

## Israeli film fund closes Palestinian loophole: Creators must pledge to be 'Israeli'

After local Arab filmmaker accepted large grant, then registered movie as 'Palestinian' at Venice Film Festival, country's two big film foundations close loophole.

By Nirit Anderman 09:27 27.01.15 2

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It all began following the controversy last summer over the decision by Israeli Arab director Suha Arraf to list her film "Villa Touma" at the Venice Film Festival as a Palestinian film. Arraf sees herself as a Palestinian artist and views "Villa Touma," which deals with Palestinian characters in a Palestinian setting, as Palestinian as well. She decided to list the film at the prestigious Venice festival as Palestinian accordingly.

When her decision became public, it caused a media storm in Israel. The film had been funded by three Israeli public entities – the Israel Film Fund, the Economy Ministry and the Mifal Hapayis lottery commission. Ultimately Arraf changed the nationality designation for the film to "no nationality," but the Culture and Sports Ministry, which provides funding to the Israel Film Fund, demanded that the fund return the grant that the film received. The Economy Ministry demanded the same directly of Arraf. The film fund ultimately decided not to demand that Arraf return the fund's grant, and instead absorbed the 1.4 million shekel (\$353,000) loss itself in repaying the Culture Ministry.

### Contract addendum

Cinema project staff at the Yehoshua Rabinovich Foundation for the Arts – which, with the Israel Film Fund, is one of the country's two largest film funds – decided to avoid similar occurrences with the films it supports. The foundation wrote an addendum to the contracts it signs with the creators of films it invests in, requiring directors to declare: "I, the director of (name of film), view myself as an Israeli creator of an Israeli creation. I promise I will present, register and identify myself as such in every forum and in every medium in which there is a reference in any manner to the film, its creators or its producers."

Rabinovich Foundation director general Giora Einy explains that film foundations in Israel are obligated to support only films by Israeli creators. "We are not allowed to give support without Israelis [involved] and in any event support only creators who are Israeli citizens," he says. "And we asked our legal counsel to protect us against what happened at the Israel Film Fund. We provide about 2 million shekels in support per film, and I am not prepared [to be penalized 1.4 million shekels like the Israel Film Fund was] because of some idiot whose film we supported who then decides all of a sudden to declare that he has no nationality. Therefore we tell him up front: 'Please declare, sir, that you are Israeli and that you will display all of the logos in your film as required.'

"We have protected ourselves against the worse case," Einy says. "If the director defines himself as an Israeli-Palestinian, I have no problem with that, but he needs to also say that he's Israeli and feature the logo of the fund and that of the Ministry of Culture and Sports in the film."

After being penalized in connection with the Arraf film, the Israel Film Fund also inserted a change into its contracts with grant recipients, requiring them to promise to represent their films as Israeli at any screening or representation.

It should be noted that these two foundations are the only ones to fund full-length Israeli feature films and both get allocations from the government. (The Rabinovich Foundation also supports documentaries and student films).

### 'Nationalistic, dark rule'

"It's saddening that the film world has become jealous of the nationalistic legislation of recent times and has invented a nationalistic, dark rule of its own," says young producer Nadav Lapid, whose work includes "Policeman" and "Haganenet" ("The Kindergarten Teacher"). "A place with altruism and self-confidence would have been able to show understanding and consideration for the contradictions and difficulties that Arab directors in Israel find themselves in. This demand [by the film funds] teaches more than anything about a discomfort with oneself, a difficulty looking in the mirror and an attempt to assuage an unclear conscience through heartless, bureaucratic regulations.

"Films are created first of all, and perhaps only, by individuals who sometimes, like their work, skip around from identity to identity and from [self-] definition to [self-] definition. Anyone who demands that they commit to one definition and identity is apparently deeply flawed in understanding what art and freedom are, and in any event, the two things are linked."

The Israel Film and Television Directors Guild said in response: "We are looking into the issue and will set up a meeting with the director general of the Rabinovich Foundation." Comment from the Culture and Sports Ministry to the new terms required of grant recipients by the Israel Film Fund and the Rabinovich Foundation was not available at press time.

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