

Censorship of artist Basma al-Sharif continues: Germany's foreign ministry reprimands Goethe-Institut for showcasing her work

Sybille Fuchs
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State censorship efforts are once again being directed against an artist with Palestinian roots. Foreign Minister Johann Wadepuhl's (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) ministry has reprimanded the Goethe-Institut for allowing a work by Basma al-Sharif to be shown in an exhibition in Lithuania.

The Goethe-Institut is a non-profit cultural institution that operates worldwide to promote the study of the German language and international cultural exchange. It is funded primarily by the German government.

The exhibition in question, shown from October 2025 to March 2026, was a collaboration between the Contemporary Art Centre Vilnius (CAC), the Goethe-Institut and the Academy of Arts in Berlin. It was curated by the CAC under a title that is particularly resonant given the wars currently raging: *Bells and Cannons—Contemporary Art in the Face of Militarisation*.

As part of the exhibition, al-Sharif's installation *Deep Sleep* was shown. This meditative, dreamlike video was shot in 2024 in abandoned ruins in Malta, Athens and Gaza. It links these locations to convey the destruction in Gaza to the viewer. Colourful, flickering lights; sun, earth, stone, rock, sky and water flood the scenes, accompanied by rhythmic sounds of waves, bells and footsteps. The installation closely aligned with the exhibition's theme, which alludes to the historical practice of melting down church bells during the First and Second World Wars to manufacture cannons and ammunition.

Al-Sharif has been demonised by the government as an antisemite and an Israel-hater because, in view of the genocidal actions of the Israeli armed forces in Gaza, she posted pro-Palestinian content on her Instagram account, including a call to boycott Israel. Because she referred to the State of Israel as a "Zionist entity," she has been accused of "denying Israel's right to exist."

Goethe-Institut officials stated they regretted not having been aware of these posts, claiming they were incompatible with its values. The German foreign ministry, which provides the bulk of the institute's funding, made it clear that "greater diligence is necessary in the planning and conception of events with cooperation partners, and this is also expected by the foreign ministry." This is coded language for censorship and repression.

Düsseldorf Academy of Art: attack on university autonomy and freedom of art

Basma al-Sharif, born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents, raised in France and the US, and now living in Berlin, came under attack by Zionist groups and German authorities in February, when students at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art invited her to give a lecture and take part in a discussion.

The academy and its administration were subjected to intense pressure and threats aimed at forcing the cancellation of the event. While the rector, Donatella Fioretti, refused to cancel it outright, she did yield to the extent that the student-organised event was held internally and without a public audience. The *World Socialist Web Site* reported on this.

Political pressure on the academy did not subside. A petition—signed by Düsseldorf Mayor Stephan Keller (CDU)—demanded Fioretti's resignation. She was summoned before the Committee for Culture and Media of the North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) state parliament, where she was fiercely attacked by Culture Minister Ina Brandes (CDU) and members of all five parliamentary parties: the CDU, Social Democrats (SPD), Greens, Liberal Democrats (FDP) and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). Fioretti repeatedly appealed, but in vain, to the constitutional freedom of art, science and expression.

Cornered by political pressure, the rector finally admitted to what she described as "personal mistakes." Fioretti said she should have contacted the Jewish community and apologised, stating that her actions had contributed to a misunderstanding. When questioned, she distanced herself from the artist, saying that she "did not share the statements of Basma al-Sharif." At the same time, Fioretti insisted that the Academy of Art must remain a space where dialogue is possible.

Even this was not sufficient. Culture Minister Brandes declared that she could not understand Fioretti's behaviour, accusing her of failing to live up to her responsibilities and alleging that her position was "not a responsible appeal to freedom." Addressing the rector directly, Brandes stated: "We can do nothing against you—nothing disciplinary, nothing financial. See how much freedom you have!"

The cynicism is striking. While the Israeli government commits war crime after war crime in Gaza, the West Bank, Iran and Lebanon—bombing residential areas and killing tens of thousands of civilians—Brandes exerts pressure on the rector of an art academy simply because she allowed a Palestinian artist critical of these crimes to speak. Brandes then presents the fact that she did not unlawfully dismiss the rector as proof of "freedom"!

In an open letter, more than 1,100 academics, artists and cultural workers expressed solidarity with Fioretti. They characterised the attacks on the university for what they were: assaults on university autonomy and

academic freedom. The letter condemned the growing political interference in German universities and cultural institutions and emphasised that Article 5 of the German Constitution explicitly protects the freedom of art, science and teaching, including the right to present uncomfortable or controversial viewpoints. Such intimidation by the executive and legislative branches, they stated, was unworthy of a democracy.

The letter warned that the escalating situation could set a dangerous precedent for political intervention in constitutionally protected freedoms and university autonomy. It also sharply criticised language used in the NRW parliament's science committee, where freedom of art and science was described as a "cloak" for antisemitism, a metaphor originally introduced by the AfD and now echoed by other parties to place fundamental rights in question.

The German Rectors' Conference has also weighed in, stating:

Every university, represented by its leadership, has the right to determine for itself the forms of academic discourse within the framework of the law. Events such as those at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art must not trigger a political reflex to question constitutionally guaranteed university autonomy.

Developments in Düsseldorf underscore how justified the universities' concerns are. Comparable attacks on universities in the US under Donald Trump demonstrate the direction such policies can take.

Alleged and real antisemitism

The attacks on al-Sharif continue unabated. Alon Dorn of Düsseldorf's Jewish religious community claimed—without providing a shred of evidence—that al-Sharif's actions amount not to criticism of the Israeli government, but to the "legitimisation of violence against Jews." NRW's antisemitism commissioner, Sylvia Löhrmann (Greens), asserted that inviting al-Sharif had violated the rights of Jewish students.

This claim was contradicted in an email by a Jewish student at the Academy of Art who was jointly responsible for inviting al-Sharif and wished to remain anonymous. The student wrote:

To my knowledge, no Jewish person at the academy—whether staff or student—has been asked how they perceive the debate. This has not prevented political office-holders from unilaterally taking sides in an intimidating media campaign that disregards fundamental rights. This campaign targets our freedom as students to invite whom we choose, hospitality and empathy, and the rector of the academy.

He continued:

This is not about antisemitism. ... These actors aim to suppress diversity of opinion on Zionism among Jews. Being Jewish does not mean being a Zionist.

The email further stated:

Antisemitism is not anti-Zionism. ... As a Jewish student at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, I would welcome an independent investigation into the well-being of Jewish students at the university. It would quickly become clear that such an investigation is a waste of public funds, as there is no institutional antisemitism at the academy. It appears that some politicians participate in smear campaigns about alleged antisemitism in art and universities in order to distract from their failure to confront the real antisemitic threats in German society.

The student explained that he spoke out only reluctantly, fearing that he himself would be "cancelled." Subsequent threats against the university proved his concerns were well founded. *Monopol* magazine reported on emails and online posts containing explicit threats, including one message sent January 20, the day before the event:

We will find a way to disrupt your antisocial scum event the way antisemites otherwise do with Jewish topics ... Now we're coming for you.

Another online comment read:

You far-left HamaSS fans are now more dangerous to our democracy than the AfD ... Now we're coming for you, fascists.

Further attacks on Basma al-Sharif are already under way. She has been invited to the internationally respected Osnabrück European Media Art Festival (EMAF), where her award-winning short film *Morning Circle* is due to be screened in late April, alongside her participation in a panel discussion.

On March 30, the city of Osnabrück announced that "intensive discussions" had taken place with festival organisers, who nevertheless continued to support al-Sharif. The city subsequently distanced itself from relevant parts of the programme, and Lower Saxony's Minister-President Olaf Lies (SPD), withdrew his patronage of the festival. However, funding from the city and the state government remains intact.



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