

A NATIONAL IDENTITY YABOUS CULTURAL CENTRE JERUSALEM

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Who I am is not an easy answer, but put simply, I am a mother of four children and a dog.

I am 49, and I am not afraid to announce this because getting old is great... Every experience is a learning opportunity.

I love life, and everything I do is with love.

I decided from the beginning to leave a trace wherever I work. To commit with full passion.

The Oslo agreement indicated Jerusalem's fate and that the Israelis had plans to occupy the city entirely.

So we formed Yabous cultural centre in 1995 to strengthen artistic life in Jerusalem. It was the start of a challenge, an impossible task, to keep Jerusalem, our Palestinian capital, on the map. We were broke, building something from nothing but our effort and ideas.

Over 25 years, we created a strong cultural foundation with thousands of activities, and Yabous became one of the most beautiful experiences of my life.

However, the challenges have become bigger and bigger.

There are difficulties with the Israeli authorities who oversee our premises and must grant a work permit.

Many donors do not like our vision, so we must reject funding to remain true to our values and national identity.

We are prohibited from working with many Palestinians who have specialist skills, as after the wall was built, they could not travel to Jerusalem.

I am from Bethlehem, living in Jerusalem on a family unification permit, so my personal situation is unstable. There have been many threats by Israeli authorities to take it away if I do not stop working at Yabous.

The centre has been closed down several times. The Israelis were so determined to cancel one festival that they arrested the organisers and then started chasing a balloon with the festival logo down the street.

Recently there was the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem , and with it, the plans to abolish any institution working to sustain Palestinian national culture. This was when attacks on us intensified, starting with the arrest of my husband and me.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when the Israeli army arrived at our house.

I woke my children and told them not to be afraid.

They search our house, taking research papers, education certificates, our photos, and passports.

They stormed Yabous centre, confiscating everything and loading it into cars.

My interrogation lasted 12 hours. And when I was released on bail, I was banned from speaking to anyone from Yabous for a month, including my husband.

Since then, the Israeli authorities have not stopped calling and questioning me. We are still trying to recover the confiscated computers, documents and files. And I have had further interrogations and bans from contacting anyone at Yabous centre.

There is no official crime to charge us with, so they work in a roundabout way through intimidation, obstructing our path, and an attempt to break our morale.

So yes, the challenges in Jerusalem are huge.

And for sure, they cannot stand a strong Palestinian woman who leads an institution that strives, who can speak to the media and has relations with thousands of people around the world...

A Palestinian woman who defies the stereotype they wish to paint. And who works to plant the seeds of belonging, love for Jerusalem and for Palestine.