

The Present: The brutality of Israeli checkpoints

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The Present, a 2020 film directed by British-Palestinian filmmaker Farah Nabulsi, is now streaming on Netflix. It has played at various film festivals and been warmly received. The short film treats the Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, focusing on the brutal checkpoint system.

The film, co-written by Nabulsi and poet Hind Shoufani, was shot over six days at or around the infamous Checkpoint 300 in Bethlehem, Palestine. At that entry point thousands of Palestinian workers queue up as early as 3 a.m. to cross into Israel for work.

Yusef (played by the world-renowned Palestinian actor Saleh Bakri—*The Band's Visit*, *The Time That Remains*, *Wajib*) takes his young daughter Yasmine (Mariam Kanj) to buy a gift for his wife Noor (Mariam Basha) on the couple's wedding anniversary. The simple excursion, which also involves buying groceries, requires going only a short distance. But nothing is simple when confronted with the enormous hurdle of passing through a checkpoint manned by Israeli soldiers who would rather abuse and demean Yusef than allow him to pass.

At the entry, Yusef is forced to remove the contents of his pockets and some of his clothing. He is then put in a cage with other men waiting for admittance. During the long wait, the traumatized Yasmine urinates in her pants.

The return trip home is made even more difficult because father and daughter are pushing a trolley with a new refrigerator—the anniversary present—that won't fit through the gates of the checkpoint. More dehumanization: along with their groceries is a bag with Yasmine's soiled pants. "You're all disgusting," sneers one of the Israeli soldiers.

Rifles are instantly pointed at Yusef when he loses his temper. Chafing at the injustice of not being

allowed to navigate or bypass the checkpoint gates with his refrigerator, he nearly becomes another Palestinian casualty of war.

Beautifully shot by seasoned French cinematographer Benoit Chamaillard, the 25-minute movie dramatizes its points eloquently, forcefully and efficiently. In a world in which millions of refugees face insurmountable borders, Nabulsi, in an interview with eninarothe.com, speaks about a people whose freedom of movement is continually trampled upon.

In Palestine, she explains, there are more than "130 Israeli military checkpoints, another 100 or so 'flying' check points—that can appear anytime, anywhere—separate roads, curfews, the separation wall, a convoluted permit and ID system and of course the inhumane blockade of Gaza."

These control mechanisms, Nabulsi says, "are all an assault on this basic human right, that in turn destroys so many other rights—like the right to get to work and earn a living and put food on the table for your children, like being able to visit friends and family, tend to your lands, get to a hospital or clinic, school, study at university—or in the case of my film, something as simple as being able to go and buy someone you love a gift!"

The director also speaks about the psychological ramifications and the "impact on the human spirit, and the harm it can cause an individual, families, children, and whole communities, caught in such an exhausting, stressful and deliberately humiliating infrastructure."

In 2014, Nabulsi made her first trip to Palestine as an adult, where she saw up close the infamous wall "ploughing through villages, the refugee camps, the separate road system, the checkpoints, the settlements," she explains in an interview with the *National News*.

"I have met with mothers whose 13-year-old boys

were in military prison,” she notes in another interview, “I listened to their stories of how they were taken, what their experiences inside prison were. I have met families whose homes were demolished, and had tea with them on the rubble.”

Her filmography indicates her commitment: she wrote *Oceans of Injustice* in 2016 and *Today They Took My Son* in 2017 about a mother coping with her young son being taken away by the Israeli military.

Award-winning film director and journalist John Pilger commented about the latter that this “extraordinary film is a landmark work. It touched me deeply and made me angry all over again about the horror of Israel and its treatment of the Palestinian people. It points a finger straight at the rest of us, whose governments support Israel, and demand that we speak up now, and never stop until Palestinians are free.”

In 2018, Nabulsi wrote and directed *Nightmare of Gaza*.

“The arts play a crucial role in changing the world and I believe film precedes them all. It gives voice to the silenced, thereby helping build the empathy and understanding needed to effect change.” Farah Nabulsi



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