

Culture

El-Hakawati theatre struggles to survive

Malak Hasan

Jerusalem

After having amassed unpaid bills of about \$150,000, the Palestinian National Theatre, El-Hakawati, was saved when the Palestinian Authority (PA) lent it money to stop Israel from shutting down East Jerusalem's leading cultural institution and only theatre.

Arabic for "the storyteller", El-Hakawati faced closure on November 26th, when Artistic Director Amer Khalil received a phone call from the Israeli Enforcement and Collection Authority (ECA), responsible for debt collection and law enforcement, notifying him that the theatre building will be seized and shut down in 48 hours.

The debt was owed to City Hall, the national insurance fund and the local Israeli electricity company. Two weeks before the phone call, ECA seized El-Hakawati's bank account.

To many, this may sound a standard procedure, in which the state rightfully collects overdue debt, but analysts and activists accuse Israel of waging a covert war against Palestinian cultural institutions by levying hefty taxes and depriving them of services and fiscal support.

"El-Hakawati must stay open. This place is our home and we won't give it up even if we have to work for free."

Activist Abir Kobty said the theatre faced Israeli closures more than 35 times since its establishment in 1984 in predominantly Arab East Jerusalem, signalling "a systematic attempt to shut down the theatre".

East Jerusalem is disputed territory that Israel seized from Jordan in the 1967 war, annexed it and declared it part of the indivisible and

eternal capital of the Jewish state. However, no other country recognises Israeli sovereignty there and most expect its status to be determined in negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis.

Jerusalem houses some of Islam's holiest shrines, which makes the area highly sensitive to the world's 1.6 billion Muslims and a flashpoint that spurred Palestinian violence against Israel, the latest bout of which started on October 2nd over a Muslim shrine Palestinians suspect Israel wants to annex.

"Lack of financial support was a significant issue for El-Hakawati."

The Palestinian cultural scene has been shattered by decades of Israeli occupation and isolation by Arabs who refuse to mix with Israelis living among Palestinians. Israel is seen as using all means to toughen living conditions for Palestinians in Jerusalem to motivate them to leave.

B'Tselem, an Israeli information centre for human rights, said aside from physically isolating East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank, Israel "unfairly divides the budget" between East and West Jerusalem resulting in "harmful effects to infrastructure and services in East Jerusalem". It did not give a breakdown.

However, Khalil said lack of financial support was a significant issue for El-Hakawati. "There is no question that Israel wants to shut down El-Hakawati" and often makes excuses to do so, he said. The theatre's bills include 3 million shekels (\$763,155) in Israeli taxes, Khalil said, and operating expenses amount to an additional \$1,300 per day.

"Now it is El-Hakawati but it might be another institution very soon. Israel is emptying Jerusalem of its indigenous people and making it harder for anyone to access the city," except Israelis and Jews,



Saved by the PA. Amer Khalil, director of the Palestinian National Theatre, known as El-Hakawati (The Storyteller) holds a court order outside the theatre in East Jerusalem, last November.

he said.

El-Hakawati began as a small troupe. It has hosted scores of Palestinian satirical plays, orchestra and dancing shows over the years. When the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) signed a framework of a peace deal with Israel known as the Oslo Accords in 1993, donor countries invested billions of dollars in Jerusalem and its Palestinian cultural sector, including the theatre.

The prosperity continued until 2000 when the second intifada broke out and the political situation deteriorated, most notably with the establishment of the separation wall that effectively separated East Jerusalem from the rest of the West

Bank.

Since then, donor support has gradually dropped due to political instability.

Jerusalem Affairs Minister Adnan al-Husseini said the PA paid 1 million shekels – \$254,207 – to the theatre in 2015.

"When I first received a phone call that the theatre was at risk of being closed, I took a decision to provide the sum needed to stop the Israeli authorities closing the theatre," he said.

Husseini confirmed that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is working on a comprehensive plan for 2016 to help the theatre pay the entire debt and avoid similar financial crises.

Khalil wondered when Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem would leave for a safer environment where they can function without fear of being targeted.

"We do not claim that the PA is not intervening to help, but if we are not offered steady financial support, culture in Jerusalem will disappear sooner or later," Khalil explained.

"El-Hakawati must stay open. This place is our home and we won't give it up even if we have to work for free again like we used to when we started El-Hakawati 32 years ago."

Malak Hasan, based in Ramallah, has covered Palestinian-Israeli issues for more than five years.

Egypt's TV talk shows are local

Mahmud el-Shafey

London

In a country where an estimated one-quarter of the population is illiterate, television in Egypt, and particularly television talk shows, hold an oversized grip on public consciousness. Talk show hosts such as Amr and Emad Eddin Adeeb, Mahmoud Saad and Tamer Amin not only reflect on the news of the day, they push and influence the debate.

Egypt's media, battered and bruised from four years of political turmoil, revolution and counter-revolution, has grown adept at self-censorship. The talk shows, seeking to attract and hold viewers who have hundreds of local and international Arabic satellite TV channels at their disposal, have found that the key lies in engagement. Shows are increasingly focusing on local issues – whether social or political – and often allow for phone-ins and live tweeting to maximise audience participation.

There is a symbiotic relationship between social media and Egypt's talk shows, Cairo University media graduate Asma Mohamed agreed: "Yes, we rely on social media but it is linked. The talk shows often find their issues from what is trending on social media and then what appears on the talk shows is discussed via social media as well."

Egyptian talk show host Doha al-Zohairy said the influence that talk shows have on society in general cannot be overestimated but it is social issues that attract the most attention.

Zohairy hosts the two-hour *Al Sharaa Al-Masry (Egyptian Streets)* programme for the Al Arabiya Al Hadath channel. The programme is split between a first hour focusing on important news and developments in Egypt and a second hour that contains a field report. She described it as a "socio-political programme".

"Unfortunately in Egypt talks shows are important and very influential. Each category in society follows the talk show presenter who represents his or her views and who is closest to his or her social level," Zohairy said.

"When something major happens, politically, [Egyptians] turn to pan-Arab news channels. Viewers know that the local channels are full of views, more than news. Foreign policy comes at the end of people's interests. People follow whatever they feel will affect their bread and butter directly – it could be political or social."

Recent social reports carried by *Al Sharaa Al-Masry* include an investigation into car thefts, a look at the state of Egypt's cafés post-revolution, flaws in the construction industry and other socio-political issues, seeking to shed light on issues affecting ordinary people.

"The media's main concern is what is happening in Egypt. Even when it covers international issues, it does this through an Egyptian lens," Mohamed said.

Zohairy recalled a recent episode which focused on people who have long-term leases on home appliances and end up paying much more than the appliance is worth and accumulating huge debts. The report featured a woman, Ratiba, who was imprisoned for more than ten years after being unable to pay her debts.

"The importance of these programmes is that they shed light on these chronic problems and these flawed laws."

"The programme is not a charity but when we broadcast this report we received a lot of offers from people who wanted to pay off her debt," Zohairy said. Things were not so simple though, with Ratiba remaining behind bars even after the debt had been paid.

"The importance of these programmes is that they shed light on these chronic problems and these

flawed laws," Zohairy added. She said public pressure that the report brought on authorities, with the Arabic hashtag *Presidential pardon for Ratiba* trending on social media, eventually led to her receiving a presidential pardon.

"Thanks to *Al Sharaa Al-Masry* for bringing this case to public attention. How many Ratibas are there languishing in Egyptian jails?" one twitter user asked.

Western coverage of Egyptian media has focused on some of the more outlandish claims made by TV talk show hosts, much of which focuses on insular views and conspiracy theories.

Tamer Amin hit the headlines in the West in October after a clip from his show *Min Al Nihaya (In the End)*, in which he puts forward a conspiracy theory that included speculation about a "world supreme council" with the ability to manipulate weather and cause earthquakes, went viral.

But Amin, a former state TV host, is perhaps more well-known among Egyptians for the call-in portion of his show which he dedicates to helping ordinary Egyptians with bureaucratic and legal issues. "Tell us your problems, we will do our best for you," he sought to reassure viewers.

"Most Egyptians will not call in for help with their problems but they want to hear other people's problems and they like knowing that there is someone out there doing something to help ordinary people," Mohamed said.



Doha al-Zohairy, host of *Al Sharaa Al-Masry (Egyptian Streets)*.