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Israel forces attack Jenin Freedom Theater

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Jul. 28, 2011 NCR Today

Early yesterday morning, Israeli soldiers attacked the Jenin Freedom Theater in the northern West Bank city of Jenin and arrested two of its employees.

According to the theater's press release about the incident, Ahmed Nasser Matahen, a night watch guard and technician student at the theater, was awakened by the sound of stones being hurled at the theater's entrance. Matahen said when he opened the door, he found masked and heavily armed Israeli Special Forces outside.

"They told me to raise my hands and forced me to take my pants down. I thought my time had come, that they would kill me. My brother that was with me was handcuffed," Matahen said.

The two men arrested were the theater's location manager Adnan Naghnaghiye and theater board member Bilal Saadi. When the theater's general manager and one of its co-founders -- Jacob Gough from the UK and Jonatan Stanczak respectively -- arrived at the scene, they were forced to squat next to a family with four small children surrounded by about 50 heavily armed Israeli soldiers.

"Whenever we tried to tell [the Israeli soldiers] that they are attacking a cultural venue and arresting members of the theater, we were told to [shut up] and they threatened to kick us. I tried to contact the civil administration of the army to clarify the matter but the person in charge hung up on me," Stanczak said.

I visited the Jenin Freedom Theater during a December 2009 tour of the West Bank. At that time, the cultural center was a place of notable optimism, abuzz with young people studying filmmaking, photography and theater. The Israeli occupation, commonly referred to among Palestinians as "the situation," did not dominate every conversation. One woman talked of pursuing her B.A. in acting.

The theater's co-founder Juliano Mer-Khamis, an Israeli-Palestinian actor of Jewish and Christian heritage, spontaneously invited myself and traveling partner to lunch. Mer-Khamis, a passionate and charismatic man, spoke of cultural resistance and the value of offering art to people who are enduring oppression.

In April of this year, a Palestinian gunman assassinated Mer-Khamis as he was leaving the theater. (I reported on Mer Khamis' funeral here [1].) It is not known if yesterday's arrests were linked to the murder. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) "denied the theater was targeted but offered no further details," writes the Israeli daily *Haaretz* [2].

Theater officials have expressed shock at the manner of the arrest and wonder why the IDF could not have issued summons and called the men in for questioning as is routinely done in coordination with the Palestinian Authority, *Haaretz* reported.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/news/people/israeli-peace-activist-leaves-behind-legacy-creative-rebellion
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