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New York City vigil commemorates Palestinian journalists, artists murdered in Gaza by Israeli military

On January 24, in a somber and moving ceremony, about 200 people gathered in Lower Manhattan's Washington Square Park to commemorate the lives of journalists, writers and artists murdered in Israel's genocide in Gaza.

The candlelight vigil was sponsored by the New York City chapter of Writers Against the War on Gaza (WAWOG) and Al-Awda: The Palestine Right to Return Coalition, and featured speeches and readings of letters from Gaza and Palestinian poetry.

Formed at the outset of the Israeli murderous assault on the Gazan population, WAWOG issued an appeal on October 26 signed by thousands of writers. In part, it read: "We stand firmly by Gaza's people, victims of a genocidal war the United States government continues to fund and arm with military aid—a crisis compounded by the illegal settlement and dispossession of the West Bank and the subjugation of Palestinians within the state of Israel."

The open letter also noted, "Internationally, writers and cultural workers have faced severe harassment, workplace retribution, and job loss for expressing solidarity with Palestine, whether by stating facts about their continued occupation, or for amplifying the voices of others. These are instances that mark severe incursions against supposed speech protections."

This Thursday, WAWOG members, including Palestinian writer Randa Jarrar, staged a protest against PEN America's sponsorship of a reading by pro-Zionist Mayim Bialik in Los Angeles. WAWOG commented on its Twitter/X feed, "With delusional liberal

aplomb, @PENAmerica claims objectivity while platforming genocidal Zionists and silencing Palestinians like @randajarrar who enact the ‘free speech’ PEN claims to stand for” and noted that PENAmerica “has also been silent on the IOF’s [Israel Occupation Forces] targeting of journalists and censorship of English-language media agencies.”

PEN America, the writers organization, has made a mockery of its self-proclaimed goal of defending free speech. It has notoriously supported the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine and the extreme right-wing Ukrainian government’s censorship of Russian literature. It is significant that writers are exposing the group’s pro-war and pro-imperialist character.

At the January 24 vigil, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Hussain Omar, the co-leader of the New York City chapter of Writers Against the War on Gaza. We asked him about the purpose of the vigil.

“So the vigil here is to commemorate writers, poets, journalists, cultural workers that have been killed, not just in the recent genocide but going back historically for several decades to the foundational moments of Zionism itself. We are outraged by the lack of attention that these deaths have *not* received in the national and international media, and we are here to commemorate our colleagues. The Zionists are clearly targeting journalists and cultural workers.”

We asked him what he thought the Zionists’ purpose was in murdering so many cultural workers.

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“It’s part of an ongoing project to make Gaza unlivable,” Omar said. “Palestine, as you know, has a very high literacy rate. It’s an incredibly educated population. All of the universities in Gaza have been destroyed. Obviously, the journalists are being killed so that these crimes are not exposed to the world.

“But there’s a real effort to erase not just the people that make Palestinian culture. Heritage sites of importance in Palestine have been destroyed pretty deliberately and systematically in this war. And we’re here to voice, in a very small way, our opposition to it. We are using the tools that we have available to us, which is our capacity to write and our capacity to do cultural work, to say enough is enough.”

The January 24 event opened with remarks by Ilana Cruger Zaken, an interdisciplinary scholar at New York University's Center for Experimental Humanities and a Jewish language project research affiliate, among which were the following:

"We gather, vigilant here in solidarity to uplift the lives of the survivors ... even as the leaders of this city, our Zionist mayor, stands hand in hand with the Zionist regime, even as the history, cultural institutions of this city whitewash genocide. The *New York Times* abandoned its poetry section and prints lies that whitewash genocide in its garbage pages. The 92nd Street Y canceled its poetry series and instead hosts genocide heirs to comfortably enjoy talking about genocide in their war rooms.

"Yet we, we are the writers, we are the artists," Zaken continued. "We are the culture makers of this city ... we answer the call of the martyr Dr. Refaat al-Ar'eer, who wrote, 'at the end of the day, nothing Palestinians or those who support Palestine do will please Israel or the Zionist regime, and Israeli aggression will continue unabated. BDS [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions], armed struggle, peace talks, protests, tweets, social media, poetry, all are terror in Israel's books.'"

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The Palestinian American writer Sarah Aziza read a letter to a fellow poet about the anguish of the genocide. She still has three cousins surviving in Gaza. "I am forced to knock out the walls of my imagination again and again, to make way for ever deeper depravity. I discover what a body looks like when it is both bloodless and crushed. I learn how long a premature baby can survive without warmth. I now know what it sounds like when a four-year-old orphan describes war. I hear my father sob as I never have before."

Lylla Younes, a poet, read Palestinian American Fady Joudah's poem titled "[...]". A different poem of the same title by Joudah was the last item published in the *New York Times Magazine* on November 2 by its poetry editor Anne Boyer just before she resigned from the Times because of the newspaper's "ghoulish euphemisms ... verbally sanitized hellscape ... warmongering lies" about Palestine.

One line of Joudah's poem read by Younes goes, "Too many kids got in the way of precisely imprecise one-ton bombs dropped a 1001 times over the children's night. They will not forgive the children this sin."

Among other readers, Palestinian actor Adam Bakri and writer and poet Chase Berggrun read selections from the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish.

The audience was silent as it paid close attention to the writers' words. The meeting was rich with the images, feelings and political thoughts of an oppressed people. Most of the crowd, standing in the rain, were young, and not a few were students from nearby New York University. The WSWS spoke to one of them, Ricardo, about his reaction to the vigil and his views on the Gaza genocide.



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WSWS: What do you think it means that Israel has been targeting poets and artists, playwrights and beating them and detaining them and assassinating them? What's the significance of this systematic attack?

Ricardo: Art, expression, freedom, all carry so much meaning. It moves the world. And [the Zionists choose] to continue to suppress that, not just as a form of suppression of information and of expression and of opinion, but also of culture, of history, of art and those who choose to share that.

Art has always been intertwined with activism and liberation movements. And this is just another pattern in the history of suppression ... the definitions of who is a terrorist will continue to justify these state atrocities and the suppression of journalists, artists, and truth-tellers and activists alike.

It's really a travesty. And we have to be very careful about how we allow ... these narratives to be pushed upon anyone who is in opposition to state violence.

WSWS: What do you think about the role of Biden in the ongoing genocide? What responsibility does he have?

Ricardo: Well, he's very complicit. He's an enabler. He's continuing to fund this genocide very handily and usurping the role of Congress even in that, who are already very readily willing to fund this genocide year after year. And Biden has been a staunch Zionist for decades. And this is something that has been very publicly known about him and is a core component of his continued success within the Democratic Party.

And it's very frustrating to be stuck in a system where our only political options that are presented to us by the majority parties of power ... are both genocide supporters. And Biden continues to front as if he is an ally of oppressed people and of liberation and of social betterment.

But you cannot even pretend to be domestically interested in those values if you continue to send this amount of money, this amount of diplomatic coverage towards an oppressive state, a genocidal state. ... So it is very frustrating, not only Biden's role in this but all of his supporters and people that are continuing to enable and not question this presidency, which has coded itself in all of these values of egalitarianism but continues to do wrong on so many levels.

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