



## PRESS RELEASE

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### Beirut Conference: Censoring artists and art

**Whether imposed by the state, religious institutions or society itself, censorship, it appears, is still key and parcel to art in the Middle East.**

ARTICLE 19 welcomed and participated to a symposium organized by the Goethe-Institut Beirut, the Lebanese UMAM Documentation and Research association and the Anna Lindh Foundation, on art and censorship in the Middle East.



Art Legislation and Freedom of Expression Panel

For two days, artists, activists, religious leaders and even state censors passionately debated the taboos in Arab societies and elsewhere, the limits of tolerance, and the right to free artistic expression.

The eternal tug of war between the individual and culture on the one hand and the guardians of “morality”, religion and state interests is one that appears to be ever-present and ongoing. In Germany, according to the Key Note Speaker *Dr. Roland Seim*, nearly 20,000 items are banned, but he insisted that “content is censored and not people.”

“**Censoring people**” was described by Iraqi painter *Dhikra Sarsam* as a key challenge facing artists in Iraq today. But according to her, those censoring artists are not the state but radical elements within society who according to her fellow national, scholar Haider Saeed reject freedom and by doing so reject culture.

*Dr. Samia Mehrez* of Egypt also spoke of the attempt to censor her in 1989. Mehrez described the day she was charged for allegedly sexually harassing her students at the American University of Cairo simply because she chose to teach Mohammad Chukri’s novel *Al-Khobz al-Hafy* in her class.

The rising religious extremism in Egypt and the extensive search and seizure powers given to Al-Azhar’s Islamic Research Centre by the Minister of Justice in 2004 has paved the way for much abuse. According to Sayed Mahmoud, Al-Ahram culture journalist, a number of poets and writers

have found themselves facing charges in the past years for allegedly not conforming to Islamic values.

In addition to the post-censorship imposed by para-state groups in both Iraq and Egypt, the practice of **prior censorship** is commonplace in the region and is imposed by various bureaus in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Its chilling effect on freedom of expression was discussed candidly between the artists in attendance on the one hand and *Major Elie Asmar*, Assistant Director of the Censorship Directorate at the Lebanese General Security.

While the debate was heated at times, Major Asmar insisted that his team has been extremely liberal in recent years and have ignored a number of provisions under article 9 of the Penal Code. **“Had they strictly abided by the law, artistic massacres would have occurred”**, he said.

The Lebanese censor is “*coince*” (*stuck*), basically damned if they do and damned if they don’t, he continued. According to celebrated actor and director Roger Assaf, dialogue may be possible with the censor and decisions can be discussed and sometimes changed.

For instance, Rabih Mroue’s play, *How Nancy Wished that Everything was an April Fool’s Joke*” was banned momentarily for allegedly stirring sectarian tensions and for bad timing given the current context in Lebanon. Luckily the loud objections from journalists, local organizations such as *Ashkal alwan* in addition to those of the Minister of Culture Tarek Mitri bore fruit and the play was licensed and successfully staged.

In a paper presented as part of the Art Legislation and Freedom of Expression Panel, ARTICLE 19’s Programme Officer Sarah Richani argued that many legal provisions, such as those found in the Jordanian and Lebanese Press and publications Law, the Jordanian Fostering Culture Law, the Egyptian Laws 102 and 103 and the Syrian Decree 409 of 1960, allow for prior or post censorship on art be it literature, theater or music and stand in stark opposition to all these countries’ constitutions and international obligations.

ARTICLE 19 strongly condemns the global trend of increasing intolerance towards anything deemed offensive or controversial by mob violence and religious groups, and calls for a review of all existing laws and restrictions on artistic expression in the region, to bring them in line with international standards.

The full text of the speech is available in both English and Arabic on the following links respectively.

<http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/middle-east-article-19-speech-into-art-censorship.pdf>

<http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/middle-east-art-censorship-arabic.pdf>

## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

- For more information, please contact please contact **Sarah Richani, MENA Programme Officer**, [sarah@article19.org](mailto:sarah@article19.org), 0096170952797.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression.