DOC NYC Film Festival 2023: Part 1

Three Promises: A Palestinian family's view of the Second Intifada

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This article is the first in a series devoted to the 2023 DOC NYC film festival, which was held on November 8–26.

Three Promises (2023) not only had the most burning relevance of all the films screened at this year's DOC NYC film festival, but also was among the most modest.

Using home movies that his mother had kept hidden for 15 years, director Yousef Srouji shows how a middle-class family in the West Bank experienced the Second Intifada, a Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation that occurred between 2000 and 2005.

In the film, days of tense pseudo-normality are punctuated by nights of sheltering in the basement amid gunfire and explosions. The parents struggle with the question of whether to take their children and leave their home. This film cannot fail to strike a chord as Israel, with the explicit backing of the imperialist powers, intensifies its openly genocidal campaign against Gaza.

The Second Intifada developed out of the failures of the imperialist-backed peace process between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel. The Oslo Accords, which were signed in 1993 and 1995, secured neither freedom of movement nor improvements in daily life for Palestinian workers. Subsequent talks brokered by President Bill Clinton at Camp David ended in failure.

In 2000, the vicious reactionary and war criminal Ariel Sharon made a provocative visit to the Temple Mount during his campaign for prime minister of Israel. He declared that the site, which is holy to Muslims and Jews alike, would be under perpetual Israeli control. These comments sparked angry Palestinian protests that the Israeli police suppressed with violence. This incident is often taken to mark the beginning of the Second Intifada, which took the lives of more than 1,000 Israelis and more than 5,000 Palestinians.

As the film opens, we meet Suha, a woman who lives in Beit Jala and works at an architect's office. Suha habitually films the daily life of her husband Ramzi, their daughter Dima and their son Yousef. They appear to enjoy a normal, middle-class life that includes family gatherings for Christmas. Suha rarely appears on screen, but we see that she is a loving mother who is not above playing the occasional joke on her kids. Ramzi, who is often at home, provides a stable, calm presence for the children. Dima and her younger brother Yousef play together, go to school, gather with friends and behave like well-adjusted children.

But one night, the family is startled by the eruption of gunfire outside. Suha, camera in hand, and her family stand on their balcony, watching the explosions appear against the black sky. They know it is an uprising against the Israeli occupation but are not sure exactly where the fight is taking place or how close it will come. In a superficially calm voice, Suha describes and speculates about what is happening. Ramzi gives brief, matter-of-fact responses. His motto seems to be, "The less said, the better." The children are concerned and seek reassurance from their parents.

Daylight brings renewed quiet, but anxiety simmers under the surface. At night, the fighting resumes. The cycle repeats itself. Sometimes the gunfire seems to grow more intense, and the explosions seem to get closer. As they look out from the balcony, the children are scared. A teary Dima insists that everyone should

take shelter in the basement, and on some nights they do so. With sleeping bags, blankets and pillows laid out on the floor, the basement has the atmosphere of a somewhat grim sleepover. The kids joke around and try to make light of the situation. When they're asleep, the parents finally express their own fears. They wonder how much longer they will be able to stay in Beit Jala.

Suha recounts that during this period, there was no leadership, little information and no one to talk to. Although not religious, she ended up talking to God. The first time the fighting grew intense, Suha promised God that if he allowed her family to survive, then she would take the kids and leave. When the fighting ebbed, Suha made excuses to God and broke her promise, which would not be the last that she made.

As the Intifada continues, its effects on the family intensify. One day, Yousef discovers that his friend has moved away, the friend's family having fled the country for their safety. Suha realizes that Yousef understands the gravity of the situation and that his childhood has abruptly ended. If she could draw Yousef, she says, she would draw his eyes as black, soulless holes.

When the violence worsens, Suha, Ramzi and the children move to an abandoned school in Bethlehem. We see a woman and her son Sasha come to visit. Sasha has become friends with Dima and Yousef. He knows a surprising amount about ammunition and shells, having learned in part by picking up casings in the street. Together, the children look at photographs of buildings from their neighborhood that have been damaged by machine guns or bombs. Recognizing these ruins seems somehow reassuring to the children; it appears to keep them connected, however tenuously, to their previous lives.

Finally, having survived another round of intense fighting, Suha keeps her promise to God and gathers the family to flee. They are lucky enough to have passports, so they can travel abroad. We are told that during their flight, the family felt more than the amount of trauma normally associated with being uprooted. They are said to have felt the trauma of 1948. One need not subscribe to the idea of "inherited trauma" to see truth in this statement.

At the end of the film, a title notes that the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories continues. The monstrous and ongoing response of the fascistic Netanyahu government to the Hamas rebellion of October 7 has only heightened the immediacy of a film that already had contemporary relevance.

Largely personal in its scope, the film does not examine crucial historical issues such as the founding of Israel and the failures of the peace process. Nor does it discuss political questions such as the character of Zionism, the bankruptcy of Arab nationalism and the role of imperialism. Grasping these issues is essential to understanding and responding to the horror now unfolding in Gaza.

Nevertheless, the film provides, in a small way, a sense of how the Israeli occupation, and the resistance to this occupation, has affected the daily lives of Palestinians—or at least the more fortunate among them. Suha and her family had the money and bureaucratic permission to move abroad to escape the violence. The intensification of Israel's onslaught against Gaza, with 25,000 people slaughtered by the IDF, has made horribly clear that most Palestinians are not so fortunate.

To be continued