

The Swimmers: Images of the horrific refugee crisis

Joanne Laurier
7 March 2023

The Swimmers, available on Netflix, is directed by British-Egyptian filmmaker Sally El Hosaini (*My Brother the Devil*) and co-scripted by El Hosaini and Jack Thorne (*Radioactive*). The film is a fictional account of a well-known incident that occurred in August 2015.

Disaster threatened when two Syrian sisters and competitive swimmers, Sara and Yusra Mardini, together with 18 other refugees, were attempting to cross the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos. The group were crammed into a dangerously small inflatable dinghy equipped with a defective outboard motor. To prevent the overcrowded, failing craft from submerging, Sara and Yusra lightened the load by swimming, guiding the half-sinking boat to safety with their three-and-a-half-hour swim. “I was scared to die, but I felt like someone had to do it to make the boat lighter,” Yusra recalled.

Subsequently, after reaching her destination in Germany, Sara returned to Lesbos and took part in efforts to assist refugees. She was thereupon arrested by Greece’s Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government and spent 100 days in jail. For her attempts to help the unfortunates escaping war-torn areas, Sara and two others faced outrageous charges—people smuggling, fraud, membership in a criminal organization and money laundering—that carried up to 20 years in prison. Only in January, a Greek court threw out the charges.

El Hosaini’s film follows 17-year-old Yusra and 20-year-old Sara (played by sisters Nathalie and Manal Issa, respectively) living in Daraya, Damascus, as the bombs start falling during Syria’s civil war. The talented swimmers are being coached by their father Ezzat (Ali Suliman) with dreams of competing for Olympic medals. Daily life becomes more

precarious as parts of the city are devastated. During one swim meet a bomb lands in the pool, destroying the building.

As far as the family is concerned, it becomes clear the girls must leave home for Europe. Once the sisters are in Berlin, the plan is to apply for family reunification, which would allow their parents and sibling to join them. The girls set out.

Traveling as a refugee is a hazardous, costly ordeal, as the sisters and their cousin Nizar (Ahmed Malek) discover. During their journey, the Mardinis arrive in Turkey by airplane and plan to reach Germany via Greece. At this point, the perilous boat ride and swim across the Aegean takes place. Many of those who made the crossing then travel as a group for safety, including new acquaintances Shada (Nahel Tzegai), Emad (James Krishna Floyd), Bilal (Elmi Rashid Elmi) and others. Following a perilous journey involving unscrupulous smugglers and a near-rape, the duo arrive in Berlin after 25 days of walking, riding on buses and taking whatever transportation they can find.

Yusra and Sara find a local swim club, convincing coach Sven (Matthias Schweighöfer) that Yusra has the ability to qualify for the refugee Olympic team for Rio de Janeiro in 2016, while Sara wants to return to Lesbos to help with the swelling crisis.

The Swimmers’ principal focus is the horrific plight of refugees in the most immediate and direct sense. As of May 2022, the total number worldwide had reached an astronomical 100 million, with 7.8 million forcibly displaced due to the war in Ukraine, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency. Approximately 5.7 million Syrians have become refugees since 2011.

Aided by the skills of cinematographer Christopher Ross, the film reaches its high point and reveals its greatest strength in the pivotal, tension-filled scene of

the Aegean passage and the real possibility of 20 people joining countless others in a watery grave. The images of that episode speak to the experience of millions, tens of thousands of whom have met a tragic fate drowning in various parts of the Mediterranean since 2014.

According to director El Hosaini, in an interview with mashable.com, there “were people cast on that dinghy who had taken the same journey themselves. I had cast a lot of refugees in the movie and also had people behind the scenes working on the film who were refugees.”

Yusra added that there are “many, many refugees who went through that, and I was lucky to make it. Lots of refugees unfortunately drowned in that sea, and that's exactly why we want to share this story with the world. Even if it's painful to me to share ... being a refugee is not a choice. It doesn't matter where a refugee comes from. They should be welcomed, and there should be a system to integrate them without them going through those horrific journeys.”

She continued: “I really want people to empathize with that, to understand that no one wants to send their kids off in such dinghies. Like my parents, after an hour of us not responding on the phones, they thought they lost us. I never want to experience that with my own kids. No one wants to go through those things; we just are forced to.”

Elsewhere, the filmmaker remarked that she was interested “in people on the margins of society; outsiders and outcasts.”

The Swimmers indelibly depicts the horrors of the refugee crisis. That is entirely legitimate and praiseworthy. The film makes no attempt, however, to explore *why* millions of Syrians, for example, have been forced to flee their homeland or to name those responsible. El Hosaini may well wish to avoid the trap of “humanitarian imperialist” propaganda, which has used the turmoil in Syria to legitimize US and Western military intervention.

Nonetheless, not discussing the issues at all is a limitation. The Obama administration and its allies in the region made use of anti-Assad government protests in 2011 to launch a major campaign aimed at regime change. As the WSWS explained, “The CIA and Washington’s regional allies—the Gulf petro-monarchs, Turkey and Israel—financed, sponsored, trained and

aided a succession of Islamist militias as their proxies to carry out the task of unseating Assad. These Sunni sectarian forces, some of whom like al-Nusra Front were linked to al-Qaeda, were ludicrously hailed as ‘revolutionaries.’”

The bloody imperialist intervention in Syria has had appalling consequences, including the flight of millions, like the Mardinis, and the deaths of more than 400,000 people. As of 2021, 60 percent of the population were in need of humanitarian assistance. More than 500,000 children under the age of five in Syria suffer from stunting due to chronic malnutrition. The Biden administration has continued the murderous US policies in the region.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact