

## 2026 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 1

***Inside Amir: Tehran, before US and Israeli bombs rained down...***

David Walsh  
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*This is the first of a series of articles on the 2026 San Francisco International Film Festival, April 24-May 4, which made a number of films available online.*

This lovely and sensitive film from Iran, *Inside Amir (Daroon-e Amir)*, takes on a far greater significance in light of the present criminal US-Israeli war, this “terrorist onslaught,” complete with Donald Trump’s Hitlerian threats to destroy Iranian “civilization.”

Amir Azizi’s work, filmed in 2025 without official Iranian government permission, includes many scenes of Tehran, Iran’s capital. One can’t help but wondering after two months of war and countless waves of bombing, and thousands of civilian deaths: Does that neighborhood still look like this? Is that tall building standing? Which neighborhoods have been targeted, devastated? And what of the overall city skyline, is it dramatically altered?

Amir (Amir Hossein Hosseini), the protagonist of the film, is planning to emigrate, to join his girl-friend, Tara (Hadis Nazari), in southern Italy. At present, they can only spend time together on their cellphones. Amir has a job he hates, as a courier or messenger, but he loves spending much of his time on his bicycle. Because he’s leaving Iran, perhaps for good, about which he feels ambivalent, he cycles around and around the city. So, ironically, at this moment in history, we are presented with a film that is also a love poem to Tehran.

And what do we see? Scenes of everyday life in a big city—boulevards, divided highways, tunnels, trees and parks, apartment buildings, newspaper stands, shops, signs. At night—an amusement park, an overpass, streetlights, traffic. Shoppers, workers, pedestrians, drivers of a million cars, other cyclists... People going about their business, not suspecting they will be under savage bombardment before too long.

Azizi told an interviewer:

Tehran is one of the main characters in the film, in all its peculiarities. It has such a specific kind of beauty—the sight of a certain street after the rain, the view as you turn a corner. ... One of the joys of taking the film on the international festival circuit is having people be really surprised by Tehran’s beauty and charm. (Tank.tv)

Tehran is one of the world’s megacities. The city itself has an estimated population of 10 million, and its greater metropolitan area—second largest in the Middle East after Cairo—is home to some 17 million people, making it the 23rd largest urban agglomeration in the world.

The American and Israeli militaries have dropped thousands of bombs on this vast metropolis. Despite the lying claims that only military and

security targets have been struck, hospitals, schools, sports arenas and apartment buildings, have all been damaged or destroyed. The *Financial Times* has been frank enough to report:

Tehran has been pockmarked by window-shaking explosions ever since Israel and the US launched their assault on Iran on February 28, with government buildings, military and intelligence sites, residential areas and civilian infrastructure struck as the campaign has escalated.

The Tehran region has a lengthy history. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* observes:

The first time Tehran is mentioned in historical accounts is in an 11th-century chronicle in which it is described as a small village north of Ray (Rayy). Archaeological remains from the city of Ray, once known as Ragh? and a major city throughout history, show signs of settlement on the site as long ago as 6000 bce.

On April 7, Trump threatened that “a whole civilization will die tonight.”

In the film, Amir has a group of slightly eccentric friends and an uncle to whom he is close.

Nader (Nader Pourmahin), one of those friends, also emigrated at one time, to Brazil. “All my calculations were wrong,” he explains as he cooks dinner, “Money wasn’t the problem.” He was “suffocated,” “depressed.” He feels that he is a “champ” only in his perimeter, his immediate surroundings. “If I go farther, I get into trouble.” But Amir is in a different situation, he’s leaving to be with Tara, his beloved. Nonetheless, Amir admits, all of this, this hanging out with friends, “makes me hesitant.”

Amir, Nader and a third friend, the deaf, goodhearted Nariman (played by Nariman Farrokhi, a painter), all three on bicycles, ride around, have a fine time. Amir has another pal, the longhaired Pirouz (Pirouz Nemati), who seems at loose ends. He plays ping pong and smokes, drinks. He’s stuck where he is, he has absorbed his “perimeter.”

To Tara, again on the phone, Amir explains how he feels about Tehran and his imminent departure, even as the power goes out. “All this hardship is showing me something new. I’ll come soon.” “I hope so,” she says. In flashbacks, we see how Amir and Tara meet. She shyly approaches him in a store, and asks for his number. She has seen him

coasting downhill on his bicycle, with headphones on, “free, liberated.” I’m sorry, she says, I know it was sudden. “Do you think badly of me?” “No, it was kind of nice.”

Amir’s uncle recounts his own period of emigration, in New York, which didn’t go well. He neglected his pregnant wife, “I went after my own pleasures. I fell in love with someone else. She caught wind of it, I came home drunk and in bad shape. I’m full of regret. Maybe my experience can guide you.” He thinks Amir should follow and be with Tara. “I’m telling you to go after your love.”

In a flashback, Tara wishes she could pack up parts of Tehran, certain buildings, and take them “with us. People can be moved around like nothing, but not these buildings.”

The BBC reported on some of the recent damage in Tehran:

A mother stands by the rubble, crying out for her daughter. For days she has been waiting for rescue workers to dig through the flattened remains of what was once her daughter’s flat in Resalat, a residential district in eastern Tehran. “They don’t have the manpower to get her out,” the woman says. “My daughter is under the rubble... she’s afraid of the dark.”

Are there scenes of Resalat in Azizi’s film? We have no way of knowing, but it’s possible.

The BBC goes on:

Dozens of families had lived in the multi-storey apartment building in Resalat before it was destroyed by an Israeli air strike on 9 March. ... Another apartment building, across the road, was also destroyed in the air strike... Local authorities and residents say between 40 and 50 people were killed in this single attack...

The scale and spread of the damage observed in Resalat is consistent with the use of the Mark 84, the largest of the [Mark 80] series, weighing 2,000lb (907kg). Unexploded bombs matching these types have been photographed in the city. The UN has previously urged countries and armed groups at war to avoid using powerful bombs in highly populated areas because of the danger to civilian lives. BBC Eye has spoken to two international humanitarian law experts, who believe that the use of such a heavy bomb in a densely populated area would be disproportionate, considering the potential harm to civilians, and possibly unlawful. Resalat is not an isolated case. Since the start of the conflict, the IDF said it had dropped more than 12,000 bombs across Iran and 3,600 bombs on Tehran alone.

The mass destruction inflicted by the genocidal Netanyahu regime is not accidental or the result of a miscalculation. It is the express purpose of this murderous-terrorist war.

Amir’s friends are philosophical about his departure. In any case, someone says, “In the end, you die, so don’t worry... You burn like a candle and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

As part of his job, Amir delivers a message or a letter to the same woman several times. The last time, she gives him a huge tip. “You’re the bearer of good news!” The young woman is a composer and she has been trying to reach a conductor, who lives in seclusion, with no email, no address. He has finally accepted her musical work, “a strange piece ... about a fairy who loves a boy. Of course, he’s in love with someone else.” She plays the piece for Amir on the piano. It’s haunting.

Finally, the Italian embassy emails Amir. He packs while on the phone

with Tara. He says goodbye to the couple’s cats, who are going to the uncle’s house. Amir sells his furniture and belongings, but he can’t part with his bicycle. A final ride around the city. No helmet, in traffic, a sunny day, streets, parks, busy commercial streets.

The friends have a final “feast.” Amir’s uncle gives a little speech:

I just want to say that ... I really don’t know how to say it ... with Amir Hossein leaving, it feels like a part of me is going with him. But it feels like a piece of me is going to be planted somewhere else. To put down roots, to sprout again. We’ll all miss him, so much we can hardly believe it. For me, it’ll bring a kind of loneliness. A sadness ... that isn’t sorrowful.

A last talk on the phone with Tara from a distance, “I’ve missed you a lot... I think about Nader, about uncle, about Nariman, but I can’t wait to see you.” She says, “It feels like you’re bringing a part of there with you.”

The director Azizi writes that the film

swings between past and present—friendships, late-night anxiety, and a city Amir is still tied to. *Inside Amir* is a quiet meditation on the emotional distance between staying and leaving—not about what’s right or wrong, but what remains unresolved.

*Inside Amir* is rooted in personal experience, but it aims to speak in a universal cinematic language. It portrays a young man drifting through a city filled with memories, loneliness, and silent transformations. I’m drawn to the poetry of ordinary life—to the subtle rhythms of streets, bodies in motion, and moments that seem quiet but are emotionally charged.

It is difficult to say what the director thinks about the political and social situation in Iran, except by inference, through his images of young people emigrating. Azizi is careful not to mention politics or refer to government policies. Whatever he may think, his film provides an opportunity to see Tehran clearly before it was bombarded by the barbarian imperialists.

A British observer recently reported:

Images showed widespread destruction at the prestigious Pasteur Institute of Iran, which has led the country’s public health research for more than a century. Established after the First World War with France’s Institut Pasteur, the institute pioneered the development of indigenous vaccines for diseases such as smallpox and Covid-19. A spokesperson for Iran’s health ministry condemned the strike and called on the World Health Organisation and other global health bodies to intervene.

*Inside Amir* concludes with images of its protagonist making his way around the city, preparing to leave. A song plays over the scenes. The following is the English translation. This is the country, the “civilization,” that the gangster Trump and his criminal accomplices have pledged to return to the “Stone Ages.”

When I think of you again,  
my eyes begin to fill with tears.  
Joy slips right out of my hands,

and crying brings no comfort here.  
When I sing this song aloud,  
you're standing right in front of me.  
And I know you know it too;  
that you're my last and only dream.  
When the swallows come again,  
from journeys far and wide...  
I ask for you, as one by one  
they pass across my sky ...  
To pass, to pass...  
Since I do not hear from you,  
my music's lost its song...  
So I write this down for you to say  
I've missed you all along.  
With such loneliness and pain,  
the night turns to day and shines.  
And then I tell myself: I wish  
Your gaze had never met mine.  
When the swallows come again  
from journeys far and wide...  
I ask for you, as one by one  
they pass across my sky...  
To pass, to pass...

Amir cycles through a tunnel into the bright daylight.



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