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Israel-Palestine war: Israeli forces detain and assault Palestinian artists after raid on Jenin theatre

Thursday 28 December 2023, by [HEARST Katherine](#) (Date first published: 15 December 2023).

The Freedom Theatre staff say Israeli soldiers treated them 'like animals' and beat them during arrest, prompting an outpouring of solidarity by artists and theatres around the world

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The theatre's offices in the aftermath of the raid on 13 December (Adnan Torokman)

[Israeli](#) forces have sparked widespread criticism after [raiding](#) the Freedom Theatre, a community theatre based in [Jenin](#) refugee camp in the occupied West Bank, detaining three of its artists on Wednesday.

The troops ransacked the theatre, destroying offices, knocking down a wall and began firing from inside the building, in what Zoe Lafferty, the theatre's associate director, decried as a form of "cultural genocide".

Israeli forces then detained the artistic director, Ahmed Tobasi and producer and manager, Mustafa Sheta, at their homes, blindfolding and handcuffing them. The troops later "severely beat" and detained a recently-graduated acting student, Jamal Abu Joas at his home, according to a [statement](#) by the theatre.

"The night before, Tobasi was really nervous because they were going house to house and arresting people," Lafferty told MEE.

"He was already putting his coat on in case they came to the house," she added.

Tobasi reported that, before detaining him, Israeli forces made him 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 statement added.

"They 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."

Israeli forces then blindfolded him with a towel, before handcuffing and detaining him along with his

brother.

Sheta's wife, Rasha Sheta, said that her husband was 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.

Tobasi has subsequently been released, but Sheta and Joas remain detained. The Freedom Theatre said that Tobasi is suffering from leg and back pains as a result of being beaten by Israeli Forces.

"They treated us like animals," he said in a [statement](#) following his release. "They are trying to hurt us in any way they can, but it's important we stay strong."

Over 100 [Palestinians](#) have been [arrested](#) amid the large-scale incursion on the city and the refugee camp. Twelve Palestinians have been [killed](#), including a 17-year-old boy.

A window onto Jenin

[Founded](#) after the [First Intifada in 1987](#) as the "Stone Theatre," the Freedom Theatre [aims](#) to provide young Palestinians with important tools for dealing with the hardships of daily life under occupation.

"One of the reasons [it was established] was to find a way to speak to the outside world and tell them what is going on here, and put the perspectives of Palestinians and specifically Palestinians from Jenin onto the stage," Lafferty told MEE.

Israel's attack on the Freedom Theatre in Jenin camp is part of a cultural genocide [Read More »](#)

"The theatre is attacked because it's a cultural organisation that provides a window into what is happening in Jenin camp," Lafferty said. "Also the fact it is located in the camp means it's vulnerable [to attacks]."

In 2011, then artistic director, Juliano Mer-Khamis was [shot dead](#) by a masked attacker in Jenin.

In July, the theatre was structurally [damaged in an air strike](#) amid a three-day Israeli offensive on Jenin.

Since the latest Israeli onslaught of Gaza began on 7 October, raids and detentions of the theatre and its artists have [escalated](#) amid multiple incursions in and around Jenin.

Three of the theatre's members have been [killed](#) by Israeli forces in recent weeks, including [17-year-old Yamen Jarrar](#), 26-year-old Jihad Naghniyeh, and 30-year-old Mohammed Matahen.

They join youth theatre members, [Sadeel Naghnaghia](#), age 15, who was shot dead by Israeli forces in June, and [Mahmoud al-Sadi](#), age 17, in November 2022.

"They weren't specifically targeted because they're from the Freedom Theatre," Lafferty told MEE. "They were killed just [because] they were from Jenin, [where] all people are targets."

In its [statement](#) on Thursday, the theatre highlighted that Israeli forces have long "deliberately targeted" Palestinian cultural institutions and artists, with "unprecedented numbers of writers, poets, theatremakers and journalists" killed since 7 October.

"If you put all of this together, you cannot see it as anything but a very, very strategic and targeted

campaign,” Lafferty said.

Through the relentless incursions, the theatre has continued its work, enacting its motto of “resistance through art”.

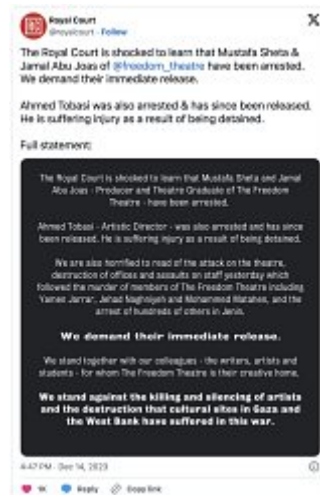
“We have created a generation of artists and leaders, who one day will be at the forefront of the Palestinian liberation movement,” the theatre’s website [explains](#).

“Freedom is not going anywhere,” Lafferty said.

Resisting ‘deep silence’

Theatres and artists internationally have shared solidarity statements with the theatre.

The Royal Court Theatre in London released a [statement on X](#) condemning the attack and demanding the “immediate release” of Sheta and Joas.



London’s Tamasha Theatre also posted [a statement on X](#) demanding the artists’ release and “an end to the persecution of writers, artists - everyone - in Palestine”.

UK South Asian venue Tara Theatre also shared a [statement](#) saying, “We stand with Freedom Theatre and call for all creative workers affected by the conflict to be free from persecution.”

[An open letter](#) signed by over 100 Scottish playwrights demanded "the immediate release of our colleagues, and an end to the military occupation and its targeting of artists, journalists and writers in Palestine.”

‘They treated us like animals. They are trying to hurt us in any way they can, but it’s important we stay strong’

- Ahmed Tobasi, creative director, Freedom Theatre

Despite a [wave of censorship](#) targeting pro-Palestine voices in cultural spaces in the US and Europe, artists and culture workers have been working to amplify the voices of Palestinian artists since the Israeli onslaught on Gaza began on 7 October.

An open letter signed by 1000 artists who refused to work with Bristol's Arnolfini International Centre for Contemporary Arts after its cancellation of scheduled film and poetry events programmed by Bristol Palestine Film Festival, highlighted "an [alarming pattern](#) of censorship and repression within the arts sector".

On 29 November, hundreds of theatre workers [staged](#) a walkout to protest arts organisations' "deep silence" over ongoing Israeli attacks on Palestinians.

On Tuesday, the final poem penned by Palestinian scholar, Refaat Alareer who was killed by Israeli forces on 7 December, *If I Must Die*, was read by British actor Brian Cox in a [video](#) published by the Palestine Festival of Literature.

The poem has been translated into 160 languages and recited at Palestine solidarity vigils and rallies across the world.

Katherine Hearst

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<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-israeli-forces-raid-jenin-theatre-detain-arts>

War on Gaza: Palestinian drama teacher killed amid 'deadliest' assault on refugee camp

Artist Ahed Abu Hamda was among the estimated 90 victims of devastating air raids on the camp over Christmas



A Palestinian artist and theatre maker was killed by Israeli forces amid air strikes on the Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza over Christmas.

Ahed Abu Hamda, a drama teacher who worked with Theatre Day, a Gaza-based community theatre, was killed amid a devastating wave of air strikes targeting the densely populated camp, the

organisation Artists On The Frontline reported on Wednesday.

The onslaught started just before midnight on Christmas Eve and continued into Christmas Day, killing at least 90 people, many of them children.

Israeli forces reportedly carried out more than 50 strikes that night on three refugee camps Al Bureij, An Nuseirat and Maghazi.

The Palestinian authorities reported that the intensifying strikes across the besieged enclave between 23 and 26 December had killed more than 250 people in 24 hours, as Israel stepped up its bombardment of Gaza.

The refugee camp, which is Gaza's smallest, has previously been targeted by air strikes, but the attack on Sunday was described as one of the "deadliest" since the start of the conflict in early October.

The Israeli Air Force later expressed its "regret" after an internal investigation revealed it had used the wrong type of weaponry in the attack, wreaking extensive collateral damage.

No prior warning

According to Al Jazeera's Tareq Abu Azzoum, the camp is one of the most densely populated areas in the Gaza Strip, and is an area that had been designated "safe" by the Israeli military.

In previous assaults, Israeli forces would warn residents of an attack, but in Maghazi, residents reported that the onslaught happened without prior warning, with entire residential blocks flattened and body parts scattered across the camp.

While the official death toll stands at 90, residents say the number is likely much higher.

According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (Unrwa), the camp is normally home to 30,000 people, but it is estimated that the population has swollen to 100,000, with the influx of refugees fleeing intense Israeli bombardment in the north.

With no fuel to operate bulldozers and vehicles due to the "total siege" imposed on the strip by Israel, residents are digging through the rubble to recover victims with their bare hands.

A war on culture

Abu Hamda's death comes after the Palestinian Ministry of Culture released a report revealing how the months-long Israeli onslaught on the besieged Gaza Strip has torn through Palestine's cultural sector.

According to the report, at least 28 Palestinian artists, intellectuals and writers in Gaza have been killed since 7 October.

"The war on culture has always been at the heart of the aggressors' war on our people, as the real war is a war on the narrative to steal the land and its rich treasures of knowledge, history, and civilization, along with the stories it holds," Dr Atef Abu Saif said in the report's introduction.

On 13 December, Israeli forces raided the Freedom Theatre, a community theatre based in the Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank, detaining three of its artists. Although two were subsequently released, Mustafa Sheta, the theatre's producer and manager, remains in detention.

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<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/war-gaza-palestinian-drama-teacher-killed-israeli-assault-refugee-camp>
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