

The statement against antisemitism issued by a coalition of Dutch political parties is “a weapon of mass distraction”

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In this piece I reflect on the responsibility of the cultural field in the wake of recent events surrounding a concert of the Dutch singer-songwriter Lenny Kuhr. I would like to distinguish between the principled right and necessity to protest, on the one hand, and the question of the appropriate form of protest, on the other. It is important to not lose sight of what is truly at stake at this present moment.

You have to give it to Lenny Kuhr. She managed to elicit more public outrage in the Netherlands than the murder of close to 33,000 people in Gaza in the last five months, the majority of whom are women and children.

After [Kuhr's concert](#) was interrupted by pro-Palestine activists, matters were brought to parliament, following which thirteen out of fifteen political parties swiftly issued a [statement against antisemitism](#). In the meantime, the entire establishment is up in arms about the cultural sector being prone to hatred towards Jews. The powerful umbrella institutions of the Dutch cultural sector, including VSCD, NAPK, VNPF and Creatieve Coalitie are now bending over backwards publishing declarations about protecting artistic freedoms and ensuring the safety of artists. These are the very same powerful institutions which buried their heads in the sands of neutrality when it came to speaking out about the destruction of basically every single cultural institution in Gaza or the killing of dozens of artists, cultural workers, poets and writers.

Let me say at the outset that I believe the interruption of Lenny Kuhr's concert was misguided, poorly thought-through and ultimately counterproductive. Calling her a terrorist is inaccurate and inappropriate. To attack her on the grounds of her children and grandchildren serving in the Israeli military is to wrongly hold her responsible for another's deeds. The tactic of interrupting her during her performance arguably only increased the audience's endearment to her rather than making the audience conscious of the entanglements of her politics and her art. The intervention heavily focused on her as an individual instead of highlighting what makes her political views problematic. This can be easily misread as prejudice toward a person, their religion or intolerance towards differences of opinion. This inevitably leads to a backlash and is fertile ground for the demonization of pro-Palestinian protest at large. Anyone could have seen this coming.

Notwithstanding my reservations toward their intervention, I firmly stand behind their right to publicly question Lenny Kuhr's vocal support for Israel's war on Gaza and completely reject it being labeled as antisemitic. If she uses her celebrity status to publicly profess her political position, then surely it is fair for members of the public to publicly challenge her on it. The protest may have been unpleasant to all who nurture warm feelings toward Lenny

Kuhr and her songs that stand out for her attractive voice and her catchy tunes, but it was certainly within the confines of the law. On the contrary, Kuhr's husband's threat to push one of the protestors over the railing is egregious and the couple's ridiculous televised announcement that 'this is terror' deserves at least as much critical interrogation.

The protest at Lenny Kuhr's concert should also not be seen in isolation. Recently there were protests outside De Balie, which hosted an [Israeli state-sponsored film festival](#). A performance of the Jerusalem Quartet at the Concertgebouw in January this year was interrupted by protestors who alerted audiences to the way in which culture is used as a propaganda tool by the Israeli government. We can expect even more protests around the Eurovision song contest. The call for targeted boycotts of concerts and cultural events by campaigners for the [BDS \(Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions\) movement](#) has a long history and takes its inspiration from the successful campaign for the cultural boycott of Apartheid South Africa, in which, lest we may have already forgotten, the Netherlands also actively took part. This is not a boycott of individuals but targeted at institutions and activities allied to the Israeli state or military. It is not terror but a legitimate form of nonviolent civil disobedience.

For a national culture that prides itself on its history of dissidence and opposition, it is rather odd to see all these anxiety attacks about a performance being disrupted. After all, it is fairly common to witness expressions of disapproval and protest during and around performances or festivals, people walking out, booing performers, shouting or hurling objects on stage or unfolding banners. You could even argue that the Netherlands has a tradition of such protests. If Actie Tomaat could shake up the bourgeois theatre world by throwing tomatoes on the stage of Amsterdam's City Theatre, if the musicians of the Notenkraker collective could use popular music podia such as Carré to protest against the war in Vietnam, if Kick Out Zwarte Piet and Black Lives Matter actions could break through numerous barriers in cultural institutions, if Extinction Rebellion can interrupt concerts and museum exhibitions to raise awareness about the climate emergency, then why shouldn't pro-Palestine protestors be able to shake up the complicity of the Dutch cultural sector in normalizing relations with the state of Israel and art-washing genocide?

The cultural sector that is supposedly addressed by this statement against antisemitism (verklaring tegen jodenhaat) should have no doubt that the statement has nothing to do with fighting antisemitism, and everything to do with stifling anti-war protestors and using the accusation of antisemitism to justify the blind support for Israel. This is what the Indian writer Arundhati Roy aptly calls "weapons of mass distraction".

The parties that signed this statement dangerously equate Judaism with Israel and any criticism toward a person who happens to be Jewish as antisemitism. This completely trivializes antisemitism and damages its actual combating. In doing so, they are also implicitly vilifying and negating the voices of critical, anti-Zionist Jewish Israeli and Dutch

groups, who have played a big role in several recent demonstrations, including the one opposing the recent inauguration of the Holocaust Museum by the Israeli President Herzog. One wonders why these politicians didn't jump to the defense of those Jewish groups while they were attacked or completely sidelined in the media?

The cultural and political elite of this country seems to be completely out of touch with the groundswell of public disgust with the Dutch state's continued support for Israel and with its refusal to even support a temporary ceasefire. They only know to respond with repressive measures and by manufacturing more enemies.

Yet not all is bleak in the Dutch theater world. Theater de Generator from Leiden was one of the first to promptly issue a bold counter statement "[sta op tegen antisemitisme in de tweede kamer](#)". They rightly warn of the neoliberal right hijacking antisemitism to their own ends, even as actual cases of antisemitism rise with the growing popularity of these parties. Since the arts are the first targets of the far-right, the accusation of antisemitism will become a convenient excuse to get rid of and restrict whatever minimal structural support the arts receive. [Sadettin K](#) has also publicly rejected the one-sidedness of the statement, whereby the same parties who speak about fighting antisemitism are also the ones who are actively Islamophobic or transphobic. Their statement points to the hypocrisy of the current transitional government which calls on people to combat antisemitism while simultaneously looking for ways to bypass the court ban on delivering weapons to Israel, thereby directly contributing to the killing of Palestinians. Since November last year, numerous initiatives such as the [sleep-ins for Gaza](#), the collective readings of the [Gaza Monologues](#) in solidarity with Ashtar Theatre, and [campaigns](#) to support the continuation of children's theater in Gaza have forged a collective presence of artists taking action against genocide.

It is the task of everyone engaged in the cultural sector in the Netherlands, whether as artists, educators or as organizers, to not lose sight of what is truly at stake in the present moment. On the one hand: the right, urgency and necessity to protest does not diminish in any way the responsibility to develop appropriate methods and forms of protest. On the other hand: the statement against antisemitism seeks to manipulate public attention away from Dutch complicity toward the demonization of those who protest this complicity. In this context, the following words of Bertolt Brecht serve as an important reminder:

"It is the raging river that is called violent, never the riverbeds that constrict it." [Der reißende Strom wird gewalttätig genannt, aber das Flußbett, das ihn einengt, nennt keiner gewalttätig.]