

200 Meters: A Palestinian father separated from his family by a wall

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200 Meters is the first (and an impressive) feature written and directed by Palestinian-Jordanian Ameen Nayfeh (born 1988). The fiction film, which depicts the relentless cruelty of the Israeli government's policies toward the Palestinians, had its world premiere at the Venice Film Festival.

Mustafa (Ali Suliman, *Paradise Now*), a Palestinian construction worker, lives in a West Bank home 200 meters (219 yards) away from his wife Salwa (Lana Zreik) and three children on the other side of the Israeli border wall. They're separated by a bulldozed field and a barrier topped with barbed wire. Though eligible for an Israeli ID, Mustafa resists the unjust laws enforced by the occupying Israeli government. Instead, his tenuous work permit is all that allows him to visit his family.

In the evenings, Mustafa stands on his mother's balcony to chat with his children by phone across the wall. Both parties use lights to see each other and convey their messages. These are very endearing sequences.

By day, Mustafa joins a stream of hundreds of men herded like cattle through a border checkpoint. It is a demeaning process, designed to insure maximum tension and intimidation. It involves a series of fingerprint ID checks and similar measures. Nothing is stable and entry into Israeli territory is not guaranteed.

This is the "routine" existence for Mustafa and others like him, whose families are torn apart by the striving for better employment and educational opportunities. Salwa works two jobs on one side of the wall, while Mustafa breaks his back constructing Israeli homes on the other.

The couple have disagreements over what might under different circumstances be inconsequential issues. "You want Madj [their son] to play with *Israeli*

kids?" There are dangers inherent in a Palestinian boy attending an Israeli school, Israeli soccer camps and so forth. A minor altercation could put the family at risk. Further, the expiration of Mustafa's work permit is another obstacle, one that could disrupt the fragile family dynamic.

That's precisely what happens at a time when his son has been hospitalized, and Mustafa, denied entry into Israel, must embark on a perilous odyssey in which 200 meters now becomes 200 *kilometers*. He must employ the services of an expensive "coyote," and commence a journey that involves threatening Israeli settlers, enduring a Netanyahu/Trump billboard and being crammed into a car trunk at the risk of suffocation.

To make matters more precarious, two passengers—a German woman, Anne (Anna Underberger), and her militant Palestinian friend, Kifah (Motaz Malhees)—are naively oblivious to potentially life-threatening situations. We later learn that the woman has hidden her Israeli background, which in the end has an impact on the outcome of the smuggling operation.

The film is based in director Nayfeh's hometown Tulkarm, through which a giant wall runs. The Israelis call it a "separation wall." The Arabs call it a "wall of apartheid."

In his director's statement, Nayfeh explained that the focus in his film was not so much on the *physical* wall, but "on what such a separation does to us as human beings. And to shed more light on the invisible barriers and walls that are created as a result of the physical barrier."

In an interview, Nayfeh observed that "maybe 99 percent of Palestinians have to go through a similar journey in overcoming such absurd obstacles in their daily life. You fight your way to small victories in order to achieve simple, basic tasks." The director went

on to point out that he had experienced his “share of separation” as his mother “is originally from a Palestinian village on the other side of the wall. The village was my ‘Neverland’ growing up. But after the wall was built, we were cut off from the rest of our family, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and childhood friends.”

In another interview, Nayfeh stated the biggest challenge was to shoot the film in 22 days, the most the production could afford. “Can you imagine shooting a road film in more than 35 locations in just 22 days!”

Ali Suliman is a prominent Palestinian actor, born in Nazareth in 1977. He explains that he had encountered so many people who claimed that the drama of *200 Meters* was their exact story.

“I’ve heard so many stories from real people who have been separated by the wall. Even while we were shooting, normal people were in the streets,” Suliman said. “‘This is my story.’ I heard that from many people who live like that.”

A majority of the compelling film’s supporting cast are Palestinians appearing for the first time.

B’Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, has characterized the “Separation Barrier,” which the Israeli government decided to construct in 2002, in these terms: “The declared objective was preventing Palestinians without permits from entering Israel from the West Bank ... A key factor in determining the barrier’s route was the location of settlements, thereby laying the groundwork for the de facto annexation of most of the settlements and much land for their future expansion.”

The human rights organization comments that the barrier “thus became a major political instrument for furthering Israeli annexationist goals. It serves for Israeli takeover of almost 10 percent of the West Bank, to minimize the number of Palestinians living in the confines of the area between the barrier and the Green Line [the boundary between Israel’s sovereign territory and the West Bank], and also inflicts collateral damage on Palestinian communities living east of the barrier which, in effect, cuts them off from their land.”

B’Tselem goes on to add that about 85 percent “of the barrier’s meandering route winds through the West Bank. In other words, it runs through the occupied territory, and is not located along the Green Line or in Israel proper (i.e., west of the Green line).” It is 712

kilometers long.

There are some 11,000 Palestinians living in 32 communities who are now trapped between the barrier and the Green Line. This number does not include Palestinians living in areas annexed to the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem.

B’Tselem insists that, among other things, the “Separation Barrier” curtails freedom of movement, consequently impinging upon the rights “to work, education, medical care, family life” and earn “a living and an adequate standard of living. The Palestinians’ collective right to self-determination is also violated, as the winding route of the barrier cuts into Palestinian space and breaks up the population living there.”

200 Meters is Jordan’s official submission into the Best International Feature for this year’s Academy Awards.



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