

Culture

Arrest, 'normalisation' charges face Lebanese film-maker upon return from film festival

Makram Rabah

Beirut

As a rule, international travel is rarely trouble free. Still, the last thing that crossed the mind of celebrated Lebanese film-maker Ziad Doueiri when his flight touched down in Beirut earlier this month was that he would be detained by Lebanese General Security for two hours and have his Lebanese and French passports confiscated.

That Doueiri was shortly released is a matter of record. However, the incident and the vicious media campaign now directed against Doueiri have highlighted the ignoble tussle within Lebanon over moral ownership of the Palestinian cause.

● **While much of the case against Doueiri has been couched within moral and philosophical frameworks, the undercurrent of violence is tangible.**

Doueiri's reception probably wasn't what he had expected. He was returning from the Venice International Film Festival where his latest film, "The Insult," had scooped a prize. Instead of receiving a warm welcome, however, he was detained and summoned to a military court, charged with violating the Lebanese penal code during the production of an earlier film, 2012's "The Attack," which was partly filmed in Israel, a country Lebanon remains officially at war with.

Speaking by phone, Doueiri denied the charge that his actions helped normalise relations with Israel: "Normalisation means a policy pursued by two government entities and not a lone act by an individual, and though I was very much aware of the political implications of this act, it was never my intention nor

the message of the movie to endorse normalisation with Israel," he said.

Though the case was dismissed by the Military Tribunal as falling outside of Lebanon's statute of limitations, Doueiri questioned the timing of the smear campaign he now feels has been directed at him. Along with the decision not to screen his latest film in cinemas throughout Beirut, column inches have been dedicated to sabotaging both the film and its maker's reputation. Much of the impetus for this, Doueiri claims, is "The Insult," which challenges the accepted narrative of the civil war and the plight of Palestinians within Lebanon. They "do not like the fact that this film is challenging their monopoly of the Palestinian cause, especially that our lead Palestinian actor has won the top prize at the Venice festival," Doueiri said.

Much of the public criticism levelled at Doueiri has come from circles affiliated with Lebanese social lynchpin Pierre Abi Saab, who also serves as cultural editor of the Syrian daily, al-Akhbar. Abi Saab, who initiated the smear campaign against Doueiri, wrote that Doueiri, whom he labels a Zionist, is part of a master project to normalise Arab perception of the murderous Israeli state. To anyone familiar with the local setting, branding someone a Zionist is nothing short of putting a bullseye on their back, something that Abi Saab and his cadre appear to have little shame in doing.

While much of the case against Doueiri has been couched within moral and philosophical frameworks, the undercurrent of violence is tangible. Writing on Facebook, journalist Hasan Illeik commented that anyone within Lebanon promoting Israel, such as Doueiri, should be locked up or shot. "These matters cannot be resolved through debate. A person who has visited Israel and stayed for 11 months and made a film with the Israelis and preaching to us the greatness of Israeli society cannot be rewarded. What type of dialogue are we to have with him? Locking up such people and executing spies and some of those endorsing normalisation and



Fresh perspective. Palestinian actor Kamel El Basha holds aloft the Volpi Cup for best actor for his role in "The Insult" at the 74th Venice Film Festival, on September 9. (AP)

suppressing any voice which supports them is the only way. After we do that we can debate everything else."

It has become clear that the case against Doueiri has grown beyond the courts. Nadine Farghal, a Lebanese lawyer and activist, argued that Doueiri's detractors believe "that the legitimacy of their claim supersedes Lebanese laws and thus Ziad should be judged in the court of public opinion."

Despite the heated accusations of collaboration with an enemy power, Farghal pointed to many contradictions in people's attempts to vilify Doueiri. Principally that individuals belonging to the anti-normalisation group were vocal supporters of Fayez Karam, a member of Michael Aoun's political party who was found guilty of collaborating with Israeli intelligence in 2012.

Much of the attack on Doueiri serves to distract from "The Insult," which tackles the themes of the Lebanese civil war and the importance of post-war reconciliation between both the Lebanese themselves, and with their Palestinian guests. However, none of the agitators appear to care that the latest film, which places the plight of the Palestinians forced to live in legal limbo and in dire economic conditions at the very centre of the debate.

More importantly, the film challenges the traditional stereotype of helpless Palestinians that critics have manipulated and bent to their cause in an effort to validate their own standing. The greatest insult here is probably to the Lebanese themselves, who are presented with the choice of either conforming to someone else's vision of the issues Doueiri raises or weathering accusations of Zionism and the death threats that too often accompany them.

Makram Rabah is a lecturer at the Lebanese American University and the American University of Beirut, Department of History. He is the author of "A Campus at War: Student Politics at the American University of Beirut, 1967-1975."

Shaping narratives in region through Arabic design, typography

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Sharjah

Salem al-Qassimi, who heads the multidisciplinary Fikra Design Studio in Sharjah, had been wearing two hats until recently. Besides being a principal and founder at Fikra, he was teaching at the American University of Sharjah (AUS).

Fikra, founded in 2006, pioneered bilingual Arabic and English design communication solutions in the United Arab Emirates.

Qassimi said he was equally passionate about computers. When he enrolled in AUS, he pursued a bachelor of science degree in multimedia design. As part of an internship, he worked in London for a design company and, after graduation, worked in Dubai. While Qassimi said he enjoyed his time in London and Dubai, where he worked in traditional design and commercial branding, he felt the urge to do something more.

"I wanted to do other things. I was interested in research as well as doing experimental and research-based work," Qassimi said.

His relationship with the influential Arabic calligraphy artist and designer Wissam Shawkat and the Kitabart Conference – the first major Arabic calligraphy and typog-

raphy conference in the Middle East – organised by the American University of Dubai in 2006, led Qassimi to the realisation that there was a void in the region for Arabic graphic design and typography.

Fikra began doing a lot of Arabic graphic design work and became well-known for its bilingual Arabic and English designs as well as culturally relevant work. "We filled the gap at that time for bilingual design and typography, interactive design as well as design-led research," Qassimi said.

Qassimi took a two-year break from work to complete a master's of fine arts in graphic design from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), an experience that changed his life, he said. His thesis was on Arabish (Arabic and English) culture – the bilingual culture and identity – in the UAE.

After returning to Sharjah in 2011, Qassimi focused on teaching and developing research-led and culture-driven projects.

For Fikra – an Arabic word meaning "idea" or "concept" – it was imperative to create visual experiences that are culturally and contextually relevant, yet global.

A recent project and publication "Afaq Al Mustaqbal" centred on the indigenous Emirati Cafeteria concept, commissioned by and for the UAE Pavilion during Dubai Design Week, is a good example of the studio's immersive, interactive and

culture-driven, experimental project.

The cafeteria in the UAE is a cultural concoction with a mélange of disparate tastes, visuals and ideas coming together to form a multicultural singularity. "Afaq Al Mustaqbal" successfully evoked that experience, bringing out the contemporary aesthetics of UAE culture into a sensory experience.

The communication campaign for Global Art Forum and Art Dubai this year was based on the theme "Trading Places" and is an example of culture-driven work done by Fikra. "The visualisation of that abstract idea of 'trade' into currency and food was successful and we really enjoyed the collaboration," Qassimi said.

● **Sharjah-based Salem al-Qassimi heads the multidisciplinary Fikra Design Studio.**

There is so much to the work that Fikra does in advancing design thinking and research – in print and new media, which includes branding and identity creation, book design, data-visualisations, environmental graphics, type design, web and app design.

Qassimi has a platform called Afsar Fikra, which undertakes independent research and experi-

mental projects exploring "regional topics through design."

Most of the work at Fikra, both professional branding projects and research projects through Afsar Fikra, Qassimi said, has been designed to work with Arabic typography or by incorporating Arabic typography.

Qassimi said that when he set up his studio in 2006, the design scene was very different. "Arabic graphic design education was almost non-existent," he said, "and a lot of the people actually doing design work in the Arab world were Western multinational agencies with many non-Arabic speaking designers who had very limited understanding of Arabic and Arabic typography."

"Now, there is a lot more awareness in terms of Arabic design and typography and there are a lot more designers working with and for Arabic type who are doing an incredible job. Also, there are more and more Arabic type foundries offering beautiful Arabic and bilingual fonts and many Arabic design educators, including myself, started to incorporate and highlight the importance of Arabic typography in our teaching."

The technology has evolved, Qassimi said. "Arabic and other RTL (right to left) languages were difficult to work with in some software. There were not many good Arabic type designers and, mainly because of that, we had a very limited selec-

tion of fonts to use."

Fikra Design Studio has made a significant and pioneering contribution towards developing a unique bilingual design style in the UAE and the Gulf.

Fikra started the movement by encouraging others to offer services in Arabic design and typography. "Our contribution is not limited to bilingual design work and typography," Qassimi said. "Fikra is really challenging the status quo of graphic design in the region as a whole. It is doing that not only through its bilingual design work and typography but also through design research, interactive work and its meticulous process-driven investigation related to culture."

Qassimi said he was excited about design in the region: "In today's time and age of communication and social media, the world is a lot smaller and, because of many shared traits and cultural aspects with other Arab countries, I think it is safe to say that the region as a whole is working together to enhance Arabic and bilingual design and typography and developing a unified aesthetic voice."

"It is through the efforts of different Arabic designers that we are addressing different visual problems related to bilingual design."

N.P. Krishna Kumar is a Dubai-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.