

Iraq Pavilion at Venice Biennale is closed 'in solidarity' with protesters

[Rupert Hawksley](#) Nov 13, 2019 Updated: November 15, 2019 05:03 AM

Serwan Baran's show, 'Fatherland', was due to run until November 24



Visitors at the opening of Serwan Baran's 'Fatherland' at the Venice Biennale

The Iraq Pavilion at the Venice Biennale has been closed in a show of solidarity with anti-government protesters in Iraq.

The Ruya Foundation, a non-profit organisation based in Baghdad, which has commissioned the Iraq Pavilion in Venice since 2013, announced the closure of *Fatherland*, a collection of expressionist paintings by Iraqi-Kurdish artist Serwan Baran, on November 5. It was due to run until November 24.

The decision to close *Fatherland* was taken, [the Ruya Foundation stated](#), to show support for "the popular youth uprisings that have erupted in Iraq

against state corruption and deteriorating economic and living conditions". The foundation also called for cultural institutions in Iraq to go on "strike".



The opening of Serwan Baran's 'Fatherland' at the Venice Biennale. Courtesy: The Ruya Foundation

Objects from the uniforms of Iraqi soldiers killed during the second Gulf War and the fight against ISIS have been incorporated into Baran's large-scale paintings. Born in 1968, Baran served in the Iraqi army and was previously forced to paint propaganda images recording military glory.

According to [the Venice Biennale website](#), Baran's works explore "the relationship between man and his native country through the position of the soldier [...] The choice of *Fatherland* as a title, in contrast with *Motherland*, is also a commentary on the masculine and paternalistic dimension of the political culture of Iraq as well as of the region." In response to the closure of *Fatherland*, Baran said: "The people will prevail as long as we are with them."

The statement from the Ruya Foundation reads: "We condemn the use of

violence against peaceful protesting, and the bloodshed that has led to the death of over 265 protesters so far. Peaceful protesting is a basic right, enshrined in Article 38.c of the Iraqi Constitution.

“Since our founding in late 2012, we have worked hard, frequently in inhospitable circumstances, to create a platform for artists across Iraq to freely express their creativity, in a firm belief that culture is an integral component of any society, and a powerful force for change towards an open and free country. This is particularly important for Iraq, given its difficult recent history and authoritarian past.” The Ruya Shop in Baghdad will also be closed.

Fatherland was curated by Tamara Chalabi, director and co-founder of the Ruya Foundation and daughter of former Iraqi politician, Ahmed Chalabi. She told [Artnet](#): “The Pavilion is a representative of Iraq abroad and we as a cultural NGO do not wish to remain silent in the face of official violations against unarmed protesters with rightful demands.

“[Our foundation] stands in defence of the basic rights of Iraqi citizens, in particular, the right to peaceful protest. We have consistently worked to improve cultural life in Iraq and an essential component of that is non-violent freedom of expression. Recent government activity stands in direct contravention of our values and mission.”

[Anti-government protests began in Baghdad on October 1](#) and quickly spread across the country. The uprisings are a response to a lack of basic services, unemployment and widespread corruption, grievances that have led to repeated unrest in Iraq over the past few years. More than 319 people are reported to have died so far in the protests.

On Tuesday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke with Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and urged him to take “immediate steps to address the protesters’ legitimate grievances”.

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