

## Bahrain and Lebanon Withdraw From the Venice Biennale Due to Mideast Turmoil, While Egypt's Participation Is Uncertain



Courtesy Robert Goff Gallery

"Untitled," 2009, by Ahmed Mousdani, who will participate in Iraq's first Biennale pavilion since 1976

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By **Kate Deimling**, ARTINFO France

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It is no surprise that the popular uprisings sweeping the Middle East should have an impact on the Venice Biennale, the international showcase of art, culture, and political soft power, and now the first embattled countries have begun to withdraw from participation. Bahrain, the tiny Gulf nation that was to make its first appearance at the Biennale this year, has backed out amid violent crackdowns at home, and Lebanon has likewise called off its sophomore pavilion. Meanwhile, Egypt's participation remains something of a question mark.

Bahrain's inability to send an artist to Venice is especially unfortunate since last year the country had its first appearance at the **Venice Architecture Biennale** and walked away with the **Golden Lion** for best pavilion. Curated by architects **Noura Al-Sayeh** and **Fuad Al-Ansari**, the national display [focused on plans to develop areas along its shores where water has receded and included three traditional fisherman's huts](#). The jury was impressed with its "lucid and forceful self-analysis of the nation's relationship with its rapidly changing coastline." It is unclear whether Bahrain had already chosen a curator and artist for its appearance in the Venice Biennale this June.

As for Lebanon, it skipped the 2009 Biennale but had its own national pavilion for the first time in 2007, curated by **Saleh Barakat** and **Sandra Daghe** with the participation of artists **Fouad Elkoury**, **Lamia Joreige**, **Walid Sadek**, **Mounira Al Solh**, and **Akram Zaatari**. The exhibit had the official support of Lebanon, but was funded by private donations from the Lebanese community. The 2007 curators' statement said that Lebanon was joining the Biennale "at a time of grave political crisis in the country — when the concept of the nation has once again been called rather roughly, even violently into question."

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This time around political instability has led the country to withdraw from the event entirely. The curator was to have been **Georges Rabbath**, who had titled the pavilion "Lebanon As a State of Mind." Ten artists were to have been featured: **Annabel Daou**, **Etel Adnan**, **Marya Kazoun**, **Cornelia Krafft**, **Ricardo Mbarkho**, **Samer Mohdad**, **Jacko Restikian**, **Shawki Youssef**, **Camille Zakharia**, and **CPS (Chamber of Public Secrets)**. Daou, who grew up in Lebanon and moved to the United States at age 18, told **ARTINFO** that she received a letter from the culture minister about 10 days ago stating that Lebanon would not participate in the Biennale. Daou said that "I thought possibly there might be issues... obviously these things are difficult," but that she didn't expect the pavilion to be canceled after plans were so advanced. Lebanon's coalition government fell apart in January, and so far the country has been unable to form a new one.

As for the status of Egypt's participation, despite Biennale president **Paolo Baratta's** announcement at a Friday press conference that the country would not participate in the exhibition this year, it seems the country does in fact plan to proceed. According to **Fatenn Mostafa** of the **Cairo Arts Initiative**, newly-appointed culture minister **Emad Abou Ghazi** has confirmed Egypt's participation in the Biennale and has chosen **Ahmed Bassiouny** to represent the country. A Biennale representative, however, told **ARTINFO** that the organizers are awaiting "confirmation or any communication from Egypt."

Bassiouny died on the fourth day of Egypt's uprising, and Mostafa told **ARTINFO** that the pavilion will showcase the late artist's "work as well as his January 25 revolution videos," according to Mostafa. Already an icon of the revolution, Bassiouny was depicted by Cairo artist **Ganzeer** in his portrait series of martyred

[activists](#). In 2009, the Egyptian pavilion showed the work of artists **Adel el Siwi** and **Ahmed Askalany**, which [the Independent's Michael Glover](#) called "the tenderest and most haunting work in the Giardini."

In another positive piece of Biennale news from the region, Iraq, dealing with its own postwar turmoil, will nevertheless present its first pavilion in Venice since 1976, under the curatorship of **Mary Angela Schroth** and with support from Iraq's ministry of culture, the **Arab Fund for Arts and Culture**, and the Iraq embassy in Italy. Two generations of Iraqi artists will be presented, starting with **Ali Assaf**, **Azad Nanakli**, and **Walid Siti**, who were born in the 1950s. **Abel Abidin**, **Halim Al Karim**, and **Ahmed Alsoudani** represent a later generation that grew up during the Iran-Iraq War and the invasion of Kuwait.

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