DISCUSSION PAPER



The Silent Triumph of "No Other Land"

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TRT WORLD research centre

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PUBLISHER

TRT TRAINING AND RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

June 2025

TRT TRAINING AND RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

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(Ilia Yefimovich - Getty Images)

No Other Land, a Palestinian Israeli co-production filmed in the West Bank, won this year's Oscar for Best Documentary, becoming the first Palestinian film to win an Oscar. However, this achievement was not properly celebrated; it became the target of limited perspectives.

The documentary chronicles the Israeli government's efforts to forcibly evict Palestinians from Masafer Yatta in the southern West Bank after declaring the area a military training ground and the residents' resistance to the gradual demolition of their homes, which they have inhabited for generations. It also reveals their struggle to remain on their land in the face of pressure from the military and settlers.

Film Narrative: Alienation in Cohabitation

This documentary is notable for its objective and unvarnished presentation of demolitions carried out by Israeli soldiers from 2019 to 2023. Filmed by Palestinian activist Basel Adra, a resident of Masafer Yatta, and Israeli journalist Yuval Abraham, it also highlights an alliance between people from two opposing sides. Notwithstanding the four-year temporal span encompassed in this production, which was shaped by the contributions of directors Basel Adra, Yuval Abraham, Hamdan Ballal, and Rachel Szor, the destruction we witness is both historical and ongoing.

In an atmosphere of such partisan intolerance, their bond is an unexpected and rare intimacy. The reason the documentary has received so much praise and won so many awards is that these two young people, from opposite sides of the polarisation, develop a trust that is independent of the prejudices of their environment. Adra and Abraham meet each other as individuals, not as Palestinians or Israelis. In doing so, they challenge the prevailing one-sided perspective that dehumanises them. This friendship serves as a testament to the ease and affordability of achieving harmony through dialogue.

Their relationship is rare in Israel and the occupied territories. Despite the imbalance of power and the unequal standard of living that lie behind the conflict, this pair emphasises what it means to be human. The conflict is not symmetrical. However, No Other Land demonstrates the potential for establishing empathy even on this asymmetrical foundation. In his speech after the Oscar awards ceremony, Yuval Abraham draws attention to this common ground, asking, "Can't you see that we are intertwined?"

Levinas' ethics of the "other" resonates with this question. The issue here is the ability to accept the other not because they are "like me" but because they are "outside of me" and "different from me". Abraham and Adra do not see themselves in each other's reflection; they see "otherness" in front of them. This is why their friendship is a radical ethical choice rather than a sentimental one.



Political Reactions: A Perception of Threat

The real triumph of the documentary is that this partnership could be forged amid destruction. However, this achievement has often gone unrecognised in both Palestine and Israel. This success was not only a cinematic achievement but was also based on a rare human relationship established amidst fragmented geography. Therefore, the attention that No Other Land received at international festivals, its Oscar nomination, and its other achievements should have been greeted with enthusiasm.

However, the theme of hope, which brought the film to the forefront — namely, the possibility of establishing a relationship within the individual that is reflected in society — was also the subject of much criticism. This hope was perceived as a threat, particularly by those with a one-sided mentality, and was the subject of much criticism. While the film aimed to shed light on the issue, the mentality it sought to dispel persisted, preventing the unifying idea from penetrating the rigid perception of political reality.

However, the relationship between Adra and Abraham, which they hope will promote Israel-Palestine harmony, is an essential component of No Other Land. However, this possibility came into conflict with official discourse and ideological barriers. Indeed, following the award, Israeli Culture Minister Miki Zohar described the documentary's Oscar win as **"a sad moment for the world of cinema"** and called on cinemas not to screen the film, claiming that it distorted Israel's image.

The moral contradiction underlying the desire to silence different points of view becomes apparent in the choice between defending human dignity and protecting the state's image. Prioritising image over humanity, even when one's own rights are at stake, and failing to treat others humanely reveals a widespread misunderstanding of fundamental freedoms. This misconstruction manifests itself in recognising one's own rights but not recognising the same rights of others.

The filmmakers received death threats for filming what they saw as an aspect of reality and making the world witness it. Israeli settlers attacked Yuval Abraham's family home.

Abraham, who supports the Palestinians, has been labelled a "traitor" by the far-right groups that form Netanyahu's dominant political force. Meanwhile, Hamdan Ballal was detained by Israeli forces after being beaten by settlers. This was not the first time that the filmmakers had been attacked. Last February, Adra was besieged and attacked by masked Israeli settlers. This serves as a chilling reminder that speaking out in Israel can be a matter of life or death. While the documentary won them awards, it also exposed them to danger.

A Double-Edged Sword

Adding to the controversy, the documentary also faced unexpected criticism from the Palestinian side—remarks that were as striking as the angry and official reactions from the Israeli side.

The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) stated that the documentary violated the BDS movement's anti-normalisation guidelines.

They expressed several concerns, including the fact that the film did not adequately condemn Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people. While they did not explicitly call for a boycott, their hesitant and ambiguous criticism suggests that PACBI also had reservations about whether the film met the existing criteria.

However, it should be noted that the documentary does not cover all of Israel's crimes against humanity, but only the situation in Masafer Yatta. It does not address genocide; it limits its focus to the violations of international law committed by Israel through land occupation. The fact that it avoids divisive language and focuses on the occupation of a small village rather than all the atrocities is an opportunity to break through partisanship and see the humanity behind it. However, some circles have interpreted this as an attempt to exonerate Israel's actions.

Although BDS shares a common goal with the directors — the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination — this declaration undermined the work of those who criticised the Israeli government, which could have been a turning point in the Palestinian struggle. While their statement contains some truth, it serves as a reminder of the need to pursue the lesser of two evils rather than the ideal. The critical role that this work could have played in bringing about change towards a common goal should not have been overlooked, particularly by a Palestinian group.

The Illusion of Neutrality: How Hollywood Obscures Western Complicity

We are talking about a documentary film that is centred on the lived truths of Palestinians. This film gives a voice to the oppressed without the need to balance opposing views — and these voices deserve to be heard. However, it is difficult to argue that this right has been recognised. The week after it won an Oscar, Miami Beach's mayor threatened to evict an art cinema from a municipal property for showing the documentary.

Despite being honoured with an Oscar in front of the whole world, this documentary struggled for months to find a distributor in the United States. The fact that an Oscar-winning production remained inaccessible for months is no coincidence but rather a clear reflection of Hollywood's political reflexes.

This scene suggests that the Oscar jury is putting on a show of "**neutrality**" by awarding a production that criticises Israel. However, behind this façade, Hollywood has a long-standing and questionable approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Despite all the efforts to silence it and the anger of partisan crowds, the documentary's success was to highlight the system that tried to censor it. In fact, these obstacles made the documentary's central question more visible: What is so feared?

Beyond Sides: Reclaiming Humanity Over Identity

Some have criticised the documentary No Other Land for being "**one-sided**". This is true. But the question is: Which side? The documentary does not take the side of either the Palestinians or the Israelis. Human beings make up its side. The story it tells aims to highlight not the parties to a conflict but the human cost of that conflict.

By their very nature, documentaries are not neutral. They depict a specific experience through a selective lens. This film is no exception. It explores the effects of the Israeli occupation and the displacement of Palestinians, as well as life under occupation, through the lens of a specific village and community. It does not claim to provide a full account of the conflict but rather to highlight a human aspect of it that is often overlooked.

The point is not to accept a film as the absolute truth but to use the perspective it offers to add a human dimension to the incomplete picture. No Other Land achieves this. Our task is to understand what it reveals, not what it leaves incomplete.

Although it is a predicament of human history that the same human situation is judged differently by different people, it is difficult to immune oneself to the astonishment it inspires. This striking contradiction of the human mind is that human dignity is universal, yet reactions to it are subjective. Those who criticise No Other Land for being "one-sided" choose to look away instead of facing up to this contradiction.

Instead of discussing the displacement of Palestinian villagers, the issue was reduced to a question of land ownership. However, no legal or historical justification can legitimise the unjust treatment of a person's dignity. In the documentary, a Palestinian asks the soldier conducting the demolition a simple question: **"Don't you have a God?"** It is not about legal texts but about human dignity.

Attempting to "make sense" of the atrocities depicted in the documentary is often an emotional defence reflex rather than an intellectual quest. When previously held truths become part of a person's belief system, they tend to postpone or reject questioning them altogether in order to avoid confronting internal inconsistencies. In this way, a deep-rooted emotional connection to a narrative can be preserved at the expense of solving the fundamental problem that gave rise to it. However, sound judgment is derived from prudence and should not be overshadowed by perspective.

Even when emotionally triggered, there is no justification for undermining another person's dignity. In such moments, right is recognised not by formal arguments but by human intuition.



The Revelation of Partiality

The familiar pattern of partisanship in human history persists today, with people often remaining unaware of it. At the Berlin Film Festival, for example, German Minister of Culture Claudia Roth applauded only the Israeli director and ignored the Palestinian one. It reveals a partiality centred on belonging rather than human.

Such reflexes are fuelled not only by external political positioning but also by internal insecurities stemming from traumas. Indeed, Yuval Abraham, an Israeli and one of the directors of No Other Land, finds himself at the heart of this tension. He has been labelled a **"traitor"** by his own people, and his presence in the Masafer Yatta community has been met with caution. Palestinians find it difficult to accept his loyalty: **"It is your relatives who are doing this to us!"** The idea of "us versus them" is a driving force between Israelis and Palestinians, a sentiment that, as the reactions to the documentary show, is entrenched on both sides.

However, against this backdrop of mutual vulnerability, Abraham's position is exceptional. Unlike the majority of his people, who are content with their privileged status as Israelis, Abraham questions his rights in light of how his Palestinian neighbours are treated. As an Israeli who supports the Palestinians, Abraham's ability to form independent opinions, despite the prevailing opinion in his society, makes him a representation of a self-rule maker, and his behaviour is a manifestation of "freedom" in the Kantian sense.

For, according to Kant, it is not external laws or social norms that determine what is right, but rather the moral law within the individual — that is to say, an intuitive sense of right and wrong. Abraham's attitude demonstrates that ethical judgement stems from within, not without, and that individuals can develop a sense of responsibility towards the world through the moral code they carry within themselves. No Other Land demonstrates that this intuitive ethical capacity still exists and has the power to unite people.

Who will have the courage to admit their wrongdoing?

The documentary's real success lies in its ability to forge a friendship between two young people from opposite sides of the world, one that transcends all points of view in a polarised, crowded world. It is precisely this human courage that gives the awards their true value. However, in an environment where identities are absolutised and our ability to welcome each other as human beings, not as this or that, is being undermined, we cannot collectively celebrate the Oscar win for the best documentary as a victory.

Yet the desperation in the eyes of the Palestinians is clear: they must either leave their land or stay and continue living under threat, constantly rebuilding houses or taking refuge in caves. At the end of the documentary, a woman asks, **"And where will we go?"** This question is not only a cry of physical displacement but also an existential rupture. 'No Other Land' is much more than a geographical claim; it is an expression of how belonging and human dignity have become fragile for political reasons.

At this point, the documentary confronts the viewer with a challenging question: For whom is there truly no other land? Displacement is not only a form of being displaced but also of being unrecognised and rendered invisible; it is a historical and existential denial. On which side is the "helplessness" of the film's title more evident? Who has no other land, and who has too much?

'No Other Land' sheds light on both the Israel-Palestine conflict and a fundamental question about humanity's capacity to live together: Who dares to consider the possibility of being mistaken? Having the courage to look the other person in the eye is an expression of the ability to suspend one's own sense of absoluteness. The side to take in the face of this confrontation should not be the side of identities or nations but the side of humanity. Through this film, the directors document an atrocity and address us all: Another world is possible. Yet that world can be created by those who recognise that truth does not belong solely to our reality.

This is why 'No Other Land' is not just a narrative about Palestine but also offers a perspective on the possibility of healing the world.

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