



« Home

« Prospero

## An explosive evening in the territories

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A FLARE lit up the sky above the Siam residence in Silwan, a Palestinian neighbourhood of East Jerusalem. The whistles of young men echoed through the valley. Clashes between the Israeli army and Palestinian boys had begun in the afternoon, and one man was reportedly shot in the face with a rubber-coated bullet. For Ali Siam, a resident in his 50s, it was a night like many others.

"The police drive their car down the hill, and the youth throw stones," he said, shrugging. A police vehicle could be seen parked at an intersection as tear gas wafted through the spring air.

Just past the police car, the [Palestine Festival of Literature](#) (PalFest) was about to hold its final event: an open-mic night featuring literary greats and the Palestinian rap group [DAM](#) (pictured top). But like so many things in the Palestinian territories, events had veered off-course, guided by the awkward logic of military occupation.

It was not the first time that PalFest participants had encountered the military during the week-long festival: getting into the West Bank from Jordan, some had endured hours of questioning. Travelling from the West Bank into Nazareth for a panel, a few had to stay behind at a checkpoint.

Arriving at Silwan was already difficult Wednesday night, as police had made the area inaccessible to cars for Passover. Silwan sits just on the outskirts of the Old City and its main Jewish holy site, the Western Wall. The community of 16,500 Palestinians has been [steadily annexed](#) by Israeli settlers. An archaeological dig amid the jumble of Palestinian homes has been commandeered by Jewish settlers, and a warren of underground tunnels connects the site with key Jewish areas in the Old City. Last June, Israeli city officials decided to demolish 22 Palestinian homes in Silwan to build an archaeological park there, but the plan has yet to be implemented.

The residents of Silwan have established an information centre and a solidarity tent to help garner international support. The centre's director, Jawad Siam (a distant relation to Ali), has been arrested multiple times, accused of assaulting another Palestinian in what he says are trumped-up charges. Human rights organisations point to another problem unique to Silwan: an inordinate number of its children are being arrested. In March alone, 15 children were detained, usually for throwing stones.




"PalFest's mandate is to 'bring world class cultural events to populations that would otherwise have no access to them',"


said Ahdaf Soueif, founder PalFest and author of the acclaimed "The Map of Love", in an e-mail when asked why the group was meeting in Silwan. "It seemed to us that the people of Silwan very much fitted that description."


And so, as award-winning authors such as Gary Younge, a columnist for the **Guardian**, and Meena Alexander, a poet, made their way towards the Silwan solidarity tent, the group heard that police had tossed a tear-gas canister inside it. Jawad Siam, barely able to speak from the gas, called a friend to say that perhaps the reading would have to be cancelled. The international guests, coughing and tearing up, were nevertheless stalwart.

By ten o'clock at night, two-and-a-half hours after the event was to start, the air had cleared. Authors read poetry in English and Arabic while DAM set up sound equipment. On the dark hillside behind the protest tent, Israeli soldiers crouched.

The rap group, from the town of Lod in Israel, closed the night with their most beloved song. "How am I a terrorist/When you've taken my land?" the group rapped to the audience. "We made sure the speakers were really loud so the soldiers would hear," said DAM member Suhel Nafar. (A video of the event can be [seen here](#) .)

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