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Open letter to the organizers of cultural events in Switzerland.

## The Palestinian group Juthour withdraws from the International Folklore Encounters Festival Fribourg (RFI).

Geneva, Basel, July 1, 2012 (original : French)

Dear Festival Organizers,

**The Palestinian dance Juthour, based in Bethlehem, canceled its participation in the International Folklore Encounters Fribourg Festival (RFI). Sadly, this decision deprives the Swiss public a rare opportunity to experience Palestinian culture live, and yet is fully justified.**

The statement of the Palestinian dance group Juthour explains their decisions by the presence at the festival of the Israeli group Shalom Israel. We recall that when they presented the 2012 festival edition, RFI management stated their intention to bring the two groups together on stage. Juthour's statement announcing its withdrawal from RFI (attached), explains that their performance would be stained by the presence at the festival of a group whose production supports the colonization of Palestinian land. Palestinian artists are committed to reject participation in events that trivialize and normalize the Israeli occupation.

The city of Ashdod, where the group Shalom Israel was founded, was built on the ruins of the Palestinian town of Isdud, ethnically cleansed during the War of 1948 (\*). All 5,300 inhabitants of Isdud were forced to flee or were expelled to the Gaza Strip, where, today, their children and grandchildren suffer the Israeli blockade. Concomitantly, it is a colonizing culture that has emerged in the city, brutally destroying the local Palestinian culture. The Shalom Israel group, which emphasizes its role as cementing the different cultures of Ashdod, unifying folklore by new residents from the former USSR with that of the first Jewish settlers who arrived from Morocco in the 1950s, is fully complicit in this operation. Incidentally, the group is also involved in effacing the particular Jewish cultures in order to conform them to the colonial project of Israel.

In contrast, Juthour's dancers reside in Bethlehem, a West Bank town subject to a continuing Israeli military occupation, surrounded by 17 illegal Israeli settlements. It is in this city, where it is dangerous to be Palestinian, that the dancers of Juthour continue to work to maintain the vitality of Palestinian traditional dance. As a collective engaged in resistance and culture, Juthour is currently involved in performances in solidarity with Palestinian prisoners in Israel. The Al-Doha Cultural Centre, of which Juthour is the main resident, organizes the Arts Festival for the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees, whose sixth edition was held at the University of Bethlehem early this July.

The management of RFI therefore thought to bring together in the same festival representatives of a culture of oppression and representatives of a culture of resistance without considering that this would be offensive to the latter. We regret that those responsible did not fully consider the embarrassing situation in which they have put Juthour.

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RFI management also ignored that Palestinian artists have been engaged since 2004 in the cultural and academic boycott of Israel (PACBI), the cultural component of the campaign for Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions against the apartheid policies of the State of Israel (BDS). The cultural boycott of Israel condemns events that promote a false symmetry between the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian resistance, as well as events that claim to promote dialogue or reconciliation without mentioning the Palestinian demand of justice. Such events trivialize and normalize Apartheid. We recall that in 2011, over 170 artists in Switzerland have made public their support for this campaign.

**BDS Switzerland regretted that the RFI have not been able to showcase culture traditional Palestinian in a respectful environment. In this regard, we invite Swiss institutions to take cognizance of remarkable cultural work of the Al-Doha center in Bethlehem, and to support it.**

**BDS Switzerland is at the service of institutions and programmers of cultural events in Switzerland who seek information about the boycott led by Palestinian artists against Israeli policies.**

BDS-ch: Rania Madi, Jorge Gajardo Muñoz, Gabriel Ash

#### References:

- Appendix: Statement of the Administrative Board of Juthour
- Official web page of Juthour (see also Juthour or Jothor), resident of Al-Doha Cultural Centre in Bethlehem [http://www.beth-city.com/host/jffra/dccc/English/Juthour\\_team\\_for\\_Palestinian\\_popular\\_dance.html](http://www.beth-city.com/host/jffra/dccc/English/Juthour_team_for_Palestinian_popular_dance.html)
- Al Juthoor video [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siaSHXHoUxw&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siaSHXHoUxw&feature=player_embedded)
- (\*) Benny Morris, The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee problem, 1947-1949, Cambridge University Press; 1987, p.223.
- (\*) Mariam Shanin, "A Brief History of Isdood" in <http://www.ccun.org/Documents/Isdood%20Brief%20History.htm>