

Mahdi Fleifel's *To a Land Unknown*: Palestinian refugees search for the land of milk and honey

David Walsh
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To a Land Unknown, by Palestinian-Danish writer-director Mahdi Fleifel, one of the most important films released this year or last, is now playing in theaters across the US.

Variety reported in February that *To a Land Unknown* had “screened at more than 100 festivals including San Sebastian, Toronto, London, Thessaloniki, New Horizons and Sarajevo, and won more than 20 awards.” The film is being distributed in 40 countries or territories.

Astonishingly, it was shot, edited and had its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in 2024, all while the Israeli war of extermination in Gaza was ongoing.

Fleifel's fiction film follows two undocumented Palestinian refugees and cousins, Reda and Chatila, who find themselves in Athens and make desperate efforts to reach Germany, where they hope to open a restaurant. In the course of their attempt to escape wretched conditions, they are obliged to resort to underhanded and even brutal methods themselves. There is a price to be paid for such actions.

Although *To a Land Unknown* does not treat the immediate political or military circumstances, or conditions in Gaza as such, that it dramatizes the plight of the Palestinians assuredly played a part in its generating such a powerful popular and critical response last year at Cannes.

As one media account explained, not only did the film receive a nine-minute standing ovation at its screening at the film festival, “the crowd at the theatre also chanted ‘Free, Free Palestine!’ and other slogans to show support for Palestine.”

In introducing the film, Fleifel noted that it was

especially moving to me, in these incredible times, to present a Palestinian film at Cannes. As Palestinians, we challenge media stereotypes, but more importantly, we defy invisibility, a struggle we've faced since the beginning. Our stories are needed now more than ever.

None of this is to suggest that the Israeli crimes in Gaza are solely or even primarily responsible for the film's success. It is a serious, intelligent work of art in its own right. However, *To a Land Unknown* is able to draw power and significance from contemporary events because it is *already* oriented toward the great questions of our time: poverty, social inequality, attacks on immigrants, war and imperialist oppression, and their inescapable, everyday consequences for the lives of great numbers of people.

In Fleifel's film, as noted, Palestinian refugees Chatila (Mahmoud Bakri) and Reda (Aram Sabbah) are stranded in Athens, with no papers, living hand to mouth, squatting along with other Arab refugees in miserable quarters. Reda has been off heroin for a month, but the urge is still powerful. In one of the opening scenes, the pair steal a woman's purse, only to discover, with disgust, that she too is poor and only had five euros on her.

Passports and plane tickets are their principal objects of desire, so they can get to Germany. “Germany is not like Greece.” But false passports cost serious money. Chatila speaks by cellphone to his wife Nabila and his son, who remain in the refugee camp in Lebanon from which he and Reda have made a getaway.

Why did you leave Lebanon?, Chatila is asked at one point. “Lebanon is not our country,” it's “like a prison, like Gaza.” As for the cousins' present whereabouts,

“Look at the Greeks,” he says contemptuously, “They look like Arabs.”

Another robbery. But the stash of money Chatila has hidden away is gone. Reda has taken it for drugs. Chatila is outraged. Guilt-stricken, Reda prostitutes himself to replace the money, or a portion of it. Chatila speaks by phone with Reda’s mother, and lies about her son’s being clean from drugs. “Promise me you’ll take care of him,” she implores.

They plan to make some cash by smuggling a 13-year-old boy they meet, Malik (Mohammad Alsurafo), into Italy, to join a relative. But they need a “respectable woman” to play the part of his mother. Someone Chatila has met in a park, and initially rejected, Tatiana (Angeliki Papoulia), will have to do. However, she doesn’t believe Chatila’s claim that he and Reda merely want to help Malik get to Italy. “How much money will you make?,” she asks, and quickly demands a cut.

Once that operation has been set in motion, Chatila comes up with an even more ambitious and dangerous “people smuggling” scheme, to gain them all the cash they need in one fell swoop. Things of course do not go as planned.

Reda is the more sensitive or at least the more easily conscience-stricken of the two cousins. To console himself in part, he does drugs in the company of the unrepentantly addicted Abu Love (Mouataz Alshaltouh). “Chatila, we’re bad people,” Reda laments, as their desperate plan unfolds. Chatila’s answer is merely to point to “the shit we’re in.” Also to comfort himself, Reda dreams of their future life in Germany, the apparent land of milk and honey. “Tell me about the café,” he is prone to demand of Chatila, who obliges, painting pictures of “a small shop in an Arab neighborhood,” with “Nabila in the kitchen,” etc.

Toward the conclusion, Abu Love repeats verses from renowned Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s “The Mask Has Fallen.” “The mask has fallen off,” he recites, “You have no brothers, my brother. You have no castles, no water, no medicine, no sky, no blood, no sail.”

The lines take on new meaning amidst the Gaza genocide collectively carried out by Israel, the US and the other great powers, and fully agreed to by the Arab bourgeois regimes. The “democratic,” “peaceful” guise has dropped away entirely, with something ghastly, bloody taking its place.

To a Land Unknown is sharp-eyed, unsentimental, realistic, accurate, occasionally comic. It doesn’t paint pretty pictures, but neither is it cynical in the least. Chatila

and Reda, and most of the others too, are perfectly decent, well-meaning people, even sweet, tender. Terrible circumstances, including the three-quarters of a century of Zionist violence, produce these terrible results.

The intense sincerity and authenticity of the film are undeniable. In this, the painful, tortuous Palestinian experience no doubt comes into play. Oppression doesn’t necessarily ennoble, as *To a Land Unknown* itself confirms, but if the artist in such difficult conditions *does* take life and struggle seriously, it can encourage a devotion to personal and social honesty that is compelling and irresistible. The artist might even say, with a famed French novelist, “But, above all, I want to be truthful.”

The film sheds light on the Palestinian refugee situation, the physical and psychic predicament of the undocumented and abandoned in general and, in passing, offers a glimpse of the social misery in Greece, thanks in part to the rotten “left” Syriza regime, which promised social change and delivered utter subservience to the banks and big business.

The conditions we see in Athens, however, are not so different from those in countless other major urban centers. The drugs, daily violence, despair, the scramble to survive. This is what capitalism has inflicted on populations everywhere. Official society throws up its hands, or points to original sin and the rottenness of human nature, to account for the crimes its own profit hunger, ruthlessness and corruption set into motion. Films like this point in another direction, concretely toward the existing system of social and economic relations.

In *To a Land Unknown* and *A World Not Ours*, Fleifel has now created two substantial, moving, disturbing feature films. In addition, he has directed a number of striking shorter films, fiction and documentary, including *Xenos* (2014), *A Man Returned* (2016), *A Drowning Man* (2017) and *3 Logical Exits* (2020). It is difficult to think of another filmmaker who has accomplished more in the past dozen years.



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