to justify its discrimination and aggression

towards Palestinians. It shouldn't surprise us that successive Australian governments have befriended such a state as partners in settler-colonial crime.

The state of Israel depends on this carefully fabricated mirage to normalise atrocities against my people, sponsoring cultural events abroad while routinely targeting, shutting down and raiding Palestinian cultural events and centres. This is a state – for decades, a nuclear power – that stole my family's land in the Galilee to make way for a kibbutz and sent two diplomats to meet with my editors at the national broadsheet when I was a 21-year-old journalist, asking why they had hired a Palestinian.

The state's film fund also imposes conditions that erase Palestinian identity from any films it funds. This year, Human Rights Watch published a report finding that Israel is committing the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution – hardly groundbreaking news to anyone paying attention.

This is why Palestinian civil society has called on the international community to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel until Palestinians are free, joining a proud tradition of boycotts, divestments and sanctions led by the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

It's why artists and writers in the festival's program are withdrawing. The withdrawals include Malyangapa Barkindji hip-hop artist Barkaa, Darumbal and South Sea Islander writer and academic Amy McQuire, artist Khaled Sabsabi, author Michael Mohammed Ahmad, comedian Nazeem Hussain, Arab Theatre Studio, Bankstown Poetry Slam and others.

International and local artists have also signed an open letter calling on the festival to end its ties to the Israeli state, including actress Miriam Margolyes, journalist Behrouz Boochani, renowned Palestinian painter Sliman Mansour and actor Saleh Bakri.

But despite these creatives asking a festival which opens its website with an acknowledgement of First Nations people and their "continuing connection to lands, waters and communities" to join them in rejecting the Zionist state's input, the festival chooses to side with a settler-colonial regime dedicated to erasing the connection of indigenous Palestinians with their lands, waters and communities.

There's no substance to the argument that artists should remain in the program and use the platform to condemn the festival's stance. The ultimate condemnation of an intolerable situation is the withdrawal of labour. This is a question of Israeli state funding, not Jewish or Israeli participation.

I'm reminded of the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who sadly died on Sunday. He famously stated that South Africa could not have achieved democracy without the help of the international community, who through "boycotts and divestment encouraged their governments and other corporate actors to reverse decades-long support for the apartheid regime".

Tutu added: “The same issues of inequality and injustice today motivate the divestment movement trying to end Israel’s decades-long occupation of Palestinian territory and the unfair and prejudicial treatment of the Palestinian people.”

We all belong to the international community, artists included. Palestine is a litmus test for progressives today, and in a few years’ time, many will look back with embarrassment and shame at how flippant and dismissive they were in the face of these calls for solidarity. When the apartheid wall comes down, when the settlements are removed and the checkpoints crumble, when Palestinians living under occupation can finally see the sea, and when my birthright is reinstated and I can go to my family’s land in the Galilee and breathe freely, then we can have festivals in which artists can express themselves freely without fearing – or serving – the objectives of an oppressive and unjust state.

Jennine Khalik is a Palestinian-Australian writer and content creator. She is a member of the coalition organising the boycott of the Sydney Festival.