Cartoons counter our numbness to modern wars: *Caricaturist*



By Alireza Sepahvand
Freelance journalist

INTERVIEW
EXCLUSIVE

Massoud Shojai Tabatabai, a prominent Iranian cartoonist and advocate of visual arts, believes a single image can expose contradictions that politicians spend hours trying to conceal through speeches. Drawing on decades of artistic experience and curating international events, he sees cartooning as far more than a form of entertainment: it is a universal language for challenging power, confronting censorship and expressing humanitarian concerns.

In the following exclusive interview with Iran Daily, Shojai Tabatabai discusses the role of political cartoons in interpreting global developments, the policies of US President Donald Trump, the war in Gaza and the suffering of the Palestinian people. He also reflects on artistic freedom, the cultural differences that shape how audiences interpret images, and the impact of artificial intelligence on the future of cartooning.

Having worked with artists from dozens of countries through international competitions, he argues that what distinguishes a meaningful cartoon in an age of rapidly generated imagery is not merely technical skill, but the power of an original idea, the ability to expose contradictions and the courage to offer an independent perspective on the world.



Massoud Shojai Tabatabai

Massoud Shojai Tabatabai poses for a photo beside his cartoon, titled "A Few Steps Away from the School," at the "Minab School" exhibition at the Khaneh Tehran Gallery in the Iranian capital in September 2026.
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SEPAHVAND: When politicians seek to impose their narratives on the world through speeches, threats and even war, how can a cartoonist challenge those narratives with a single image? Can a political cartoon sometimes achieve what hundreds of pages of political analysis cannot?

SHOJAI TABATABAI: Throughout my years of working in cartooning and caricature, both as an artist and as a curator of international competitions, I have repeatedly witnessed how a single image can connect with people across borders, languages and political differences.

In my experience, the power of a cartoon lies in its ability to expose, with just a few lines drawn, a contradiction that a politician might spend hours trying to conceal through speeches. Politicians use their platforms, media access and political power to impose their narratives on public opinion. A cartoonist, however, can challenge those narratives with a clever idea and encourage audiences to look at an issue from a different perspective.

Donald Trump has become one of the most frequently depicted figures in political cartoons worldwide. What is it about his personality, behavior and political style that makes him such a compelling subject for cartoonists? Is he simply an ideal figure for political satire, or has he come to symbolize broader trends in contemporary politics?

My experience of curating the Trumpism competitions, particularly the Third International Trumpism Cartoon and Caricature Contest, held last year with artists from 68 countries participating, showed me that Trump and the phenomenon known as Trumpism have captured the attention and imagination of artists far beyond the borders of the United States.

Artists from different countries, with diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives, have expressed strong criticism of Trump and drawn attention to his controversial record, including his links to the Epstein case. They portray him as a figure whose actions have contributed to several wars and whose policies have aligned him with Benjamin Netanyahu's, who has ordered the killing of Palestinian children in Gaza. Netanyahu has even been legally accused of war crimes, and his conduct is the subject of proceedings before the International Criminal Court.

For me, this demonstrated how an arrogant and politically domineering figure can become the focus of a global debate on bullying, media censorship, pressure on immigrants, racism, restrictions on freedom of expression and other pressing issues.

You recently curated an exhibition featuring works by prominent Iranian and international cartoonists on Trump, war and Israel, which attracted considerable attention and media coverage. What inspired the exhibition, and what message did you hope to convey to visitors, particularly those unfamiliar with Iran or the Iranian perspective on these developments? What questions or reflections did you want them to take away from the exhibition?

The idea behind this exhibition stemmed from a profound humanitarian and artistic concern. When war, violence and political crises affect the lives of millions of people, I believe artists cannot simply remain spectators. For me, cartooning is not merely a means of conveying humor; it is a tool for questioning, challenging power and expressing humanitarian concerns.

As I mentioned before, we sought to bring together works by Iranian and international cartoonists to explore, through art, issues such as Donald Trump's policies, war, Israel's actions and the inhumane consequences of these developments.

It was important to me that the exhibition should not simply reflect a national viewpoint, but also provide an opportunity for audiences to engage with different artistic perspectives and interpretations of major global issues.

Political cartooning in many countries faces censorship, political pressure and sometimes fierce backlash. Where do you draw the line between political satire, criticism of power and personal offence? Should artists impose limits on themselves, or is their role precisely to challenge the boundaries set by those in power?

In my view, one of the most important characteristics of political cartooning is its ability to cross conventional boundaries and challenge those in power. Throughout my professional career in cartooning and caricature, and through my experience curating international events, I have come to believe that whenever art loses its ability to question, it forfeits a significant part of its social function.

Of course, artistic freedom does not mean freedom from humanitarian responsibility. Artists must be free, but that freedom acquires meaning through knowledge, awareness and a sense of responsibility.

As for red lines, I believe artists should not abandon their questioning simply because political authorities have drawn boundaries. History has repeatedly shown that subjects once considered forbidden or beyond public discussion can eventually become part of mainstream debate. If artists always adapt themselves to imposed restrictions, art risks becoming a tool for endorsing the status quo.

Images of war now spread rapidly across social media, exposing audiences daily to scenes of death, destruction and civilian suffering. What can political cartoons do to capture public attention that photographs and news reports might not? Can satire be an effective response to human tragedy without diminishing the suffering of its victims?

Every day, we are confronted



The cartoon by Massoud Shojai Tabatabai shows US President Donald Trump (L) in horror, holding an injured Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.
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