

Farha: Film about Israeli atrocities in 1948 comes under attack

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Written and directed by Darin Sallam

Farha is Jordanian writer-director Darin Sallam's first feature film. It is set in Palestine in 1948 during the initial period of the Palestinian-Israeli war that resulted in the *Nakba*, or catastrophe, in which Palestinians were driven from their homes by the hundreds of thousands. The WSWs recently reviewed an Israeli documentary, *Tantura*, which also treated the tragedy.

The new film, in fictional form, puts a human face on these events. It has also become the target of fierce attacks by Israeli officials and apologists for the Zionist state.

Farha premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in 2021. It was screened to critical acclaim at film festivals in Italy, South Korea, Sweden and France, and also presented in Rafah, Gaza City and Ramallah to Palestinian audiences. The film began streaming on Netflix on December 1.

The narrative follows Farha (Karam Taher), a headstrong 14-year-old girl who insistently requests permission from her father Abu Farha (Ashraf Barhom) to leave the village, of which he is mayor, to attend school in a nearby city.

At the film's outset, Farha is telling her Quran teacher that women should be less concerned with marriage and more with education. At that point, the British are leaving and the Arab villages have no means of defending themselves from the encroaching Israeli military. Various Arab governments have promised guns and ammunition.

When Farha chooses to stay with her father rather than flee north with the family of her best friend and cousin Farida (Tala Gammoh), Abu Farha pushes his daughter into a hidden food cellar and locks the door for her protection, promising to return. Farha,

sequestered in the dark, catches rainwater and peers out between the cracks in the stone walls as bombs explode nearby.

Soon, Farha witnesses a barbaric scene. A Palestinian family seeks shelter in Farha's home. Shortly after the mother gives birth, Israeli soldiers murder the family, leaving the newborn to die unattended in the courtyard.

A title explains the girl's ultimate fate.

Sun-filled, pastoral opening sequences quickly give way in *Farha* to abject darkness captured effectively by cinematographer Rachel Aoun. Farha struggles to orient herself, both in relation to her immediate physical conditions and to the violence outside her dank confines. Witnessing the brutal extermination of the family helps destroy her innocence, and childhood.

The representation of these episodes was painful for many of those involved. Sameera Asir, who plays the murdered mother, said that shooting such scenes affected her deeply. "Some of the crew members," explains director Sallam, "were crying behind the monitor while shooting, remembering their families and their stories, and the stories they heard from their grandparents."

Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, in his book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006), describes a mass killing that took place in the Palestinian village of Dawaymeh: "The Jewish soldiers who took part in the massacre also reported horrific scenes: babies whose skulls were cracked open, women raped or burned alive in houses, and men stabbed to death."

The Dawaymeh outrage was one of countless incidents of ethnic cleansing in 1948 and beyond, many of which have survived in the collective memory of Palestinians.

In an extended interview with *Time*, Sallam remarked: "Like every Jordanian of Palestinian

descent, or any Arab, we grow up listening to stories about Palestine ... All these stories that I heard from my grandparents, families of friends, patched together to create the character of Farha, a name that means joy in Arabic. I chose the name because of how they talked about their life before the *Nakba*—to me it was life before their joy was stolen.”

“I’m not a politician,” she went on. “I’m an artist. But what I can say is that my grandparents were forced into exile in 1948; my father was six months old then. They heard about a massacre near them, so they took their stuff and left. They were scared for their lives ... My grandparents thought they would be back in a few days when things calmed down but it didn’t get any better, so they arrived in Jordan. This happened in many other villages.”

Sallam also discussed the problems of making a film in general and in the Middle East in particular, as it is far more difficult to secure funding. “And when you talk about Palestine, it becomes more and more challenging because it’s a topic that is avoided,” she added.

Farha has come under ferocious criticism from Israeli officials, especially when Netflix announced plans to stream the work. Culture Minister Hili Tropper accused the film of equating the actions of Israeli soldiers in 1948 with those of the Nazis during the Holocaust. Israel’s outgoing finance minister Avigdor Lieberman, head of the right-wing Yisrael Beytenu party, condemned Netflix for streaming the film, which he claimed was created under “a false pretense [to] incite against Israeli soldiers.” He suggested the government should withdraw public funding from the Al Saraya Theater in Jaffa if it went ahead with plans to screen the movie.

The above-mentioned film *Tantura* and its Israeli director Alon Schwarz also faced attacks earlier this year. Schwarz’s documentary uses eyewitness testimony and recorded accounts by Israeli soldiers to document the 1948 murder of Palestinians in a coastal village.

“The reason I’m so shocked by the backlash,” commented Sallam, “is because I didn’t show anything. Compared to what happened during the massacres, this was a small event. I don’t know why some Israeli officials are very upset about this scene. It’s blurry and out of focus because I always said it’s

about this girl’s journey.” She didn’t want to talk about Farha, she explained, “as a number. I want to talk about her as a child who had dreams. She lost her friend, her father, her house, her life. I don’t want to talk about war but it’s there as part of her journey. It’s about her feelings on what she’s witnessing.”

Responding to the attacks on her film, Sallam insists that denying “the *Nakba* is like denying who I am and that I exist. It’s very offensive to deny a tragedy that my grandparents and my father went through and witnessed ... I’m getting hateful, racist messages about who I am, where I come from, and about how I dress. This is not acceptable. They can keep talking; I can’t do anything about it but it’s inhumane.”

Farha is the Jordanian entry for the 2023 Academy Awards.

“We are overwhelmed by the amount of support the film is receiving globally and are grateful to everyone who is doing their part to stand up against this attack and ensure the film is spoken about and seen,” the filmmakers said in a statement. “The film exists, we exist, and we will not be silenced.”



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