

H2: The Occupation Lab: Reality in the Occupied Territories

“This is the place where you see the apartheid in day-to-day life”

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The ongoing mass murder in Gaza and beyond sheds light on every one of the individual crimes carried out by the Zionist regime over the course of the past three-quarters of a century. Each outrage, aided and abetted by the US and other governments, helped create the conditions for further and greater atrocities.

In their 2022 documentary *H2: The Occupation Lab*, Israeli filmmakers Idit Avrahami and Noam Sheizaf detail the impact of fascistic Jewish settlers, backed by the Israeli military, on the Palestinian city of Hebron and its population. The film also chronicles the brutal methods of repression and control that serve as a model to be followed in other portions of the Occupied Territories.

“H2” is the name given to the eastern section of Hebron, the only Palestinian city with Jewish settlements in its middle. After the 1967 War, Jewish religious zealots established a community in the city initially involving 20 families. Now 250,000 Palestinian Arabs surround an enclave of 800 Jewish settlers, who are fanatically protected by the Israeli military.

Co-director Sheizaf was there as an army officer in the 1990s and Avrahami’s family lived in Hebron for generations. Through extensive research, archival materials, news footage and interviews with Hebron’s military commanders, the filmmakers present an objective, and therefore inevitably appalling picture of the Israeli occupation and how its illegal settlements are established.

In the film’s production notes, the directors write:

The event that turned our attention to Hebron happened on March 24, 2016, when a couple of Palestinians tried to stab Israeli soldiers at the entrance to a settlers’ compound in H2. One soldier was wounded, while his friends shot the attackers. Ten minutes later, as one of the wounded Palestinians was still lying on the ground (along our street), an army medic approached and killed him from close range. This event was captured on camera from multiple angles, and created a political storm in Israel, which ended in the resignation of the minister of defense, who insisted on putting the medic on trial.

The Azaria Affair—as it became known in Israel—happened in the old city of Hebron, in H2. As we researched this affair, we came to realize that the unique feature in it was

its location and how it has been the most filmed place in the Middle East for years. ...

The more we researched the more it became clear that there is a unique cinematic way to tell the story of this place and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it is reflected in this one-kilometer-long street in the heart of Hebron.

The city is divided into two sectors, H1, controlled by the Palestinian Authority, and, as noted, H2, which is under Israeli control. It is also carved up by numerous military checkpoints, towering fences and barriers with new ones constantly sprouting up. The Zionist authorities have created an open-air prison for large parts of the Palestinian population, “inmates” in their own homes. Children are confined to tightly fenced-in enclosures and some areas are covered by a steel mesh. The settlers use every opportunity to throw garbage and pour liquids on top of the grid, further humiliating the Palestinian residents.

Issa Amro, a Palestinian civil rights attorney, asserts that “this used to be the richest area. Now it’s the poorest.” He reveals that there are 22 checkpoints, staffed by Israeli soldiers. Slogans like “Jews have the right to live everywhere” appear in ubiquitous graffiti, like neon signs. Others urge, “Arabs to the incinerators,” reminding viewers that the occupiers are aping the Nazis.

In an interview with *Variety*, the co-directors confirm that they had long wanted to collaborate on a project about the West Bank. “We both feel that the occupation is the most urgent issue Israeli filmmakers face,” says Sheizaf.

It was the previously mentioned Azaria Affair—the dreadful 2016 killing of a young Palestinian man by an Israeli soldier—that led Avrahami and Sheizaf to focus on Hebron. A video of the incident taken by Imad Abu Shamsiya showed the soldier, Elor Azaria, executing 21-year-old Abdel Fattah al-Sharif as he lay wounded on the street, shooting him in the head at point-blank range.

Hebron is a 90-minute drive from Tel Aviv, although it exists in another social and economic universe.

People who visit the city are shocked, wondering how such a place can exist, says Avrahami. “This is the place where you see the apartheid in day-to-day life.”

The main street of Hebron was once filled with markets and shops now closed due to the severe security measures and division

of the city that followed the arrival of the Jewish settlers.

“This was the heart of the city,” Sheizaf explains. “It’s a city that is very old. Hebron has existed for three to four thousand years.” The center of Hebron was comparable to the busy downtown districts of other West Asian cities, such as Cairo or Istanbul, he adds. “It was one of those places where it’s almost impossible to walk because of the merchants and the traffic and all that. There was also a central bus station in the city that had buses to Jordan, to Jerusalem, to everywhere.

“In 50 years of military control, the place has undergone a unique transformation,” he laments.

The filmmaker further insists: “It’s about life being sucked out of the place. Life was sucked out of the street and it became this political theater, where people talk about politics and fight over each meter. This process is what we wanted to show.”

Avrahami adds: “And you see it now in West Jerusalem; you see it in other parts.” She continues:

Hebron was the first place that Jews went into the Arab city and look what happened 50 years later: Arabs are behind bars, locked up, soldiers are entering their homes in the middle of the night. The same thing is happening in Jerusalem. The same thing is happening in other villages in the West Bank. So the method that was implemented in Hebron is now being used in other parts.

Jews are exempt from curfews. “They are not under curfew. They can move freely. Living in this reality creates a lot of violence and tensions.”

“We see the settlers as an arm of the state,” says Sheizaf.

As people, they are extreme, they are radicals, but they couldn’t have done it on their own. They are an arm of the state. Maybe they are an avant-garde – they step ahead, but the state catches up and agrees to what they do and helps them. If it wasn’t for the army, they wouldn’t stay.

Avrahami and Sheizaf recently signed a petition against Israel’s Shomron Film Fund that is limited to Jewish settlers in the West Bank and inaccessible to the 2.5 million Palestinian residents of the occupied territory. “We signed the petition saying that we’re not taking grants from this fund because it’s an apartheid fund,” Sheizaf says. More than 300 filmmakers have signed the open letter.

“The occupation is a cancer,” he adds. “Everything is contaminated—everywhere you turn. It’s not just whether you know about what’s happening in Hebron. If you’re a filmmaker here in Tel Aviv you need to make those decisions.”

Another 2023 *Variety* article reported that the Ministry of Culture and Sports announced that now the State of Israel “will not finance projects that defame IDF [Israel Defense Forces] soldiers, not being based on actual facts that have been verified by

authorized IDF officials.”

The proposed pledge could result in an even more heavily sanitized Israeli cinema that does not deal with big issues, says Avrahami. “‘Let’s not talk about the occupation. If you do not show the occupation, people will not know about it.’ This is really what they think.”

There is already a precedent for the culture ministry’s proposal: the so-called “Nakba law,” a 2011 amendment to the Foundations of the Budget Law, allows the government to cut state funding to institutions for any activity that denies Israel’s identity as a Jewish and “democratic” state or that incites racism, violence or terror.

The Rabinovich Foundation’s Israel Cinema Project, the country’s largest film fund, already requires applicants to sign off on that pledge. The ministry is now aiming to expand the Nakba law requirements to all the film funds and to add further articles that would prohibit funding to films that allegedly harm the country or its military, Sheizaf explains.

In response, Israeli filmmakers have launched a counter campaign calling for the Rabinovich fund to remove the requirements. More than 100 filmmakers—among them Berlin Golden Bear winner Nadav Lapid (*Ahed’s Knee*), Ari Folman (*Waltz With Bashir*, *Where is Anne Frank*), Eran Kolirin (*The Band’s Visit*) and Hagai Levi (*Scenes from a Marriage*)—have signed a petition calling on an industry boycott of the Rabinovich fund until the foundation stops requiring the loyalty oath.

“The film industry is being attacked, as is public television, and specifically documentaries,” says Avrahami, noting that *H2: The Occupation Lab* has been caught “in the middle of this storm.”

“But the storm is bigger than our movie,” she adds. “The storm is really affecting a lot of documentaries.”

The government’s threats are already causing a chilling effect on the industry, Avrahami says, noting that filmmakers are no longer proposing works about the conflict and occupation. This makes *H2: The Occupation Lab* all the more significant.



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