

'What do you expect a Palestinian artist to paint – sunsets and flowers?'

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THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL'S largest Arab art gallery has been placed under a cloud by a new Israeli government bill widely known as "Loyalty in Culture".

"My concern is that I will have to work under conditions that put a stop to creativity," says Said Abu Shakra, founder and director of the gallery since it opened in 1996 in the northern city of Umm el-Fahm.

"The moment you limit the artists, the work becomes devoid of content and then our institution loses its content. I want us to have content and clear statements, without censorship. When censorship interferes, the art doesn't respect itself."

The planned law, which passed its first reading in the Knesset last week, empowers the Ministry of Culture to withhold state funding to institutions that negate the existence of Israel as a "Jewish and democratic" state, incite to terrorism, mark Israel's Independence Day as a day of mourning (as Arab citizens do), or harm state symbols.

The ministry provides 30% of the funding of the Umm el-Fahm gallery, an institution that thrives on artistic dialogue between Jews and Arabs and makes Jewish visitors feel welcome. At the same time, it prides itself on being the primary venue for Palestinian citizens to showcase their work.

"The gallery is a platform for multiculturalism and artistic dialogue, with art as the meeting point between Jewish and Arab artists," says Abu Shakra, 62, a veteran of 25 years of service in the Israel Police and an

artist in his own right who does not come across as a radical.

Yet he says he would like to see Israel transformed from a Jewish state to one of all its citizens, a stance for which the government has zero tolerance. Among the guests Abu Shakra hosted at a recent gallery event was Elias Zananiri, an official in the Fatah faction of Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas.

Many in the arts, and in the Israeli opposition, believe the law's criteria will be broadly defined to silence criticism of the 51-year old occupation of the West Bank and of the ultra-nationalist policies of the government.

Culture Minister Miri Regev, the hard-right, former chief military censor who is spearheading the bill, referred to the legislation last week as "the loyalty bill", which in the view of critics implies that artists who express political dissent are traitors.

The Deputy Attorney-General, Dina Zilber, last week warned Knesset legislators against the bill, suggesting it was part of dangerous trends in the government to create uniformity of views. Zilber was officially reprimanded by Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit and told to "refrain from similar remarks" in the future,

Leading foreign and Israeli filmmakers have slammed the bill, warning of censorship and predicting that it will seriously damage the Israeli film industry.

Arab leaders fear that Arab institutions will be hit hard. In a Knesset speech, Regev singled out the work of Palestinian poets Mahmoud Darwish and Dareen Tatour, an Israeli citizen who was sentenced in July to five months in prison for incitement, as examples of what the bill is designed to combat.



Bombing of Beirut in 1982, by Israeli artist Gershon Knispel

"I am here to say unequivocally that freedom of expression and creation must not be freely translated into freedom to incite and to give perks and encouragement rewards to those who undermine our very existence," Regev said.

Abu Shakra was so jarred by the bill that he attended his first political protest last month and denounced it at a gathering outside the Tel Aviv Cinematheque attended by a thousand people, including a number of cultural luminaries. "I think that this law is against me as a human being,

not as an Arab," he says.

"It's a law against humanity. It will harm Arabs and Jews. It will harm my goals of dialogue. How can I have a discussion with you if we don't know we are free to say what we want?"

Yusuf Jabareen, a member of Knesset from the predominantly Arab Joint List, stresses that Arabs will be a primary target. "It is we and the democratic Jewish forces who express the Palestinian narrative and the Palestinian identity who will suffer.

"We are very much afraid that the law would be used to suppress legitimate activity and expression of our narrative and that criticism will be prohibited. We are also afraid cultural activists and artists will be afraid to engage in this activity because they don't want to hurt the institutions they work in. So there's a chilling effect."

The 2011 "Nakba Law" gave the Finance Ministry power to penalise institutions that mark Israel's Independence Day as "Nakba Day", the day of catastrophe. The ministry has avoided using this power, which will now be in the hands of Regev, possibly joined by another minister.

Over the years the gallery has hosted exhibitions dealing with checkpoints and other aspects of occupation. "Maybe they will say about an exhibit on the occupation that it's attacking the army, that it's harming a symbol of state." Abu Shakra says.

He also worries that an archive of interviews with local elders covering the period of the Nakba could run afoul of the cultural authorities. "How can I document history without talking about the days of the Nakba?" he says.

Regev's record does not inspire optimism. Two years ago, she stormed out of Israel's version of the Oscars while verses by Darwish were read

out because his poems object to a Jewish state. Early this year, she reacted furiously against the award-winning Israeli film *Foxtrot*, in which soldiers in the West Bank cover up their killing of the Palestinian passengers of a car. Regev admitted she hadn't seen the film but that did not stop her from accusing it of "slandering" the army.

Currently, the gallery is exhibiting paintings by the Jewish communist artist Gershon Knispel, who died in September, and works relating to issues of space and identity by Fouad Agbaria of the nearby village of Musmus.

"A Palestinian artist comes with his own artistic place. It can be a place of memory, of narrative on the life of refugees, of the suffering of the Palestinian people or occupation," Abu Shakra says. "It's natural that a Palestinian artist talks about these things. What do you expect him to paint, sunsets and flowers?"

One of the Knispel paintings would not please Regev. It is a powerful depiction of Palestinian horror and anguish from the Israeli air force's devastating bombing of Beirut in 1982, complete with a dead man and child on stretchers, an agonised woman with her hand over her face, girls running in the street and a military aircraft visible behind a minaret. All of this is encircled as a target.

A group of Jewish pensioners who visited the gallery last week marveled at its exhibits. But Abu Shakra's aspiration to transform the gallery into the first Arab art museum in Israel now faces a hurdle. He knows he will need funding from the Ministry of Culture. If the "loyalty in culture" bill becomes law, he says, "it will be a building without spirit, without content, without soul."

Photo: Said Abu Shakra (Ben Lynfield)

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