

PA expels founder of Jenin youth orchestra over concert for survivors

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Wafa Younis, a musician from northern Israel who founded a youth orchestra in the Jenin refugee camp, was arrested there on Tuesday by Fatah militants and sent back to Israel from the West Bank. Last week the orchestra played for Holocaust survivors and elderly Arabs in Holon, news that ignited passions in Jenin.

On Tuesday, Younis had been meeting with students' mothers when about four armed men in civilian clothing surrounded her. The militants were led by Zakariya Zubeidi, head of Fatah in the camp, who demanded that Younis go with him in his car to the camp's police station.

"The police chief, who is familiar with my activities, said he would prefer that I leave because those are the instructions regarding anyone with an Israeli identification card," Younis told Haaretz Thursday.

"Zubeidi offered a hudna, where we would suspend our activities for a time, and I agreed. I'll return to Jenin at the right moment because the children are waiting for me, because the community is waiting for me. And if I can't teach them in their classroom I'll teach them in the center I founded in A'ara [where she lives]."

Younis' work in the camp has made her a household name there. After teaching more than a dozen schoolchildren to play the violin, oud, drums and other instruments, she arranged performances in Israel for the orchestra, Strings of Freedom. A year ago it played in A'ara for the families of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, Israeli soldiers who were abducted to Lebanon, and of Palestinian prisoners held in Israel.

On Thursday PA officials said they and Fatah were under heavy pressure from Hamas members in the camp as a result.

"On the Internet there are pictures of the children under photos of the Israeli prisoners, and they performed for Holocaust survivors," one Fatah official said. "Hamas accused us of normalization activities, of identifying with the enemy, so we were forced to expel Younis. The subject is now closed."

Younis, who was interviewed by Arab and foreign news outlets Thursday, told Haaretz that she would appeal directly to the office of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. "I'll ask him to appoint a genuine commission of inquiry that will hear the children and their parents, too," she said. "I will wait until the issue is thrashed out because I cannot continue my work with these interruptions."