

ARTISTIC FREEDOM INITIATIVE



Submission by Artistic Freedom Initiative & Regional Advocacy for Women's Sustainable Advancement to the Fourth Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review of the Republic of Lebanon

Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review 51st Session

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ABOUT ARTISTIC FREEDOM INITIATIVE

Established in 2017, Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) provides pro bono immigration representation and resettlement assistance for international artists at risk. AFI directly provides legal and resettlement services to artists who have experienced persecution, censorship, or other restrictions on their freedom of expression, and supports artists committed to advancing social change and fundamental human rights. AFI works with artists to promote and protect cultural heritage, as well as champion art in exile, and has partnered with artists to improve freedom of expression and advance policy changes in their home countries. At the United Nations, AFI seeks to draw international attention to the persecution of artists and to the suppression of the right to artistic expression, leading several statements, UPR recommendations, and building cross regional consensus on the issue.

ABOUT REGIONAL ADVOCACY FOR WOMEN'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Regional Advocacy for Women's Sustainable Advancement Alliance for African and Arab States- briefly RAWSA Alliance- is an ECOSOC accredited, women-led and women-majority non-profit organization with a strong track record in human rights, gender equality, and climate justice advocacy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since its establishment in 2019. RAWSA supports, empowers, and educates women and vulnerable/marginalized communities in the MENA region to reach their full potential and effectively participate across all spheres of society by knowing their rights and responsibilities and being able to make their own decisions. Indeed, RAWSA is committed to the 2030 UN SDGs Agenda through the following SDGs: SDG1 (No poverty), SDG2 (Zero hunger), SDG3 (Good health and well-being), SDG5 (Gender equality), SDG8 (Decent work and growth), SDG13 (Climate action), and SDG17 (Partnerships for the goals).

INTRODUCTION

In preparation for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the Republic of Lebanon (*hereinafter* "Lebanon") at the UPR Working Group's 51st session, this joint submission evaluates the state of artistic freedom in Lebanon from 2021 to the present. The current situation is characterized by an accelerating deterioration of artistic freedom and cultural heritage amid political, economic, and security crises. Authorities and non-state actors have increasingly targeted artists and cultural institutions through censorship, harassment, and moral policing, particularly against works exploring themes of gender, sexuality, religion, and political critique. These restrictions are

compounded by broader structural instability and armed conflict, which have devastated cultural infrastructure and has led to the mass displacement of artists and cultural workers.

FOLLOW UP TO THE PREVIOUS REVIEW

1. In the previous UPR cycle, Lebanon received 297 recommendations, of which it supported 179.¹ Lebanon supported recommendations related to the legal and general framework of implementation, universal and cross-cutting issues, civil and political rights, economic, social, and cultural rights, women's rights, and rights of other vulnerable groups and persons.²
2. Lebanon supported 13 recommendations related to freedom of opinion and expression and access to information and six recommendations related to economic, social, and cultural rights. Lebanon also supported three recommendations to foster a safe and enabling environment for civil society, journalists, human rights defenders, and minority groups, including LGBTQ+ persons, including by combating harassment and intimidation and ensuring respect for the right to peaceful protest.³
3. During the review period, Lebanon took several positive measures to support cultural heritage and build capacity in the arts sector. In November 2024, following Israel's military assault against Hezbollah in parts of Lebanon, the Lebanese government formally requested and received provisional "enhanced protection" under the Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention for 34 cultural properties.⁴ Lebanon also participated in UNESCO's "Dive into Heritage" platform to digitally document World Heritage sites from 2022-2024.⁵ In March 2024, Lebanon's Ministry of Interior, with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations (UN)-Habitat, and the European Union (EU), rehabilitated the public library at Rashid Karami Cultural Center, Nawful Palace in Tripoli.⁶ In May 2023, the Sursock Museum reopened following

¹ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Infographic: Lebanon. Geneva: OHCHR, n.d. Accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/lb-index>.

² United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Infographic: Lebanon. Geneva: OHCHR, n.d. Accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/lb-index>.

³ "Universal Periodic Review - Lebanon," Matrix of Recommendations, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/lb-index>.

⁴ "Lebanon: 34 Cultural Properties Placed under Enhanced Protection | UNESCO," November 18, 2024, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/lebanon-34-cultural-properties-placed-under-enhanced-protection>.

⁵ UNESCO Centre du patrimoine mondial, "Dive into Heritage," UNESCO Centre du patrimoine mondial, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://whc.unesco.org/fr/dive-into-heritage/>.

⁶ "United Nations and European Union Improve the Livelihoods and Employment Prospects for Youth in Tripoli and Al-Beddawi," UNDP, accessed June 16, 2025,

extensive post-blast restoration in response to the 2020 Beirut Port explosion, supported by Lebanon's Directorate General of Antiquities and UNESCO.⁷ Additionally, Lebanon submitted its periodic report under the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in July 2021, outlining efforts to protect Arabic calligraphy and traditional culinary arts. Lebanon also partnered with UNESCO to deliver educational training on integrating intangible cultural heritage into school curricula from 2021-2023.⁸

4. Despite these progressive steps toward the protection of cultural heritage and the fortification of the arts sector, Lebanon did not take meaningful action to uphold its commitments to freedom of expression. Rather than establishing long lasting protections for artistic and cultural rights, Lebanese authorities continued to enforce repressive laws that enable moral and political censorship. Lebanon did not take action to repeal Articles 473 and 474 of the Penal Code, which criminalize offenses against morality and religion, or Article 534, which is often used to target LGBTQ+ expression, despite prior recommendations to safeguard freedom of expression and eliminate repressive laws.⁹
5. Lebanon's General Security, which operates under the Ministry of the Interior, maintained its expansive censorship powers, including its pre-approval requirement for all public performances and films,¹⁰ a practice that contradicts Lebanon's support for recommendations on freedom of opinion and expression. It also routinely invokes its internal, non-statutory directives to cut or alter film and theatre scripts—mandating filmmakers to secure extra approvals from the Lebanese Army, Internal Security Forces, and political or religious groups—creating an opaque, discretionary system that disproportionately stifles women's and LGBTQ+ artists.¹¹
6. Lebanon did not make significant progress towards addressing the unique challenges faced by women and gender diverse individuals, including rising online and in person harassment

<https://www.undp.org/lebanon/press-releases/united-nations-and-european-union-improve-livelihoods-and-employment-prospects-youth-tripoli-and-al-beddawi>.

⁷ "Your Museum Is Back!," Sursock Museum, accessed June 16, 2025,

<https://sursock.museum/content/your-museum-back>.

⁸ "Bringing Education and Living Heritage Closer Together: The First Global Online Training of Trainers Course on Living Heritage. - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage," UNESCO, accessed June 16, 2025,

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/news/bringing-education-and-living-heritage-closer-together-the-first-global-online-training-of-trainers-course-on-living-heritage-and-education-ended-recently-13324>.

⁹ "Censorship and Harassment in Lebanon's Arts Scene," *Mimeta*, April 1, 2025,

<https://www.mimeta.org/mimeta-news-on-censorship-in-art/2025/4/1/censorship-and-harassment-in-lebanons-arts-scene>.

¹⁰ "Film Censorship in Lebanon: How Does It Work?," *Skeyes Media | Center for Media and Cultural Freedom*, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.skeyesmedia.org/en/News/News/25-08-2023/10831>.

¹¹ Jadaliyya- جدلية and Jadaliyya, "Censorship in Lebanon: Law and Practice," *Jadaliyya - جدلية*, accessed July 14, 2025, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/27150>.

and stark gender inequality in the professional sector.¹² Women and gender diverse individuals –particularly those critical of gender or other societal norms– represent upwards of 75% of targets of digital violence online in Lebanon.¹³ UNESCO’s “Gender Creativity” report similarly highlighted that women and gender-diverse artists generally face bullying, abuse and digital threats in their professional environments, underscoring the urgent need for gender-transformative cultural policies in Lebanon.¹⁴ Additionally, despite women’s historically large enrollment in arts universities,¹⁵ they remain underrepresented in major exhibitions and funding calls¹⁶, reflecting systemic gender gaps in cultural visibility and support. Although Lebanon’s Ministry of Culture published a Strategic Roadmap in 2016 outlining priorities for heritage preservation and institutional development, there have been no updates or concrete steps toward implementing or revising this framework during the current review period,¹⁷ leaving gender parity in exhibition programming, grant allocations, and governance largely aspirational.

7. The state has also failed to ratify or accede to the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.¹⁸ No initiatives have been launched to assess the impact of cultural policy on artistic diversity, nor have authorities supported the development of a national strategy that encourages cultural pluralism. Instead, public support for independent arts has declined sharply, and the cultural sector continues to operate under opaque, arbitrary constraints.¹⁹

¹² “Censorship and Harassment in Lebanon’s Arts Scene,” *Mimeta*, April 1, 2025, <https://www.mimeta.org/mimeta-news-on-censorship-in-art/2025/4/1/censorship-and-harassment-in-lebanons-arts-scene>.

¹³ SMEX. “80% of Women in Lebanon Face Digital Violence.” *SMEX*, February 13, 2024. <https://smex.org/80-of-women-in-lebanon-face-digital-violence/>.

¹⁴ “New UNESCO Publication Investigates the State of Gender Equality in the Cultural and Creative Sectors,” March 8, 2021, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/new-unesco-publication-investigates-state-gender-equality-cultural-and-creative-sectors>.

¹⁵ Khal, Helen. “The Woman Artist in Lebanon.” *One Fine Art*. Accessed July 16, 2025. <https://www.onefineart.com/articles/woman-artist-lebanon>.

¹⁶ Harb, Mona. “Artistic Practices and Cultural Production in Beirut: Urban Restructuring, Gender and Resistance.” *RedALyC: Revista de Estudios Sociales* 64 (2018): 80–95. <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/6646/664673190004/>.

¹⁷ “Ministry of Culture Strategic Roadmap Strategic Priorities,” November 4, 2016, <https://institutdesfinances.gov.lb/sites/default/files/2024-06/Ministry-of-Culture-Strategic-Roadmap-strategic-priorities.pdf>.

¹⁸ “Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions - Legal Affairs,” UNESCO, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-protection-and-promotion-diversity-cultural-expressions>.

¹⁹ “Analysis and Recommendations for EU Intervention in Lebanon in the Arts and Culture Sectors,” Cultural Relations Platform, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu/2024/03/21/download-our-report-analysis-and-recommendations-for-eu-intervention-in-lebanon-in-the-arts-and-culture-sectors>.

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8. The 2023-2024 Israeli offensive in Lebanon has not only resulted in civilian casualties and displacement but also inflicted damage on Lebanon’s cultural sector and cultural heritage.²⁰ Artists and cultural workers were forced to flee or suspend their work due to safety concerns, numerous cultural institutions, galleries, and performance venues were shuttered, and the destruction of theaters, museums, and artistic archives undermined the ability of the cultural sector to function.²¹ These developments have further strained Lebanon’s already vulnerable creative ecosystem and highlight the urgent need for safeguards to protect cultural rights in times of crisis.
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INTERNATIONAL, REGIONAL, AND DOMESTIC HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS

9. Lebanon has committed to protecting and respecting the rights and freedoms outlined in several key international human rights instruments. Lebanon is party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)²² and acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).²³ Lebanon also acceded to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict,²⁴ accepted the 1972 World Heritage Convention, and ratified the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.²⁵ At the regional level, Lebanon is a member of the Arab League²⁶ and ratified the 2004 Arab Charter on Human Rights.²⁷ Additionally, Lebanon acceded to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on 14 June

²⁰ “Lebanon: Hostilities Wreak Havoc on Civilians,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 16, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/16/lebanon-hostilities-wreak-havoc-civilians>.

²¹ Emilie Madi, Riham Alkousaa, and Riham Alkousaa, “Creating in the Dark: Lebanese Artists Struggle to Keep Creativity Alive in a Nation at War,” *Reuters*, November 14, 2024, sec. Middle East, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/creating-dark-lebanese-artists-struggle-keep-creativity-alive-nation-war-2024-11-12/>.

²² “Universal Declaration of Human Rights - Lebanon Document - Letter from Lebanon - Question of Palestine,” accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-180386/>.

²³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. “Ratification Status for Lebanon,” OHCHR, accessed June 4, 2025, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=96&Lang=EN.

²⁴ “Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict with Regulations for the Execution of the Convention - Legal Affairs,” UNESCO, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-protection-cultural-property-event-armed-conflict-regulations-execution-convention>.

²⁵ “Periodic Reporting: Submissions and Forthcoming Deadlines for All States Parties - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage,” accessed June 4, 2025, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/submissionsanddeadlines-00861>.

²⁶ Jonathan Masters Sergie Mohammed Aly, “The Arab League | Council on Foreign Relations,” accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/arab-league>.

²⁷ “Arab Charter on Human Rights (revised),” Right to Education Initiative, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.right-to-education.org/ar/node/452>.

2007 and completed its ratification in April 2022, reinforcing its obligation to ensure inclusive access and participation in cultural life for persons with disabilities.²⁸

10. The Lebanese Constitution contains several provisions related to the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms:
 - a. Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, speech, the press, assembly, and association. It states that “The freedom of opinion, expression through speech and writing, the freedom of the press, the freedom of assembly, and the freedom of association, are all guaranteed within the scope of the law.” Moreover, Article 7 of the Lebanese Constitution explicitly guarantees that “all Lebanese are equal before the law” and forbids discrimination on the basis of religion, race, language, or sex—thereby providing a constitutional foundation for nondiscriminatory access to cultural and artistic life.²⁹
 - b. Section C of the Lebanese Constitution’s Preamble affirms Lebanon’s commitment to freedom of opinion and freedom of belief. It states that “Lebanon is a democratic parliamentary republic based upon the respect of public freedoms, freedom of opinion and freedom of belief; and of social justice and equality in rights and duties among all citizens, without distinction or preference.”³⁰
 - c. Article 9 of the Lebanese Constitution guarantees freedom of belief and religious practice. It states that “Freedom of conscience is absolute. In assuming the obligations of glorifying God, the Most High, the State respects all religions and creeds and safeguards the freedom of exercising the religious rites under its protection, without disturbing the public order.”³¹
11. In addition to constitutional protections, the Lebanese domestic legal framework includes several laws intended to safeguard cultural heritage, including Law No. 194/2020 (Cultural

²⁸ “Statement of the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Lebanon Mrs. Najat Rochdi on the Ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by the Lebanese Parliament | United Nations in Lebanon,” accessed July 14, 2025, <https://lebanon.un.org/en/176653-statement-united-nations-resident-and-humanitarian-coordinator-lebanon-mrs-najat-rochdi>.

²⁹ “Lebanon 1926 (Rev. 2004) Constitution - Constitute,” accessed June 4, 2025, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Lebanon_2004.

³⁰ “Lebanon 1926 (Rev. 2004) Constitution - Constitute,” accessed June 4, 2025, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Lebanon_2004.

³¹ “Lebanon 1926 (Rev. 2004) Constitution - Constitute,” accessed June 4, 2025, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Lebanon_2004.

Heritage Post-Beirut Blast),³² Law No. 37/2008 (Cultural Property Law),³³ and the 1933 Antiquities Law.³⁴

WRONGFUL USE OF MORALITY, RELIGION, AND NATIONAL SECURITY LAWS TO SUPPRESS ARTISTIC FREEDOM

12. During the review period, Lebanese authorities continued to invoke morality, religious sanctity, and national security as grounds for suppressing artistic and cultural expression. These justifications serve as flexible tools to criminalize dissent and reinforce dominant sectarian power structures. Instead of reforming vague and outdated provisions in the Penal Code and Military Code, Lebanon has expanded their enforcement to target artists, particularly those engaging with sensitive political or religious themes, during the review period.
13. Several articles of the Lebanese Penal Code and the Military Code of Justice are routinely used to criminalize artistic and political expression under defamation, blasphemy, morality, and national security provisions:
 - a. **Articles 384, 385, 386, and 388: related to Slander or Defamation Against Representatives of the State, Public Bodies, or Individuals** allow for imprisonment up to one year for those found guilty of defamation.^{35,36} Artists, journalists, and human rights defenders who critique systemic corruption or institutional abuse are frequently charged under these articles.
 - b. **Articles 473: Blasphemy Against God** criminalizes blasphemy against God with imprisonment from one month to one year.³⁷ This article is used to punish artists who reference religion in non-traditional or irreverent ways, stifling creative exploration of faith and belief.

³² “Law No. 194 Dated 16/10/2020 Relating to the Protection of the Damaged and Affected Areas and Their Reconstruction Following the Explosion of the Port of Beirut. – Aldic – Lebanon,” Aldic.net, October 24, 2020, <https://www.aldic.net/law-no-194-dated-16102020-relating-to-the-protection-of-the-damaged-and-affected-areas-and-their-reconstruction-following-the-explosion-of-the-port-of-beirut/>.

³³ “Law No. 37 Regarding Cultural Property - UNESCO Database of National Cultural Heritage Laws,” UNESCO, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/fr/cultnatlaws/law-no-37-regarding-cultural-property>.

³⁴ “Lebanon,” Saving Antiquities, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://en.saving-antiquities.org/>.

³⁵ “Penal Code - Maharat FoE,” Maharat Foundation, accessed July 14, 2025, <https://foe.maharatfoundation.org/Themes/Law?law=Penal%20Code&lang=en>.

³⁶ “KNOW YOUR DIGITAL RIGHTS!,” *March Lebanon* (blog), June 1, 2018, <https://www.marchlebanon.org/report/know-your-digital-rights/>.

³⁷ “Penal Code - Maharat FoE,” accessed June 6, 2025, <https://foe.maharatfoundation.org/Themes/Law?law=Penal%20Code&lang=en>.

- c. **Article 474: Insulting Religious Rights** criminalizes contempt of religious rituals or symbols with imprisonment from six months to three years.³⁸ Religious institutions frequently invoke this law to silence artists critical of sectarian influence.³⁹
- d. **Article 317: Incitement to Sectarianism** prohibits acts or publications that provoke sectarian or racial tensions, carrying imprisonment from one to three years and a fine of 100,000 to 800,000 Lebanese pounds.⁴⁰ Authorities apply this law to artists whose work references Lebanon's sectarian divide.
- e. **Article 157 of the Military Code of Justice: Insulting the Military** compounds these abuses by allowing civilians to be tried in military courts and imprisoned for three months to three years for offenses such as insulting the army, breaching fair trial standards.⁴¹ Although Lebanon's court proceedings are nominally public, the military court is located within a military zone, requiring independent observers—such as human rights organizations and journalists—to receive prior permission to enter and monitor trials.⁴² As a result, this law is exploited to prosecute artists through discretionary military court procedures, allowing authorities to impose punishment without clear standards and ultimately deterring political commentary on the military or other security forces.
- f. **Article 533 of the Penal Code: Against the Production or Distribution of “Indecent” Materials.** This article defines “indecent” so broadly that it empowers General Security to ban artworks, books, or films that portray sexuality outside heteronormative norms, with penalties of one month to one year of imprisonment and fines.^{43,44} In late 2023, Lebanese lawmakers also reviewed a draft media law intended to replace the 1962 Press and Publications Law, proposing expanded state powers over content regulation, including criminalizing defamation, introducing prior authorization requirements, and enabling license revocations. While no law amendments have been finalized or implemented to

³⁸“Penal Code - Maharat FoE” Maharat Foundation, accessed June 6, 2025,

<https://foe.maharatfoundation.org/Themes/Law?law=Penal%20Code&lang=en>.

³⁹ “Lebanon: Defamation and Insult Laws Weaponized to Silence Critics,” *Amnesty International* (blog), August 7, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde18/7046/2023/en/>.

⁴⁰ “Penal Code - Maharat FoE,” Maharat Foundation, accessed June 6, 2025,

<https://foe.maharatfoundation.org/Themes/Law?law=Penal%20Code&lang=en>.

⁴¹ Aya Majzoub, “There Is a Price to Pay,” *Human Rights Watch*, November 15, 2019,

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/11/15/there-price-pay/criminalization-peaceful-speech-lebanon>.

⁴² Bassam Khawaja, “It’s Not the Right Place for Us,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 26, 2017,

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/01/26/its-not-right-place-us/trial-civilians-military-courts-lebanon>.

⁴³ “LGBTI Rights in Lebanon,” ILGA World Database, accessed July 14, 2025,

<https://database.ilga.org/lebanon-lgbti>.

⁴⁴ “Queer Resistance to Digital Oppression in the Middle East and North Africa,” *ARTICLE 19* (blog), accessed July 14, 2025, <https://www.article19.org/queer-resistance-to-digital-oppression/>.

date, the proposal raises serious concerns about pre-publication censorship and suppression of dissenting narratives.⁴⁵

14. These provisions have been repeatedly weaponized against artists, often with vague or arbitrary interpretation. Lebanese authorities frequently level multiple charges against a defendant, often including defamation, blasphemy, and incitement charges, to escalate penalties and broaden the basis for investigation and arrest.⁴⁶
15. Although Article 47 of Lebanon’s Criminal Procedure Code requires authorities to inform detainees of the reason for arrest and grant access to legal counsel, this is often violated in practice, with many detainees unaware of the charges until after interrogation and receiving only oral summons without written explanations.⁴⁷ This omission is compounded by a culture of self-censorship among journalists and media outlets, who often avoid reporting detailed legal information to sidestep pushback or legal entanglements, leaving the specific provisions used to prosecute artists undisclosed and hindering accountability for abusive law enforcement.⁴⁸
16. Nevertheless, evidence from past cases suggest that artists and activists are charged with several overlapping charges to maximize punishment, stigmatize defendants as threats to public order, and justify prolonged detention.
 - a. In January 2025, **comedian Qassem Jaber** was arrested for a satirical online video that mocked Hezbollah’s influence in Lebanese politics. While the exact charges were not publicly released, the nature of the accusations, which included incitement to sectarian strife and defamation of a political figure, suggests likely invocation of **Article 317** (inciting sectarian conflict), **Article 386** (defaming public officials), and **Article 157** of the Military Code (defaming the military or military-aligned actors). Jaber was detained for several days and released under investigation.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ “Proposed Media Law Poses Grave Threat to Freedom of Expression in Lebanon,” *Amnesty International* (blog), November 28, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/lebanon-proposed-media-law-poses-grave-threat-to-freedom-of-expression/>.

⁴⁶ “Censorship and Harassment in Lebanon’s Arts Scene,” *Mimeta*, April 1, 2025, <https://www.mimeta.org/mimeta-news-on-censorship-in-art/2025/4/1/censorship-and-harassment-in-lebanons-arts-scene>.

⁴⁷ “Enforce Lebanon’s Anti-Torture Law,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 27, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/27/enforce-lebanons-anti-torture-law>.

⁴⁸ “Lebanon: Journalists, Activist Summoned for Investigations,” *Human Rights Watch*, April 14, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/14/lebanon-journalists-activist-summoned-investigations>.

⁴⁹ “Comedian Qassem Jaber Arrested Over Satirical Video,” *Mimeta*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.mimeta.org/mimeta-news-on-censorship-in-art/2025/4/22/comedian-arrested-amid-free-speech-controversy>.

- b. In May 2024, **comedian Shaden Fakih** was prosecuted after performing a routine that referenced religious hypocrisy and sectarian divisions after facing complaints from both Sunni and Shiite religious figures. Although the exact charges, which were eventually dropped, were not disclosed, the complaints and nature of the performance suggest likely application of **Article 473** (blasphemy against God), **Article 474** (insulting religious rites), and **Article 317** (inciting sectarian unrest).⁵⁰
- c. In August 2023, comedian **Nour Hajjar** was detained after posting an Instagram sketch mocking Lebanon’s economic collapse, which drew criticism from conservative religious figures, including Dar al-Fatwa.⁵¹ Although the legal basis for his detention was not disclosed, the nature of the complaints suggests possible invocation of **Article 386** (defaming public institutions), **Article 317** (inciting sectarian unrest), and **Article 474** (insulting religious rites) given the authorities’ broad use of these provisions in similar cases.⁵²

CENSORSHIP OF LGBTQ+ AND POLITICAL ART AND ARTISTS

17. Lebanese authorities have increasingly fostered a climate of hostility toward LGBTQ+ cultural expression, not only by censoring works that promote LGBTQ+ rights but also by failing to ensure the safety and inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in public life.⁵³ LGBTQ+ artists and those producing work with themes surrounding gender and sexuality are especially vulnerable, as are the curators and institutions that host them.
18. The General Directorate of General Security (*hereinafter referred to as General Security*) operates under the authority of the Ministry of Interior and is responsible for overseeing censorship of all public cultural materials, including films, books, plays and exhibitions.⁵⁴ Acting under Legislative Decree No. 2/1977 and accompanying ministry directives, the General Security may censor or ban content deemed contrary to undefined notions of “public morality” or “national values.” This review process is opaque and offers no formal

⁵⁰ “Comedian Shaden Fakih Accused of ‘blasphemy’ by Dar al-Fatwa,” *L’Orient Today*, May 10, 2024, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1413306/comedian-shaden-fakih-accused-of-blasphemy-by-dar-al-fatwa.html>.

⁵¹ “Lebanon: Popular Comedian Detained after Sketch on Economic Conditions,” *Middle East Eye*, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lebanon-popular-comedian-detained-following-sketch-economic-conditions>.

⁵² Kareem Chehayeb, “Controlling the Narrative: Lebanon Compromises Free Speech In Crisis,” *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy* - (blog), March 17, 2020, <https://timep.org/2020/03/17/controlling-the-narrative-lebanon-compromises-free-speech-in-crisis/>.

⁵³ “Lebanon: Attack on Freedoms Targets LGBTI People,” *Human Rights Watch*, September 5, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/09/05/lebanon-attack-freedoms-targets-lgbti-people>.

⁵⁴ “Censorship in Lebanon: Law and Practice,” *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung | Beirut | Middle East*, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://lb.boell.org/en/2010/12/15/censorship-lebanon-law-and-practice>.

opportunity for appeal. In practice, the system disproportionately targets LGBTQ+ content and operates within a broader legal and political context that stigmatizes LGBTQ+ identity.⁵⁵

19. Since 2021, authorities have repeatedly issued directives that curtail LGBTQ+ gatherings and events, and they have failed to protect LGBTQ+ individuals and artists from targeted threats and harassment.
 - a. In August 2023, members of the conservative Christian group “Soldiers of God” **violently disrupted a drag performance** in Beirut, threatening attendees and chanting homophobic slogans. Although Internal Security Forces (ISF) officers arrived at the scene, they failed to intervene against the attackers and instead questioned the event organizers.⁵⁶ This lack of state protection reflects a broader environment of institutional inaction that enables non-state actors to intimidate LGBTQ+ artists without consequence.
 - b. In June 2023, authorities attempted to ban the screening of the film “**Barbie**” days before its Lebanese release, claiming the film “promoted homosexuality and contradicted moral values.” The Ministry of Interior did not release any legal rationale behind their decision, but Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi publicly stated that Lebanon “will not allow any film that contradicts moral standards.”⁵⁷
 - c. In June 2022, Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi issued a directive **banning all LGBTQ+ gatherings**, citing the preservation of “moral and religious values.” While the directive did not explicitly reference artistic or cultural events, it provided broad discretionary authority that could be used to suppress LGBTQ+ artistic expression, including exhibitions, performances, and film screenings. Human rights groups expressed concern that the order encouraged censorship and emboldened religious and political actors to target LGBTQ+ cultural initiatives.⁵⁸
20. Politically sensitive artistic works, particularly those referencing the 2019-20 protest movement and sectarian corruption, were also increasingly targeted. Many of these projects have been restricted from public exhibition or preemptively withdrawn by organizers for fear of government retaliation.

⁵⁵ El Meouchi, Chadia, and Marc Dib. "Lebanon." *Media Law International*. Accessed June 6, 2025.

<https://www.medialawinternational.com/page148.html>.

⁵⁶ “Violent Assault on Drag Event in Lebanon,” *Human Rights Watch*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/25/violent-assault-drag-event-lebanon>.

⁵⁷ “Lebanon Moves to Ban ‘Barbie’ Film for ‘Promoting Homosexuality,’” *Reuters*, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanon-minister-moves-ban-barbie-film-promoting-homosexuality-2023-08-09/>.

⁵⁸ “Lebanon: Unlawful Crackdown on LGBTI Gatherings,” *Human Rights Watch*, July 4, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/04/lebanon-unlawful-crackdown-lgbti-gatherings>.

- a. In January 2025, the General Security banned **four plays** in Beirut for addressing “taboo” topics such as Lebanon’s civil war, religion, and homosexuality.⁵⁹
- b. In October 2021, security forces stopped the **Al-Madina Theater** in Beirut from holding a performance of “Tanfiseh,” which directly translates to “Vent,” because the director failed to send the script to the General Security for approval. The director, **Awad Awad**, was also taken into custody and questioned for allegedly criticizing the president in his play.⁶⁰

RETALIATION AGAINST ARTISTS BASED ON PERCEIVED POLITICAL OR SECTARIAN AFFILIATION

21. In Lebanon, artists frequently face censorship as well as harassment, interrogation, or prosecution based on their perceived sectarian, political, or geopolitical affiliations. These often informal and selectively enforced retaliatory measures, ranging from exclusion from cultural spaces and denial of funding to online harassment and threats to personal safety, create an atmosphere in which artists must navigate their associations with extreme caution. Artists may be targeted for their work as well as for their background or alleged links to state-designated adversaries like Israel, Syria, or Western institutions.
 - a. In November 2024, digital artist **Rafik Hariri** reported being denied exhibition opportunities due to assumptions that he was connected to the late Sunni Prime Minister because they shared a first and last name. Though such suspicions were unfounded, as they two had no relation, the artist said that the perceived connection nonetheless limited his access to Lebanon’s cultural institutions.⁶¹
 - b. In April 2024, renowned **playwright Wajdi Mouawad** was forced to cancel the world premier of his play “Wedding Day at the Cro-Mahbons” at Beirut’s Monnot Theatre after online accusations that he had received prior funding from Israeli institutions. Although Mouawad denied these claims, political actors identifying with the “resistance” filed a complaint against him in military court for alleged

⁵⁹ “Censorship and Harassment in Lebanon’s Arts Scene,” *Mimeta*, April 1, 2025, <https://www.mimeta.org/mimeta-news-on-censorship-in-art/2025/4/1/censorship-and-harassment-in-lebanons-arts-scene>.

⁶⁰ “Dust-up over Canceled Play Sheds Light on Lebanon’s Censorship System,” *L’Orient Today*, October 13, 2021, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1277892/dust-up-over-canceled-play-sheds-light-on-lebanons-censorship-system.html>.

⁶¹ “Lebanese Artist Rafik Hariri on AI, Mental Health, and Reality,” *Al Majalla*, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://en.majalla.com/node/323708/culture-social-affairs/lebanese-artist-rafik-hariri-ai-mental-health-and-reality>.

collaboration with the Israelis. The campaign of harassment and threats led Mouawad to leave the country to seek safety abroad in France.⁶²

IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT AND ECONOMIC COLLAPSE ON CULTURAL LIFE

22. From 2021 to present, Lebanon’s cultural heritage and artistic life have suffered extensive damage due to the combined effects of armed conflict and economic collapse. The 2024-25 war between Israel and Hezbollah resulted in the destruction of historic sites and cultural institutions,⁶³ while the ongoing financial crisis has undermined the country’s capacity to protect and sustain its cultural assets.⁶⁴ The economic crisis, triggered by years of financial mismanagement, corruption, and banking sector collapse, has resulted in massive inflation, currency devaluation, and widespread poverty, severely affecting public services, including those related to cultural life.⁶⁵
23. The following incidents illustrate the extent of the damage to Lebanon’s cultural heritage during this period:
 - a. In November 2024, Israeli airstrikes leveled the ancestral home of Lebanese Philharmonic Orchestra conductor **Lubnan Baalbaki** in Odaisseh. The house, designed by his father, renowned painter **Abdel Hamid Baalbaki**, housed valuable artworks, a library of over 1,500 books, and personal letters, all of which were lost.⁶⁶
 - b. In October 2024, Israeli airstrikes destroyed the 19th century **St. George Melkite Catholic Church** in Derdghaya, killing at least eight civilians sheltering inside.⁶⁷

⁶² “Wedding Day at the Cro-Magnons” Review: A Bittersweet Premiere - The New York Times,” accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/10/theater/wajdi-mouawad-wedding-day-at-the-cro-magnons.html>.

⁶³ Jwana Chahoud, “Saving Lebanon’s Cultural Heritage: A Global Effort to Protect its Endangered Heritage,” Billet, *ArchéOrient - Le Blog* (blog), December 13, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.58079/12xa6>.

⁶⁴ “Lebanon Celebrates Art amid Crisis” – DW – 06/01/2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/lebanon-celebrates-art-amid-crisis/g-69240787>.

⁶⁵ “World Report 2023: Lebanon,” *Human Rights Watch*, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/lebanon>.

⁶⁶ “Orchestra Conductor Mourns Childhood Home’s Destruction in Israel’s Southern Lebanon Offensive,” *AP News*, accessed June 6, 2025,

<https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-israel-orchestra-conductor-lubnan-baalbaki-f6c595f2c2b5629788c51563a2ddf09b>.

⁶⁷ “Israeli Missile Destroys Catholic Church in Lebanon; at Least 8 Dead,” *Catholic News Agency*, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/259815/israeli-missile-destroys-catholic-church-in-lebanon-at-least-8-dead>.

That same month, the historic **Ottoman-era souk** in Nabatieh was obliterated,⁶⁸ and the 18th century **mosque** in Kfar Tibnit was reduced to rubble due to Israeli bombardments.⁶⁹ In Baalbek, airstrikes damaged the **Ottoman-era El-Menchiyé** building and the historic **Hotel Palmyra**.⁷⁰ In the same month, the medieval **Tibnin Castle** sustained damage from Israeli airstrikes, resulting in the collapse of one of its walls.⁷¹

- c. In September 2024, the archaeological site at **Deir Zanoun** in the Bekaa Valley faced significant challenges due to the escalation of hostilities. The archaeological team was also forced to evacuate.⁷²
24. The compounded impact of war and economic crisis has led to the displacement of artists and closure of cultural venues. The destruction of historic sites and institutions not only erases physical landmarks but also disrupts the cultural continuity and identity of Lebanese communities.
- a. In November 2024, **artist Charbel Samuel Aoun** reported that two of his exhibitions were canceled due to ongoing conflict.⁷³ In that same month, **singer and musician Joy Fayad** was unable to perform publicly due to the security situation and economic uncertainty.⁷⁴
 - b. In October 2024, the escalation of conflict led to a **major displacement crisis**, with over 875,180 people reported to have been displaced due to the strikes.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ “Israeli Attacks Destroy Ottoman-Era Market in Lebanon,” *Al Jazeera*, accessed June 6, 2025,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2024/10/13/israeli-attacks-destroy-ottoman-era-market-in-lebanon>.

⁶⁹ “What the Israel-Hezbollah War Did to Lebanon’s Cultural Heritage Sites,” *NPR*, accessed June 6, 2025,

<https://www.npr.org/2024/12/23/nx-s1-5213230/lebanon-cultural-heritage-israel-war-hezbollah>.

⁷⁰ “Israeli Strike Destroys Ottoman-Era Building near Baalbek Ruins,” *Reuters*, accessed June 6, 2025,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-strike-destroys-ottoman-era-building-near-baalbek-ruins-2024-11-07/>.

⁷¹ Lauren Frayer, “What the Israel-Hezbollah War Did to Lebanon’s Cultural Heritage Sites,” *KUCB*, December 23, 2024, <https://www.kucb.org/2024-12-23/what-the-israel-hezbollah-war-did-to-lebanons-cultural-heritage-sites>.

⁷² Jwana Chahoud, “Saving Lebanon’s Cultural Heritage: A Global Effort to Protect its Endangered Heritage,” *Billet, ArchéOrient - Le Blog* (blog), December 13, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.58079/12xa6>.

⁷³ Emilie Madi, Riham Alkousaa, and Riham Alkousaa, “Creating in the Dark: Lebanese Artists Struggle to Keep Creativity Alive in a Nation at War,” *Reuters*, November 14, 2024, sec. Middle East,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/creating-dark-lebanese-artists-struggle-keep-creativity-alive-nation-war-2024-11-12/>.

⁷⁴ “Artists in Lebanon Keep Creating During Conflict,” *Voice of America*, November 19, 2024,

<https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/artists-in-lebanon-keep-creating-during-conflict/7863633.html>.

⁷⁵ “Crisis in Lebanon.” *International Organization for Migration*. Accessed June 4, 2025.

<https://www.iom.int/crisis-lebanon>.

Rather than platforming artists, theaters like the 60-year-old **Le Colisee cinema** in Beirut became repurposed shelters for displaced individuals.⁷⁶

- c. In May 2023, the **Sursock Museum** reopened after extensive restoration funded entirely through international sources.⁷⁷ In 2024, however, the museum was forced to move its collections to underground, hidden storage to protect them from potential damage.⁷⁸
25. The economic crisis has also left Lebanon’s cultural sector chronically underfunded, with the state increasingly unable to provide even basic operational support to museums, galleries, and heritage institutions. As a result, access to international aid between 2023 and 2025 has become essential for institutional survival.⁷⁹ However, such aid remains precarious, as artists and institutions receiving foreign funding, particularly from Western organizations, are often subjected to harassment, defamation, or heightened scrutiny by Lebanese authorities and affiliated political groups.⁸⁰ These affiliations are frequently portrayed as acts of disloyalty or foreign collusion, which discourages many cultural practitioners from seeking or acknowledging international support, despite their reliance on those resources to continue their work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

AFI and RAWSA urge Lebanon to affirm its commitments to freedom of expression and the rights of artists, cultural workers, and other human rights defenders. Specifically, AFI and RAWSA make the following recommendations. Lebanon should:

- 1) Align national law and practice with Lebanon’s international human rights obligations by:

⁷⁶ Bassem Mroue Press Associated, “Massive Displacement from Israel-Hezbollah War Transforms Beirut’s Famed Commercial Street,” *WPLG*, October 24, 2024, <https://www.local10.com/news/world/2024/10/24/massive-displacement-from-israel-hezbollah-war-transforms-beirut-famed-commercial-street/>.

⁷⁷ “Beirut’s Sursock Museum Reopens Three Years after Port Blast,” *Al Jazeera*, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/6/6/beirut-sursock-museum-reopens-three-years-after-2020-port-blast>.

⁷⁸ “To Shield Art from Bombs, Beirut Museum’s Walls Hang Bare,” *Reuters*, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/video/watch/idRW740905112024RP1/>.

⁷⁹ “In Lebanon, Culture Is the Source of Livelihood for Thousands, Generating Two Billion Dollars Annually,” *Lebanon News*, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/economy/703160/in-lebanon-culture-is-the-source-of-livelihood-for-thousands-generatin/en>.

⁸⁰ “Lebanon: Journalists, Activist Summoned for Investigations,” *Human Rights Watch*, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/14/lebanon-journalists-activist-summoned-investigations>.

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- a) Ratifying the UNESCO 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which affirms the right of individuals and communities to freely participate in cultural life and express cultural identity; and
 - b) Codifying the right to artistic expression in domestic law in line with Articles 19 and 27 of the ICCPR and Article 15 of the ICESCR.
- 2) Revoke or amend domestic laws used to suppress artistic expression by:
- a) Repealing Articles 473 and 474 of the Penal Code, which criminalize blasphemy and insult to religious rites;
 - b) Repealing Articles 317, 384, 385, 386, and 388, which are frequently used to target political dissent and satirical or critical artistic content under the guise of incitement, defamation, or insult to public figures; and
 - c) Reforming Article 157 of the Military Code to ensure that civilian artists and cultural workers are not subject to military jurisdiction for expressive acts.
- 3) Ensure legal and institutional protections for LGBTQ+ artists and artistic expression by:
- a) Rescinding directives issued by the Ministry of Interior –including the June 2022 ban on all LGBTQ+ gatherings– that restrict or limit the LGBTQ+ community’s participation in cultural life;
 - b) Overturning Legislative Decree No. 2/1977, which grants the General Directorate of General Security broad censorship authority over artistic content based on undefined notions of “public morality” or “national values” and is frequently used to target LGBTQ+ themes; and
 - c) Requiring Internal Security Forces and other relevant state authorities to respond to and prevent threats or violence made by state and non-state actors against LGBTQ+ artists.
- 4) Prohibit censorship based on political or sectarian affiliation by reforming the General Security and municipal authorities’ power to block or cancel artistic events without explanation by establishing an independent cultural oversight body to review such decisions, oversee access to venues and funding, and investigate politically or sectarian-motivated discrimination.
- 5) Reform the structure and powers of General Security by:

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- a) Transferring responsibility for reviewing artistic content from General Security to a civilian body with transparent procedures;
 - b) Establishing an independent appeals process for censorship decisions; and
 - c) Publishing all relevant rules and decisions related to cultural content regulation to ensure transparency.
- 6) Protect cultural institutions and heritage during times of crisis by:
- a) Developing emergency protocols for the protection of cultural heritage sites during periods of violence or natural disaster.
 - b) Allocating public funding to museums, galleries, and performance venues affected by the economic crisis and armed conflict; and
 - c) Facilitating access to international cultural aid by ensuring that artists and cultural institutions are not subject to government-led harassment, stigmatization, or undue scrutiny for receiving foreign funding.

ANNEX 1

Electronic communications about AFI and RAWSA's joint submission to the CSO Stakeholder Report for the Fourth Cycle of the UPR of the Republic of Lebanon can be directed to:

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Written communications about AFI and RAWSA's joint submission to the CSO Stakeholder Report for the Fourth Cycle of the UPR of the Republic of Lebanon may be sent to AFI's physical address at:

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ENDNOTES