

Haaretz | Israel News

Israel: Released From Detention, Owners of East Jerusalem Bookstore Still Don't Know Why They Were Arrested

Thursday 13 February 2025, by [HASSON Nir](#) (Date first published: 13 February 2025).

Ahmed and Mahmoud Muna were held in detention for two nights in harsh conditions, after police raided their bookshop and confiscated books they claimed 'incited violence.' The brothers were questioned just once for 15 minutes. 'We challenge the Israeli narrative, but also the Palestinian narrative,' Mahmoud told Haaretz

A sign is displayed in support of Mahmoud Muna and Ahmed Muna after Israeli police raided two Educational Bookshops and made arrests, in East Jerusalem, February 10, 2025. Credit: Ammar Awad / Reuters

Even amid a surfeit of news from the Middle East, the Israel Police's raid on the Educational Bookshop in East Jerusalem succeeded in finding a prominent place in the global headlines. That is no surprise: It would be hard to find a journalist stationed in Jerusalem who doesn't know of the shop and its owners, the Muna family. On Wednesday, a day after they were released from jail, Ahmed and Mahmoud Muna recounted the Kafkaesque affair of their arrest on the charge of selling books.

On Sunday, [six police officers arrived at the store's](#) two outlets on Salah al-Din Street and for two hours inspected the bookshelves, leafed through books, and used their phones to scan and translate titles appearing on spines in a hunt for suspicious books.

In the end, they collected between 100 and 150 titles and wrapped them in big garbage bags.

"They didn't give the impression of being very professional. They didn't know either English or Arabic," said Mahmoud. "In English, they say don't judge a book by its cover. But that's literally what they did - they looked at the cover and if there was a flag, if the word Gaza appeared or Hamas, a picture of Ahmed Yassin, a picture of an Israeli soldier, [even the word antisemitism](#). They took Rachel Shabi's book an antisemitism."

The police also wanted to confiscate newspapers, including Haaretz in English and newspapers in Arabic, but according to Mahmoud, one of them put in a call to a superior and was told there was no need.

When they had completed their work, the police arrested Mahmoud and his brother Ahmed, loaded the books into the car, and drove to the Kishle police station in the Old City. There, the two say, they placed the books on a table and began sorting them. "There was one smart policeman there who told them, 'Look, these are biographies, research books, not banned books,' so they started sorting them." In the end, four suspect books remained, for which [Mahmoud and Ahmed were held in](#)

[custody](#) for two nights.

One of them is a book of photography called "A People Called Palestine" by the British photographer J.C. Tordai. The book contains pictures of ordinary Palestinians, but the cover aroused the suspicions of the police because of an image of a child holding a poster of a Palestinian activist who was shot and killed by the Israel Defense Force in 2001.

Supporters of Ahmed and Mahmoud Muna outside the Jerusalem Magistrates Court on Monday. Credit: Sraya Diamant

The second was an art book in Arabic called "Memory of Color - Jerusalem in the Eyes of a Palestinian Artist." The third was in German and is about Hamas and the fourth was a coloring book for children called "From the River to the Sea." It mainly features well-known Palestinian figures such as poet Mahmoud Darwish and journalist [Shireen Abu Akleh](#) but also includes more "incriminating" pages with drawings of a Palestinian next to a tank and armed soldiers with the Al-Aqsa Mosque in the background.

The police called the family and asked them to come and collect the books, which were cleared of all suspicion.

The brothers were then questioned for about fifteen minutes in what they said was a very technical and general way. "They asked where you live, what you do. I said I sell books. I don't know all the books, and I also make coffee for people. They didn't even get into the question of incitement," said Mahmoud.

From the Kishle police station they were taken to the Russian Compound, but it was late in the day and there was room for only one in the holding pen. As a result, Ahmed was returned to Kishle and Mahmoud stayed at the Russian Compound.

Like every detainee who has been through the Jerusalem detention center, his descriptions of the inside are shocking.

Ahmed Muna under house arrest on Wednesday. Credit: Olivier Fitoussi

"They gave me clothes, the pants were too small, the shirt had no buttons. They put me in a room with 10 other people, with no light. Lots of shouting in the hallway. When the guards pass by they hit the doors with their clubs. They gave me a thin yoga mat, no blanket and no pillow to put on a concrete bed. Because I arrived late, there was no food either.

"It was obvious that someone had worn the clothes they gave me. There was no toilet paper in the bathroom, the shower was broken, the place stank, the mattress was dirty, the toilets, everything. When you move from place to place, they put a COVID mask over your eyes and handcuffs on your hands. The guard leads you, drags you. He turns corners with force and on purpose, and you crash into the wall," said Mahmoud.

The Israel Prison Service spokeswoman said that it "operates in accordance with the provisions of the law and any claim on the subject may be investigated by the appropriate authorities."

The next day, the brothers were brought before Judge Gad Ehrenberg of the [Jerusalem Magistrates Court](#). The police asked to extend the remand by eight days, but the judge agreed to just one. Despite that, the brothers were never questioned again. The first interrogation for 15 minutes was the last one, too.

Mahmoud Muna under house arrest on Wednesday. Credit: Olivier Fitoussi

The investigation apparently grew out of an earlier one. About two weeks ago, police arrested a woman in the Old City with books in her bag that were suspected of being inflammatory. They traced where they were purchased, which was a bookstore in the Old City. In the raid on the store that followed, books that could be considered inflammatory under the law were seized, including ones by Yahya Sinwar and Hassan Nasrallah, as well as books calling for [violent resistance to Israel](#). The owner was arrested and the store closed by administrative order for 30 days. As a result, the investigation began against the Muna family's store.

The police statement said that "during a targeted operation, a search was conducted in two bookstores suspected of selling books containing inflammatory content. The suspects who sold the books were arrested. Investigators from the David region began an investigation, during which they found many books containing inflammatory content of a Palestinian nationalist nature."

Despite what was reported in the police statement, the two were not arrested for incitement, an offense that requires the prosecutor's office's approval for an investigation, but "suspicion of harming public peace," a sort of default offense that the police frequently use.

However, in this case the police raided a store that is also a unique cultural institution in Jerusalem. The store is used by foreign diplomats, researchers and journalists. Not surprisingly, diplomatic representatives from eight countries, as well as a representative of the European Union, appeared at the court hearing.

"All the books in the store are also in the National Library - all were published by reputable publishers," said Mahmoud. "We challenge the Israeli narrative, but also the Palestinian narrative. We believe we have a commitment to our society and our mission, and we will continue. If [Israel wants to start censoring books](#), let it publish a list of what is allowed and what is forbidden to read."

Said Ahmed: "This experience has sharpened my view of the state of freedom here - freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom of movement. How easy it is to take you and put you in the worst place imaginable, completely cut off from the world. But when the door to the detention center opened, and I saw 20 journalists' cameras pointed at me, I realized that there are still people who care about us, who care about culture, and who care about information."

Nir Hasson

P.S.

- Haaretz. Feb 13, 2025 6:01 am IST:
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-02-13/ty-article/.premium/freed-from-detention-owners-of-e-jlem-bookstore-still-dont-know-why-they-were-arrested/00000194-fc40-db1f-a5dd-fcc172d60000>
- Nir Hasson's articles in Haaretz:
<https://www.haaretz.com/ty-WRITER/0000017f-da24-d718-a5ff-faa4b8a00000>