

Jerusalem the focus of first Palestinian Museum show

The Palestinian Museum launched its inaugural exhibition Saturday with a highly political art show focusing on Israel's occupation of east Jerusalem.

"Jerusalem Lives" opens to the public on Sunday in the university town of Birzeit near Ramallah, the Palestinian political capital in the occupied West Bank.

The museum opened last May to great fanfare -- but without any exhibits, sparking both bemusement and some criticism.

Officials insisted at the time that they were merely inaugurating the building itself.

A press preview on Saturday of "Jerusalem Lives" displayed works ranging from the abstract to the overtly political.

In one room, a four-wall photographic panorama surrounds visitors with images of the ring of Israeli settlements around Jerusalem.

In the garden, a green staircase climbs skywards from inside a mesh cage, seemingly referencing the confinement of the Palestinians by Israel's occupation.

But the symbolism of the staircase, coming to a dead end in mid-air, is open to interpretation.

Curator Reem Fadda said the collection was meant to spark discussion of "cultural resistance" to the policies of Israel, which occupied east Jerusalem in 1967 and later annexed it in a move never recognised by the international community.

The West Bank and Gaza Strip were occupied in the same year but not annexed, and their occupants need special -- and hard-to-get -- Israeli permits to visit Jerusalem.

Fadda said she had not been able to make the short journey over the past year as she does not have such authorisation.

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Palestinian diaspora



A woman looks at posters during a media tour ahead of the 'Jerusalem Lives' exhibition. (AFP/Abbas Momani)

"The aim of this exhibition was really to provide a way for us to think in a creative way how can we resist this hegemony of Israeli occupation that is facing the city of Jerusalem through a cultural stance," she told AFP in English.

Another goal of the show, she said, was to "present Jerusalem to the people of Palestine that can't go to Jerusalem".

The exhibition runs until December and admission is free.

The organisers plan to bring groups of young Palestinians to the show, although those who are in Gaza or who are refugees in neighbouring countries will mostly be unable to visit.

Fadda said she hoped parts of the collection could travel to countries where there is a significant Palestinian diaspora.

Jerusalem recently saw weeks of Palestinian protests over new Israeli security measures at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the most prominent symbol of Islam and Palestinian nationalism.

Israel installed new metal detectors after two police were killed by Israeli Arab attackers near the site, leading to daily protests until the devices were removed.

Mahmud Hawari, the museum's director, told AFP that recent events had given the exhibition added relevance.

"The recent popular movement in Jerusalem has given us much more impetus and a context to the exhibition highlighting the hardships of Jerusalemites," he said.

The idea for the museum dates back to 1997, four years after the Oslo peace accords established the Palestinian Authority and were meant to lead to an independent Palestinian state.

Exhibition organisers said they aimed to create a place of memory for Palestinians, who often accuse Israel of rewriting history to justify its policies -- including the expansion of settlements.

The building cost about \$28 million (23.5 million euros), financed 95 percent by Palestinians.

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