

Saudi Filmmaker Lacks Visa for Festival



Abdullah Al Muheisin

A scene from "Shadow of Silence," directed by Abdullah Al Muheisin, which will be shown at the New York Arab and South Asian Film Festival. [More Photos >](#)

By SHARON WAXMAN
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A rare Saudi Arabian feature film will make its American debut at a film festival in Manhattan tomorrow night, but its director, unable to secure a visa in time, will remain in Riyadh, left to ponder the realities of artistic exchange in an era fraught with suspicion.

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"I am sad that I could not be able to be in the United States to bridge the gap between the culture of our two societies, to know the people, and explain what is needed to be explained during my projection," the director, Abdullah al-Muheisin, said in a telephone interview from Riyadh. His film, "Shadow of Silence," is set in an unnamed Arab country, and follows the travails of a woman who enlists a group of Bedouin tribesmen to free her husband from a state institution set up, according to the festival summary, to "manufacture unthinking citizens."

Mr. Muheisin added: "Our good relationship is too long to be damaged by somebody who is an alien to Saudi society — Bin Laden or whoever tried to spoil that relation. It is sad. We are paying the price for the mistake of somebody else."

Mr. Muheisin's absence is not the only challenge faced by organizers of the New York Arab and South Asian Film Festival, which has been screening 78 films, including 30 features, from Arab, Muslim and South Asian countries at the TriBeCa Centers downtown and at [Columbia University](#) uptown.

Ahmed Issawi, the festival's executive director, said that Khaled Chouket, the director of

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an Arab film festival in Rotterdam, a Dutch citizen of Tunisian origin and a guest of the festival, was held by immigration officials for five hours at John F. Kennedy International Airport. Immigration officials did not return calls seeking comment.

The festival, which began on Feb. 23 and runs through tomorrow, screened Palestinian propaganda films from the 1970s — never previously shown in this country. But many more of them did not arrive, because they were in the Gaza Strip, and Federal Express declined to pick up there.

And the festival did not even bother inviting artists from Iranian cinema. “That’s a territory I no longer want to tread,” Mr. Issawi said. “It’s over. Given the whole thing with Iran — I refuse to approach it.”

“One of the things about this whole experience is that there is no predictability,” he continued. “You can’t say ‘well, O.K., if Fed Ex picks it up, they send it.’ That’s not guaranteed. Or, ‘If he gets a visa, will he get in.’ That’s not guaranteed. It takes its toll.”

For those who work in the realm of cultural exchange between the Arab world and the United States, the festival’s difficulties have been discouraging evidence of a widening gulf between the two sides, despite American efforts to change Arab attitudes about the United States.

In one much-publicized example in 2002, the Iranian director [Abbas Kiarostami](#) was denied a visa to attend the [New York Film Festival](#). And last year, Lewis Alsamari, an Iraqi-born actor who played the lead hijacker in the big-budget Hollywood film “[United 93](#),” was denied a visa by United States immigration authorities when he applied to attend the premiere in New York, despite having lived in Britain since the 1990s.

“Surely at this point in our history we should be encouraging as much contact with the Arab and Muslim world as possible, have as many people come and experience the United States as we can,” said Richard Pena, program director for the [Film Society of Lincoln Center](#). “But in fact we are not.”

Jack Shaheen, author of “[Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People](#)” (Interlink, 2001), said: “We’re talking about improving cultural relations, the struggle for hearts and minds. Karen Hughes goes to the region and talks about commonality, and here we go against everything we tell them.” He was referring to outreach efforts by Ms. Hughes, the under secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs. “We’re saying one thing and doing something completely different,” he said.

The case of Mr. Muheisin is still surprising, considering the close diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Initially, “Shadow of Silence” was meant to be the festival’s opening-night film. Mr. Muheisin, 59, applied for a visa about three weeks ago, and was first given an interview date for late March. After efforts on his behalf by the festival and Arab-American groups, the interview was moved to last Saturday, and organizers moved the film’s screening to the closing night.

Mr. Muheisin said that he was told after his interview that the visa decision would be issued in about 10 days — too late for him to participate in the festival.

A spokeswoman for the United States embassy in Riyadh, Melissa Ford, said that she was aware of Mr. Muheisin’s case, and that the problem was purely bureaucratic. Embassy officials had been unable to reach him, she said.


“We were trying to help this guy,” she said. “He was not calling us back. Our embassy is happy to accommodate people.” At first Ms. Ford said Mr. Muheisin had failed to show up for his interview, but after checking, said that he might have.

Mr. Issawi and Mr. Muheisin said this was nonsense. “This reached the highest level of the embassy, and they know it,” Mr. Issawi said. He continued: “I understand there’s a bureaucracy, and 100,000 people applying for visas. But there should be some

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discrimination: 60 years old, a filmmaker — use your judgment.”

Mr. Muheisin, who still hopes to come to the United States in October, said he had long been a supporter of the United States political system; he added that he found the incident difficult to explain to his Saudi colleagues. “My Arab friends who would argue with me over freedom in America, when they were Communist and Socialists, they are laughing at the procedures today,” he said. “They say, ‘Look at what your American friends are doing to you.’”

The director will travel to Japan to show the film at a festival there next week, and then take it to Italy, India and Russia.

While careful to point out that his film had a universal message about freedom, Mr. Muheisin acknowledged that his film, with its focus on a repressive Arab government, “could be banned in certain Arab countries. Perhaps that’s why I don’t have distribution.”

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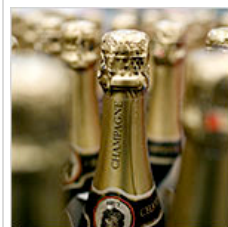


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