

## WHAT HAPPENED

On March 5, 2007, a car bomb was exploded on Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad. At least 30 people were killed and 100 were wounded. This locale is the historic center of Baghdad bookselling, a winding street filled with bookstores and outdoor book stalls. Named after the famed 10<sup>th</sup> century classical Arab poet, Al-Mutanabbi, this is an old and established street for bookselling and has been for hundreds of years. It has been the heart and soul of the Baghdad literary and intellectual community.

## OUR RESPONSE

In April of 2007, San Francisco poet and bookseller, Beau Beausoleil, began to form a coalition of poets, writers, artists, booksellers, printers, and readers to address not just the tragic loss of life but also the idea of a targeted attack on a street where ideas have always been exchanged. The coalition recognizes the commonality of Mutanabbi Street with any street that leads to a bookstore or cultural institution, in this or any country. The Mutanabbi Street Coalition, at first, aimed at organizing just one reading in San Francisco to commemorate the bombing. However, as we began to contact others, the project took on a much broader meaning, and then, a life of its own. To date, we organized a reading at the San Francisco main library; a reading at Book Passage Book Store and Red Hill Book Store in S.F.; inspired a reading in Marin County, as well as at Bird & Beckett Book Store in San Francisco; and most recently, a reading at the Central Library in Los Angeles as part of their *Aloud Series*. Coalition members have been interviewed on KPFA radio in Berkeley, KPFK in Los Angeles, and the Los Angeles reading prompted a panel discussion on KCRW radio of Santa Monica. A public-access cable station presented a one-hour interview/reading concerning the Mutanabbi Street project on a program sponsored by the Arab-American Cultural Center of Silicon Valley/San Jose. In response to our call, Upstart Crow Book Store in Vancouver, Canada, held a reading.

In addition to sponsoring readings, the Coalition issued a call to letterpress printers for their personal response to the bombing on Mutanabbi Street. This call was organized by printer and professor, Kathleen Walkup. To date, we have received over 40 broadsides. There was an exhibit of this work during November, at the San Francisco Center for the Book. In December there will be an exhibit of some of these broadsides (with a reading) at the St. Helena, California library. In March 2008, there will be another exhibit of these broadsides, along with a reading and work from a poetry workshop from Saratoga High School, at the Saratoga library.

## THE FUTURE OF THIS PROJECT

We continue to seek booksellers, individuals and cultural organizations in other states that will help organize readings dedicated to Mutanabbi Street and the art and cultural communities of Iraq. We also hope for further panels which would address the effects of a bombing like this on any cultural or literary institution, drawing parallels with our own need for open and free discourse. Further, we are looking for other regional coordinators for the extension of the the Mutanabbi Street Letterpress Broadside Project. We also invite other forms of artistic expression that address these issues. Please contact: Beau Beausoleil at [overlandbooks@earthlink.net](mailto:overlandbooks@earthlink.net).

