

By order of the Israeli minister of national security, literature is prohibited in occupied Jerusalem

Israeli armed forces encircled Al-Hakawati, the Palestinian National Theatre in Jerusalem, on Saturday 23rd of May 2009, and prevented the launch of the Palestine Literature Festival. The Palestine Literature Festival, held for the second consecutive year in Palestine, is organized by Engaged Events, a British literature association and sponsored by UNESCO and the British Council. This year's festival is attended by thirty internationally renowned writers who come to Palestine in solidarity with the Palestinian people and in support for their struggle for freedom and independence.

Among the guests attending last evening's launch were diplomatic representatives of Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Norway and France, foreign and Palestinian dignitaries in addition to tens of literature loving people. Upon brutally closing down the theatre and heavily armed Israeli forces making it clear that the event is not going to take place, Mr. Jean Paul Ghnoeim, the French Cultural Attaché, quickly reacted by offering an alternative venue for the launch, at the French Cultural Centre, which happens to be a five hundred meters walk from Al-Hakawati. The Israeli police looked very puzzled watching the one hundred or so guests leaving Al-Hakawati, marching up Salah El Din Street and entering the French Cultural Centre. On the one hand, they had clear orders from their minister of national security to prevent the event from taking place- citing security reasons as usual- and on the other hand, they did not want to start a diplomatic row with the Republic of France.

The festival was successfully launched in the beautiful garden of the French Cultural Centre, with welcoming words by Mr. Jean Paul Ghnoeim, who clearly stated that as a French man he will always stand behind the protection of freedom and liberty. Dr. Nazmi Al Gubeh, on behalf of Yabous Productions, also welcomed the guests and emphasized the importance of holding the launch in Jerusalem, an occupied Palestinian city that is facing an unprecedented Israeli campaign to alter its Arab demographic and geographic characteristics. This was followed by our guest writers; Carmen Callil, Henning Mankell, Claire Messud, Ahdaf Soueif, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Deborah Moggach, MG Vassanji and Victoria Brittain, who read pieces of their work, engaging the audience engaged for the remainder of the evening.

We, the Palestinian people are thankful to Engaged Events and all those who made this festival possible for their solidarity and support and for breaking the state of isolation forced upon us.

We are also very thankful to the French Consulate for its principled position of protecting freedom and liberty that was reiterated yet again last evening by offering the French Cultural Centre for the launch of the festival.

And above all, we view the successful launch as another tribute to the Palestinian people who have paid dearly and continue to offer great sacrifices in order to attain their freedom and independence.

The Coalition for Jerusalem
Jerusalem, 24th May 2009