

 Search HAARETZ Hi, UPenn Libraries

Gift Haaretz



Boycotted, Canceled and Isolated: Will Israel Become the New Russia Due to the War in Gaza?

Israel's artists are being shunned by the world's cultural community since the war erupted, some are scrapping their own plans for forays abroad, and it's getting tougher to draw foreign artists and performers here. Is Israel becoming Russia 2.0?



Itamar Katzir and Ofir Hovav

Dec 9, 2023

October 7, 2023, was supposed to be a festive day for the Israeli film "A Room of His Own." At 6 o'clock that morning the director and screenwriter, Matan Yair, and his crew departed for Warsaw, for the international festival where the movie was to be screened. But immediately upon landing in Poland they heard the horrific news from home. The film was shown as scheduled, but there was nothing festive about the event.

"It wasn't a happy screening," recalls the producer, Maya Fischer. "But the hall was full, all the questions after the viewing were about the situation in Israel, and there was a lot of empathy. Relative to many other countries in Europe, the reaction of most Poles was heartwarming."

In the week that followed, the filmmakers found themselves caught up in the spiral of events following the outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip, which all Israelis experienced. But in the absence of flights back home, they had to endure it all from afar, and very quickly realized that this was not the only problem they would face. When the dust settled after a few weeks and they wanted to continue to promote the film internationally – they discovered that it was a tougher mission than they had anticipated.

"After the premiere, the international sales agency that was promoting the film told me that they weren't able to book it for any more festivals, not even Jewish and Israeli ones, many of which had in fact been canceled," Fischer, of the Israeli-Australian Green Productions company, relates.

Amid all this one case, stood out: An important Jewish film festival, which Fischer prefers not to name, canceled its scheduled screening of "A Room of His Own." The reason: The movie mentions the Israel Defense Forces.

Fischer: "The film is about an 18-year-old in his senior year of high school who wants to go on a trip to Poland and is apprehensive about his upcoming army service. There is no 'army' in the movie; there is one scene of his interview during the psychotechnical [screening] test that deals with the guy's fear of the draft. But the sales agent received an email from that festival stating that from their point of view, that was a reference to the army and they were very concerned about politicization, so they were canceling us. And it's one of the most significant Jewish film festivals in the world."

That's not the only story of plummeting Israeli participation in art and cultural events abroad since the war erupted. A number

of screenings and performances have been canceled or reduced, but in addition, in some cases, the Israelis themselves, fearing for their personal safety abroad, have opted out of participating. Likewise, foreign artists do not seem to be in any hurry to accept invitations to appear in Israel in the near future.

In some instances, seemingly superficial perceptions of the situation in the country have, at times, informed the cancellation and the exclusion of Israel and its artists abroad, bolstered by general pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel sentiment tinged with antisemitism. On the other hand, there is a realization among producers of overseas events that the wartime situation is complicated and that it would be better not to give the stage to Israelis, or Palestinians, as it were, so as not to upset anyone. In practice, the outcome is the same: Israel is becoming isolated and outcast in the world cultural community, and some observers are even saying that it is reprising what happened not long ago in the same realm to a certain other country, namely, Russia.

Indeed, such a comparison may seem self-evident. For many Israelis, however, the differences are crystal clear: Russia, they say, launched a cynical, particularly cruel war on Ukraine, whereas we fell victim to a murderous assault by Hamas terrorists and had no other option but to respond. Israel was forced to embark on a war of survival against an enemy that was holding 240 hostages, killed some 1,200 people on October 7, and has been using the inhabitants of Gaza as a human shield. But many in the West see things without nuances: There is one side that attacked and another side that was attacked – one purely evil side and one good side – and Israel is on the wrong side.

Mounting dehumanization

Cultural boycotts of Israel are nothing new. Indeed, in a certain sense, those who are boycotting Russia today may have even picked up a tip or two from them. For years, the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement, aka BDS, has called on artists, particularly musicians – among them, Big Thief and Sam Smith, in recent months – to cancel their shows, while lambasting those who nonetheless appear in Israel. BDS demonstrations have also succeeded in blocking Israeli cultural events abroad. One striking case was the Israeli neo-noir rap musical "The City," whose series of performances at the 2014 Edinburgh Festival Fringe was canceled under the pressure of demonstrations – ostensibly, because it was impossible to ensure the actors' safety.

Over the years, as Israel's public relations in the West have deteriorated, bringing foreign art and artists to Israel became more difficult.

"I don't think people realize how hard the situation is, especially if you're an establishment body that is supported by the government or a local municipality," says Itay Mautner, the artistic director of the Israel Festival in recent years and, previously, of the Mekudeshet Festival in Jerusalem.

"We are working day and night to create a separation between BDS narratives and pro-Israel narratives, on the one hand, and what we believe we represent," he continues. "Our point of departure is very clear-cut: We are against boycotts as such. Once people stop talking to each other, dehumanization only increases. To boycott the State of Israel by means of the Israel

Festival is to inflict harm upon anyone who is trying to create a different reality here."

Is it becoming more difficult to fight that boycott over time?

Mautner: "Clearly it has become tougher over the years, and the situation has deteriorated under the present government. Israel, and Israeli culture specifically, are becoming less and less relevant, less legitimate in the international realm."

Still, there has been a sea change since October 7. Suddenly it seems that the default option is to boycott Israel and its artists, or at least to avoid any contact with that hot potato. Indeed, at the height of finalizing the program for the 2024 Israel Festival next summer, Mautner recently contacted the participants, suggesting that they rethink the performances they are planning so that they won't be triggering for a postwar audience. About 90 percent did not respond at all, and 10 percent announced that they were canceling their appearances.

Examples of the cultural isolation of Israel continue nonstop and are especially glaring in the cinema and television industries. At one point in last month's International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, said to be the most important event of its kind in Europe, pro-Palestinian activists leaped onto the stage holding a banner that read, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," to the applause of the festival's artistic director (who later apologized). The Stockholm International Film Festival reportedly disinvited Aleeza Chanowitz, the American-Israeli creator of the TV series "Chanshi," from being an in-person guest at the event, held in mid-November, because it "had to take a stand." Afterward, however, its program director denied she had been disinvited her and apologized, saying that there had been a "misunderstanding" about the travel

arrangements and that they had suggested that Chanowitz should pay for her own flight. She refused.

For her part, Maya Fischer, who also produced Maya Kenig's 2023 film "The Milky Way" – which last month represented Israel at the well-regarded international festival in Tallinn, Estonia – says it's not by chance that the movie did not win the top award, despite it and its creators being given a warm reception there. The Israelis heard first-hand from a festival source that the decision revolved wholly around the question of whether the prize could go to an Israeli entry. In the end, "The Milky Way" received a "special jury mention."

Israel's music industry is also feeling the iron fist of cancel culture. Not because all the international musicians who were scheduled to perform locally (among them the Belgian band Yin Yin and three groups that were to have performed as part of the Barby club's jazz festival a few weeks) have canceled – which is natural in light of the situation – but because Israeli performers who regularly appear abroad also felt compelled to cancel all their shows after October 7, including at major festivals in Europe. "At first all the outgoing flights were canceled, so I had to figure out how I could fly my whole crew out of here during the war," relates singer-actress Liraz Charhi, who has a thriving career abroad. "Afterward I understood that from a security point of view, I shouldn't go and I canceled the October and November shows. While we were wondering what to do, and how to do it, big festivals canceled us because they received threats."

Charhi's project, in fact, carries a message of peace and coexistence: Her songs are all in Farsi, which she learned from her Iranian-born parents, and are her way of giving a voice to the beleaguered women of Iran and acting as a bridge between

the Iranian people and Israelis. But that's not what bothers those making the threats – some of which are explicit. For example, organizers of a festival in Las Palmas, in the Canary Islands, where the 45-year-old singer was scheduled to appear some weeks ago, warned her of threats along the lines of "We will murder you," "We will plant bombs at the show."

"The decision to cancel was made unanimously," says Dan Basman, who heads Supernova, the artists management company that represents Charhi.

One show, canceled at Charhi and Basman's initiative, was scheduled for the Womex Festival in late October, an important showcase for world music. The plan was for Charhi to finalize her shows for the whole of 2024, by making contacts and connections at the festival. But despite the great professional damage, the security consideration prevailed. A small concert tour in Belgium was also called off, for fear of an antisemitic backlash, she says.

Charhi: "I was really afraid that our security would not be enough, and it was beyond my means to hire a more serious firm to accompany us to the gigs. I was heartbroken – they were terribly, terribly important concerts, and I've been riding a good wave and was all set to reap the fruit, but at the moment it's all come to a halt. I pray that things will go back to how they were soon."

"My feeling is that everyone was relieved when we canceled," Basman adds. "But I must say that even though [some of] these places are very much identified with the left and with being woke, they didn't cancel us. In other words, people seem to understand the complexity a little. But that said, in the coming

months, half a year, a year, I don't see anyone abroad being eager to schedule performances by Israeli artists."

Will this trend also affect TV shows dealing with the so-called Israeli narrative? Will series about the Shin Bet security service or the Israeli army, like "Fauda," for example, be denied the possibility of becoming international hits simply because networks won't air them abroad?

"Decision-makers in the television industry in Hollywood keep their distance from headaches," says Israeli-American screenwriter and novelist Ron Leshem, who wrote the scripts for the Israeli film "Beaufort" (2007), based on his book of the same name, and for the American TV series "Euphoria" (2019).

"If they think that a series will spur calls for a boycott and a TikTok campaign against the series or its creators, they will skip over it, they won't risk uncertainty," says Leshem, who lives in the United States. "That approach produces de facto blacklists in Hollywood, of creators and of different worlds. This self-censorship could 'dilute' the patience people have for sympathetic stories about Israel in the years ahead. The small screen is much more volatile than the cinema."

At present, he continues, the industry is still backing Israel, but that has mostly been felt in private conversations. "What we've heard from the top people at the channels and broadcast networks in recent weeks is horror at the sheer evil of Hamas, but also the fear that the war will end with tens of thousands of Palestinians killed," Leshem says. "That's stressing them out – you won't hear any more declarations of support for Israel from them."

The Russian precedent

After Russia launched its offensive against Ukraine, in February 2022, a global boycott movement against all things Russian gained rapid momentum. Western states imposed economic and political sanctions on the invading country; leading Western advertising firms stopped their campaigns in Russia; a boycott of Russian athletes was broadened; and anti-Russian demonstrations were held in the United States and Europe. Finally, the world of culture also suffered. Calls to boycott Russian artists and performers who supported the regime came from around the world – and even in Israel there were highly publicized cancellations. The most recent was in August, when performances by Moscow's Lenkom Theater, whose actors and management back Russia's war against Ukraine, were canceled by the host theater, Habima, in Tel Aviv.

The problem is that it's not only Putin's supporters who are being boycotted. Almost anything with Russian content is being marked with an asterisk until it's demonstratively shown itself to be anti-regime. And even that doesn't necessarily do the trick. For instance, Russian writer and satirist Viktor Shenderovich, who was interviewed by Liza Rozovsky in Haaretz, is living in exile in Poland because he's a vocal opponent of the regime – but Ukrainian activists are also calling for him to be boycotted, because he ostensibly identified with Russian soldiers and with patriotic sentiments.

In the interview Shenderovich said there was "an attack on everything that is considered Russian," and offered two examples. Both involved cancellation of the participation in festivals of cultural figures – Linor Goralik, an Israeli author of Ukrainian origin who writes in Russian, and Masha Gessen, a Russian-American writer and journalist and outspoken critic of Putin – under pressure by Ukrainian participants.

Other incidents reverberated in a more sweeping way. At the beginning of the war, for example, the European Film Academy issued a feeble condemnation of Russia. But afterward, bowing to Ukrainian pressure, the academy published a much sharper statement and declared that it would be henceforth be a full partner to the boycott of all Russian productions. In practice, major film festivals are still showing some respect toward Russian filmmakers, who are known to oppose Putin. Thus, the Cannes Film festival hosted the acclaimed Russian director Kirill Serebrennikov, who used the platform to protest against the sweeping boycott of Russian creative work.

Is this what lies in store for Israel and its creative artists? A widespread boycott that will affect even those who have been vocally critical of Israeli policy?

"The opposition to Russia came from governments and has spread to their populations as well, but this is not the case with Israel," says Yossi Harpaz, a researcher of globalization and national identity in the Department of Sociology of Tel Aviv University. "Governments are not generally hostile to Israel and are not in geopolitical rivalry with it. We are still not in the predicament of Russia, whom many clearly view as an enemy that needs to be boycotted. Israel is, after all, connected to [more] global networks of art and creative endeavor."

Maybe that's also a problem? Many young people in the West from Gen Z aren't crazy either about the West and what it symbolizes to them.

Dr. Harpaz: "In recent years we have indeed seen that this approach, of political correctness and being woke, is gaining strength and is categorizing various groups not according to

their geopolitical affiliation, but based on how historically excluded or privileged they are. In addition, the discourse is becoming superficialized and Americanized, as a result of which the Palestinians have been perceived in recent years as an excluded, voiceless group – like women, Blacks or the global South. They're seen as 'Blacks,' while Israelis, including Israeli and Jewish artists and cultural creators, are considered to be clear-cut representatives of a global system led by America and the white man, and are therefore 'whites' who need to be silenced.

"That is not exactly the mainstream position, but I suppose that in artistic venues, for example, where there is pressure to be perceived as part of an intellectual and political spearhead, that is certainly the accepted position. Of course, if we take into account the Holocaust, or the waves of immigration of Jews from Ethiopia, North Africa and the Middle East – Jews are not exactly the whitest and most privileged group there is."

Samuel Barnai, a research fellow at Hebrew University's Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, who also teaches in the Department of Jewish History at Ben-Gurion University in Be'er Sheva, echoes those perceptions. "The boycott of Israeli artists and Israeli cultural institutions has deeper layers," Dr. Barnai avers. "It rests on old hatred that is based on race and, in parallel, continues to arm itself with new tools, such as social media. Whereas the Russians are coping with a political boycott, the Israelis have to cope with an antisemitic boycott."

Perhaps that bodes well for a turning point in the future. Maybe the waves of antisemitism will somehow, ultimately, generate a backlash, a change in public discourse. Indeed at present Israel is

receiving sweeping support from some quarters in Germany, including from the Berghain club in Berlin, a major locus of German nightlife. But in most of the world we're not there: Many Israelis, as well as Jewish artists and cultural figures abroad, are vividly feeling the impact of the trends described by scholars Barnai and Harpaz.

Quite a few Jewish artists, collectors, gallerists and donors, for example, feel since the war broke out that they are unwanted in circles that were once their home. Often they get a general impression that it's less expedient now to display Israeliness or Jewishness in public, and sometimes they even receive direct messages to that effect. Examples are an exhibition of fanzines at the Brooklyn Museum last month, at which posters and publications were sold that called for the "globalization of the intifada" and for the expulsion of Jews from Israel; the request the National Gallery of Art in Washington received in November from artists Nicholas Galanin and Merritt Johnson to remove a sculpture they had created that was on display there, the reason being U.S. support for Israel; and, at the conclusion of a work of performance art by the Teo Ala-Ruona group in New York a few weeks ago, when the four members of the cast thanked the audience and called out, "In blood and fire we will redeem Palestine."

A feeling of betrayal

There are also digital petitions and open letters, like that appearing on the website of the Artforum monthly magazine and circulated on other sites worldwide, along them e-flux, Hyperallergic and The Art Newspaper. "An Open Letter From the Art Community to Cultural Organizations" – published in Artforum (in the form of a petition) 12 days after the war in Gaza

broke out and expressing support for the Palestinians without mentioning the Hamas massacre – was signed by, among others, photographer Nan Goldin, feminist scholar Judith Butler, artists Peter Doig and Kara Walker, and also by Israelis living abroad, among them author and curator Ariella Azoulay and architect Eyal Weizman.

Shortly after the letter's publication, the editor of Artforum, David Velasco, was fired; the publishers, Danielle McConnell and Kate Koza, declared that the text was shared "without our, or the requisite senior members of the editorial team's, prior knowledge," and did not meet the magazine's standards. At the same time, some of the signatories requested that their names be removed from the list.

The scars of the war have also been evident with respect to the Documenta contemporary art show, one of the most important art events in the world, held every five years in Kassel, Germany. Even though the next Documenta is scheduled for 2027, preparations have already begun – but all six members of the team charged with selecting its artistic director have resigned, for different reasons related to the Israel-Hamas war, in recent weeks. First to leave was Tel Aviv-based artist Bracha Ettinger, who cited the Documenta staff's insensitivity toward the situation she found herself in because of the war – for example, by insisting she participate in Zoom meetings during attacks on Israel. She was followed by curator and critic Ranjt Hoskote, who came under fire for signing a BDS petition in 2019 and was criticized for being antisemitic, but said his sympathy for the Palestinian cause was now being misrepresented as support for Hamas. He added that he was worried that in "such a toxic atmosphere," Documenta's "historic openness to a diversity of

positions" would be jeopardized. Then the other four committee members left.

Alana Kushnir, a legal expert in the field of art and a curator, shared Ettinger's feelings and made a similar decision. Until recently, Kushnir, who is Jewish and works with galleries and museums in Australia, was a member of the board of directors of the Australian Center for Contemporary Art. But after October 7 her world was severely jolted.

"I started to see that many artists, who until then exhibited within the framework of the center and with whom I was in contact, were posting content which I thought was problematic at the very least," she says. "Many referred to Hamas' terrorism within the broader context of the occupation, some called to boycott the Zionists and stop cooperating with them, and there were also those who went further. One gallerist, named Matt Chung, talked about the need 'to attack, conquer and harm' Israel and Zionists."

Kushnir drew the attention of the art center's board members to these issues, but they ignored her. She began to clash with the artists on Instagram, attempting to explain to them why their posts were problematic. In response, Chung wrote in a post that the lawyer-curator is an "full-blown Zionist" who criticizes artists every time Israel "commits genocide."

This time the board members did respond. They summoned Kushnir to an urgent meeting at which they confronted her with Chung's allegations. They refused to present screenshots of the allegedly threatening messages she had posted, she states. "I felt humiliated. They pushed me aside and did not refer to the antisemitic allegations of Chang and others. Part of my job is to

raise donations, and I simply couldn't see how I could urge people to support ACCA. I decided to resign."

That feeling of "betrayal by the industry" has also been evident in the past two months in the world of fashion. After Israeli designer Dorit Bar Or posted a clip expressing support for Israel on her Instagram account, pro-Palestinian web influencers called for a consumer boycott against her, and clothes she designed were removed from shopping sites such as Matches, Net-a-Porter and others.

Indeed, the fashion arena was quickly divided between Palestinian supporters and Israel supporters. Social media messages posted by both sides exerted pressure on models, designers, brands and fashion houses to take a stand on the war in Gaza, and many hurried to adopt the keffiyeh as a sign of their support for Palestinian resistance, or a Star of David pendant as an expression of Israeli and Jewish patriotism. At an early stage the fashion media mostly seemed to support an anti-Israeli narrative, including calls to liberate Palestine and stop "the war crimes that Israel is committing against the Palestinians," by means of harshly anti-Israeli declarations, illustrations and other images. There was an outburst of efforts to label certain fashion brands as pro-Palestine or pro-Israel based on their campaigns on Instagram.

Such phenomena have spilled over into other realms, of course. There was controversy surrounding three Israeli directors of Hörl in Berlin, one of the most important electronic-music radio stations in the world, a platform that every self-respecting deejay wants to be affiliated with. Back home in Israel they were assailed for continuing to host pro-Palestinian deejays, expressing support for both sides in the war, and lamenting the

indiscriminate killing of Palestinians in Gaza. There were vilifications and calls for a boycott against them because they came out against the October 7 massacre, and yet refused to condemn Israel unilaterally. Meanwhile, commenters persistently noted that the directors had served in the IDF.

Collateral damage

This problematic climate, which seems to be seeping into all fields of culture now, could cause collateral damage: Artists and performers in Israel, or those who wish to continue doing business with Israel, may "cancel" themselves instead of waiting for others to do it. Here, too, there is a Russia-related precedent. "The Snow Forest," a novel by the American writer Elizabeth Gilbert ("Eat, Pray, Love"), whose plot is set in mid-20th century Siberia, was due to come out in 2024, but furious online pro-Ukrainian reactions induced her to delay its publication. "It is not the time for this book to be published," she stated, and triggered a debate over the boundaries of freedom of expression.

Indeed, many Israeli film producers are already apprehensive about sending entries to official competitions, in the knowledge that many of the decision-makers at the major festivals of Europe aren't considered to be sympathetic to Israel.

"In my circle of young producers, the question has arisen of whether it's even worth sending films to European festivals at this time," says the producer Harel Ben Melech from Tiarafilms. "The first in a series of major events is the Berlin Festival [in February], and it costs a lot of money to submit an entry, so it's not clear whether there's any point. It's not a new thing that Zionist films don't really succeed, rather pro-Palestinian films that come from within [Israel]."

However, producer Katriel Schory, a former head of the Israel Film Fund and now a juror at a number of international competitions – including the Tallinn Festival – is urging filmmakers not to be deterred. "What are you talking about? You have to send in an entry," he says. "At worst you'll get a negative reply."

In Schory's view, Israel's situation in the cinematic world bears no resemblance to that of Russia, despite being unpleasant.

"We're absolutely not there," he says. "I know that an Israeli film has already been accepted by the Rotterdam International Film Festival – and the Dutch cultural realm isn't the friendliest in the world just now. I myself am invited to workshops, all of which are funded by the European Union or the European Council, and I don't see that it has stopped because I'm an Israeli. I don't know what things will be like in another month, but at the moment I don't feel a change on the ground."

Importation problems

Along with the difficulty of exporting Israel culture in the shadow of war, a new problem has arisen: bringing international culture to Israel. This is likely to be a critical issue for organizers of concerts, festivals and other events. Moreover, local museums may be hard pressed to launch exhibitions by foreign artists, and film producers will be less likely to obtain funds from cultural foundations overseas.

The Israel Museum, for example, is deploying for the possibility that exhibitions planned for the near future will be canceled, and they're working on alternatives.

"There are exhibitions for which works are supposed to arrive from abroad, but it's possible we won't receive them because of

the war," says veteran curator Suzanne Landau, the Jerusalem museum's acting director. "This might happen for concrete reasons, because of the museums' concern of risking their works, and it's also possible that artists will not want to travel to or take part in exhibitions in Israel. The insurance costs for works being sent to countries at war also increase a great deal, and they will remain so for a long time after the war will end. So we must be prepared for every scenario."

Lior Avitzur, artistic director of the renowned Batsheva Dance Company, also cites the problem of bringing international troupes to Israel, but in the same breath says that his company's tours abroad haven't been canceled. "Our ability to bring creative artists to Israel in order to work here will become more complicated than our ability to go on tours abroad. [Our performances] haven't been canceled at the moment, rather postponed. We agreed on that together with our partners – agents, theater directors, producers – based on our feeling that a complex discussion must be held that takes account of the political state of affairs and the public mood, but won't involve declarations like 'Together we'll win' or whatever."

Avshalom Pollak, an actor, choreographer and director of an eponymous dance troupe, is not perturbed by the situation. "One of the biggest punishments of artistic and creative work is that you are always dependent on someone, be it governments or sponsors or donors and audiences," he observes. "But you always find a way. Solutions are found."

However, those solutions fall short in certain spheres. Filmmaking, for example, which is dependent more than the other arts on the support of festivals and European funding. "In Israel a film receives support to the tune of 3 million shekels

[presently \$810,000], which is zilch," producer Ben Melech says. She wonders whether hatred of Israel will fade, because people tend to forget things, but realizes that that could take a long time. "What interests me is whether the industry will decline to the extent that what has happened in Russia and Ukraine will happen to us."

Interestingly, in the 2022 Eurovision song contest Russia was boycotted and Ukraine won. This year Israel is the current odds-on favorite, apparently because of the war. Although this is an amusing development, since neither a singer nor a song has yet been selected, the sympathetic approach toward Israel at the competition might actually overcome the calls for a boycott. That, at any rate, is the view of Alon Amir, a Eurovision commentator and head of the Israeli delegation in two highly charged venues: Baku, Azerbaijan and Malmo, Sweden, a city that the Israeli delegation dubbed "Ramalmo," he notes (a reference to Ramallah, in the West Bank).

"The call to boycott Russia did not come from the European Broadcasting Union, which oversees Eurovision," Amir points out. "It originated with European broadcasting networks that identified with Ukraine. Initially the EBU issued a statement that everyone would participate, and the next day retracted it under pressure of the networks. But we are not in the same situation. We are the attacked side. It's hard for me to believe that Israel will be ousted. That said, I would advise officials at the broadcasting authority here to speak with their counterparts in the broadcasting organizations and networks – to prepare the ground already now."

Double whammy

And if all this weren't complicated enough, there's yet another aspect in the realm of cancellations and boycotts in the world of culture: the fears harbored by Palestinian artists who are citizens of Israel, who are worried they will suffer a double whammy.

"We are taking the heaviest flak from both sides," says Nazareth-based photographer and video artist Rafat Zriek. "The Israelis don't trust us, while on the other side, the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza see us as traitors. October 7 was a blow to us, too. Israeli Arabs were also killed, Bedouin were abducted. The Israeli side takes no account of them and behaves toward us with frightening coarseness and fascist attitudes, even though I think that many Arabs in Israel are disappointed by what happened, frightened by what Hamas did. After all, we live here together."

Israel's attitude toward the Palestinian artists and creators in question is stirring a deep concern that eventually little or no patience will be shown to anyone who shares the views of the Palestinian mainstream. Signs of that approach were evident years ago, when there were calls to stop state funding for films "that slander Israel abroad." Just this year, Culture Minister Miki Zohar pushed for revocation of the funding for the documentary film "H2: The Occupation Lab," which depicts the ordeals of the occupation in Hebron, because it "promotes our enemy's narrative." Such moves could now become more widespread.

"The massacre [on October 7], and the possible sin of Israel sacrificing the hostages will give rise among us to hatred and guilt feelings that will shape society for decades and generate endless violence," Leshem, the screenwriter, predicts. "In the

face of that, a culture that is free is more critical than ever – to process, to vent feelings, to illuminate, to give hope. The problem is that Israel's governments have been working for years to put culture to death, in contrast to every Western society, where it has establishment support. If at the same time the path to [foreign] co-productions is also blocked, all we'll see on the screen is propaganda and infantile entertainment."

In such a reality, we really will turn into something like Putin's Russia – not only in the eyes of the world, but in terms of our own attitudes toward ourselves. And that, above all, must never be allowed to happen.

Click the alert icon to follow topics:

 2023 Israel-Gaza War  Israel culture

