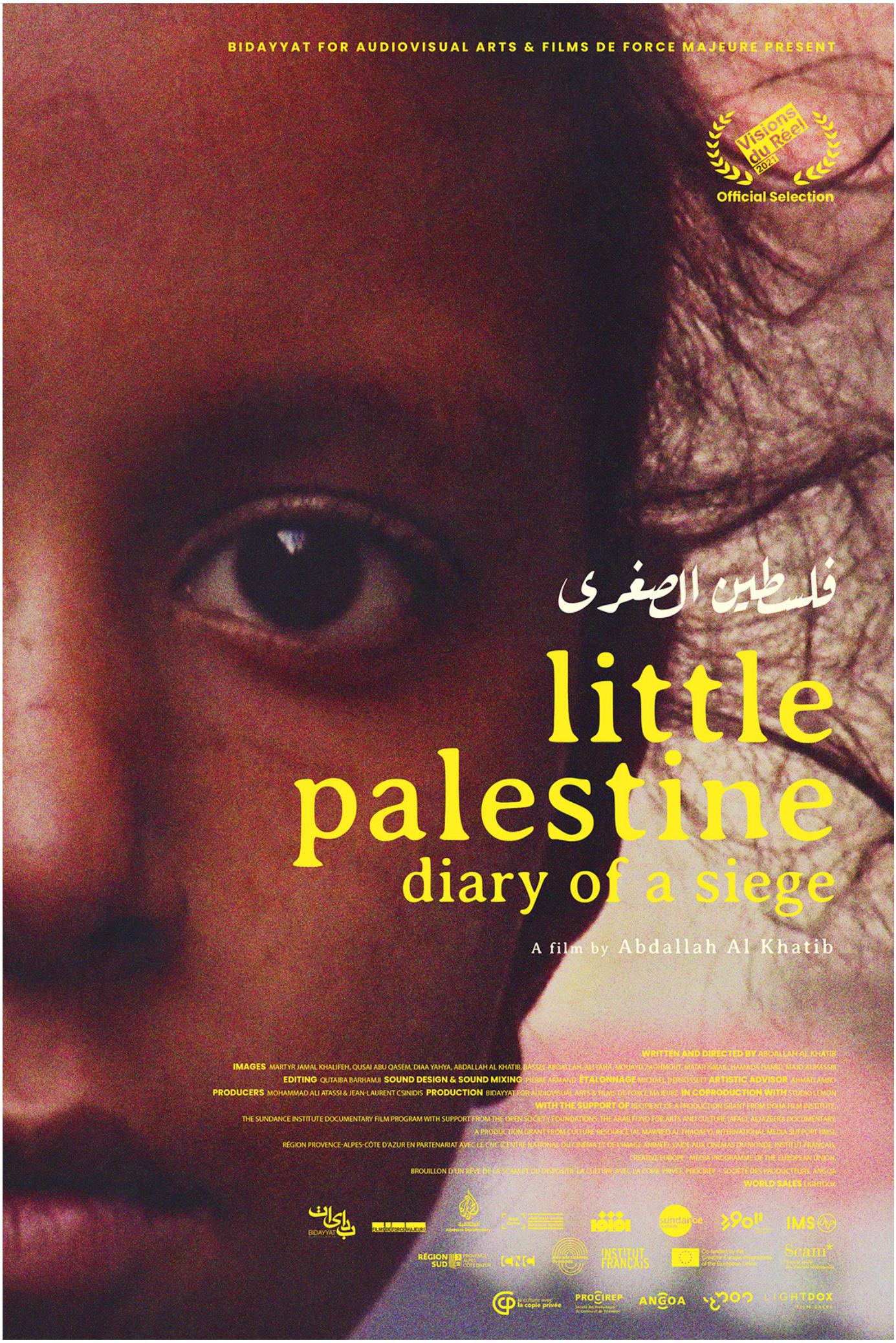
BIDAYYAT FOR AUDIOVISUAL ARTS & FILMS DE FORCE MAJEURE PRESENT
Visions du Réel 2021
Official Selection
فلسطين الصغرى
little palestine
diary of a siege
A film by Abdallah Al Khatib
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY ABDALLAH AL KHATIB
IMAGES MARTYR JAMAL KHALIFEH, QUSAI ABU QASEM, DIAA YAHYA, ABDALLAH AL KHATIB, BASSEL ABDELLAH, ALTARA
EDITING QUTAIBA BARHAMJI SOUND DESIGN & SOUND MIXING
ARTISTIC ADVISOR
PRODUCERS MOHAMMAD ALI ATASSI & JEAN-LAURENT CSINIDIS PRODUCTION BIDAYYAT FOR AUDIOVISUAL ARTS & FILMS DE FORCE MAJEURE
IN COPRODUCTION WITH
WITH THE SUPPORT OF
THE SUNDANCE INSTITUTE DOCUMENTARY FILM PROGRAM WITH SUPPORT FROM THE OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS
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little palestine

diary of a siege

A film by **Abdallah Al-Khatib**

Produced by Bidayyat for Audiovisual Arts & Films de Force Majeure

Lebanon / France / Qatar - 89 min - 2021

synopsis

The district of Yarmouk (Damascus, Syria) sheltered the biggest Palestinian refugee camp in the world from 1957 to 2018.
When the Syrian revolution broke out, the regime of Bashar Al-Assad saw Yarmouk as a refuge of rebels and resistance and set up a siege from 2013 on. Gradually deprived of food, medicine and electricity, Yarmouk was cut off from the rest of the world.
Abdallah Al-Khatib was born in Yarmouk and lived there until his expulsion by Daesh in 2015. Between 2011 and 2015, he and his friends documented the daily life of the besieged inhabitants, who decided to face bombing, displacement and hunger with rallying, study, music, love and joy.
Hundreds of lives were irredeemably transformed by war and siege - from Abdallah's mother, who turned into a nurse taking care of the elderly at the camp, to the fiercest activists whose passion for Palestine got gradually undermined by hunger...

« The siege is time »

an interview with **Abdallah Al-Khatib**
by **Rasha Salti**

Can you tell us a bit about your educational background. Did you study cinema?

I was studying sociology at the University of Damascus when the revolution broke out. At the moment, I am hoping to complete my degree here in Germany. To be honest, the discipline fascinates me, and I am motivated to pursue researching and producing academic work in the field, specifically about the Yarmouk refugee camp and the situation of Palestinians in Syria. It's become normalized for us to be researched and not to be researchers, a position I find infantilizing, as if we could not tell our own stories and realities because we don't possess the requisite language and tools.

What is your relationship to the camera, how did you start filming?

Before the Syrian Revolution and the siege of Yarmouk, I had no relationship whatsoever with the camera. I worked at the UNRWA (United Nations Relief Works Agency), in programs of youth development and support. The outbreak of the Revolution changed everything, everyone's social role was transformed by the political emergency. Hassan Hassan, my close friend, was interested in filmmaking from the outset of the events. When he decided to leave the camp after the siege intensified, he entrusted me with his camera. In fact, the first segment I ever filmed was his departure: we were both riding our scooters, chatting. Once he reached the checkpoint, he was detained by the Syrian regime forces and eventually died under torture. *(NB: Hassan Hassan is a protagonist of Axel Salvatori-Sinz' film* The Shebabs of Yarmouk)

Hassan left, and his camera remained in my safekeeping. I didn't know how to use it, but I felt compelled to film and document our everyday and the crimes committed by the Syrian regime against the Palestinians. I began to film and compile footage, but I refrained from uploading and circulating any of it without really thinking about how, when and whom might be using the material. I didn't consider that footage my personal property because it captured realities and stories of people living under siege. My only concern was that it be used in a context that gave justice to people's suffering. I was filming without imagining that one day, I would consider forging a film from all that. I did not know I would survive the siege.
After I left Yarmouk, at every stage of my displacement from one area to another, even after I reached northern Syria and smuggled into Turkey, none of the hard disks stayed with me, out of fear they might be confiscated or destroyed. I entrusted them to friends who relayed their transport to safe places. Only when I arrived to Germany I was able to view the content of the disks and began working on the writing and editing.

So in the end, when you left the camp, none of the hard-drives were with you. But did you keep the camera?

Yes, the camera stayed with me. I kept filming until I reached Turkey. And there we parted ways when I left for Germany. At the time that it was logical for Hassan's camera to remain active in the hands of those who stayed in the north of Syria, rather than accompany me to Germany.

What is your relationship to the camera today?

I am now living in Berlin. I bought a camera, and I find myself pressing on the record button all the time. There's a stork that sits in front of my window every day, I feel like we have a daily appointment to film it.
Perhaps the main reason I film so much now, is because it was so difficult to do it during siege, despite the fact that cameras were available. We had to be very economical, deciding what to film without hesitation, constrained by how long the battery could keep the camera running, how much the SD cards could hold and space left on the hard disk to store footage. The power cuts barely allowed cameras to be recharged, and made it impossible to upload material online.
I made a short video for Visions du Réel's "carte blanche" series where you can see a turtle eating. In the background my friend is complaining that it is a useless shot, a waste of battery and space on the hard disk.

I want to ask about the scene with the children picking and eating weeds in the field. Had you noticed them a few days earlier and then returned with your camera in order to capture the scene? Or did you wander around with your camera, stumble across the scene, and then decide to film it on the spot?

Only one scene in the film was staged: the one where you see me calling my mother from the street. I actually asked a friend to film it. With that exception, none of the scenes were prepared before being filmed. During the siege, I would pick up the camera and went around places without aim or design, and I was not very conscious of the choices I made for filming a particular scene.

In the film, in one of the last scenes, you see Tasneem, the little girl who is picking weeds, and in the background we hear the sound of shelling. Some friends thought that we added the sound for effect in the postproduction. The sound is in fact real, the shelling was happening, the scene was filmed at the edge of the camp next to the demarcation line where clashes and shelling regularly broke out. Most of the time, people avoided going there because they were scared of the shelling and sniper bullets. I myself was frightened and wary while passing through the area with my camera.

I saw that young girl crouching in the weeds who was impervious to the sound of shelling, and to what was going on around her. She picked the weeds calmly, carefully, putting them in the bag next to her. I found the scene astonishing, so I decided to come closer with my camera and have a conversation with her. Only after viewing the footage did I realize that she led the conversation between us.

What about the scene in the playground with the children running towards the camera and you suddenly ask them what they dream of, and their answers are so harsh while their eyes still laugh playfully? Do you think they were 'performing' to the register of the camera or were they so familiar with you that the camera did not really matter?

I had a special relationship with that group of kids because I coached them in football everyday — even though I don't really know how to play myself. In fact, we lost all our matches and even the tournament, but we shared deep bonds of affection and trust. Trust is key, in my opinion. The camera was always present with us in the playground, every day, and I filmed most of our exchanges. With the passage of time, trust developed and struck root, and the familiarity with the camera allowed this intimacy.
The reason for their spontaneity and the power of this scene is that the camera was not the chief purpose of our gathering and exchanges. We were there to play, and the camera happened to be there.

I would like to ask you about the experience of time in the siege, first as lived time, and then its transformation as the film's temporality. How did you manage to transform this lived experience into such a genuine cinematic form? In the lived experience of the siege, do the days of the week remain the same, does a Friday remain the same or lose its rituals?

I wrote a text on my experience of siege that is titled *The Forty Rules of Siege*. The very first rule is specifically about time. Because the siege is time. The notion of a day changes. The day doesn't begin with sunrise, nor does it end with sunset. The day begins with the first morsel of food you eat and ends with the last. Under siege, people no longer refer to the usual greetings for morning or evening, instead they ask: "What did you eat today?" It no longer matters whether it's Friday or Saturday. People's movements are connected to finding food, and time is linked to food. Time under siege is long and morbid. The day does not always end. But if you find food, then time accelerates and the day concludes.
As the siege tightened, I wrote: "*I see no end to the siege beyond my own death, and no end to my death beyond the siege.*" What I meant was that I couldn't conceive of a meaning for life outside that place, beyond the siege. And even if I somehow managed to make it out, something inside me will remain besieged, tied to memories that refuse to be forgotten.

I remember, for example, the first week after arriving in Turkey. My friends were surprised I kept using the light from my mobile phone. I had lost the reflex to switch on the light in the room, the electrical fixture. I had also forgotten the simplicity of taking a shower with hot water without anyone waiting at the door, or nagging me not to use too much water. Or being able to open the fridge and find food, because in Yarmouk under siege, refrigerators became pointless and we used them as closets to store clothes and other objects.

Can you tell us about how human relations were transformed under siege? For example, your mother, Umm Mahmoud, stopped being a housewife and reinvented herself and devoted her time and to caring for the elderly in the camp?

The siege imposed two kinds of change, social change involving people's relations with one another, and psychological change involving a person's relation to their self. On the level of the social, the change was radical, bringing out the harshest aspects of the human soul, the dark and evil and the noblest and kindest, all at once. For example, a man who kept a box of baby formula and then sold it surreptitiously for a hundred dollars, was also the man who rushed to save a child left behind by her parents as they fled their shell-stricken home.

The instinct for survival prevailed our behavior during these circumstances, it dictated who will live and who will die. I myself was not innocent from committing small acts of betrayal that I'm ashamed of today. Did I not eat a can of tuna all by myself and refrained from sharing it with my friends? Yes, I did. Did I disclose my secret to them? Obviously not! I am confessing now. And I'm certain all my friends did similar acts of betrayal during the siege. In the end, we're all human, and we can't make value judgements about those who lived the siege.
Going back to my mother however, to be honest I don't think Umm Mahmoud's social role changed during the siege. Rather, she reclaimed the role she'd relinquished in order to care for her husband and sons. During the Palestinian Revolution, my mother was a freedom fighter. Marriage transformed her into a housewife, and then the Syrian Revolution and the Siege of Yarmouk gave her back her role in the public sphere. She reclaimed a role that had been taken away from her when she was forced to become a housewife.
My mother was not alone in that regard. Dozens of Palestinian women regained their public role during the siege. It was a positive and beautiful aspect during the ugliest of moments.

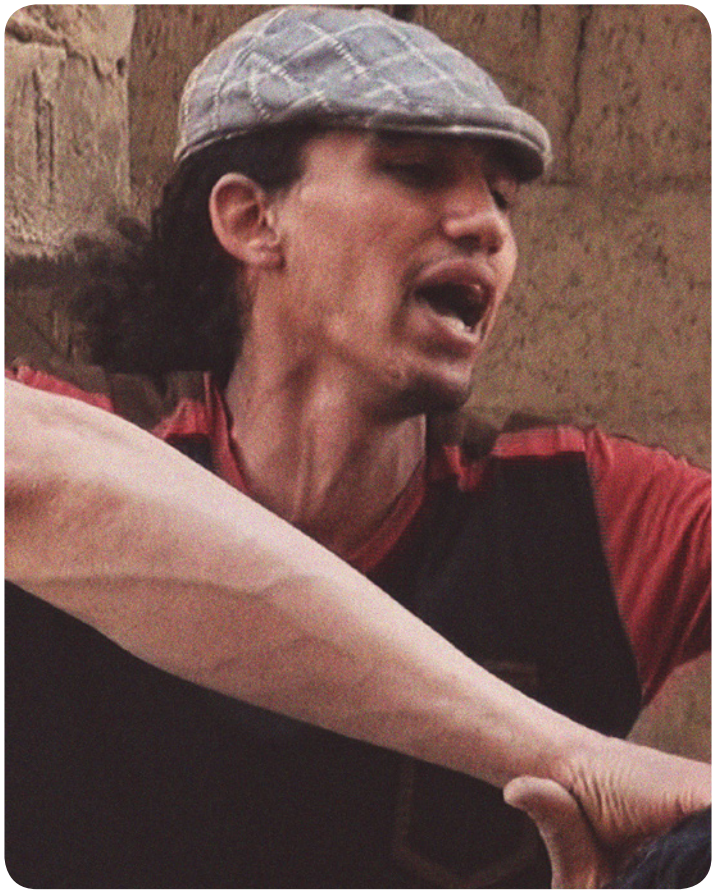
How did the siege change you personally? Did it inspire an artistic or cinematic sensibility? Or were you just documenting and filming, and then you discovered this other side of yourself?

There's no doubt that documenting was important to all of us. It was fundamental. And I wasn't the only person with a camera in Yarmouk. But I also had a certain sensitivity towards the scenes that I filmed, the characters that I worked with, and the events I was documenting. For example, I never went to photograph the victims of shelling, or someone who'd died of starvation looked like a skeleton. Despite the importance of documenting those sorts of scenes so that they become part of an archive documenting death by shelling or starvation. But I personally didn't want to film those sorts of scenes, just like I didn't sell the material I filmed to the media or satellite news stations.
At the same time, I wasn't doing it to become a filmmaker. I didn't know what it meant to become a filmmaker, and I never went to the cinema regularly. There was only one cinema in the camp. I went inside and picked my way through its ruins when fleeing the camp after ISIS entered in 2015. Today, I can say that at the time I was careful not to film people in a way

that was humiliating or harmed their dignity. I wasn't fully aware of that choice at the time, but there was something inside me that stopped me from filming certain scenes that violated people's sanctity. In short, I was keen to document human experience poetically, in all its contradictions, rather than documenting war crimes and building criminal cases for human rights violations.
After I arrived in Germany, I read and educated myself about cinema. I tried to acquire the necessary tools to work with the material I'd filmed, so that a year after my arrival, I could work on the film as a filmmaker who could compose scenes in the framework of a narrative structure. The producers helped me, as did the editor Qutaiba Barhamji *(see short interview thereafter)* who was by my side with his vast experience, intelligence and distance from the events. But in the end, the final decisions remained my own, not simply because this is my story and my experience, but rather because this film is my film, and I bear responsibility for it.

Going back to the film and distance to the images, did you need time or psychological support before beginning the editing of the film, and viewing these images once again? Did you want to watch them again, or did you have the desire to forget?

I didn't watch the footage again until I'd arrived in Europe and started working on the film. Before, during the whole span of the siege, we had neither the luxury nor the means to review the footage we'd shot, because time was tight and electricity rare.
When I started working on the film, it was hard to view the images, but at the same time, it was nice. Because I could see people who'd been killed once again otherwise. I still love and miss them but it also brings some happiness to see their images.
The difficulty for me wasn't seeing cruel or harsh images, but rather cutting footage of people and scenes that meant a lot to me, but whose images and stories had no place in the film. At times, I felt like I was betraying them, because my story and my mother's story ended up taking more space than the rest of my friends.
But over the course of two years, I became convinced that I couldn't cover every event in Yarmouk and the siege, but that I was making a film about human experience, my own and my mother's, and maybe through it I could shed light on what happened in that place without narrating the whole



“ The siege is as long as a day in prison. Like a railway in the desert on a hot summer day. A path leading to madness or suicide. Under siege, time is the true prison of the besieged. Beware. Time kills those who follow it. Leave it alone. Fill the void with meaning as much as you can. ”

history of ten years of life in the camp. I don't think the film's task is to tell the whole history of Yarmouk, its people, and its destruction, because the task of cinema is to raise questions rather than to provide answers.

I think that in this film, you succeeded in encapsulating the experience of siege during modernity, with its technologies and tools, meaning the digital camera, the hard drive, international aid organisations, the warplanes that bomb and the global indifference. Watching the film, I felt it was the story of siege. It could be about the siege of Warsaw, or the siege of Sarajevo, despite the importance of the specificity of Palestinians from Yarmouk. Is this why cinema is important, its ability to produce from a particular reality a document that opens out to the whole world?

To be honest, that question was very present during post-production. For me, that place has gone; it had been destroyed, its people displaced, their return forbidden. As a result, the film wasn't made to break the siege of one particular place, a place which basically no longer exists. The idea was to try to produce a film that transforms this particular experience of siege, which concerns the memory and suffering of people in Yarmouk, into a general experience of siege that could have taken place anywhere in the world and be meaningful for anyone.

Today, there is a film that you will take and present to audiences and critics. Will you introduce yourself as a filmmaker?

I didn't start my career as a director or filmmaker. But today, after two years of hard work, there is a film that I directed, that has helped me to become a director and that I've helped to become a film.

Interwiew made in April 2021

Abdallah Al-Khatib

Abdallah Al-Khatib was born in 1989 in Yarmouk. He studied sociology at the University of Damascus. Before the revolution, he worked for the UN as coordinator of activities and volunteers. He created the humanitarian aid association Wataad, with several friends, which carried out dozens of projects in several regions of Syria, and in particular in Yarmouk. He participated in several documentary films relating the life of the Yarmouk camp, notably being one of the cameramen of 194. Us Children of the Camp which premiered at Visions du Réel in 2017. The German magazine Peace Green identified him as one of the 2014 “peacemakers». In Sweden, he received the Per Anger Human Rights Award in 2016. Abdallah currently lives in Germany, where he was recently granted refugee status.

« Everything disappears, but dignity remains »

a short interview with **Qutaiba Barhamji**

editor of *Little Palestine*

One of the strengths of Abdallah Al-Khatib's film lies in its very specific filmic material. How did you approach it during the editing process?

It is often said that the language and the rhythm of the editing are already determined by the shooting, but what if the logic of the shooting is unprecedented and exceptional? We spent most of our time trying to figure out what it meant to film in a survival setting. We had to find the balance between moments of joy and more challenging ones without neither unnecessarily shocking the audience nor betraying the story. It is a testimony of a survivor. The frailness of the images and the frailness of the person filming have become the strength of the story.

How did you structure the film's dramaturgy?

We wanted to develop the story of the film story in accordance with the evolution of the siege. During the siege everything disappears gradually, mostly food but also joy, smiles, speech and colors. But there are things that remain and among these things are mainly resistance and dignity. That's what the dramaturgy of the film is based on. I had read The 40 Rules of Siege that Abdallah had written during the siege and posted on his Facebook page while he was still in Yarmouk. This powerful testimony was in a way our starting point.

April 2021

technical information

Length : 89 min

Date : 2021

Countries of production : Lebanon, France, Qatar

Director : Abdallah Al-Khatib

Original screenplay : Abdallah Al-Khatib

Producers : Mohammad Ali Atassi, Jean-Laurent Csinidis

Production : Bidayyat for Audiovisual Arts, Films de Force Majeure

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la Scam (Bourse Brouillon d'un rêve), la Procirep-Angoa, Studio Lemon.

Editing : Qutaiba Barhamji

Artistic advisor : Ahmad Amro

Sound design and mix : Pierre Armand

Color grading : Michael Derrosset

Production manager : Nora Bertone

Language : Arabic

Available subtitles : French, English

DCP : 16.9, 25 FPS

Sound : 5.1, stereo

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