

# [***Israel could win Eurovision. That would cause major headaches for the song contest's organizers***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BYW-FW41-DY7V-G06R-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; In the seven-decade history of Eurovision, it's unlikely that a three-word slogan has been repeated so readily by the song contest's extravagant contestants, tireless organizers or cagey media managers: The world, they insist, can be "United by Music."

But Malmo, the Swedish city [*hosting the kitsch cultural phenomenon*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/13/europe/eurovision-song-contest-2023-winner-intl/index.html) this year, is increasingly divided by Eurovision - and as the contest's grand final approaches on Saturday, organizers are struggling to keep the controversy over Israel's participation from taking over the event.

Israeli contestant Eden Golan was booed by sections of the crowd during her semi-final and during public dress rehearsals this week, but progressed to Saturday's showpiece event.

Some of her fellow contestants have also expressed concerns about the country's involvement, while large pro-Palestinian protests have taken place in Malmo to coincide with the first Eurovision live shows.

On Thursday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu congratulated Golan in a video message for performing in the face of what he called "an ugly wave of antisemitism" while still "representing the state of Israel with great honor."

The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), which organizes the contest, has tried desperately to keep the focus of the event on the performers, but critics have called for a boycott of the event over their refusal to exclude Israel, while it conducts its war against Hamas in Gaza.

And on Thursday, after Golan was announced as a finalist, the very real prospect of Israel winning the competition emerged - an outcome that would cause huge headaches for the EBU and give Israel the right to host next year's event.

Israel soars among bookmakers

Saturday's Eurovision final will be watched by more than 150 million people around the world on TV and around 15,000 fans gathered inside the Malmo Arena. But the concert may be only the second-best attended event in the city that evening; a pro-Palestinian protest, calling for Israel's removal from the contest, is expecting at least 20,000 attendees, and possibly far more.

The competition - which tries desperately to retain its "apolitical" tag - has become the largest cultural event so far to be rocked by the repercussions of Israel's war in Gaza. Israel's military assault has killed more than 34,000 Palestinians in Gaza since it was launched in response to Hamas' October 7 attacks on Israel, in which at least 1,200 people were killed and more than 250 taken hostage.Those protesting or boycotting the song contest claim it is "artwashing" the conflict; others defend Israel's inclusion, insisting the contest should not be dragged into geopolitics.

"***Politics*** does influence the event from time to time," Paul Jordan, a fan and researcher of the contest who worked in its communications team from 2015 to 2018, told CNN. But this year, "the presence of Israel has become such a big issue (that) I think it's going to overshadow the event," he said.

Weeks of simmering tension over the question came to the fore in Malmo this week, ahead of the contest's semi-finals on Tuesday and Thursday. And they are leading perhaps the tensest three minutes in the contest's history, when Golan performs live.

Thursday's second semi-final saw Israel secure a place in the final, with the song "Hurricane."

And minutes later, she soared to second-place among some bookmakers' odds for the grand final, after a moment from the Italian broadcast circulated on social media.

Italy's broadcaster, RAI, seemingly revealed the results of its public's televote during their live show, which national networks are not meant to do. The results showed that Israel had picked up 39% of the Italian public vote in the 16-strong semi-final, winning among Italian voters in a landslide.

RAI told CNN the results were published in error due to a "technical issue," and the broadcaster apologized to the EBU, which in turn said it had asked RAI to "review their procedures."

If Israel wins on Saturday, it would have the right to host next year's contest. The EBU's director general, Noel Curran, told CNN that in that event, the EBU "will do what we always do," sitting down with Israeli broadcaster KAN to plan the logistics.

But such an outcome would cause major headaches for the EBU, ensuring that the contest is mired in geopolitics and controversy for another year, and make it difficult to keep fellow broadcasters onside.

Ukraine did not host the event after winning in 2022 due to Russia's invasion, so second-placed finishers the United Kingdom hosted a celebratory edition of the contest on Kyiv's behalf. The EBU may seek to find such a compromise if Israel's war with Hamas is ongoing when it plans the event; but it could find it more difficult to find a country willing to host on Israel's behalf, given the likely backlash from sections of the Eurovision community.

An increasingly political song contest

It is difficult to pierce the celebratory bubble that surrounds the competition each year. But even among Eurovision's media-managed contestants, there are some rumblings of discontent this time.

"It is frustrating. I don't agree with it at all. It doesn't make sense," Bambie Thug, Ireland's participant, told CNN of extensive rules restricting any form of pro-Palestinian statement during the event.

The singer previously released a statement resisting calls to boycott the event, saying they intended instead to provide a "pro-Palestinian voice" in Malmo. They told CNN that Israel's involvement in the competition was the "wrong decision."

Founded by the EBU in 1956 as a unity-fostering project between national broadcasters, Eurovision has been rocked and buffeted for decades by the continent's geopolitical currents. It offers an unrivaled soft power-building platform to member states with poor human rights records, like Azerbaijan and, [*until two years ago*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/25/entertainment/eurovision-russia-competition/index.html), Russia.

But this year is the most difficult yet for the EBU, which decided against excluding Israel over the country's war in Gaza, whereas [*Russia was barred*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/25/entertainment/eurovision-russia-competition/index.html) after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine two years ago - contrasting stances that led to calls of double standards.

"The two are not comparative at all," Curran, the EBU's director general, told CNN, insisting that Israel's national broadcaster KAN did not breach the contest's rules as Russia's did, which is the ultimate test of eligibility for the contest.

"If we start across the board just deciding that we're going to exclude people, on the basis of geopolitical situations or terrible things that might be happening in the world, then every year we're just going to have groups of people calling for someone to be excluded - be it Azerbaijan, be it somebody else," Curran said.

"We want to try and keep the contest as non-political as we can," he added. "And that's hard."

He may be understating matters. Publicists representing a swathe of Europe's most eccentric musical artists in Malmo have been especially cautious with their talent, seeking to protect them from questions relating to the protests taking place just a few yards from their hotels.

CNN asked to interview Golan, Israel's performer, for this story, but was told it would only be arranged if CNN provided the questions beforehand, which goes against standard journalistic practices.

The EBU was already forced to intervene when Golan's initial song submission, "October Rain," was deemed to too closely reference Hamas's October 7 attacks on Israel.

And the EBU has worked hard to keep dissent from seeping into Malmo Arena. Long-standing rules preventing flags of non-competing countries and territories mean that Palestinian flags are banned from the crowd, which Bambie Thug told CNN they "100%" disagreed with.

Artists are not allowed to make statements either, though some may risk the punishment - a fine for their broadcaster - to do so, as Iceland's act did in 2019, when they [*held up Palestinian flags*](https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/18/europe/iceland-eurovision-palestine-intl/) during the contest, which was held in Israel.

"We wouldn't want them to do that, quite obviously," Curran said. "That is not something that we want artists to do, and it's in the rules that they shouldn't do that, and can't do that."

When asked by CNN, the EBU did not rule out adjusting sound levels on the broadcast to obscure booing, if it occurs during the Israeli performance.

But, for all their efforts, Eurovision bosses will hold their breaths while Golan sings in Saturday's grand final.

"The real worry would be any threat of violence, particularly towards the singers," Jordan said. "The worst nightmare could be a stage invasion." The latter occurred during the United Kingdom's performance in 2018, when a man [*snatched the microphone from singer SuRie*](https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/12/entertainment/eurovision-winner-israel-netta-barzilai/index.html) and screamed a message before being removed.

'It has divided the city'

As Malmo sought to stage a week's worth of events and performances to celebrate Eurovision, it encountered a problem: artists kept dropping out, following pressure from pro-Palestinian groups urging a boycott of the contest.

"It has divided the city, in a way," admitted Karin Karlsson, who is in charge of staging the events in Malmo. "I don't think we will solve any questions when it comes to the war in Gaza by boycotting," she said.

In total, she said 20 artists had dropped out of performing in the city. But Karlsson is undeterred. "I sleep well," she said. "I want to show everybody a vibrant, super diverse city, where we can live side by side but still think differently."

She hopes that Malmo is on track to fulfilling that goal. "But you never know. It's uncertain at the moment."

Her efforts may have been complicated by the choice of host. "(Malmo) has this history of resistance and solidarity, and it's a working class city, but at the same time the municipality has tried to rebrand Malmo as a more global city," Elina Pahnke, a Malmo-based journalist covering culture for the Aftonbladet newspaper, told CNN.

That has caused tensions with some residents, she said, who want resources and time spent on public services, rather than international spectacles.

The city is also home to large Muslim and Palestinian populations. Weekly pro-Palestinian protests have been held since Israel's war in Gaza began in October, and the protest during Saturday's live final could be the biggest since those early weeks.

"We hope to show the EBU that the people of Malmo reject their attempt at artwashing," said Mohammad Ghannam, who has led the movement to boycott Eurovision as part of Sweden's Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) group.

A massive security operation is in place; a Swedish police spokesperson told CNN it was one of the largest Malmo has ever seen, and involves officers from Denmark and Norway as well as Sweden.

And last week, Israel's National Security Council raised its travel warning to Malmo, urging Israelis planning to attend Eurovision to reconsider whether they need to do so. It cited "tangible concern that terrorists will exploit the protest and the anti-Israel atmosphere to carry out an attack on Israelis," and described Malmo as a hub for "anti-Israel protests."

Lara Yosef, a 30-year-old Syrian migrant to Malmo who will be attending Saturday's demonstration, said that when she walks past Eurovision advertising in her city, "I see blood."

"I'm hoping that some artists will surprise us and (make) some statements on stage," Yosef said.

Amid those tensions, some artists have complained of online harassment and abuse, while others have praised the pro-Palestinian demonstrators. "Power to them for protesting," Bambie Thug said, before their media manager quickly asked CNN to return to questions centered on their music.

But many more are working to block out what is becoming a near-deafening distraction, joining Eurovision's organizers in offering delicate comments. "(Our) sympathy is (with) all people who say that war is sh\*t," said Ukrainian contestant Alyona Alyona. "Because who, if not we, can say what is war, and how sh\*t it is?"

Analysis by Rob Picheta, CNN

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