

Alam: A Palestinian youth steps out “of the safe zone of passive fear into the light of freedom”

Joanne Laurier
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The current savage physical attack on the Palestinian population of Gaza and the West Bank has been accompanied by the disappearance of certain Palestinian films on streaming platforms, and a general artistic and cultural assault.

Yasmin Khan at *Rock and Art* notes that “recent allegations suggest that Netflix may be engaging in censorship by quietly removing Palestinian films from its library—a move some claim is an attempt to align with Israeli political interests.” Many of these were reviewed by the WSWs over the course of the past year.

Khan goes on

Palestinian filmmakers have long used cinema as a form of resistance, documenting Palestinian communities’ lived experiences, struggles, and resilience. By focusing on themes of displacement, identity, and occupation, Palestinian cinema provides a crucial counter-narrative to the dominant framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often seen in Western media. Films like *Omar*, *Paradise Now*, and *The Present* offer deeply personal stories that transcend political agendas, allowing viewers to see beyond the headlines and into the humanity of a people affected by decades of conflict.

She further observes that research from the *Global Media Institute* indicates, not surprisingly, that “media platforms that amplify one side of a conflict while silencing the other significantly influence public opinion, often leading to skewed perceptions of complex geopolitical issues.” To say the least.

Moreover, according to December 10 article on *Hyperallergic*,

A wave of anti-Palestinian repression has swept the Western art world in the aftermath of October 7th, 2023. From Amsterdam to San Francisco, artists who have criticized Israel’s brutal war on Gaza have seen their exhibitions canceled, their work deinstalled, and other opportunities rescinded.

There is obviously a concerted attempt by pro-Zionist forces to make Palestinian oppression and suffering invisible.

One of the works still available is the 2022 film *Alam* (*The Flag*), written and directed by Palestinian debut feature filmmaker Firas Khoury and streaming on Amazon Prime. The narrative unfolds through the thoughts and feelings of 17-year-old Tamer (Mahmood Bakri of the Bakri family of actors).

Although Tamer lives in an Arab village located near Arab ruins, he is a Palestinian citizen of Israel. Among other injustices, he must attend a school that teaches an Israeli-organized curriculum, in which Israel’s Independence Day is celebrated without mentioning the *Nakba* (the Catastrophe), the day Palestinians memorialize their dispossession and displacement by the hundreds of thousands in 1948. Israeli soldiers occasionally drop by the school, to check on the students. This is education under the gun.

The kids have heard from their parents and grandparents of the land they lost and the villages “erased” through “ethnic cleansing.” They are subjected to media stories dominated by Israeli lies. Tamer is part of a generation of Palestinian Arabs whose families chose to stay and found themselves second-class citizens or worse after 1948 in what used to be their own land.

The youth and his high school friends, the aggressive Safwat (Mohammed Abd El Rahman), Shekel (Mohammad Karaki), and Rida (Ahmed Zaghmouri), suffer chronic

psychological trauma. In fact, Safwat angrily challenges his school's Israeli educator. Local activist Adel (Riyad Sliman), counsels youths at a community center on their rights and how to behave if arrested; and "Lenin," the neighborhood drug lord, deals from his elderly mother's home. Interestingly, Tamer has a mug that plays "The Internationale."

The boys are totally disconnected from their history and culture, symbolized by the illegality of their flying the Palestinian flag, an egregious affront as the blue and white Israeli flag is ubiquitous in the village. Director Khoury skillfully depicts the labyrinth of control that follows the forced denial of history. A flag proves as explosive as a bomb, with cinematographer Frida Marzouk capturing the acute disturbances in the protagonists' tender inner and outer lives.

When the militant and resolute Maysaá (Sereen Khass)—her brother is a martyr—joins Tamer's class, the latter's up-to-that-point "apolitical" existence is challenged. The reason he remains non-committal has a great deal to do with his Uncle Naji (Saleh Bakri), who was tortured and imprisoned by the Israelis for revolutionary activities. Physically broken and mentally ill, Naji spends much of his time setting fires. Tamer's father (Amer Hlehel) is quick to drive home the fact that anti-Israeli activism is a potentially deadly game.

A plot, nonetheless, is hatched. Tamer and company are recruited by their classmates Safwat and Maysaá into an act of political protest. They also attend an Israeli rally with near-fatal consequences.

In a statement, director Khoury explained that in *Alam* he wished to "give prominence to the Palestinian youth, who have willingly and despite [everything,] chosen to turn their peaceful struggle against injustice [into] their primary vocation. High school students with courageous souls have become a great source of inspiration to me, since I began following and observing them in recent years."

His aim in this film, Khoury continued, was

to expose their struggle to define and reinvent themselves, as well as to bring forth their personal story. I wish to show the world that a Palestinian teenager is no different from any other around the world, they have similar dreams and aspirations, and they seek to embark on new experiences, to find love and recognition while transforming into adults. This, I believe, would contribute to how Palestinians are perceived beyond the eye of the media.

Movingly, he asserted:

It is also an attempt to bring into light under which circumstances the Palestinian youth is forced to develop, the sharp existential contradictions they are subjected to at a young age. In that sense, *Alam* is a story of a collective, embodied in the life of a young man (Tamer), who wishes to step out of the safe zone of passive fear into the light of freedom. But as always, freedom does not come without sacrifice. Tamer will know freedom only if he is willing to pay the price.

In an interview with *Variety*, the 40-year-old filmmaker explained that *Alam* in some ways reflects his own belated political awakening. "When I was younger, I was afraid to go to demonstrations and participate," he said. He became more politically active while researching the film, writing about the plight of Palestinians and "going to demonstrations where 90 percent of these demonstrators were youths under the age of 20."

Alam is a sincere and honest film. Its thoughtful presentation of its central character's dilemma—the desire to live a normal life under conditions of perpetual repression and violence, conditions that make "normalcy" in fact impossible—has a resonance beyond the borders of the Middle East.

To dramatize an individual's political awakening, or perhaps more accurately, in this case, his decision to act despite serious risks, to accept that sacrifices are part of a life of struggle, is a complicated matter. Khoury presumably wants to contrast scenes of what is conventionally called "coming of age," which take up much of *Alam*, with other more urgent sequences, and thus to criticize Tamer's initial apparent social indifference. In fact, Safwat and Maysaá have more politically on the ball. One cheers for Tamer, all the while being annoyed through much of the film with his semi-*flâneur* existence.

In any case, after 14 months of the current Israeli war of extermination, one suspects that exhortation has become almost redundant. It has become literally impossible for Palestinian youth to remove themselves from the ongoing nightmare.



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