

How Eurovision Became an Unlikely Lightning Rod for Anti-Israel Sentiment



Eden Golan, representing Israel, performs "Hurricane" during the Grand Final of the 2024 Eurovision Song Contest in Malmo, Sweden, May 11, 2024. (Leonhard Foeger/Reuters)

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A Young Israeli singer reveals a hidden truth: Israel's unpopularity might be an elite phenomenon.

It is often claimed that the Super Bowl is the most watched program on television. It is not. That particular honor goes to a song contest, the Eurovision, which is watched on live transmission by up to 200 million viewers every year.

The contest began in the aftermath of the Second World War with the worthy aim of enabling “friendly competition” between European countries that had recently been at war with each other. That remains its noble aspiration, but politics has a nasty habit of intruding.

The playing of Portugal’s Eurovision entry “E Depois do Adeus” on a Lisbon radio station at 10:55 P.M. on the night of April 24 was the secret signal for the start of Portugal’s Carnation Revolution in 1974. The following year, Turkey invaded Cyprus, and Greece boycotted the contest in protest. In 2015, Turkey withdrew from the contest because of objections to the previous year’s winner from Austria, Conchita Wurst, also known as “the Bearded Lady,” who performed in drag.

Eurovision votes have been subjected to perennial scrutiny to detect suspected “political voting.” As each year’s winner is decided by a combination of expert juries and public votes, it’s a formula that on occasion has thrown up some interesting voting patterns.

Greece and Turkey have never voted for each other throughout the almost seven decades of Eurovision. Likewise, Germany had seldom given Turkey any votes until the 1990s. An influx of millions of Turkish *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) had a profound impact on Germany’s demographic profile. Nowadays, the public vote from Germany usually ensures that Turkey receives a large number of votes.

In 2022, just three months after being invaded by Russia, Ukraine won the Eurovision on a wave of popular emotion in which the public vote swung the result for Ukraine. However, it would be wrong — and unfair — to attribute Ukraine’s track record in Eurovision as solely the result of public sympathy. Since first participating in 2003, Ukraine has won three times and reached the final on 15 consecutive occasions — including this year — a unique achievement.

Despite its name, the European Broadcasting Union is a very broad church that is unconfined by simple geography. The EBU operates across the European Broadcasting Area, which is determined by the International Telecommunications Union. Any country within the EBU’s footprint of signal distribution is entitled to membership, and any member can participate in Eurovision. So countries in North Africa and the Middle East are eligible to compete.

However, because Israel is eligible and chooses to take part, all the EBU’s Arab members refuse to do so. As a television event, the Eurovision is wildly popular in most Arab countries, as it is throughout much of the world. However, each year when the Israeli singer comes on stage, the TV screens in many Arab countries go blank.

The 68th Eurovision, held last week in the southern Swedish town of Malmö, has been embroiled in controversy like never before. Since Malmö first staged the contest in 1991, the demographics of Sweden’s third-largest city have changed hugely. As a result of large-scale migration from the Middle East in recent years, Malmö now has a population that is 20 percent Muslim.

But that's not the reason last week's song contest became the most politically controversial in Eurovision's history of almost seven decades. The participation of Israel sparked widespread calls for artists and performers to boycott the event because of the war in Gaza. As a consequence, the Malmö Eurovision became a lightning rod for anti-Israeli, anti-Zionist sentiment and a cover for antisemitism in Ireland and across Europe.

For several days, tens of thousands of pro-Palestinian demonstrators protested near the Malmö Arena venue. One of those burnishing their agitprop skills at these demonstrations was Greta Thunberg; her mother, Malena Ernman, represented Sweden at the 2009 Eurovision.

There were sustained campaigns to have individual artists boycott this year's Eurovision because of Israel's presence. Singers who have publicly backed the Palestinian cause in the past, such as Ireland's Bambi Thug and the U.K.'s Olly Alexander, were urged to withdraw. However, in the struggle between conscience and career, in all cases career won out.

The EBU itself was also subjected to enormous pressure to ban the Jewish state. Those advocating a ban argued that the EBU had excluded Russia from the competition in 2022 because of its invasion of Ukraine, so why not Israel for its invasion of Gaza?

The EBU has rejected this comparison, claiming Russia was banned in 2022 for consistent breaches of membership obligations and a violation of "public service media values." The EBU director-general, Noel Curran, insists that the EBU is a "nonpolitical media organization." It's on that basis that the organization has defended its decision to allow Israel to participate in this year's contest. EBU spokespeople have said that to ban Israel "would be a political decision and we are not allowed to do that."

However, that does not tally with the facts. The EBU's 2022 statement banning Russia did so on the basis that Russia's inclusion could bring the competition into disrepute "in light of the unprecedented crisis in Ukraine." The statement made no reference to breaches of membership obligations or violations of public-service media values.

The fact that the statement was issued on February 25, 2022, the day after Russia invaded Ukraine, leaves little room for doubt that this was a political decision. There are many reasons why Israel should not and could not be banned from this year's Eurovision, but claims that the EBU is a nonpolitical media organization is not one of them.

As the EBU organizers struggled to keep a grip on the most politically fraught Eurovision ever, there was another dramatic development on Saturday. Just hours before the start of the grand finale, the EBU announced the disqualification of Dutch artist Joost Klein — one of this year's favorites. This was because of a "backstage incident" that allegedly involved threats Klein made to a female production-team member, who reported it to the police.

As an indication of the toxicity surrounding Israel's entry this year, when Klein was suspended from rehearsals on Friday, rumors ran rife among the Malmö media that the fracas involved the Israeli singer, Eden Golan. As usual, social media amplified the rumor mill with sensational claims of insults, name-calling, and a punch in the face.

With this complete fiction about the Israeli delegation's involvement in the row quickly becoming social-media fact, the EBU scrambled to defuse the rapidly escalating anti-Israeli pile-on. It issued a statement that sought to scotch the rumors that the Israeli singer or delegation were a party to what had happened: "Contrary to some media reports and social-media speculation, this incident did not involve any other performer or delegation member."

But the most revealing incident occurred at a Eurovision press conference on Thursday when a Polish journalist asked a very pointed question of the Israeli singer. Had she considered, he wondered, if by her presence in Malmö "you bring risk and danger for other participants and the public?"

Immediately, the EBU moderator intervened, telling Golan she did not have to answer the question. Sitting two seats away from her, Klein shouted, "Why not?" Considering that this young woman was a teenager just a few months ago, her response was impressive. She indicated she wished to respond. "Well, if you want to, please" said the surprised EBU man.

Speaking with quiet authority, she said, "I think we're all here for one reason, and one reason only, and the EBU is taking all safety precautions to make this a safe and united place for everyone, and so I think it's safe for everyone and we wouldn't be here [if not]." As she finished, the room full of journalists broke into spontaneous applause.

Her rehearsals were intense and involved booing, shouts of "Free Palestine," and audience walkouts. To get her used to performing in this hostile atmosphere, in private rehearsals her team acted the part of Palestinian protesters by booing and shouting while she sang. However, at the end of the contest in which she finished fifth overall, Golan voiced a Nietzschean embrace of adversity, saying, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."


The Israeli singer thanked "people from all around the world" for their support. "I came second in the televotes, which is amazing. I couldn't ask for a better place. . . . That says everything to me; not winning doesn't matter at all." Indeed, the public's televote was so high that it briefly catapulted Israel's song into the overall lead.


There are probably many reasons for this massive show of public support for Israel's entry (second only to Croatia's), but it does raise a very interesting question. Despite the unprecedented levels of anti-Israel sentiment being vented over the past seven months, could it be that this vote is yet another case of the political, media, and cultural elites being substantially out of step with the general public? For example, Golan came in second-highest with a public vote of 323, but the 37 music professional juries gave her only 52 votes out of a possible 444.


Even in Ireland, supposedly the most anti-Israel country in Europe, the public vote mirrored the international trend by placing Israel second-highest. However, the Irish jury, largely composed of media people, gave the Israeli entry no points whatever — a divergence that was true of almost every other country's jury that voted.

Despite all the political brouhaha surrounding this year's Eurovision, it took a quietly determined young Jewish singer to reveal a heretofore hidden truth — that the anti-Israeli emperor may not be as well-dressed as had been previously presumed.

The anti-Israel controversies that overshadowed this year's Eurovision were unprecedented. But what happens should Palestine finally achieve statehood and enter the contest? Is the EBU's claim to being a "nonpolitical media organization" and its laudable 70-year-old aspiration of providing "friendly competition" sustainable into the future? On those important questions, I'm afraid the jury is still out.

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