

From Ground Zero, Stories from Gaza, a moving film from 22 Palestinian filmmakers

J. Cooper
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From Ground Zero, Stories from Gaza. *Conceived and produced by Rashid Masharawi. Directed by Ahmed Hassouna, Ahmed Al Danaf, Alaa Ayoub, Alaa Damo, Aws Al Banna, Bashar Al Babisi, Basel El Maqousi, Etimad Washah, Hana Eleiwa, Islam Al Zeriei, Karim Satoum, Khamis Masharawi, Mahdi Kreirah, Mohammad Al Sharif, Mustafa Al Nabih, Moustafa Koulab, Neda'a Abu Hassnah, Nidal Damo, Rabab Khamis, Reema Mahmoud, Tamer Nijim, Wissam Moussa. From Watermelon Pictures.*

From Ground Zero, Stories from Gaza is a unique, moving feature film comprising 22 short films by 22 Palestinian directors. Conceived of and curated by veteran Palestinian filmmaker Rashid Masharawi, *From Ground Zero* has been shortlisted in the International Feature Film category at the 2025 Academy Awards. Despite the persistent censorship of Palestinian films in North America, three have made it onto the preliminary shortlists for the 2025 Oscars (the others, *No Other Land* and *An Orange from Jaffa*.)

From Ground Zero defies the odds against making art under nearly impossible conditions. Each of the 22 directors was given complete freedom to convey his or her message. Most chose to present a slice of everyday life in documentary form, some as docu-drama recreations, a few through fictional drama, the use of puppets, animation or montage. Despite 22 directors and short vignettes, this film is a powerful whole and transports the viewer into present-day Gaza through the lenses of filmmakers whose lives have been upended by war.

The opening film, “Selfies,” by Reema Mahmoud, introduces the recurring theme of so many of these short films: “I had a beautiful life in a beautiful city,” a beautiful young woman weeps as the film opens. She writes a letter “to an unknown friend” describing how

she used to dress and put on her makeup. Now, she leaves her tent every day, insisting on putting on her makeup to retain some sense of the femininity she feels has been taken from her.

In an interview on *Democracy Now!*, producer Rashid Masharawi describes the process through which he convinced director Ahmed Hassouna to tell his story in “Sorry Cinema.” Hassouna was a “well-known cinephile” in Gaza before the war, but when offered the chance to make a film for *From Ground Zero*, he declined, saying, “I am trying to save my family, I am searching for wood ... we are moving every day from one place to another, and just a few days ago I lost my older brother. So I don’t want to make a film.” Masharawi convinced him to make the film out of this experience, and it is one of the most affecting of the 22. Intercut with clips from his “previous life” making feature films, with professional crews and equipment, the film concludes with Hassouna burning his clapperboard to keep warm.

Hassouna’s trepidation is underscored by the appearance of Etimad Washah in her unfinished segment, “Taxi Wanissa,” as she speaks directly to the camera, saying she is unable to continue as she has just learned that her brother and his entire family have been killed.

The transformation of daily life under brutal war is pervasive. Significantly, however, there is no direct mention in any of the films of Zionism or Israel. There are no soldiers, no Hamas, no IDF. There are children everywhere. Theirs are among the most moving stories in these short films. Some of the children contributed to one of the films, “Soft Skin” (Khamis Masharawi) by creating a paper cut-out stop-motion animation describing how their mothers wrote their names on their arms and legs “so if they bomb us people will be

able to collect our parts.”

While the directors of each film worked independently, common images and themes run through the whole. There is not a single intact building. There is rubble everywhere and scattered makeshift tent encampments. Several of the films feature families desperately trying to locate relatives buried under the rubble or describing their own experiences, wondering if they will be found (“No Signal,” “School Day,” “24 Hours,” “Farah and Myriam”).

Water, in its absence from daily life and its majesty in the Mediterranean, appears in almost every film. “Recycling” (Rabab Khamis) portrays a mother dragging her jerry can full of precious water up to a makeshift apartment in a partially destroyed building where she and her daughter drink from a small cup, then use the water to bathe the child, do the laundry, flush the toilet and finally spare a little for the plants. In “The Teacher,” an unemployed professor searches daily for water with a pan, a gallon jug, a jerry, each time arriving too late; he needs his cell phone charged—there is no room on the makeshift charging station in the crowded “town.” On his journey “home” to a tent with a blue door neatly attached, he encounters a former student who asks if there is anything he needs, “anything at all?” “No, I’m fine, thank you...”

The soundtrack immerses the audience in what has become the daily “normal.” Jets overhead, the constant buzz of drones, abrupt explosions and the “whee whee” of ambulances, poignantly described by one child as one of only two words her one-year-old brother knows.

A young boy carefully places his notebooks into his backpack in “School Day” (Ahmed Al Danaf), a fictional drama. Perhaps we will be surprised that amid all the devastation, a school is still functioning. We follow the young boy as he walks through the encampments along dusty roads, and arrives for his studies. He sits on broken slabs at a memorial to his teacher.

Masharawi says his purpose in making *From Ground Zero* is to show that Palestinians are “people like any others in the world who want to follow their dreams.” It is a testament to the determination in the face of a genocide that these filmmakers have achieved such a moving portrayal of striving for life and beauty. The film itself refutes the view of Palestinians as “animals.”

While the filmmaking itself is the artistic process

revealed in *From Ground Zero*, some of the short films depict Gazan artists determined to retain their humanity and their art. “Fragments,” only somewhat over three minutes long, lacks any dialogue, and juxtaposes an artist working on a painting intercut with black-and-white images of tent encampments, people on the move and explosions, which may be bombs or fireworks. Is it 1948 or is it today? This is a powerful little film that brings the history of Palestine and its unrecognized artistic talent together.

Other segments of the film directly celebrate artists and creativity. A stand-up comedian is determined to carry on with his performances—to an impromptu audience gathered in the sand near the tents. In “Flashback,” a teenage girl struggles to overcome the trauma of war and the constant drones by donning her headphones and dancing amid destroyed homes. A university art student discovers two years of her work for a graduation exhibition destroyed. “The university was bombed two weeks ago.” Stills of her joyous moments in earlier times are intercut with scenes of the ruined work. A small boy drumming with rubber tubing on tin cans provides the soundtrack for “Hell’s Heaven,” (Karim Satoum) a darkly funny segment about a young man who takes a body bag to sleep in “to enjoy it while I’m alive.”

“NO” (Hana Eleiwa) follows the director in search of joy among the ruins. Discovering a group of musicians in one of the tents, they strum guitars and sing. “No! To everything that goes against humanity, joy, life... No to everything that destroys our hopes...”

From Ground Zero is an extraordinary testament to humanity’s sensitivity and creativity. North American distribution is being handled by a new company, Watermelon Pictures, devoted to bringing Palestinian films the global recognition denied them for so long, “From the river to the screen.” *From Ground Zero* can be seen in select theaters throughout North America now.



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