

Lebanon gripped by film-banning frenzy

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Lebanon, long viewed as the freest country in the Arab world, is witnessing a string of bans on Hollywood movies that sparked condemnation about the deterioration of public freedom.

Two films – “The Post” and “Jungle” – were banned in theatres across Lebanon last month in compliance with a boycott of Israel. The ban on “The Post,” whose director Steven Spielberg is blacklisted for donating money to Israel, was retracted. The ban on “Jungle,” which recounts the survival drama of Israeli adventurer Yossi Ghinsberg, came two weeks after the film had been showing in cinemas.

Reactions to the bans were divided. Many support the boycott of Israel, a country with which Lebanon is technically at war and which is widely reviled for military aggression. Others say the censorship is arbitrary and randomly enforced.

Activist Samah Idriss, co-founder of the Campaign to Boycott Supporters of Israel, said banning films was justified and in line with the boycott of Israel law, which Lebanon passed in 1955.

“The problem is that the law may be outdated and, in many instances, it had been overlooked. This time the government has assumed its responsibility and it should be applauded and praised for it (not criticised),” Idriss said.

“It is the (Lebanese) censorship board’s responsibility to make sure that no works involving links with Israel and Israelis are cleared or can pass through.”

“In the case of ‘The Post,’” Idriss argued, “the director is pro-Israeli, a lead actor is pro-Israeli and the executive producer is pro-Israeli. Moreover, any of those three support Israel directly. For instance, Spielberg donated \$1 million to Israel in 2006 after it attacked Lebanon.”

Spielberg’s previous two films, “The BFG” and “Bridge of Spies,” were allowed in Lebanese cinemas. The ambiguity and arbitrary implementation of the anti-Israel boycott legislation causes confusion and dismay in the industry.

“Censorship is something that we face at every edition of the Lebanese Film Festival,” said actress and the festival’s director Wafa Halawi. “The criteria for censorship and the political agenda behind it have not been clear in many aspects, even artistically. In other words, we cannot predict what things will be censored or not. This puts artists and anyone in the film industry in an ambiguous position.”



Wider clampdown. Actor Tom Hanks (L), actress and singer Rita Wilson (2nd L), Executive Editor of the Washington Post Martin Baron (C), actress Kate Capshaw (2nd R) and director Steven Spielberg (R) attend the premiere of “The Post” in Washington, last December. (AP)

Several branches of government are involved in deciding on which films are banned in Lebanon. The country’s censorship board, which includes representatives from the foreign, information, education, economy and social affairs ministries, submits its recommendation to the Interior Ministry, which is represented on the board by a member of the General Security.

Halawi said arbitrary censorship is increasing and becoming stricter, especially regarding political and religious content.

“Mainly anything that could trigger any controversy or misunderstanding about religion or politics is being avoided,” she said. “Obviously, it becomes more complicated in a country like Lebanon where anything that could be misinterpreted can develop into

something much bigger.

“However, the most dangerous aspect of censorship is when artists start unconsciously to self-censor themselves. They don’t know what is allowed or not, how to talk about a theme and whether it will be controversial or not.”

Film critics blasted the bans on grounds that they harm Lebanon’s reputation as a bastion of freedom. For them, the boycott of cultural products should be a personal choice, not a state-enforced measure.

Idriss, however, insisted that the state has a role to fulfil in guiding its citizens and preventing “cultural normalisation” with Israel.

“Do you think the Americans would allow the screening of a movie funded by Iran or one that praises [Osama] bin Laden for example?” he asked. “There are tens

of books and films banned in countries of the so-called free world because they touch on national security and the safety of citizens.”

“The freedom of speech is different from the freedom of normalising relations with the enemy. We have to make a distinction between censorship and the preservation of national sovereignty, dignity and resistance against Israel,” he added.

Another controversy is simmering over the American film “Beirut,” about a CIA operative kidnapped in the Lebanese capital at the height of the civil war in 1982. There are calls to ban the fictional movie, which was criticised for tarnishing Lebanon’s image and rewriting its history without Lebanese insight. The film is to open in US theatres April 13, the anniversary of the outbreak of Lebanon’s war.

The renewed focus on the boycott laws coincides with a wider clampdown on free speech. In early January, an arrest warrant was issued for television presenter Maria Maalouf after she criticised Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Television talk-show host Marcel Ghanem is being prosecuted for criticising the judiciary.

Viewpoint



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Ban it, bin it, close it: Lebanon and the growing climate of censorship

A heated debate is under way in Lebanon that is expressing itself on television and social media. At issue is what the Lebanese can see, listen to and read. In other words, a return to censorship.

The debate involves calls to shun all artistic and literary material that remotely involves Israel.

Advocates of the boycott are supporters of the Iran-backed Hezbollah. They insist it is an act of patriotism necessary to establish a “culture of resistance” against normalising relations with the Jewish state.

Its opponents argue the boycott conceals an attempt to impose bygone norms on the Lebanese, with the aim of moulding Lebanese culture according to that of Iran.

Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah recently demanded that Lebanon’s censorship board, which was created

in 1955 and was revived recently, must ban the film “The Post,” even though the movie has nothing to do with the Palestinian conflict. The reason, said Nasrallah, was that its director, Steven Spielberg, donated \$1 million to the Jewish state during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah.

The movie was banned but an intervention by Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri reversed the decision and allowed the film to play in theatres.

Hariri, however, could not reverse a decision to ban other films. Last year, the censorship board banned “Wonder Woman” from cinemas because an Israeli actress plays the lead role. Last month, Franco-Lebanese director Ziad Doueiri was arrested in Beirut and accused of violating Lebanese laws that boycott Israel. He had travelled there using his French citizenship to shoot a film on the Palestinian issue. The film, “The

Attack,” was banned in Lebanon.

Doueiri was subjected to a ruthless campaign by Hezbollah’s media when another of his films, “The Insult,” made it to the short list of the Academy Awards’ nominations for foreign language movies. It was the first Lebanese film to be so honoured.

Interestingly, the campaign to impose censorship is limited to political issues while it is tolerant towards sexually explicit material as well as issues regarding homosexuality.

Accusations of treachery are made against anyone who defies the call for the return to censorship. Doueiri’s critics claim his film only made it thus far because its Lebanese director “betrayed the cause and denounced Palestine to the Jewish organisers of the Oscar.” Doueiri denies such accusations.

During the 1950s and 1960s, literally, any material that mentioned Israel was subject to censorship.

Any foreign media that featured articles about Israel was censored. That eased during the 1975-90 civil war when many government functions broke down.

The issue now is how to accommodate a return to censorship with the rapid advances in the means of communication. Advocates of the film boycott suggest a strange compromise: They would permit the sale of pirated copies of prohibited movies to the public while banning the films from movie theatres. The compromise makes no mention of written material. Such a concession shows the virtual impossibility of a return to the boycott that existed before the civil war.

The issue is gaining momentum as parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for May 6, approach. The question of cultural freedom is likely to be among the major issues that will decide their outcome.

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