



ART AGAINST WAR
Mohamed ELMasry
Malta Biennale
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MaltaBiennale'26



Today is March 1, 2026. I begin preparing my suitcase and finalizing the last arrangements for the trip to Lebanon, where I store the artistic equipment for the project in my studio there. I had given myself four days to conduct maintenance and the final review before traveling to Malta on March 5.

Without warning, notification sounds begin to escalate. Continuous alerts, one after another. At first I ignore them, but their unusual intensity pushes me to check my phone to understand what is happening.

I discover that the war has begun. The anticipated exchange of strikes between Iran and Israel has become reality. I look at the airport screens and see a single word repeated:

Cancelled... Cancelled... Cancelled.

Many flights have been cancelled to destinations around the world.

I wait for a while—minutes, perhaps hours—trying to understand what I should do now. Anxiety rises; Lebanon is a country with limited exits, and once Beirut Airport closes, leaving the country becomes almost impossible.

I continue following the news anxiously. At that moment, I was not yet certain what to do, or how the journey could continue under such a sudden transformation.

The Stalled Project

The project seems to be stalled once again.

The artwork I am presenting in the Malta Biennale is part of an ongoing research project titled “The Economy of Power Pays the Price.” This project begins from a critical questioning of the economics of weapons and from dismantling the deep relationship between the production of military power and the arms trade, and the human cost paid by people in every war.

The project does not view war as a sudden political incident, but as an integrated economic system that is continuously reproduced and sustained; a system that transforms military power into a vast industry and turns human beings into the price paid within the calculations of that industry.

From this perspective, the work presents a clear position: the enormous resources wasted on producing tools of killing could have been invested in education, healthcare, and in achieving human dignity and well-being.

Yet the painful irony lies in the fact that this project created to expose the logic of war and resist its narratives has itself become captive to it.

For a long time the project has remained trapped in Beirut, not because of technical or production complications, but because of the reality of war itself. The possibility of transporting the work was disrupted, the normal movement of equipment and materials stopped, and everything related to logistics became subject to the rhythm of bombardment and military escalation.

This disruption began with explosions and airstrikes targeting Hezbollah, and then intensified with the war, the Israeli incursion, and the heavy bombardment

Iran's Strike Zones in a Direct Conflict

 **DIRECT AMERICAN TARGETS**

 **U.S. BASES & NAVAL VESSELS**
(Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, Gulf)

 **U.S. FORCES**
(Iraq/Syria)

Ballistic Missiles, Rockets, UAVs

 **TARGETS IN ISRAEL**

 **AIR FORCE & INTEL BASES**

 **CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

 **MAJOR CITIES**

 **SYMBOLIC/ STRATEGIC TARGETS**

Potentially dozens to hundreds of rockets/missiles and UAVs daily

 **ENERGY & MARITIME INFRASTRUCTURE**

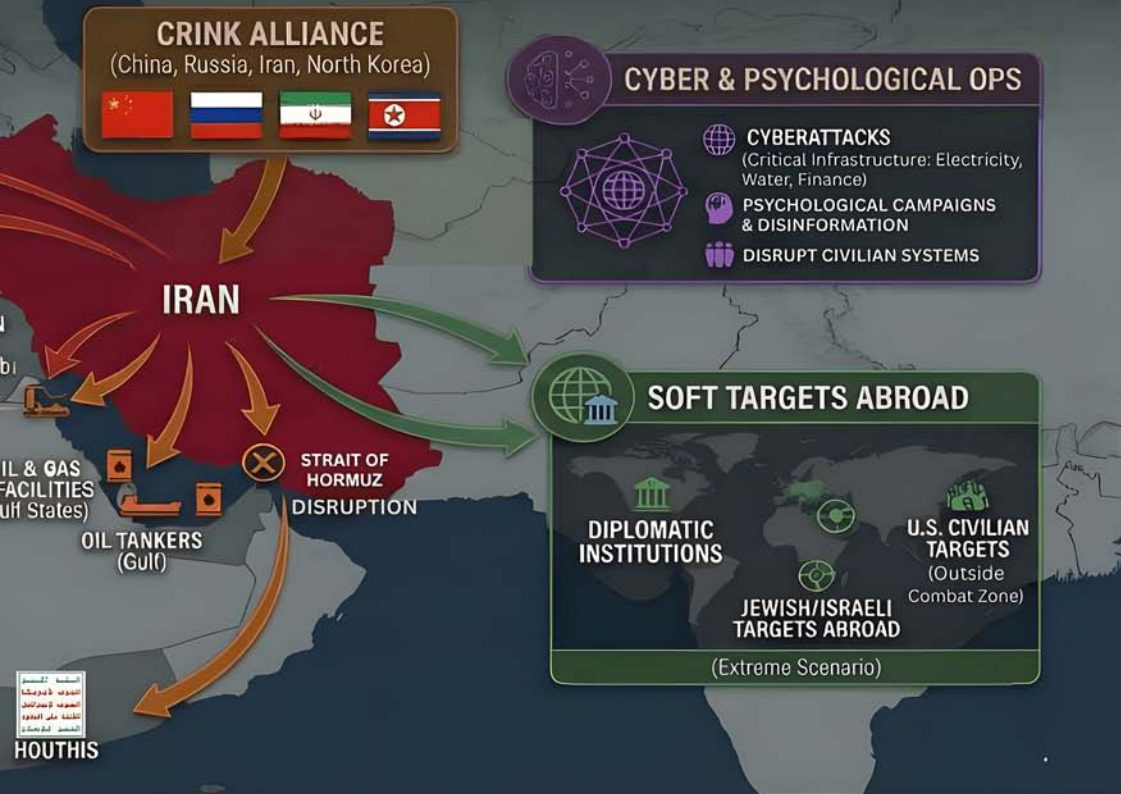
 **OIL & GAS FACILITIES** (Gulf States)

 **OIL TANKERS** (Gulf)

 **HOUTHII ATTACKS** (Red Sea, Oil Tankers)



Confrontation with the United States



that Lebanon experienced. With every attempt to reorganize transportation or resume the work, the war would return to close the routes again, turning simple movement into risk and ordinary travel into an unpredictable possibility.

Now, with the expansion of the regional confrontation linked to the war with Iran, the same scene repeats itself. Flights stop. Airports enter a state of disruption. Transportation routes collapse once more.

Thus the project whose aim is to expose the absurdity of wars and their economies finds itself once again trapped within their violent structure.

It is an irony as painful as it is infuriating: an artistic project that criticizes war, yet war itself prevents it from moving; a work that seeks to expose the economy of violence, yet that very violence disrupts its physical path and prevents it from arriving.

At this moment the interruption itself becomes part of the story: living evidence that wars do not only destroy cities and human beings, but also suffocate knowledge, disrupt art, and obstruct even the attempts that seek to question and expose their logic.

Between Missiles and Cancellations: A Moment of Paralysis

Missiles everywhere. Cancellations in every direction.

Airline screens are filled with one word repeated endlessly: Cancelled. Flights to Beirut have been cancelled, and flights from Beirut to Malta have also been cancelled. Within a few hours the entire route for transporting the project became impossible: there is no path to move the work from the studio to the maintenance center, and no path from the maintenance center to the airport.

The opening is approaching quickly. Less than ten days separate us from the exhibition, and the project quite simply is not in Malta.

I find myself facing a harsh equation: a clear commitment to participate in the exhibition confronted by a material reality that prevents the project from moving. All the logistical routes that were supposed to carry the work to the public have suddenly been closed by the war.

At that moment the question is no longer how the project will be exhibited, but whether it can be exhibited at all.

I try to think of alternatives. Perhaps a different format, another type of presentation, or a way to transport the idea itself instead of transporting the physical work. This participation represents an important opportunity to present the project not only as an artwork but as a critical idea addressing the system of war and its economies.

Yet the irony grows sharper: what the project had been analyzing for years—the economy of power, the logic of war, and the disruption of normal life under its pressure has now become a direct reality imposed upon the project itself.

The work is no longer discussing a theoretical possibility or an abstract critical vision; it is living the very experience it attempts to analyze.

Ideas accumulate and overlap, yet they also appear contradictory and confusing. I consider alternative models, possibilities for rapid production, and contacting

workshops or factories to produce new elements. I try to find a visual or material form that would allow the idea to reach the audience despite everything.

But suddenly the mind stops.

The only image that repeats itself is the same: missiles in the sky and cancellations on airline screens.

I follow the news constantly in a state of tension and anticipation. Even time it seems confused; I am no longer sure whether it is March 2 or March 3. Days overlap under the pressure of events, and the moment becomes a chain of postponed decisions and suspended possibilities.

Amid this complete confusion it becomes clear that the project is no longer facing only an artistic challenge, but a real test of its ability to continue within a reality imposed by war.

The Distant Reverberations of War

New ideas for the project begin to emerge, but they are unstable, overlapping, and confusing. I think about alternative solutions: perhaps producing models of tanks from paper, or from fabric, or simply presenting prints and documentary images that carry the idea instead of the original work. These solutions seem possible for a moment, and then quickly dissolve. Each idea appears, but none settles.

At that moment I remember that I am in Cairo a city relatively distant from the centers of conflict. A city that appears, at least theoretically, safe.

But war does not remain within its borders.

Its reverberations begin to appear everywhere: a sudden rise in the price of the dollar, rising prices of raw materials, and growing fears of increases in fuel costs. The entire economy begins to move under the pressure of war. At the same time, the emotional weight of war seeps into everyday life: in homes, in cars, in cafés, and in the streets. Almost nothing can be heard except the news. Screens remain constantly open, phones continue to send notifications without pause, and the sound of war presses on everyone.

As this pressure continues, the pressure on me increases as well: will the project reach Malta or not?

I try to deal with the practical details: flight tickets to Beirut and tickets from Beirut to Malta. I attempt to modify reservations, cancel them, or recover the money. But the airlines do not respond to calls, and customer service seems paralyzed under the pressure of events.

Then another problem appears.

My bank account is in Dubai. Suddenly a message arrives from the bank announcing the temporary suspension of international operations, and both the website and the online banking application stop functioning. I realize that

because of this war I am not only losing the ability to move, but I am also losing the money I paid for airline tickets that can neither be modified nor refunded.

The bank account is temporarily frozen. The airlines do not respond. Time passes.

I am in Cairo the relatively safe city but the reverberations of war reach me continuously. Its economic, logistical, and psychological effects surround me from every direction while the project itself remains without a clear solution.

At this stage I contact the Biennale administration. I have almost nothing to say except a single sentence:

Perhaps the project will arrive... and perhaps it will not.

I consider one last attempt, almost absurd: to travel quickly to Beirut, retrieve the work from the studio, and then immediately return to manage shipping or transportation.

I contact friends in Beirut people working at the airport and others who can describe the situation there.

What I hear is not encouraging: endless congestion at the airport, accumulated flights, and a general atmosphere of tension and disorder.

Then the news changes suddenly.

Reports appear of direct confrontations between Hezbollah and Israel, and heavy bombardment begins in southern Lebanon and across wide areas of Beirut's southern suburbs. The reports mention at least twenty-seven locations being struck inside Lebanon.

One of those locations is extremely close to where the project is stored.

At that moment everything changes.

The project is no longer only trapped within the war; it is now also threatened with direct destruction because of it.

Nevertheless I try again to book flights to Beirut, hoping to arrive quickly and retrieve the work before it is too late. But the airline website shows the same message every time:

No flights available.

No clear information. No possibility of booking. Prices continue to rise. The bank account is not working. Time is narrowing.

I try to think about traveling first from Cairo and then leaving Egypt for another destination, but Cairo Airport itself enters an unprecedented state of congestion. Long queues, tension everywhere, and airline customer services that do not answer their phones.

I cannot modify the tickets. I cannot recover the money. I cannot even fully understand what exactly is happening.

Everything appears to be moving in complete chaos.

At the center of this chaos stand the project and the artist with it, in a harshly absurd moment: an artistic project that criticizes war finds itself surrounded by it from every direction, with no clear path for movement and no guaranteed means of escape from its consequences.





Steel and Gold: A Final Attempt

Amid this complete blockage of movement between the missiles of war, the cancellations of flights, and the collapse of logistical routes a new idea emerges, perhaps driven by necessity, perhaps by stubbornness.

While casually reading an online article, I remember that Egypt is among the countries that produce tanks, particularly the locally manufactured versions of the American M1A1 tank.

This simple piece of information opens a new direction for thinking: if it is impossible to transport the original work to Malta, perhaps a symbolic representation of it can be produced in Cairo.

The idea gradually takes shape: producing a scaled silhouette of the tanks addressed in the project, maintaining the original proportions, and placing it in the same location that was supposed to host the full-scale work at the exhibition site inside the Grand Master's Palace in Valletta, Malta.

But instead of producing it from a symbolic or lightweight material, it will be manufactured from one of the materials actually used in tank production: armored steel.

Egypt is known for producing this hardened steel used in the armoring of military vehicles. The idea, therefore, is not simply a visual representation of a tank, but a reproduction albeit in a smaller form made from the same material used to protect it in reality.

But the project does not stop there.

As in the original version of the work, this armored steel is transformed into the color of gold.

Gold here is not merely decorative; it carries a clear symbolic meaning within the project. Gold is the color of wealth, the color of power, and the color of sanctity in the human imagination. In many cultures and religions, gold has long been associated with what is sacred, precious, or eternal.

When military steel is transformed into gold, the central paradox of the project becomes visible: turning an instrument of war into a symbol of wealth and sanctity, a direct reference to the complex relationship between power, money, and authority.

The idea becomes the production of a small tank silhouette made of armored steel plated in gold, placed upon the same black base the ramp that was originally intended to carry the full-scale work inside the palace.

In this situation the model will not simply replace the original work. It will function as a reference to it, a trace of it, or perhaps a small memorial reminding viewers of the absent work and the conditions that prevented its arrival.

The model may be small compared to the original work, yet the gold placed upon the black base may grant it a powerful visual presence perhaps transforming the absence itself into part of the meaning of the project.

Attempts at production begin immediately: searching for factories, contacting workshops, and trying to locate the appropriate armored steel required for the silhouette.

But once again reality does not cooperate.

It is the month of Ramadan in Egypt a month that dramatically changes the rhythm of work. The day is practically divided into two short working periods: roughly from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon, after which life almost completely stops until some workshops reopen at night between eight in the evening and midnight sometimes even until two in the morning. Even these hours are not guaranteed.

The long fasting hours make many workers reluctant to work, and some prefer simply to suspend production throughout the month.

At the same time the pressures of war continue to affect the market. Prices rise day after day. Raw materials fluctuate unpredictably sometimes without any clear explanation.

I find myself moving constantly between factories and workshops, trying to persuade workers to carry out the work under conditions that hardly seem suitable for any serious production.

On top of all this, personal health problems begin to appear: the return of allergic reactions, increasing exhaustion, and the continuous need for pain medication.

These are not normal working conditions.

They are, quite clearly, catastrophic conditions.

And yet the work continues.

Between the effects of war, the harsh rhythm of Ramadan, and the growing economic chaos, I attempt to push the idea forward even if very slowly hoping that this small model might become a visual trace capable of carrying the project's idea to Malta, even if the original work cannot arrive.

A Journey across Cairo to Modify the Flight Ticket

During the production phase and the constant movement between workshops, a new problem emerged concerning the airline ticket.

The original flight to Malta was supposed to pass through Beirut. However, after the cancellations, it was electronically modified to alternative routes through Manama or Amman. When I contacted the airline and explained that I was in Cairo and that the journey had become practically impossible to execute, the response was simple: this could not be handled over the phone, and I had to go personally to the designated office to modify the ticket.

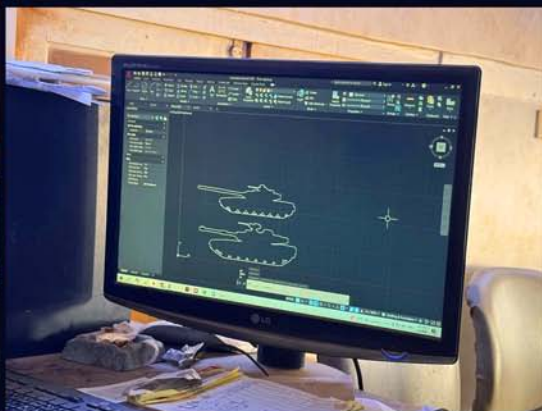
The problem was that the airline office was located in New Cairo (Fifth Settlement) in the eastern part of the city, while I was working in one of the workshops in the industrial zone of 6th of October City in the west.

This meant that on the same day and in the middle of the production process I had to cross the entire city of Cairo from west to east.

Cairo is an enormous city inhabited by more than twenty million people. With the arrival of rush hour during the month of Ramadan, the roads transform into complete traffic chaos, as everyone attempts to reach home before the evening meal.

Amid this intense congestion I moved across the city in a long and exhausting journey, simply to arrive at the airline office, explain the situation, prove that the





previous ticket modification had been incorrect, and then return again to the factory to continue the work.

It was not merely a trip across a city. It was an exhausting passage through a state of complete disorder of time, pressure, and obligations, while the project continued its race against time.

Small Workshops: When the Project Moves into Everyday Life

From the beginning, I have always tended to produce my artistic projects in collaboration with small workshops and limited local factories, outside the large industrial framework associated with major institutions.

This is not only for production reasons, but also because these workshops represent a different space of work: a space that is more independent and more closely connected to the everyday lives of the people who work within them.

Small workshops do not operate according to the logic of large-scale industrial production tied to major corporations or institutions. Instead, they attempt to build their own paths and develop their practical skills within a more fragile local economy yet one that remains more closely connected to social reality.

For this reason, producing this project within those workshops became part of the idea itself.

During the stages of cutting, preparation, and multiple layers of painting, long and repeated conversations unfolded with the workers participating in the realization of the work.

These were not merely casual conversations inside a workshop. Gradually they developed into real discussions about war itself.

The first question was simple and direct:

Why make tanks?

From that question the conversations began to expand.

Why war?

Why does it continue?

Why are so many resources spent on weapons?

Over time the discussion was no longer only about the artwork. It became about war and its direct impact on their daily lives.

The workers spoke about the constant rise in prices, about the anxiety that wars create in the economy, and about the persistent fear that these conflicts may lead to further instability.

For them war was not an abstract political idea. It was a tangible experience that appears in the details of everyday life: in the price of food, in fuel, in the ability to work, and in the general sense of security.

It was clear that they did not want these wars.

They did not want resources to be drained into weapons while living conditions deteriorated.

Many of them clearly expressed the understanding that the enormous funds poured into the arms industry do not translate into prosperity or strength for them. Instead, they simply mean the erosion of their daily lives.

In those moments it became clear that producing the project within these workshops was no longer just a technical step in the realization of an artwork. It had become a space for discussion and exchange of ideas.

In this sense, the project actually left the studio and the exhibition hall.

It moved into the street, into the workshops, into everyday workplaces, interacting with a completely different audience than the traditional audience of contemporary art.

An audience that does not normally attend exhibitions or biennials, but that lives in the very reality the project attempts to reflect upon.

Here the project acquired another dimension.

It was no longer simply a visual work that would be displayed in an exhibition space.

It became an ongoing process of circulating ideas discussions, questions, positions, and the movement of thoughts from one person to another and from one place to another.

In this sense the project is not built only upon producing static aesthetic forms objects or models presented to viewers but upon activating the discussion itself.

It is a project that moves through dialogue, through the sharing of ideas, and through creating moments of collective reflection on war, economy, and the role of the human being within these complex systems.

Within this framework the artwork becomes less connected to being an object that is displayed, and more connected to being an ongoing intellectual and social process.

A process that moves between places and people, continuously reshaped through conversations, questions, and the everyday experiences of those who participate in it even if they are not part of the art world itself.

Now the Journey Can Begin

The production phase has ended.

The metallic tank silhouettes have been completed and fully prepared for exhibition. The models are now ready to travel after a long journey of research, fabrication, and experimentation—a journey that passed through small workshops and factories, and through numerous logistical and human complications imposed by the war and the conditions surrounding it.

The path was not direct.

But the work has finally reached a form that can move.

The flight ticket has been modified once again, and the details of the alternative project have been sent to the organizers of the Malta Biennale.

Within the coming hours I will travel to Malta in order to install the work at the exhibition site.

From the Artist's Works, 2020

Britannica Atlas 1768

by:encyclopedia britannica books

1982

USA

Page No. 128 -129 Middle east

Minions in Captain America uniform at US military bases around Iran.

Minions They are fictional characters that appear in the Despicable Me

franchise, which began with Despicable Me 2010. They are distinguished by

their childish demeanor and unique language that is almost incomprehensible

at times.

Captain America: He is a superhero who appeared in the American comic

books published by Marvel Comics. Created by cartoonists Joe Simon and Jack

Kirby, the character first appeared in Captain America Comics No.1 (cover

dated March 1941) from Timely Comics.

55X 37.5 cm

64606 Stitches

5 Colors

October 2020

These models that will arrive there are not the work that was originally supposed to arrive.

But they carry its trace.

They also carry the trace of the long journey the project has undergone since the first moment it became trapped within the war.

For this reason I write this text now.

I write to explain to the audience why the project did not arrive as originally planned, and why it appears in this alternative form.

What happened was not simply a technical modification of the work, but a long chain of logistical, economic, and human consequences produced by war.

In this sense, the absence of the original project has become part of its own story. War does not only change geography and politics; it also changes the paths of work, the movement of people, and the possibility of encounters between ideas and audiences.

And yet, despite all these complications, the project continues its path.

It may not arrive as originally planned.

It may arrive in a different form.

But it arrives carrying the same questions from which it was born.

And at the end of this long journey, only one simple wish remains perhaps the most important of all:

That human beings may find a path toward peace.

That the sounds of war may fall silent.

And that life may return to its natural rhythm, where people can work, speak, build, and dream of a future that is calmer and more just.

For perhaps the world despite all this noise can still remember a simple truth:

Human beings were created to live together... not to fight one another.





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