

“The story of an olive tree in a whirlpool”



“How to make a film from nothing?”
[Making a film from the position of a stateless refugee]

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Who
What
Where
When
Why
How

am I

am I

am I

am I

am I

am I

??

Abstract:

Who are we? What are we doing here?
Growing up I found myself asking these questions, trying to find answers. Little did I know, they were the same questions that inspired my film “The story of an olive tree in a whirlpool” which explores the identity questions of the unending cycle of repetitive history that Palestinian refugees go through. The film initiates a process of documentation of Palestinian lives, in both textural forms as well as moving images.

In this thesis, I intend to answer one question ‘how to make a film from nothing?’ by nothing, I mean, the feeling of not having what you need to make a film as an inexperienced filmmaker and a refugee. Which makes it two states in one person.

The film was developed with the help of a small network of journalists & artists. I seek to create a critical engagement that reflects upon challenges faced by a refugee in life personally and professionally. The film making is viewed as a practice, a way of learning, researching the conditions of Palestinian people and my own. learning how to film, prepare for interviews, reach out to people, talk to them, and solve production problems.

It is hoped that; this research & film will help tell the people’s stories who share similar positions as mine, it would encourage more minorities to tell their side of the story and inspire other filmmakers to engage more in it from a human perspective rather than a profitable one.

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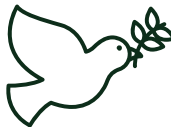
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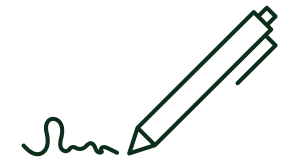
Acknowledgments

This film and thesis would’ve not been possible without the help of:	I want to express my gratitude to the interviewees and everyone who helped. I believe this film belongs to all of us, to all the Palestinians around the world, to every stateless, to every refugee, and to every person trying to survive in this world.
Haifa Al-Banna. Journalist & director. Beirut, Lebanon	
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And my Mother, Layla koubaisi.	Omar Sharabaty.
	Salah Abu Ali.
	And the oldest Olive tree on earth.

Thank You.

**I write with
love & hate
peace & war
joy & sadness
fulfillness & depression.**

**This thesis was written by me,
yet it was written by all of us.**



Mohammad Abou Chair

Overview:

In the first chapter, I briefly share my background, the history of my family, as well as Palestine's history. In the second chapter, I explain how this project started, my positioning, and how my personal life shaped the film structure. In the third chapter, I answer the thesis question, which includes the interview's production process, the problems I faced, and how I overcame them. I briefly share information about the main narrative and position representation.

Finally, I will share my reflection on what I learned from the process and the interviewees who shared their personal stories.

I would like to highlight that this research and the filming, are based on 2 years of self-taught filmmaking, with an extra challenge because of the covid-19 pandemic.

Life is more fascinating with storytelling since each one of us has a story to tell, I wanted to be involved in moving images & storytelling, simply to tell the story of my people and a homeland that we never had a chance to see.

“It is the
human being
who gives birth to
Nothingness”

Jean-Paul Sartre



nothing was found

Chapter 1.

We share one suitcase full of nothing.

When WWI ended, and after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Palestine was ruled by the British mandate 1920-1948¹. At that time, the British foreign secretary, Arthur James Balfour, sent a letter to Lionel Walter Rothschild, a banker and a politician promising him a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine, paving the way for “Israel”. It was called The Balfour declaration², Palestinians considered the declaration as a “fateful promise from those who don’t own to those who don’t deserve.”

15th of May, 1948, marked the day of “Nakba”³ in English “catastrophe” it’s when the Jewish militias armed by the British, started raiding villages and cities, stealing the lands & houses of Palestinians, bringing a new meaning to the word genocide and establishing the “state of Israel”. My 10 years old grandmother had to flee her village with her family with nothing to Gaza to seek refuge. In 1967, “Naksa”⁴ or “setback day” when the six-day war started, West Bank & Gaza were occupied by “Israel” and they had to flee again, but this time with her husband and their oldest son, my father, to Egypt. This is where their journey started until they reached Syria.

My name is Mohammad Abou Chair, a refugee, stateless, and aspiring filmmaker. born in Syria, as a Palestinian refugee, to a Lebanese mother. yet, I do not hold a Syrian, Lebanese or Palestinian nationality. Which makes me stateless, a human without rights⁵. Where I can exist, only as a being, not as a person. It feels like the world tells me: “you are nothing, and you are not allowed to be something”. This statelessness applies to more than five million Palestinians living in the diaspora⁶.

1 Mandatory Palestine: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandatory_Palestine#cite_note-1

2 Balfour declaration: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/99-years-on-balfour-declaration-still-elicits-anger/678942>

3 What is Nakba: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/15/nakba-day-for-palestinians-not-just-an-historical-event>

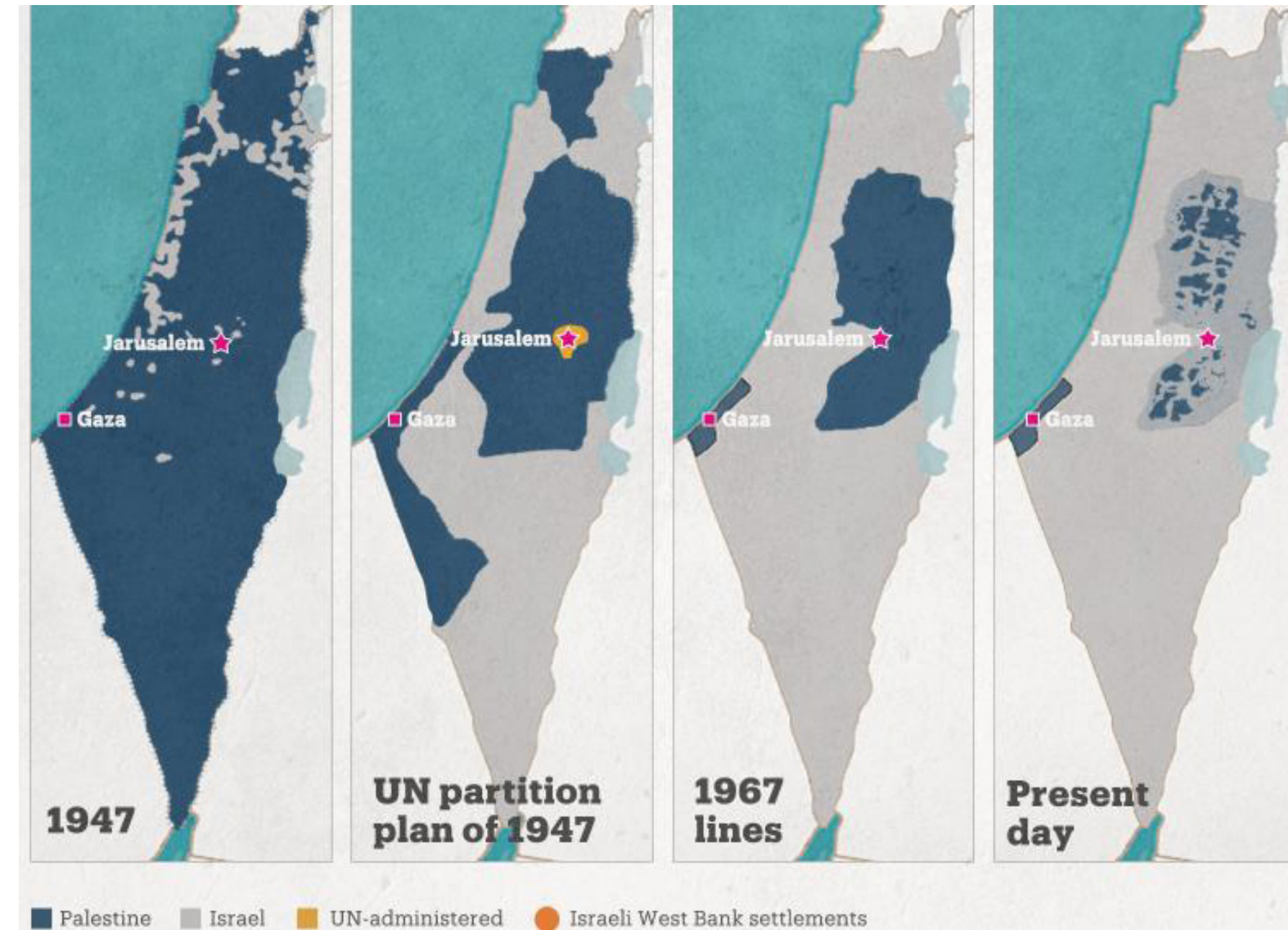
4 What is Naksa: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/palestinians-recall-1967-war-observe-setback-day-/1866274>

5 Abou statelessness: <https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/about-statelessness/>

6 Palestinian refugees: <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>
<https://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/palestine/shiblak.pdf>



British Mandate
1920-1948



Palestinian territories, including the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, have been under Israeli occupation since 1967. (TRTWorld)

“Nothing was there to
take form or become
audible, nothing to
move, trickle or rush
under the firmament.
There was only the
nothingness”

Werner Herzog
“Fata Morgana”

Chapter 2.

From the cracks of nothing we emerge

It has come to my realization that my family has been living in a paradox. The way my grandparents fled their village 70 years ago with nothing, happened again when my father fled Palestine with his parents around 50 years ago with nothing. We also had to leave Syria when the civil war started, leaving everything behind us. Then we left Lebanon to the Netherlands, again, with nothing.

It became obvious, that it is a temporal paradox of displacement we live in, and it has a connection to “nothing”, for reasons we have no control over. But the only choice is to push forward and survive. This paradox inspired me to name the film “The story of an olive tree in a whirlpool”. Here, the olive tree is a metaphor for Palestinians and the whirlpool is the paradox, the unending cycle of repetitive displacement Palestinians are stuck in. I was curious to know if it was only me or do I share this paradox with others. My curiosity grew and turned from random conversations to interviews, and later on into a film.

Most of us are stuck in this time chain and “the refugee represents the paradigm of a new historical consciousness, particularly because with that figure

we glimpse a future beyond the nation-state and its destructive exclusion of noncitizens” (Demos 2013 p.4). I tried to see how Palestinians with different perspectives are living with the paradox in the four countries: the Netherlands, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. and how they perceive the conditions and states they lived in, as a refugee, stateless, holding another nationality, or as Palestinian under the “Israeli” occupation.

The interviews were conducted to answer simple yet complicated questions if we have the position of a Palestinian. Questions about who we are, what we are doing, and why we are doing it. In the film, I analyze the different identities each person acquired, and how we share one connection to the idea of home and land.

I chose the word nothing in the title; After being moved a few times to different countries, mostly having to leave everything behind, I learned to be detached from everything, otherwise, it will be too painful. But each time it felt like I’m starting again from nothing. Learning a new language, how society functions, and how to adapt to new surroundings as a refugee. Whether I had rights or not, I had to adapt from nothing to become something.

A distinction is made “between ‘nothingness’ as the absence of something (a specific, replaceable object), and ‘nothing’ as the absence of everything (a void of absolute emptiness)”. (Green, 2011, as cited in Scott, 2018 p.2). For instance: In mathematics, nothing is zero and it equals the quantity of none and the absence of any number, but we cannot call it nothing. “If my purse is empty, says Sartre, it is not empty in general, but the money of an expected order of magnitude or perhaps of a certain exact amount is missing. When I enter a café looking for Peter, but I find only John, then Peter’s absence is directly mediated by John’s presence. This means that Nothingness is directly represented by Being”. (Kovács 2006. p.136)

“Nothingness is not general nonbeing, it is rather the nonbeing of something, or of something that should be” (Kovács 2006. p.136). I propose “nothing” as a set of circumstances where nothing exists, but one finds oneself in matters that one cannot control; like being born a stateless refugee. But nothing is already something. Even though it doesn’t exist, it starts existing as we name it. I see it as similar to having anxiety or falling in love, it is a soul, a spirit, and perhaps a God, it is something that exists as it has a name, something non-physical but we believe in it, or we create meaning out of it.

I find myself my whole life sinking into this feeling of nothing and emptiness, into a world of the unknown, trying to have a grasp of air, and resisting the force that sucks me back to nothing when I try to leave it. “Nothingness is an empty moment in the world, where man is liberated from his past and has to choose. In this sense, Nothingness is the definition of freedom; it is what cancels the past in the face of the future”. (Kovács 2006. p.137).

Eventually, I had two choices, either embrace the nothing and thrive from it, or drown in it and let it swallow me from the inside, causing only pain and suffering. During most of my life and under the circumstances of not having rights, the second choice was forced on me, as I had no idea how to deal with it. After moving to the Netherlands my choices changed since a refugee in the Netherlands has basic human rights. After being fed up with my brain thinking “I’m nothing” and living in a world that tells me “I’m nothing”, I decided to open the bag of nothingness I carried on my back and make a film out of it.

I, Nothing, & The film

When I started making this film, I found myself in new challenges of two personas combined into one person, a refugee, and an aspiring filmmaker. And I had to overcome them. My film, I, and everything surrounding us come from nothing. or as I like to call it “nothing & something”. “No other medium can represent the physical surface of reality as meticulously as cinema and no other medium can express the potential emptiness behind that surface as strongly as cinema” (Kovács 2006. p.136).

Although the film is taking place in four countries, I’m not allowed to travel. First, because no country will allow me to cross their borders, and second I have no passport, and we can consider these were my main problems as a refugee during the making of the film. As an aspiring filmmaker, I don’t have experience in filmmaking neither the money to fund my film, nor the connections to help me fund it. And above all that, a worldwide covid-19 pandemic. But since everything was challenging in my life, and I had to start from nothing many times, I want to enjoy one last challenge before I get my Dutch nationality.



C.3.

“I am nothing.
I’ll never be anything.
I couldn’t want to be
something.
Apart from that, I have
in me all the dreams in
the world.”

Fernando Pessoa

Chapter 3.

Carving a rock using a feather

During a cold winter night in the Netherlands. I remembered once a tutor told me to think about the things that keep me up at night to use them in my practice. The idea triggered me, especially since I’m a night overthinker. In my case, a practice seems much more than just a practice, it is about creating meaning to define myself, exploring my identity by using a camera, and telling the narrative from my perspective. What kept me awake mostly was questioning “who am I, what am I doing here, and why me?”. Which sounds like common life existential questions, but to me. Finding answers to these questions was a daily struggle. That night those questions helped me decide to do the first interviews, in the Netherlands.

After reflecting on the first interviews, It came to mind that they weren’t enough, a refugee in the Netherlands is living in a utopian world compared to other places. It was needed to expand geographically since there are Palestinians in different countries with different social circumstances, identities, and perspectives. I decided to film in Lebanon, where more than 192,000 Palestinian refugees live¹, as well as in Syria where I was born and raised. also Palestine, my homeland that I and many Palestinians didn’t see as the “state of Israel” doesn’t allow us to enter, because we are “seen as a threat to the maintenance of a sustainable Jewish demographic majority in the new state”².

While living in the Netherlands, watching the news presented by western media, and looking at the social media on how they present the Palestinian narrative, it made me furious, Palestinians were being called terrorists just because they are defending themselves and resisting the occupier, but let’s not forget that Nelson Mandela was once listed on a terrorist watch list until 2008 by the U.S government³, although he won a Nobel peace prize in 1993⁴, it only makes me question the integrity of the western media and politics.

We live in a double standards world⁵, especially with what is happening now between Ukraine and Russia and How the media deal with it. While the Palestinian is labeled as a “terrorist” for defending himself and his land, the Ukrainian is labeled as a resistance fighter who’s defending his land against Russia. On the other hand, on social media, the Palestinian content is being censored all the time⁶, it’s like there is a conspiracy of hiding the truth because of “the state of Israel” and any content used against it, is marked as anti-Semitism⁷.

¹ Population of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon: <https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/palestinian-programme>

² Palestinian refugees and the right of return <https://www.afsc.org/resource/palestinian-refugees-and-right-return>

³ The U.S. government had Nelson Mandela on terrorist watch lists until 2008: <https://time.com/5338569/nelson-mandela-terror-list/>

⁴ Nelson Mandela, Nobel peace prize: <https://www.nobelpeaceprize.org/laureates/1993>

⁵ Palestinians on Ukraine double standard: “Their resistance is legalized, ours is not”: <https://mondoweiss.net/2022/03/palestinians-on-ukraine-double-standard-their-resistance-is-legalized-ours-is-not/>

The world of inconsistencies between Ukraine, the Middle East, and beyond: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/07/ukraine-palestinians-kashmir-yemen/>

⁶ Digital apartheid: Palestinians being silenced on social media: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/5/13/social-media-companies-are-trying-to-silence-palestinian-voices>

⁷ Journalist Mehdi Hasan and Israeli historian Ilan Pappé debate whether Anti-Zionism is Anti-Semitism with Times columnist Melanie Phillips and Israeli politician Einat Wilf in the Squared debate from June 2019: <https://www.intelligencesquared.com/events/anti-zionism-is-anti-semitism/>



The process of making a film from nothing

My film, as well as writing the process, are divided into four parts, each country had different challenges and outcomes, with one purpose; to make this film come together.

Through this journey of creating, people shared their untold stories of how their lives were deeply impacted by uncontrolled events of displacement taking place over several generations. At the same time, the film focuses on the interviewees' feeling of belonging to a certain place, society, or in our case, a home. and how some of my interviewees practice different artistic professions to preserve their culture and identity and represent it in different ways.

After filming most of the interviews in two countries, I came across "5 broken cameras" (Burnat, Davidi. 2011). Emad Burnat has five video cameras, and each one of them tells a different part of the story of his village's resistance to "Israeli" oppression. We can also see Emad made the narrative personal by including his voice and showing the changes in his life. Although Imad was filming in one place and I'm filming in 4 different places, I was inspired to use basic equipment that I own, and other people's cameras in different countries, to make this film possible.

I didn't focus on the quality of the image, but rather on the quality of the narrative.

Another film I watched during this process is "Shadow game" (Blankevoort, van Driel. 2021). A film takes you through the journey of teenage refugees crossing borders from east of Europe to west of Europe facing aggressive border police and other dangerous circumstances. The impressive documentary tells the kids' stories from their perspective and uses mostly their documentation through their phones on the road. I'm trying to achieve a similar narrative by telling my story, the story of my people and Palestine, but this time I'm presenting the Narrative from the Netherlands, to Palestine, not the opposite as most films about refugees discuss the trips of reaching the west. Here, I'm presenting the idea of wanting to go home as a destination not just as a place we had to leave, and the fate of our existence in Europe and other places was not in our own hands.



One-man army; [the Netherlands]

I just wanted to start filming; I thought it won't be difficult. I started with some tryout interviews, I interviewed my brother & my friend, after I asked if they are comfortable sharing their stories in front of the camera. It is really important not to push people to be in front of the camera, otherwise, the story won't look real. I wanted the interviews to be natural, like two people having coffee in the park, which is what we did.

I had an old canon camera, a half-broken tripod, a phone camera with a small tripod, and a pocket microphone connected to my laptop. With a lot of curiosity and an urge to listen to my brother, I started asking him random questions that come to mind all the time. Who are you, and what are you doing here in the Netherlands? How did you get here? This was the first time I had a personal talk with my brother about his journey from Lebanon through Turkey, and Greece until he reached the Netherlands.

I suggested we do the interviews outside despite the cold weather and rain, first as I didn't have any lights to use, and second, because I wanted to show the environment that we live in now, I always asked the interviewees which area is the most comfortable for them, some preferred to be in their room, others preferred to be outside alone in the nature.

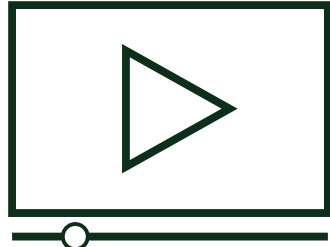
The surrounding environment is important to break

the tension, "as I had observed the young men -refugees- in therapy at the clinic, and then the same young men in the park. The aspect of 'play' or inventiveness, was apparent in Richmond Park. Whereas in therapy they appeared in a way as 'victims', people with problems, in the park they talked more openly about their journeys here, and freely turned the camera on each other, breaking the hegemony of its gaze and catching each other in the filming."(Clayton, Hughes. 2016. p.151) I try to show that the environments where the filming took place are different, to demonstrate the social space in which different refugees live. The safe space created around my interviewees was essential to let them speak comfortably rather than sitting nervously in a lighted studio.

While filming, a few problems came to the surface, my camera was recording only for ten minutes then stopped for an unknown reason, sometimes the camera didn't catch what we were talking about, however, the mic was recording all the time, this way I was able to find a way to edit my videos using the sound while using different images. At the same time, I couldn't go back to what we were talking about, I tried once or twice then I gave up. I noticed it didn't sound the same, it didn't have the same emotions or the body language the interviewees were showing. I decided to keep filming and work with what I had because I didn't want to affect the answers they were giving me due to technical errors.



Watch the first interviews through this link:
(this is only a first edit and not the final result)



click on the icon



Planting the seeds for network growth; [Lebanon]

Although my mother is Lebanese¹, I’m still not allowed to enter Lebanon for being a Palestinian refugee. I started showing my work to a few friends there. Hoping someone will take the needed roles to conduct the interviews and the filming in Lebanon.

My first contact was with Haifa Al-Banna, a Lebanese journalist, and a friend of mine whom I met during a journalism workshop. I explained to her what I’m working on and what I need. I shared the videos I made, and the idea behind the film, and she liked it, she was willing to collaborate and be part of this project and took the role of the director, and she was willing to do this for free. My second contact was with a friend from college, Mohammad Baker Habhab, a videographer, and graphic designer. He was my first option since I knew he had all the basic equipment to film.

We assembled a small team to create the interviews, I still needed interviewees. That’s when I started contacting Palestinian journalists living in Lebanon asking them about people with interesting stories to interview, and since they’re already working in this environment, they meet a lot of people with stories to tell. That’s where Fatima Abdel-Jawad, a Palestinian journalist, recommended eight people to interview. I found a link between three people and a group of teenagers. The link was in their artistic practice, two of them were musicians and singers, one photographer, and a dancing group of the Palestinian dance “Dabke”².

I chose those people because of their age differences. For the two older men who had to flee Palestine at a young age, I wanted to learn about their story of displacement in detail. The third person was a woman in her thirties who was born and raised in Palestine but moved to Lebanon to continue her master’s studies, I was interested in seeing her point of view on the difference between the two positions.

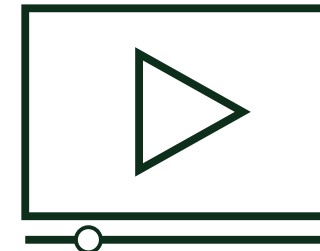
As for the group of young dancers, I was interested in how the new generation is shaping their identity and how the state of a refugee and statelessness is affecting them. Most of the interviews took place inside, first due to coronavirus regulations and second, respecting the age of the interviewees, and where they chose to be. For the group of dancers, I suggested that we have the interview on a roof, to demonstrate the environment that they are living in just like I did before in the Netherlands, only this time in a refugee camp.

After everything needed was filmed, more problems came to the surface. The videographer deleted the footage needed from the second camera by mistake, the interview with the group of dancers had a lot of sound issues, we couldn’t refilm due to time and everyone was doing this for free, and let’s not forget the limitation caused by the Covid measurements, so again I had to respect the interviewees’ ages and health, and work with what I have.

Eventually, I decided to go to the animation department in AKV St. Joost where I study & randomly went to the studio, addressed the animators about the film I’m making and I need help, while I have zero budget. That’s when Daniel Oswald Claro, a Portuguese animator, joined the filmmaking team. I explained to him the work plus the problems we are facing and how it can be solved with animated videos in between the interviews.

¹ Human Rights Watch, Lebanon: Discriminatory Nationality Law: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/03/lebanon-discriminatory-nationality-law>
² Palestinians Celebrate Culture Through Dabke Dance: <https://www.wfae.org/npr-arts-life/2013-09-19/palestinians-celebrate-culture-through-dabke-dance>

Watch the second interviews through this link:
 (this is only a first edit and not the final result)



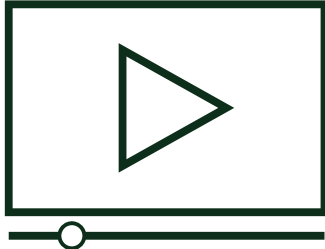
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in this video, first part in the Netherlands and second part is in Lebanon

(this is only a first edit and not the final result)



click on the icon





Image source: Getty Images



Image source: CGTN

Finding a way through the impossible: [Syria]

I was born and raised in the Yarmouk refugee camp, Damascus Syria. Before the eruption of the Syrian civil war¹ in 2011, the camp was considered the capital of the Palestinian diaspora according to UNRWA².

The camp was regularly bombed and targeted by all fighting sides during the war. Most of the Palestinians had to flee as the clashes destroyed the basic infrastructure inside the camp, without access to electricity, water, and food, which continues until today. Some people were able to leave to safe surrounding countries or areas, some couldn't leave and had to stay under those circumstances, some died, and some survived by a miracle. Nowadays only people who have paper as proof that they lived there can go back to the destroyed camp.

During the production of this part of the film, going to Syria to film was not an option as I am an asylum seeker in the Netherlands & I will lose the right to stay here if I try to enter Syria. Add to that as a young man once you enter Syria your destiny is unknown.

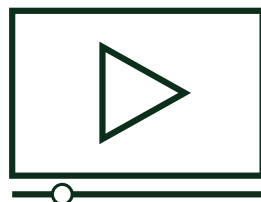


I tried sending someone to film but it was impossible to do. No one is allowed to enter. And getting a camera inside the refugee camp as a filmmaker is not an option. Even when I decided just to find people who would like to be interviewed to talk about what happened with them, they weren't interested. It's because people are surviving day by day. Which was understandable.

To solve this problem of not being able to film there, I decided to work with a mix of online footages, after I asked for a permission of use, a phone filmed videos that my father had, which they show the neighborhood destruction of where we used to live.

¹ Syrian civil war: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syrian_civil_war

² More about Yarmouk refugee camp: <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria/yarmouk-unofficial-camp>



click on the icon

Reaching the unreachable: [Palestine]

As I mentioned earlier, Palestinian refugees aren't allowed to enter the "state of Israel" or occupied Palestine. What I did is simple, I posted on social media saying I'm looking for a director, a journalist, or a content creator to help me film in Jerusalem. Abeer Bashtawi, a Palestinian director from Nazareth in occupied Palestine, reached out and I explained to her everything, she didn't hesitate to join and managed to bring her friend, Annette Demirjian, an Armenian Palestinian videographer.

I chose to talk about Jerusalem and found Palestinian guests from there because this city has religious and political positions. On one hand, the Palestinians consider it the capital of Palestine, on the other hand, Donald Trump, former US president, decided to declare it as the capital of "Israel"¹. To Palestinians, it reminds us of the Balfour declaration.

Abeer and I started looking online for people to interview. We contacted many Palestinians randomly, few didn't answer, and some agreed in the beginning but then decided to ignore us. Finally, two people agreed to the interview. We interviewed Iman Hamdieh, Islamic geometry & traditional artist, and we interviewed Omar Sharabaty, a fire performer.

The interview with Iman went smoothly, but Abeer and Annette were running out of time to interview Omar. It was getting dark, and they couldn't film anymore due to not having a budget to rent lights. They managed to film him performing, but not to interview him. We had to improvise, so we agreed with Omar to set up his camera at his home where Abeer can video call him and conduct the interview as was planned in the beginning and later edit it as if the interview went without any problems.

In the third and last interview, we had Salah Abu Ali, a Palestinian farmer in Al-Walaja village, Bethlehem, he played a big role in this film for a reason I will mention in the next part. It was difficult to reach him since he isn't on social media. But I wanted to try "Six degrees of separation"².

I thought I would need more than six people to reach Salah, but I contacted my sister, Farah Alzaman Abou Chair, a journalist, and Al-Jazeera correspondent in Turkey, who was a colleague that interviewed Salah before. I asked her if she could reach out to her colleague to share the number of Salah with me. Two hours later I was on the phone with Salah, getting to know him, explaining what I'm doing, and asking him if he would like to be part of this film. He agreed without hesitation.

¹ President Trump Has Fulfilled Lord Balfour's Dream: <http://www.nationalinterest.org/feature/president-trump-has-fulfilled-lord-balfour's-dream-119371>

² "Six degrees of separation", or the "six handshakes rule", is a concept originally set out in 1929 by Frigyes Karinthy, where a group of people plays a game trying to connect themselves to any person in the world by a chain of 6 other people: https://djjr-courses.wdfiles.com/local--files/soc180%3Akarinthy-chain-links/Karinthy-Chain-Links_1929.pdf

C.3.

From the soil,
we come and
to the soil, we
return.

Scripting a narrative

“The story of an olive tree in a whirlpool” is not just the name of the film nor a metaphor. It is also the main narrative that combines the interviews and structures the film in a simpler way. I was fascinated by the connection that refugees have to Palestine and most of us didn’t even see it. How far a person can go to have the feeling of home, it’s unexplainable what it feels like not to have a home, I’m not talking about a room with four walls to call home, I’m talking about a land, a language, a society, a culture, a history, trees, birds, or anything that represents the idea of home. This became one of the focus points for the film.

It was difficult to write what I wanted to say, it had to be honest and from the heart, yet combined with memories, facts, and self-reflection. Inspired by the poetic mode documentary¹ of Werner Herzog: “Fata Morgana”². With long-duration shots, it expresses the filmmaker’s feelings and shows subjectivity through the narration.

I wrote ideas that came to mind, mostly at night, feelings that I miss or cannot comprehend, and uncomfortable situations that we face as refugees. At the same time, I’m not saying refugees are suffering and a viewer should feel empathy, it isn’t the aim of the narrative.

¹ According to film critic Bill Nichols, the poetic mode of documentary moves away from the “objective” reality of a given situation or people to grasp at an inner “truth” that can only be grasped by poetical manipulation: <https://keyconceptsinnmc.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/bill-nichols-nichols.pdf>

² Trailer, Werner Herzog: Fata Morgana: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0U.Lc3kHWLY>

I aim to show the resilience of the refugees to empower them, to show that although we suffered or are still suffering from those consequences we still smile, we wake up every morning and resist everyone telling us we cannot live a regular life. That is a powerful message I want my viewers to reflect on.

A narrative about an olive tree as a representation of Palestinian refugees, and an anonymous person representing “Handala”³, a Palestinian character made by the Palestinian artist Naji Al-Ali⁴, became a symbol for Palestinians. Where this person goes around with his tree from one place to another, trying to find the best soil to plant it. But it’s not any soil that he is looking for, he is looking for a home for his tree and himself. the soil that we come from and where we go to when we die, is a part of us, as much as we are part of it. But there is a difference between planting an olive tree in the Netherlands and planting an olive tree in Palestine. In the Netherlands it will grow and prosper, but will never flourish in the same way, it won’t give olives or a similar aroma, and it will not be the same, exactly as a Palestinian refugee.

“Modern intellectual melodrama is when the protagonist finds himself or herself in front of an existential situation that he or she cannot understand, and this lack of understanding provokes passivity, suffering, and anxiety. Not understanding or not knowing is inherent to classical melodrama also.” (Kovács 2006. p.140)

³ More about “Handala”: http://www.runforpalestine.com.au/?page_id=1581

⁴ More about Naji Al-Ali: <https://storiesfrompalestine.info/2021/07/25/handala/>

Virginia Woolf wrote a heading in “Three Guineas”; where heroism, is defined as “botulism” And proposed the bottle as a hero (Guin 2020. p.28). I propose my hero as the olive tree, and Handala, the anonymous person is the sidekick, helping each other for one cause, finding a home.

In Palestine, olive trees that are older than the occupying “state of Israel”, get uprooted, broken, and burned by “Israel”⁵ just like the Palestinians in occupied Palestine. This tree is more than just wood branches and leaves, it holds life itself.

Eventually, to end my film, I was on the search for the oldest olive tree on earth. The oldest olive tree on earth is located in Palestine, Bethlehem, in a village called Al-Walaja. A five-thousand-year-old tree stands as a symbol of resistance. After watching a few videos of the tree, I found out that this tree has a Palestinian guardian, he inherited it from his ancestors. That guardian of the tree is Salah himself, whom I mentioned earlier. After interviewing him we made the needed shots to finish the film in a place where the mother of all olive trees still lives.

After starting with a baby olive tree and trying to find soil to plant it, it ends in the last place where it belongs in Palestine. Unfortunately, just like a Palestinian refugee, a tree cannot reach that land.

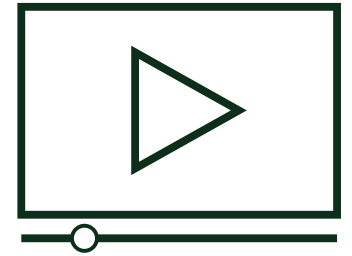
⁵ 2021 Olive harvest season in the West Bank amidst a triple challenge: <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/2021-olive-harvest-season-west-bank-amidst-triple-challenge>



Handala by Naji AL-Ali



The intro of the narrative
(this is only a first edit and not the final result)



click on the icon

Representing the in-between

From my perspective, the in-between; the earth is already divided into two points, east, and west. As a middle eastern person, living in western society, I can find myself in the middle of these two points. With an understanding of both societies, I represent my background in a western society better than an outsider who never experienced what I experienced. E.g; if we are talking about refugees, I suggest the person who is conducting the interview is a refugee himself/herself. A refugee would understand another refugee better, even the interviewee would feel more comfortable talking to the interviewer who shared similar experiences.

“Nepantla”, means “in-between space” In Aztec. Writer Gloria Anzaldúa explained it as something that “occurs during the many transitional stages of life and can describe issues and concerns related to identity, aesthetics, epistemology, and/or ontology.” (Anzaldúa 1987 p.245) I had come to the realization I was living in the “in-between” my whole life, I lived between different societies and cultures in the same place. It’s where I must adapt to two places, to belong & not to belong, and there is an urge to represent this space as it is represented in many films, e.g.: Academy award winner for best picture (2019) “Green Book”¹.

1 What to Know About the Controversy Surrounding the Movie Green Book: <https://time.com/5527806/green-book-movie-controversy/>

“This “double perspective” (in Said’s words describing exile), or this “double frame” (in Homi Bhabha’s characterization of migration) results from the bicultural knowledge produced by living in a foreign environment, generating in its positive expression a sensitivity toward difference (that of cultures, places, and communities), and a newfound appreciation of the cultural character of one’s origins when looking back from the migrant’s awry vantage”. (Demos 2013 p.3)

I’m trying to tell stories from this space, question all the sides we live in, and why we have all different personalities that pop out by each person we integrate with, our body language changes, and the way we say specific words changes as well as our voices. In a way, we learn to adapt, in another way, we lose ourselves in that space, we generate a new identity that holds all the sides in one big sea of cultures. Or as “the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes, a cultural collision”. (Anzaldúa 1987 p.78)

But what if where we come from is an occupied land we’re not allowed to see, touch or smell. How do we discover the identity of origin. I’m eager to discover the identity that I would’ve had or would have if I lived in Palestine. For now, I use the in-between space to understand the world, to understand myself, and understand how I can communicate my narratives in different environments

● space in-between 2 dots ●

● connect the dots ●

Representing
the in-between &
bringing the dots
closer



“Not
everything
that is faced
can be
changed,
but
nothing can
be changed
until it is
faced.”

James Baldwin

A mirror reflects an illusion; a film reflects the soul

Art can be a powerful weapon if we learn how to use it properly for good. With the idea of creating films as a way of resistance, we will be able to create change in society, a change for a better place for minorities, where everyone is equal. This idea can be applied to everything creative or artistic. By representing the ignored culture and daily issues that concern the public, we can create an impact, but we must find our way to create it.

Producing this film from the beginning until the end is considered a way to create a state of resistance. Human history is full of wars, fighter jets, and nuclear powers. I grew up watching countries around the world competing for who is the strongest, who can control who, and who can conquer. But wars aren't fought with guns all the time. Nowadays we have media, films, and the internet for that, where each one is used as a weapon.

When I asked Adam Al-Qaq, a Palestinian Dutch hip-hop artist, what his work symbolizes, his answer was one word: “resistance”. It is also noticed in Lebanon by Asaad Kaawach, his songs and music talk about home and returning, he also created the first Palestinian band in Lebanon, to preserve his culture and techniques and pass them to future generations. Moustafa Ahmad, the first Palestinian photographer in Lebanon, was also documenting the personal lives of Palestinians in refugee camps, but it was also a way to make a living and learn to practice.

RESIST



Creating beauty out of pain:

All the feelings and changes we go through are precious. but we have to realize they are all necessary to create contrasting beauty in our lives. Most of the interviewees' stories were emotional, I always try reaching that phase with my interviewees slowly yet not directly, where they feel comfortable sharing their experiences. They started with their regular day-to-day experiences and then into subjects that affected him. but it always depends on the person and personality, age, and what they had to go through. However, they went through a lot to be who they are right now. They are my new heroes.

My brother, Ahmad Abou Chair, a 24-year-old Palestinian refugee, whom I had the first interview with, had to go from Turkey to Greece with an overcrowded inflatable boat and then pave his way through eastern Europe on foot until reaching western Europe. For him, it was one of the most difficult journeys. Many refugees spend weeks, sometimes years, sleeping in the woods to avoid getting captured by border police just to reach their destination. This is the painful part, but what comes next is the beautiful part. How Ahmad's life was shaped after the journey. It gets more interesting; it shows the power of a human who has nothing to lose and what he/she would do to be safe and to build a future.

However I am trying to empower my interviewees, not make the audience feel pity or sympathize with them through emotions, but to learn from their resilience and to show that we can create a difference in this state of refuge through support not by standing against them. Even if the political opinion of a person doesn't allow it, everyone should have a moral compass for humanity and take a stand against oppression wherever it exists.

I am sharing this experience in making this film hoping that it will add some information to the existing filmmaking knowledge and encourage more refugees, stateless, immigrants, and minorities to tell the story from their perspective. to encourage all the artists to tackle social problems in our modern days to make the world better for everyone, despite their ethnicity, background, sexual orientation, and beliefs.



**Thank you for reading.
(an updated version of this thesis will be added
when the film is completely done)**

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