

Israeli soldiers ransack West Bank theatre, beat and detain artists

David Walsh
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The Israeli military's reign of terror directed against the Palestinian population—including its leading cultural and intellectual figures—continues unabated. The beating and shooting of journalists, the assassination of poets, the murder of painters and writers in air strikes—this is one distinctive feature of the hideous face of the Netanyahu-Biden genocide in Gaza, accompanied as well by renewed brutality and murder in the occupied West Bank.

On Wednesday, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) carried out a raid against the Freedom Theatre in the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank, destroying as much of the theatre's equipment as the IDF thugs could get their hands on and arresting three of its leading artists.

According to a statement by the theatre, on the morning of December 13, "the Israeli army began attacking and ransacking the Freedom Theatre. They shot from inside the theatre, destroying the offices and knocking down a wall."

Zoe Lafferty, the theatre's associate director, described the attack to the *Middle East Eye* as a form of "cultural genocide." The IDF "took the new computer we bought to run our shows from," Lafferty said. "It wasn't expensive but it is a huge amount of money for the Freedom Theatre. We needed to use it for the next eight years."

The theatre's statement explained that the army "then went to the homes of [artistic director] Ahmed Tobasi and [producer and manager] Mustafa Sheta, blindfolded, handcuffed and took them away. That evening the army went to the home of [recently graduated acting student] Jamal Abu Joas and severely beat him and then took him."

The theatre added that "We can confirm that Tobasi has been released. He is suffering from leg and back

pain where the Israeli army beat him. We will update his condition as soon as possible."

The *Middle East Eye* commented that before detaining him, "Israeli forces made Tobasi take off his jacket and lie in the street in the rain." They then broke into his home, destroying "everything they could, even taking plants and throwing them on the ground," the theatre added.

Upon his release, Tobasi said, "They treated us like animals. They are trying to hurt us in any way they can, but it's important we stay strong." Sheta and Joas remain in Israeli detention as of this writing.

Sheta's wife, Rasha Sheta, said that her husband had been handcuffed in front of their children. "My children spent their night crying. We felt so scared without him being around with us," she said in a statement.

The theatre pointed out that this week's attacks "follow the murder of three members of the Freedom Theatre in the last few weeks, including 17-year-old theatre participant Yamen Jarrar, 26-year-old Jihad Nagnhiyeh and 30-year-old Mohammed Matahen. In June 2023, 15-year-old Sadeel Nagnhaghia and 17-year-old Mahmoud Al-Sadi, theatre youth participants, were also murdered. Earlier, in July, the Freedom Theatre was damaged due to bombing, during a three-day invasion and [theatre technician] Adnan Torokman was detained for four days by the Israeli army."

Various theatres and theatre artists have denounced the attack on the Freedom Theatre.

One of the most prestigious theatres in Europe, the Royal Court in London, released a statement reporting that it was "shocked to learn that Mustafa Sheta & Jamal Abu Joas of @freedom_theatre have been arrested. We demand their immediate release. Ahmed Tobasi was also arrested & has since been released. He

is suffering injury as a result of being detained.”

The Royal Court, its statement went on, was “also horrified to read of the attack on the theatre, destruction of offices and assaults on staff yesterday which followed the murder of members of the Freedom Theatre including Yamen Jarrar, Jihad Naghniyeh and Mohammed Matahen, and the arrest of hundreds of others in Jenin. We demand their immediate release.” The London theatre added, “We stand together with our colleagues—the writers, artists and students—for whom the Freedom Theatre is their creative home. We stand against the killing and silencing of artists and the destruction that cultural sites in Gaza and the West Bank have suffered in this war.”

The Tara Theatre in London, which champions South Asian voices and artists, made clear that it “continues to stand in solidarity with our friends and colleagues at Freedom Theatre who were arrested and detained by Israeli forces. ... We are also horrified at the attack on the theatre, the raid and destruction of their offices and the brutal violence enacted on staff.”

More than 100 Scottish playwrights and theatre writers, including Rona Munro, Stephen Greenhorn, Liz Lochhead, Gregory Burke, Adura Onashile, Alan Bissett, May Sumbwanyambe and Karine Polwart have signed an open letter condemning the attack on the Freedom Theatre.

The letter noted that the Jenin theatre company “performed in Glasgow, at the Tron Theatre, with their show *The Siege* as recently as 2015. Ahmed Tobasi performed the show *And Here I Am* at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2017 at the New Town Theatre, and contributed to the multi-artist celebration of Arab work *Chill Habibi* at Summerhall that same year. The Freedom Theatre are valued members of our international community. The targeting of their theatre and their violent detainment at the hands of the Israeli military is an affront to us all.”

The Freedom Theatre, in its statement, made the point that for decades, Palestinian artists “have been arbitrarily detained by Israel, sometimes for years, who also target and destroy cultural buildings, a war crime under international law. In the last few weeks in Gaza, an unprecedented number of writers, poets, theatremakers and journalists have been killed, including Dr. Refaat Al’Areer, who was deliberately targeted and murdered.”



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