

Interview with Hany Abu-Assad, Palestinian filmmaker (*Paradise Now*, *Omar*): “Gaza is the Bastille of our day ... a lot is going to change”

David Walsh
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Hany Abu-Assad is a Palestinian-Dutch filmmaker, born in Nazareth in 1961. He has directed numerous features, documentaries and short films. Abu-Assad first came to international attention with *Rana's Wedding*, which was screened at the 2003 Toronto International Film Festival. His *Paradise Now* (2005), about two would-be suicide bombers, was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Foreign Language Film and won a Golden Globe in the same category.

One of his most accomplished works is *Omar*, a 2013 film about a young Palestinian baker (Adam Bakri) who becomes involved in complex political and moral matters. The film won a Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, was shown at the Toronto International Film Festival and was also nominated as Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards.

We commented in our review of *Omar* in September 2013:

Shot in Israel and the West Bank (Nazareth, Bisan and Nablus) over the course of eight weeks, Abu-Assad's film bears all the hallmarks of truth. It is tense, honest, beautifully acted. The scenes of Omar being chased through streets and houses and over rooftops are both exciting and frightening. His affection for Nadia and hers for him are convincing. The first time Lubany smiles her gap-toothed smile we are with him.

The film points to the nearly impossible personal and social conditions for the Palestinians under Israeli rule. As the director explained in our conversation, under the intense pressures friendships and relationships can change, deteriorate and turn into their opposite. *Omar* brings to life the tragic situation in intimate, concrete detail.

We also interviewed the director at the time.

Abu-Assad has also directed the documentary *Ford Transit* (2003); *The Idol* (2015), about Mohammad Assaf, a 20-year-old wedding singer from a Gaza refugee camp who won the second season of *Arab Idol*, the Middle East version of the American talent show; *The Mountain Between Us* (2017), with Idris Elba and Kate Winslet; and, more recently, *Huda's Salon* (2021).

We spoke recently on a video call.

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David Walsh: We're talking in the midst of terrible, tragic events. What is your emotional, intellectual, artistic reaction to the situation in Gaza?

Hany Abu-Assad: Emotionally, of course, I always feel disturbed by any

human beings who are suffering. Not just in Palestine or Israel. I feel it when Africa is suffering, Ukraine is suffering, Russia is suffering. Also in the United States, people are suffering. Less than Africa, for example, but they are suffering also. There is so much injustice.

So, emotionally, I feel angry that we still live in a system that doesn't protect the weak. We still live, in other words, in the jungle, where the strong decide about our lives, and when they decide to kill us, or make us hungry, or give us less money, or destroy our healthcare, they do it, and we have to swallow it. I am very angry.

Rationally, I am optimistic. I feel that everywhere in the world, most of the people realize that there is a true need for a genuine change in society. Not a cosmetic change. The whole system is corrupt, unjust, rotten.

Rationally, the biggest issue in our lives is the climate, the destruction of the environment, of nature, which is so necessary for our survival.

Second is the military-industrial complex. Vast sums of money are being spent on weapons. Unbelievable amounts. Why? Because some people can earn a lot of money from it. That's no reason, to make weapons that can destroy the planet perhaps a thousand times.

So we need a complete change. I recognize that change is coming because, in part, of Gaza. Gaza is such a clear case. It's not a confusing situation.

Seventy percent of the people who live in Gaza are refugees from places surrounding it. They, or their parents or grandparents, were forced to leave other places and made to live in this small space. They first made it a giant refugee camp and later a concentration camp. Why a concentration camp? It's a fact that when you surround 2 million people and you control everything about their lives, and you can bomb them whenever you want, it's a concentration camp. Other people say it's an "open air prison," I think it's worse than that.

Most of the people who live in Gaza are refugees, and they want solutions for their problems, which have already been going on for 75 years. They've lived 20 years in this particular prison, or concentration camp. Seventy percent of the population are under 16 years old, so they are innocent, they are children.

And yet the government of the United States and the government of Israel are denying what is a clear case of genocide. Denying this is like denying the Holocaust. There is so much evidence of this. When you deny that it's genocide, like these governments, it becomes so clear that you are corrupt and reactionary. There are no other words for that.

On Ukraine, for example, there were divisions. People could see different sides to it, it is a complicated issue. And no one trusts the US government.

On Gaza, there is almost no division. Sixty percent of the people in the

US are pro-ceasefire. Among younger people, it is much higher. Twenty percent want the war to continue, 20 percent don't know what to think. This is in the US, where the propaganda is the strongest.

There was never so much solidarity in the US on one issue.

So it's a clear case. And just as what happened with the fall of the Bastille in the French Revolution in 1789 ... Gaza is the Bastille of our day. Yes, there will be a lot of blood, but the Bastille is falling and after that, a lot is going to change.

Also, the current administration in the US is so stupid. I'm sorry, but it is so stupid. And the Israeli government is even more stupid. Dangerous, but stupid. It's exactly like what happened in France in 1789. Change is coming. And we are going to see a better system, a better world, for sure. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, before the Bastille, already had that kind of vision. So we need a new Jean-Jacques Rousseau actually. To figure out what kind of system we should live in, so we have a more just world.

This is my intellectual feeling, I am optimistic. Artistically, what I can do is to encourage people to start thinking about what kind of system we want in the future. Because the current one is not working at all. I will make films to encourage thinking. I don't have the answers, I'm not a philosopher, I'm an artist.

DW: Are you in contact with people in Gaza?

HAA: Yes, yes. I made a movie in Gaza, *The Idol*. The young boy in the film, he was 10 at the time, his entire family was killed recently. His grandfather, grandmother, aunts, uncles, cousins ... He escaped a year ago, he is almost 20 now. He is studying in London, but he lost 52 family members in Gaza, in one Israeli bombing. Another boy from the film lost his house, he lives in a tent. With another filmmaker, we are trying to help people, sending food and clothes. Even that is very difficult. There is a total siege. It's a criminal act what's going on.

I shot *The Idol* partly in Gaza, so I know a lot of people there. Every day, they are crying out. I live comfortably, but when you hear these people screaming for help ... On the other hand, they are unbelievably courageous people. And they have not lost their humanity through all this. You remember Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in New Orleans? Humanity failed in part when the system collapsed. People started to shoot each other, to steal from each other. No way in Gaza. Most people are in solidarity with each other. It's an unbelievable example of humanity. In these dark times, you have to keep your humanity, the only way to survive.

DW: What was your own family's experience in 1948, and beyond?

HAA: Part of my family escaped to Syria, Lebanon, Jordan. My immediate family, my father and mother, they fled to a church in Nazareth. Thank god, the Israelis didn't dare to go into the church. I was born in Nazareth, like they were.

They lost a lot of land, but not their house.

DW: What was it like growing up in Nazareth?

HAA: I liked it very much. There was one cinema, and one street. A very social, busy life. A lot of kids, playing. We did everything together. Now the kids, in Nazareth too, are all busy with their iPhones. I feel a little bad for them. We were always outside, playing. I suppose the new generation is busy in its own way, a different way, creating content. Physically, we were attached to each other.

I realized at a young age that we were under an occupation. The Israeli army, while we were sleeping, would invade our house searching for weapons, which we did not have. They would wake me up, thinking that my father had hidden guns under the mattress. I realized this was not normal. I went to Europe, to study there, so I feel like I escaped that jail very early. My experience with the occupation was being interrogated two times, it was not so heavy as other people.

I studied airplane engineering, I worked for two years as an engineer.

DW: How did you come to be a filmmaker?

HAA: Actually, by accident I met a filmmaker from Gaza, Rashid

Masharawi, and I became his assistant. He taught me how to make films. It's ironic, that someone from Gaza taught me. I fell in love with it.

I always wanted to be a filmmaker, because when I was watching movies in Nazareth, in the cinema—we did not have television then, my first experience with audio-visual media was in the cinema—I was instantly mesmerized. Later, when I saw *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, I realized that this was an inspiring message. You fight for change, and even if you die, your spirit will live forever. This message was so strong, that if there is injustice, you have to fight for change, no matter what. I felt that I wanted to make this kind of movie, to inspire people, not to die, but to fight injustice.

DW: What kind of films did you see in Nazareth growing up?

HAA: When I was young, it was Egyptian movies, Bollywood movies from India, or Turkish movies. And some Hollywood movies. The first one I saw was a Sam Peckinpah Western.

DW: To return to the present situation. There is certainly cause for optimism, the mass protests over Gaza have been some of the largest and most globally diverse in history. But, on the other hand, we don't want to underestimate the barbarism. For the capitalists, there are no more "red lines." Genocide is now state policy.

HAA: But they are losing. The most extreme example is Nazi Germany. They lost. In our day, there is no way on earth that Nazism or fascism will triumph. It's like a cancer, and it will not survive. It's self-destructive.

DW: There is a lot of work we have to do. People are very hostile to Israel and the United States, but there is not clarity on the source of the problem and what has to be done.

HAA: Mass protests, boycotts, hurting their pockets. The only thing people in power in the West care about is their pockets.

DW: The killing of artists, journalists, poets, intellectuals by the Israelis is often very deliberate, people who might be witnesses to these crimes.

HAA: It's a clear case of fascism, but I always ask myself, is it working? They punish people in Europe or America for speaking the truth about Gaza, or what they believe is the truth. Why are you punishing people for this? They want a ceasefire, or they think it's genocide.

But are they gaining from this, from killing artists, or children, or women? The more they do this, the more they lose popular support. They don't see they are digging their own graves.

They don't live in the context of the world, with ordinary people, they live in their bubble, so they think with all their weapons, they can get away with their crimes.

DW: You had some experience with the commercial film world, with Hollywood, winning a Golden Globe and receiving two Academy Award nominations, what was that like?

HAA: It was a different time. Nowadays, it's much more aggressive against any kind of opposition. They will punish people harder. In my situation, they warned me that if I didn't shut my mouth, they were going to end my career. It was a threat. Let's say, it was a hidden threat. "We will make you famous and rich, but you have to stop criticizing Israel ... blah, blah, blah."

DW: That actually happened?

HAA: Yes, yes. It came from all sides, but indirectly. The one who comes to tell you this is doing it as a "friend." He says, this is what other people are telling me. They told my agent, for example. "If he doesn't stop, we know what to do."

I did my best in commercial filmmaking. I don't believe anyone can control 100 percent of anything. Not everyone in Hollywood is a Zionist, or a stupid warmonger.

DW: In 2013, you said to me: "Capitalism is becoming more and more aggressive. They are controlling opinions, including opinions about art—who's in and who's out. This is the case even in the alternative cinema ... Capitalism has even started to control those margins." How is

that situation today?

HAA: Not bad—I was right, eh? I think it's worse in many ways, but I am hopeful, because there is alternative distribution, alternative filmmaking that I am optimistic about. With all their control, there is opposition, like the actors reading the South African genocide indictment against Israel, which 15 million people have watched. If you had told me 10 years ago that such a thing could happen, I'd have said you were crazy.

DW: Are you working on a film now, are you trying to make a film?

HAA: I'm trying to write, but I'm preoccupied with what's going on in Gaza, with humanitarian concerns. With another filmmaker, we are trying to open a kitchen in Gaza, where we can feed people. I'm trying to encourage people there, speaking to a lot of people. I'm trying to work, but it's difficult.

Thank you for giving me this chance to talk. I appreciate the courageous work.

DW: Like you, we have confidence that if we fight, change will come.



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