

Toronto International Film Festival 2019

An interview with Lina Al Abed, director of *Ibrahim: A Fate to Define*: “We Palestinians need to look at our recent history with a more critical and objective eye”

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I spoke to Lina Al Abed, director of *Ibrahim: A Fate to Define*, in Toronto during the film festival.

David Walsh: What was it that immediately provoked you into making *Ibrahim: A Fate to Define*, or was it simply the outcome of a long process?

Lina Al Abed: I grew up with my father’s story all my life. But I didn’t know that I wanted to make a film about it. In 2012, I had finished a short movie, *Damascus My First Kiss*. At that time, for the first time in my life, I received permission to travel to Palestine. Because my father was Palestinian and my mother is Egyptian, I was born and grew up in Damascus, with a Jordanian passport!

During this visit, which lasted nine days, I went to my father’s native village, Deir Abu Mash’al [in the northern West Bank, near Ramallah]. I stayed with some of his relatives. This visit magically relieved me of the feeling of being a refugee that I’d carried all my life. And I thought, now I have a new layer of identity. I decided that this was the moment to make the film. Seven years ago I started working with Rami El Nihawi—he is the producer, co-writer, cinematographer and primary editor on the film.

DW: What was your first concept? What was your first idea? To investigate the mystery or do something for yourself psychologically?

LAA: It was to investigate my father’s life and death, because I have the right to know what happened to him. It was really difficult. Although the Abu Nidal organization is weak today, it still exists. And my father’s friends still don’t want to talk about those events. It’s that kind of organization. It was one of the most secretive, with shadows that continue to haunt its victims. Later I realized that I would never be able to hold the truth in my hands. And that’s when I understood that the film was not mostly about facts and destinations, but about the journey itself.

At the beginning, my mother told me, no, don’t do this. Later, she became very supportive. My sister, the one in the film, kept saying she didn’t want to be in this. You should not open this door, she said. I was angry at first, but it made me understand that

my father’s disappearance was very different for my sister. She was almost fifteen when he disappeared.

My family did not take the project seriously at first, but when they noticed that I was still working on it, for years, they started to be more open. When I was shooting in Alexandria, Egypt, and my sister by this time was in Cairo, she said, OK, I will be in this.

DW: Discussing this film is complicated, because there are two big sides to it. There are your family and personal and psychological questions, but there are also related political and historical issues. Those issues are still there, unresolved.

Your father’s life and probable death had a terrible personal impact, but it also had political, historical implications.

For example, what was the nature of the Abu Nidal group, what were its politics? I would say, your father was obviously a courageous man, and self-sacrificing, but that path was a deeply false path.

LAA: The Abu Nidal group was highly hierarchical and secretive; they also believed that every dissident internal voice had to be “neutralized.” And I think the times were different too. There was no space for personal stories or lives, only a big urgent cause and it was Palestine.

DW: It’s a personal tragedy and it’s a bigger tragedy. My point is, we are living today, and the conditions today for the Palestinians and everyone else are not better.

LAA: I think they are worse.

DW: Yes, the situation is much worse in many ways. I read your director’s statement. You may find personal peace, reconciliation with the past, and I certainly hope you do, but the *world* is still the way the world is. What do we do about that?

Incidentally, why did you begin the film with Yasser Arafat’s speech to the United Nations in November 1974?

LAA: This moment at the UN was decisive in the Palestinian history and struggle. If you like, this was the first step toward the eventual “peace process,” that led later to the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993. That speech, in which Arafat committed himself to negotiations, produced a big fracture in the Palestinian

revolution. It was at this moment that Abu Nidal and his group started to oppose Arafat and his vision of the struggle. This was not an option for groups that were financed at the time by Iraq, Libya and Algeria.

DW: It's interesting. Because Arafat speaks about a democratic Middle East, with Jews, Muslims and Christians living in peace. Why did that vision fail?

Nationalism is a dead end and individual terror is a dead end. I'm not suggesting Arafat was a terrorist. The Palestinians had every right to resist. In fact, in the UN speech, he speaks about the difference between the terrorist and the revolutionary, and about who are the real terrorists in the Middle East—Israel and the US—and he's quite right.

LAA: It failed because whatever we Palestinians have sacrificed and compromised, we are still asked to give more. Nothing is left. My village, Deir Abu Mash'al, is surrounded by settlements that are growing, swallowing up the village's land.

On a personal level, myself and hundreds of thousands of other Palestinian refugees in Syria didn't have the right to enter what is called Palestine, because the PLO doesn't have the right to receive us, even in humanitarian cases. It was preferable for the European governments to receive these hundreds of thousands of people rather than put any pressure on Israel to accept that the Palestinians could welcome and host their brothers and sisters. It failed because no one wants to see a Palestinian state and they prefer to keep the Palestinians as a cheap work-force with no legal rights, whether in Jordan, Lebanon or Israel.

DW: Do you know why members of the Abu Nidal organization were purged or executed?

LAA: It's not entirely clear. But in 1987 in Lebanon and 1988 in Libya, there were many people who wanted to leave. And they were suppressed, killed perhaps. There are mass graves. No one wants to talk about it. I think that we as Palestinians need to look at our recent history with a more critical and objective eye. We need to better understand what choices were made and what are the consequences today of those choices. These are the big and important questions that we should answer as Palestinians and human beings. In my film, I ask a few simple questions about my father, and even these remain unanswered.

DW: An organization like the Abu Nidal group, a secretive, conspiratorial organization, carrying out bombings, is an invitation to intelligence agencies—the CIA, Mossad, Egyptian intelligence, the UK, who knows who else—to manipulate. No one knows who's who in such an outfit. This may be what happened to your father, if he got very unhappy with the organization. He didn't trust it, and wanted to leave.

LAA: It's very complicated. At the beginning, I really believed I could find out the truth about my father's death. I was naïve to think so.

Now I think that Ibrahim, my father, as time passed, became very critical of the organization's methods and activities and he thought about leaving it. Fared, the old friend of my father who I met in Amman, also quit them, as he explained in the documentary. They were deceived probably, like the rest of us.

DW: The film says something about the period and its problems.

There were very difficult conditions. Every political force was

betraying or isolating the Palestinians. The Egyptians, the Jordanians, the Syrians. The Soviet Union, China. The Palestinians faced the most powerful forces on earth, the imperialist powers, the US, Israel. There was massive infiltration, provocation and spying ...

People tried to make good decisions, principled decisions, and sometimes they didn't make good decisions. At a certain point, it's too late. You get to a point where you can't get out.

In any case, we don't live in a period today of small conspiracies. We have a globally integrated economy, we have the internet followed by billions of people, we have cell phones, with which people organize mass demonstrations, and everything else. You have to do things in front of people. The people have to do it themselves. You can't "liberate" people behind their backs, with a small number of individuals with guns.

I would understand, given the history, if your family members were skeptical about politics. There is the general impact of political conflicts on children, but, in this case, you may have someone killed by his own organization. How would a child feel about politics at that point?

LAA: I am Palestinian, a Syrian woman with Egyptian blood and a Jordanian passport. I lived for years in Beirut. How can I be optimistic about politics? I don't understand politics. It's an ugly thing. I believe in human beings and in the passion and truth that they bring with them, individually.

DW: I was moved by the film. That period is over. There isn't going to be a new PLO. There have to be Palestinians, Jews, Syrians, Egyptians, workers and young people, the rural population, united to throw out all the rulers: Netanyahu, Assad, El-Sisi. That's what the World Socialist Web Site stands for. They're all criminals. If Assad could make a deal with Washington, he would do it in a minute. They won't do it, it's probably too late, but he would make such a deal.

Your film raises, but doesn't solve big issues. It can't. The issues have to be solved off-screen.



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