

Free Expression Group “PEN America” Sponsored by Apartheid Israel

Director Suzanne Nossel Worked for US State Department

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Suzanne Nossel speaks at PEN’s gala dinner in New York this week. (Pen American Center/[Flickr](#))

Literature fans who respect Palestinian rights will have been disturbed to find Israel listed among sponsors of this week’s PEN World Voices festival in New York.

The “embassy of Israel” was named on the festival’s [sponsors page](#) as a “patron” and also appears on an [individual events page](#) as a fully-fledged “sponsor.”

Some of these events, and the festival more broadly, feature a number of prominent supporters of Palestine, including writer and academic Teju Cole, novelist and Armenian heritage campaigner [Nancy Kricorian](#) and Palestinian poet and academic [Nathalie Handal](#). This suggests that the festival had not been entirely transparent with participants about its financial relationships.

Cole and Kricorian’s events, the web pages of which had no direct links to the Israeli embassy, had already taken place before The Electronic Intifada was alerted to the sponsorship issue. Handal, who had originally been scheduled to appear at the sponsored event, disappeared from the listing yesterday.

The festival’s organizers did not response to a request for comment.

Charlie Hebdo award

American PEN, a division of the international literature and freedom of expression organization, has recently attracted controversy over a gala dinner it held on Tuesday.

Six “table hosts” for the dinner — renowned authors Peter Carey, Michael Ondaatje, Francine Prose, Teju Cole, Rachel Kushner and Taiye Selasi — all [withdrew from their roles](#) in protest at plans to award French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* with a special award.

A further 200 of PEN American Center’s 4,000 members were also said to have [signed an open letter](#) stating that the award overstepped the line between “staunchly supporting expression that violates the acceptable, and enthusiastically rewarding such expression.” Those who signed include internationally famous authors such as Joyce Carol Oates and Junot Diaz.

Peter Carey, in an email interview with *The New York Times*, condemned both the deadly

attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris earlier this year but also the agenda which the magazine itself espoused, saying; "A hideous crime was committed, but was it a freedom-of-speech issue for PEN America to be self-righteous about? All this is complicated by PEN's seeming blindness to the cultural arrogance of the French nation, which does not recognize its moral obligation to a large and disempowered segment of their population."

Director's pro-Israel influence

The Israeli sponsorship of the World Voices festival suggests views at PEN's America Center which extend beyond a Western liberal reification of "freedom of speech" over basic values of responsibility and anti-racism.

The association with Israel seems to stem from the appointment of Suzanne Nossel as the executive director of PEN American Center last year. Nossel had previously attracted controversy during her brief stint as head of Amnesty International's US office. Before that, as her [whitewashed biography](#) on the PEN America website puts it, she worked for the US State Department and the US mission to the United Nations and served as a board member of Human Rights Watch.

As a classic example of the "revolving door," Nossel has brought the influence of the US government to the nongovernmental organizations in which she works — the same groups which have often provided the selective arguments about human rights with which Washington justifies its wars.

She has also been a staunch supporter of Israel. In 2005, for example, she wrote in [Dissent magazine](#) that "Longstanding US perceptions of the UN membership as anti-Western, unprincipled, motivated by petty biases, and dominated by a herd mentality stem largely from [] and are given continuing basis by [] the body's history of anti-Israel conduct ... Israel became something like the proverbial friendless kid in a schoolyard, always attacked and in need of constant help."

While working for the State Department in 2011 she [reasserted her views](#), saying: "At the top of our list is our defense of Israel, and Israel's right to fair treatment at the [UN] Human Rights Council. This is the most challenging issue we face."

And in 2012, she rejected the Goldstone report, the findings of a UN investigation into Israel's slaughter in Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009, [saying that](#) the paper put "the most negative possible spin that you could put on Israeli behavior ... It draws a series of inferences about Israel's motives and behavior that are simply not supported by the facts ... We do take exception to that."

Controversy

Nossel's stint with Amnesty International's US office was the subject of considerable criticism from human rights and justice campaigners, including at [The Electronic Intifada](#), where David Cronin commented that "she had been a deputy assistant secretary of state under Hillary Clinton. Under Nossel's leadership, Amnesty whitewashed the invasion of Afghanistan by hosting a conference praising NATO's 'progress' in that country. The guest of 'honor' at that event was Madeleine Albright, the secretary of state who declared that killing as many as 500,000 children in Iraq by depriving them of essential medicines was a price worth paying."

She is [said to have](#) “resigned unceremoniously” after protests from Amnesty staff and donors about the organization’s support for the US invasion of Afghanistan during her leadership.

It is therefore unsurprising that her switch to PEN American Center has also attracted severe condemnation. One PEN member, [Chris Hedges](#), a veteran journalist, canceled his appearance at a PEN event and resigned from the organization [with a letter](#) which accused Nossel of failing to oppose Israeli abuses as well as torture and extra-judicial killing by the US and its allies. Going on to call Nossel “utterly unfit to lead any human rights organization,” Hedges said:

This appointment makes a mockery of PEN as a human rights organization and belittles the values PEN purports to defend. I spent seven years in the Middle East, most of them as the Middle East bureau chief of The New York Times. The suffering of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation and the plight of those caught up in our imperial wars in countries such as Iraq are not abstractions to me... I hereby resign from PEN. I will wait until the organization returns to its original mandate to defend those who are persecuted, including those within the United States, before returning to the organization.

Other critics have pointed out that, [just as](#) Amnesty’s failure to support US whistleblower Chelsea Manning while under Nossel’s control, [so has](#) PEN America on her watch.

The [PEN Charter](#) affirms the necessity for freedom of expression and thought. But members also “pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel race, class and national hatreds.”

Under Nossel, it appears, PEN America sees Israel as a state to be defended despite its repression of Palestinian expression and rights, while those who confront the US government’s warmongering are met with silence and a cold shoulder.

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