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Leading Figures in the Art World Support Palestinian Artist Sentenced to Death for Apostasy

BY NATALIE ILSLEY 11/27/15 AT 12:40 PM

Global artists have condemned a Saudi court's decision to sentence Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh to death.

Artists and poets across the the U.K., North America and Africa—including British poet Carol Ann Duffy, Syrian poet Adonis and Saudi artist Ahmed Mater—have denounced the ruling by a court in Saudi Arabia on November 17 to sentence Fayadh to death, after he allegedly renounced the Islamic faith.

“We don't want to lose him,” says Mater, a close friend of Fayadh's and a member of London-based art organization Edge of Arabia, speaking by phone in Saudi Arabia. “He's been a very close friend and the last thing we want to witness is his death.”

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The Palestinian poet and artist, who was born and still lives in Saudi Arabia, co-curated an exhibition in 2013 titled “Rhizoma,” organized by Edge of Arabia, at the Venice Biennale. He also curated a show in a shopping center in Jeddah, a Saudi Arabian port city, in the same year, which featured emerging Saudi artists.

The General Court of Abha, a court in the south of Saudi Arabia, says that Fayadh made comments about God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Saudi state during a group discussion in a café, according to trial documents reviewed by non-governmental organization [Human Rights Watch](#) (HRW).

Members of Saudi Arabia's religious police—the Committee on the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice—originally arrested Fayadh on August 6, 2013, following a complaint made by a citizen. The court subsequently sentenced the artist in May last year to four years in prison and submitted him to 800 lashes.

The court retried Fayadh earlier this month, after his appeal was dismissed by a new panel of judges in May 2014. The poet continues to deny making the remarks and says that another man attending the group, in fact, said it.

Since the court handed the death sentence to the Palestinian artist, leading individuals from the world's art scene have spoken out in condemnation against the charges.

Members from more than a dozen artistic associations from the U.K., North America and Africa—including the [Society of Authors](#) and the [International Association of Art Critics](#)—will sign statements denouncing the charges.

More than 200 poets and writers joined the writers associations PEN International and English PEN in calling for Fayadh's immediate release, after signing a [letter](#) on Friday condemning the death sentence.

Stephen Stapleton, co-founder of Edge of Arabia, has known the artist for 12 years. He praised Fayadh for “pioneering artistic experimentalism” in Saudi Arabia, but cautioned against an international overreaction as it could interfere with the outcome of the his appeal.

Having spoken with him since being sentenced, Stapleton told *Newsweek* that the artist is very grateful for the international response and coverage. But, he stressed that he is not against anyone and does not want to be a martyr for some cause.

Saudi artist Mater also stressed the dangers of an overreaction. “People need to be careful about what they say, as we fear too much coverage will damage the case.” He also called the court's decision as “unexpected,” saying that many other Palestinian artists are upset and distressed by the sentence.

Bisan Abu Eiseh, a 30-year-old Palestinian artist currently living in Glasgow, spoke about the incomprehensibility of the situation. “As an artist, I could not imagine myself in [Fayadh's] position. We are supposed to be creative, speaking in a different language that transforms artistic ideas and thoughts into messages across the world,” he said.

“As a Palestinian, I cannot understand the Saudi government's ruling. I could not imagine being endangered as a creative person because my ideas are opposing the government—especially in a neighboring country where people speak our language.”

Chris Dercon, the director Tate Modern in London, told [the Guardian](#) newspaper that Fayadh was a “victim of the power struggles among reformists, pragmatists and ultraconservatives in the Gulf state.

“Ashraf is someone who is outspoken and daring,” Dercon said, who met the Palestinian artist two years ago during a trip to Saudi Arabia. “The show he put together [in Jeddah] was very daring.”

Canadian-based contemporary arts magazine *Reorient*, which specializes in Middle Eastern artworks, also praised Fayadh for “actively promoting contemporary art of Saudi Arabia.” Joobin Bekhrad, editor and founder of *Reorient*, tells *Newsweek* via email: “This is a sad and disappointing moment for both humanity and morality, as well as the nascent contemporary art scene in Saudi.”

He added: “Against all odds, the seeds of a flourishing art scene with much promise are being sown inside the Kingdom; to realise its full potential, the scene needs as much support as it can get, and its exponents given the attention they deserve, both inside the country as well as outside.”

Fayadh is not the first person to be sentenced for crimes of apostasy. In February 2015, a Saudi court [sentenced a man from Saudi Arabia](#) to death for allegedly posting a video to YouTube showing him tearing pages of the Quran.

Adam Coogle, a Middle Eastern Researcher for HRW, condemned the Saudi legal system. “This is another example of Saudi Arabia problematic justice system,” Coogle tells *Newsweek*. “We have seen many egregious punishments handed out this year when, really in some cases, shouldn’t even be crimes.”

On Tuesday, [Amnesty International](#) launched an urgent action appeal calling for Fayadh’s release and denounced the Saudi court’s refusal for the poet and artist’s request for legal representation.

Fayadh has 30 days to appeal against the court’s decision.

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