



Spotlight on Iran



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From Islamic filmmaker to “propagandist working for the Zionists”: Film director Makhmalbaf’s visit to Israel sparks controversy in Iran

In recent days Iranian film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s visit to Israel for the Jerusalem International Film Festival is causing a public and media outcry in Iran and in the Iranian exile community.

This week the head of the Cinema Organization at the Ministry of Islamic Guidance instructed the director of the Film Museum to remove all exhibits pertaining to Makhmalbaf, including dozens of international awards won by the film director over the years that were contributed to the museum by his family.

Some elements of the conservative right lashed out against Makhmalbaf and branded him a traitor. The conservative media, which provided extensive coverage of his visit to Israel, accused him of collaborating with Israel, the West, and the Baha’is. Criticism against Makhmalbaf is also being voiced by supporters of the reformist camp and even regime opponents in Iran and elsewhere. Approximately 150 intellectuals, academics, and human rights activists of Iranian descent released a public letter condemning the film director’s visit to Israel. On the other hand, about 80 academics and political activists of Iranian descent released a letter in support of the visit and of the film director’s call to strengthen the friendship between the peoples of Iran and Israel.

Film Museum to be “cleansed” of awards won by Makhmalbaf

This week Javad Shamaqdari, head of the Cinema Organization at the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, instructed the Iranian Film Museum to remove all exhibits pertaining to film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf in the wake of his last week’s visit to Israel.

Shamaqdari instructed the museum director to “cleanse” the museum of exhibits dedicated to the filmmaker, which include dozens of international awards he has won over the years. In a letter sent to the museum director, Shamaqdari said that Makhmalbaf, who created his first ten movies with the support of “revolutionary institutions and government organizations” in Iran, is now taking the side of “the occupiers of Jerusalem and the criminal Zionism”, praising them, and preaching for peace and religious piety based on the British-created “stray faith” (a term used to refer to the Baha’i religion). Shamaqdari said it is appropriate to cleanse the museum of all items pertaining to Makhmalbaf in the month of Ramadan, the last Friday of which is a day for millions of Muslims to express their solidarity with the fight on Zionism (<http://isna.ir/fa/news/92042314373>).

In response to the directive issued by the head of the Cinema Organization, Makhmalbaf’s family released a statement demanding the return of all the awards it contributed to the museum. The awards, the announcement said, belong to Iran’s artistic history and were handed over to the museum on the condition that they were kept safe. The family members stressed that, according to the contract they signed with the museum to ensure that the awards could not be damaged or confiscated by the authorities, the awards were donated to the museum provided that it could keep them safe. If it cannot, the museum must return them to the Makhmalbaf family as soon as possible until such time as they can be returned to the people of Iran (<https://khodnevis.org/article/51714#.UeQdamtBS1t>).

At the same time, film director Fereydoun Jeyrani released a public letter addressed to Shamaqdari, saying that the Iranian cinema’s past involves all Iranians and calling him to avoid mixing politics with the cinema’s past. Jeyrani said that the Film Museum deals with history and the past, and that the past has nothing to do with the present. He called on the head of the Cinema Organization to revoke his directive and keep the museum immune to politics (<http://www.isna.ir/fa/news/92042414604>).

Makhmalbaf: from Islamic revolutionary to collaborator with the Zionists

Makhmalbaf, born 1957, is one of the most prominent film directors in the new wave of Iranian cinema, and has so far directed over 20 movies. Many of them have been screened at international film festivals and won awards. When he was young, he was involved in underground Islamic activity for which he was sentenced to four and a half years in prison. He was released after the Islamic revolution and became an author

and filmmaker. In 2005 he went into exile in Paris and became a strong critic of the Iranian regime.

Last week Makhmalbaf was at the Jerusalem Film Festival for a screening of his documentary *The Gardener*, shot in the Baha'i World Center in Haifa. Speaking at a press conference he held during his visit to Israel, Makhmalbaf called for the promotion of peace and friendship between the peoples of Iran and Israel. He also said that Israel would be better advised to support the democratic forces in Iran rather than launch a military attack.

In recent days Makhmalbaf's visit to Israel is causing a public and media outcry in Iran and in the Iranian exile community. Some elements of the conservative right lashed out against the film director and accused him of treason. Mohammad-Nabi Habibi, chairman of the conservative Islamic Coalition Party, said it was hardly a surprise that a person who supported the 2009 riots ended up in Haifa and Tel Aviv, since the Zionists were the root cause of the riots. Makhmalbaf, who took advantage of his art to disgrace the Islamic revolution, is now in the service of Israel, the final stop for those who work against the revolution. In a pun on the director's name, Habibi said that Makhmalbaf gets his "nonsense spinning" (*mehmal-bafi*) money from the enemies (<http://alef.ir/vdcgtx9qtak9yy4.rpra.html?192944>).

Media affiliated with the conservative right provided extensive coverage of Makhmalbaf's visit to Israel and accused him of collaborating with Israel, the West, and the Baha'is. According to Fars News Agency, the filmmaker has gone from being a revolutionary to a propagandist working for the Baha'is and the Zionists, and his visit to Israel is part of the "soft war" in which Iran's enemies turn Iranian artists into traitors in the service of the West. Having already created "pornographic and anti-Iranian themed" movies, Makhmalbaf is now showing a new film that openly preaches the Baha'i faith, Fars said (<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920422001057>).

The daily Resalat also lashed out against Makhmalbaf and accused him of treason. An editorial published by the daily said that his trip to Israel to shoot a film about the Baha'is is "treason against the nation" and part of a project directed by Iran's enemies whose objective is to turn Muslim artists into traitors against their people and the whole of humanity. Israel is the final stop for the "homeland sellers", the article said, and it's not just plans to assassinate nuclear scientists that are devised in the Zionist war room—it's also plans for a war on all fronts against the Iranian nation and the Muslim peoples. Part of this war effort could be seen in the film director's visit to Israel and the

press conference he held in Jerusalem. His public visit to Israel and the screening of his "traitorous work" that protects the Baha'is expose Israel's covert activity against Iran in the cultural sphere (<http://www.resalat-news.com/Fa/?code=146506>).

News websites affiliated with the pragmatic conservative camp and even with reformist elements also criticized Makhmalbaf's visit to Israel. Reformist journalist Ali Shokouhi attacked the filmmaker in an article published on the Ayandeh website. Shokouhi wrote that he was greatly influenced by Makhmalbaf's work from an early age, and that even when his films began criticizing the regime, he himself had reservations about the massive attack that was launched against Makhmalbaf by the Iranian media. He noted, however, that since leaving Iran in 2005, Makhmalbaf has taken the side of the enemies of his country. A man who says that he has removed himself from politics and works for the promotion of peace between nations cannot ignore the fact that participating in a festival organized by Israel and collaborating with Baha'i organizations is clearly a political act, Shokouhi said.

According to Shokouhi, Makhmalbaf has turned a blind eye to the crimes committed by Israel against the Palestinians and recognized the existence of an occupying regime. He called for peace and friendship between the peoples of Iran and Israel instead of fighting the grievous wrong inflicted by the Zionists upon millions of Palestinians and the new holocaust they are creating in the Middle East. Even those who oppose the Islamic republic and criticize the regime need to make sure that their resistance to the regime does not clash with other important political struggles waged across the globe. Unfortunately, Makhmalbaf's visit to Jerusalem proves that Iran's fight against imperialism and Zionism may bring regime opponents and the enemies of the Iranian nation to cooperate with each other, Shokouhi concluded (<http://ayandehonline.com/?a=content.id&id=1787>).

The Khabar Online website, too, published a post criticizing the visit. The author of the post said that he has always had respect for Makhmalbaf and his intellectual integrity and thought him to be loyal to himself and driven by sincere faith in his principles and opinions, even if they are deserving of criticism. In the author's eyes, Makhmalbaf is a much more respectable filmmaker than Iranian filmmakers who rely on government support and funding.

However, his visit to Jerusalem and his willingness to receive an award from the organizers of a festival directly supported by the Israeli government call his integrity into question. Makhmalbaf has forgotten the apartheid practiced by Israel against the

Palestinians every day and ignores the movement to boycott Israel, led by human rights activists across the globe whose motivations are humane rather than ideological or political. He visits Israel and talks about peace in a place where peace is trodden underfoot (<http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/303314>).

The post drew a number of comments from the website readers, who also expressed their appreciation for the filmmaker while criticizing his visit to Israel. One of them wrote that there can be no talk of peace and love in a place where crimes are committed, citizens are killed, and human rights are violated. Another reader claimed that Makhmalbaf is a “good filmmaker” but a “bad Iranian”. Still another wrote that while he supports establishing relations with the United States, support for Israel is not something he can stand for.



An exceptional reaction to Makhmalbaf’s visit to Israel was published in the reformist newspaper Ebtekar. An editorial published by the daily this week said that, even if the filmmaker’s way is deserving of criticism, his willingness to admit his past mistakes is praiseworthy. Makhmalbaf’s way reflects the political changeover that he has undergone. He and his fellow filmmakers worked to purge the “corrupt” Iranian cinema and turned it into an instrument for the new regime to fight against its enemies from within and without. In just a few years he radically revised his views and went from being a symbol of post-revolutionary Islamic cinema to the target of an unprecedented attack launched by his critics, who denounced his films, portrayed him as “anti-Muslim”, and did not allow him to continue working in his own country.

Even if there is justification for criticizing the path followed by Makhmalbaf, Ebtekar said, the rabid attack against him reflects a hysteria characteristic of his critics in the

conservative camp. His critics belong to a group that considered Ahmadinejad to be the savior of Iran, Islam, and the regime, but shortly changed its mind and began attacking the president as a symbol of the “deviant faction”. That is a group of radicals who believe themselves to be the only true Muslims and consider anyone who does not share their opinion a heretic and a traitor. They will not accept any alternative interpretation of Islam and the revolution, think that truth is always on their side, and demand that everyone else yield to their opinion.

Makhmalbaf also underwent quick and sudden changes, the article said, but unlike his critics, he is willing to openly admit his past mistakes. On the other hand, “admission” is not a word in his critics’ dictionary—they will never admit their mistakes and think that it is only others who can be in the wrong (<http://www.ebtekarnews.com/Ebtekar/News.aspx?NID=117790>).

Differences of opinion about the visit among the Iranian regime’s opponents

Criticism against Makhmalbaf is also being voiced by the Iranian regime’s critics inside Iran and by the Iranian exile community. Approximately 150 intellectuals, academics, authors, artists, journalists, and human rights activists released a public letter addressed to Makhmalbaf condemning the film director’s visit to Israel and his participation in the Jerusalem Film Festival. The signatories argued that the visit was a violation of the cultural and academic boycott imposed on Israel due to its anti-Palestinian policy. An artist who is so conscious of the political violence used in his country cannot ignore the boycott imposed on Israel, which is intended to pressure it into changing its policy and respect the rights of the Palestinians. Makhmalbaf, the letter said, allows Israel to take advantage of the visit as an instrument of propaganda while pursuing its colonial policy against the Palestinians and encouraging the policy of sanctions against the people of Iran (<http://www.k-ve.com/2013/07/002makhmalbafjuresalam.html>).

One of the signatories, blogger and human rights activist Kaveh Reza’i, wrote on his personal blog that while he used to be proud of Makhmalbaf as an Iranian, lately he has been ashamed to have the filmmaker as his fellow countryman. He accused Makhmalbaf of becoming an instrument of propaganda for the Israeli government, and argued that there is no justification for taking part in the Jerusalem Film Festival while ignoring the happenings in the Palestinian Authority territories, Israel’s policy towards Israeli Arabs, and its crimes in Lebanon (<http://www.k-ve.com/2013/07/001cinemamakhmalbafjuresalam.html>).



At the same time, about 80 political activists and academics of Iranian descent signed a letter expressing support for Makhmalbaf's visit to Israel and for his message of friendship from the people of Iran to the people of Israel. The letter stated that supporting the rights of the Palestinian people is not a justification for criticizing the visit. The signatories also expressed support for the film director's call for Israel to prefer supporting the democratic forces in Iran over launching a military attack (<http://news.gooya.com/politics/archives/2013/07/163443.php>).