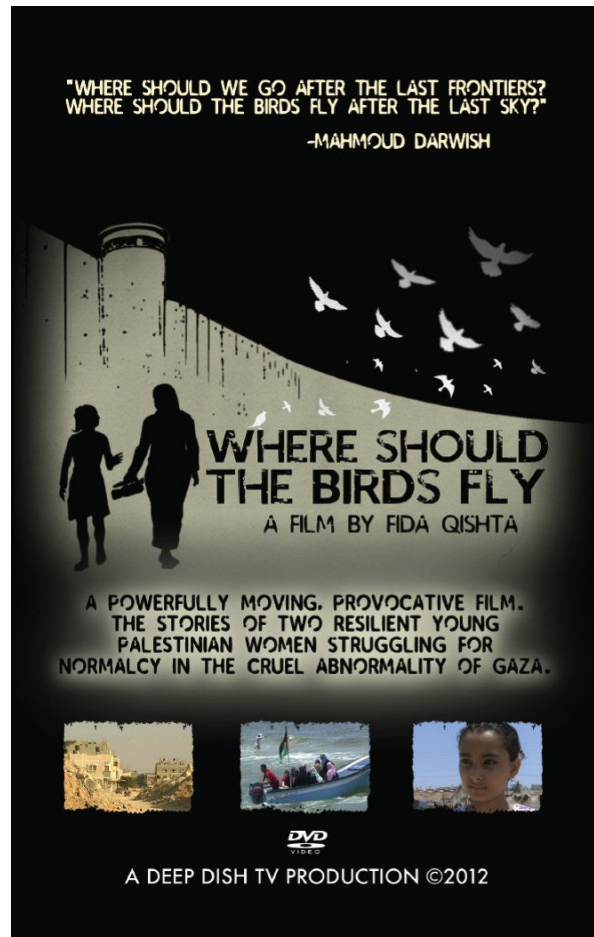


WHERE SHOULD THE BIRDS FLY?

Guidebook



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SUMMARY OVERVIEW

Mona Samouni was 10 years old when the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) bombed her home, killing her mother and father along with nineteen other family members. That bombing was part of the indiscriminate, 3-week IDF assault on Gaza known as Operation Cast Lead, which between 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009 killed more than 1,400 Palestinians, over 300 of them children, and injured over 5,300 more, most of them civilians, while 13 Israelis also died. Journalist Fida Qishta, who was born and raised in Rafah, Gaza, was there during the attacks. Working at the time with international human rights observers in Gaza, documenting everyday life under Israeli military siege, she provided commentaries and video reports that were published widely, including in the *International Herald Tribune*, *The Guardian*, and *The Observer*.

Where Should The Birds Fly? weaves the footage shot by Qishta and her all-Palestinian crew into a powerful 58 minute film that tells the story of two young women struggling to maintain their humanity and searching for normalcy in the horrid abnormality of Gaza. Ms. Qishta's narration explores her own life under siege and contextualizes the severe emotional and psychological effects of the Israeli attacks on Mona, her surviving family and friends.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

In 2004 Qishta founded and served as manager and teacher at The Life-Maker's Centre in Rafah, a free facility for 300 children affected by Israeli incursions. The Centre continues to provide a safe haven for children and offers counseling and English-language tutoring. She subsequently became an interpreter and used her video skills to document the work of International Observers in Gaza. In late 2010 she was able to get her raw footage of Operation Cast Lead out of Gaza to New York City where she began collaboration with Deep Dish TV to produce the film. Deep Dish TV, a non-profit media center, used online crowd-sourcing and community screenings to fund the film's very modest budget.

Where Should the Birds Fly? had its world premier at the Al Jazeera International Documentary Festival in April 2013, and its U.S. premier at the Manhattan Film Festival in June 2013. In January 2013, it was honored by a preview screening at the United Nations Church Center, sponsored by the Israel-Palestine NGO Working Group at the United Nations. The film was produced by Brian Drolet (Deep Dish TV), Felice

Gelman and Barbara Grill, and was edited by Gladys Joujou (*My Palestine; Falafel*).

Where Should the Birds Fly? is the first film about the invasion of Gaza made by Palestinians living the reality of the 2008 Israeli siege and blockade of this tiny enclave. It maps a trajectory from occupation to violent military siege to its devastating after-effects. Divided roughly into three segments, the film first documents ongoing Israeli human rights violations against Gaza farmers and fisherman off the Gazan coast, supplying interviews with them as well as candid footage of arbitrary Israeli tank and patrol boat attacks as they try to go about their daily routines. Israel's Operation Cast Lead was the largest, most brutal and destructive intensification of its regular incursions and harassment of Gaza. The film documents the bombing of civilians, their neighborhoods, real property and schools and the illegal deployment of white phosphorus bombs, showing the horrific damage it does to the human body. *Where Should The Birds Fly?* affirms the findings of the 2009 United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict (*The Goldstone Report*) that Israel is guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity

The central focus of *Where Should the Birds Fly?* unfolds during its third segment with the story of Mona Samouni, her (greatly diminished) family and friends. Qishta makes Mona's acquaintance through neighborhood contacts and interviews her, her brother, Salah, and her sister, Shefa, over a period of several months following the Israeli attack. The trauma inflicted by the bombing is expressed in everything Mona says and does but especially in her apparent stoicism, the frankness with which she describes the brutal deaths she witnessed of her family members, and the stark emotional distance she displays while articulating memories of her parents. When Qishta interviews her again two years later, Mona is little changed but has begun to access and resituate her pain therapeutically by way of creative and artistic involvements.

Where Should the Birds Fly? is in fact a cinematic occasioning of such therapy—for Qishta herself and for the audience whom the film transports through the horrors of occupation and brutal military siege into the process of recognition and healing. Far from the commodified, "touchy-feely" therapy culture familiar in the U.S. and Israel that is meant precisely to exploit and evade the realities of Israeli occupation and violence against Palestinians, however, *Where Should the Birds Fly?* presents to its viewers the crucial, ineradicable relationship between healing and social justice, positioning Mona as a metaphor for a Palestine that has sustained colonial siege for nearly a century yet

continues to rebound with renewed strength following every apparent setback.

BACKGROUND - GAZA AND THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION

The Israeli occupation of Gaza began formally during the 1967 Six-Day War initiated by Israel as a “preemptive” attack against neighboring Egypt and Syria, allegedly in response to military threats but in actuality in order to regain access to the Straits of Tiran controlled by Egypt and closed to Israeli shipping since 1956. Closely scrutinizing Israeli military and political archives, historians of the period have shown that any perceived threat to Israel was in fact a reaction to incessant Israeli military provocations, often clandestine, along the Egyptian and Syrian borders, against displaced Palestinians attempting to cross back into Israel in order to return to the homes and lands stolen from them by Israel during the *Nakba* (catastrophe) of 1947-48, and against neighboring, Arab countries which had supplied shelter to Palestinian refugees and, in the case of Syria, were attempting to divert much-needed water from the Jordan River to Palestinian enclaves in Syria and the Jordanian West Bank.

Palestine was under the control of the Turkish Ottoman Empire for almost 400 years, from 1517 to 1914. At its high point Ottoman caliphate, with its capital in Istanbul, extended through much of Central Europe, the Balkans, Turkey, Greece, the Middle East and North Africa. In slow if sporadic decline since the 17th century, the Empire’s decline was precipitous in the second half of the 19th century. Its internal cohesion was riven by conflict and rebellion from its own *vilâyets* (administrative provinces). The industrializing western European powers had their own competing imperial designs on the Middle East’s vast oil resources and challenged the Ottomans on every front. When the conflicts between the European imperial powers exploded into the First World War, Istanbul made a fatal alliance with Germany against Britain, France and the United States. Defeated, the Ottoman Empire met its demise in 1923 with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, a nominally secular nation-state led by a charismatic military nationalist Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1891-1938)

During the period leading up to World War I, European countries made competing promises to both Arab nationalist and Zionists. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 enabled France and Great Britain to divide their spheres of influence over much of the Middle East into colonies and mandated protectorates following the postwar fall of the Ottoman

Empire. All of these colonies and protectorates remained under European control until after World War II, when ongoing anti-colonial struggles eventually won independence for nearly all of them, excluding Palestine. (See: *Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema*, pg. 276.)

In 1917, England drafted the controversial Balfour Declaration, which effectively favored the formation of a Jewish state in historic Palestine while stating concern that any such state not impinge on the rights and freedoms of the indigenous Palestinian population. In 1920, the British Mandate over Palestine was initiated, and in 1923 it was implemented. Following World War II, however, and two decades of Palestinian resistance to British and Zionist colonization, including the 1936-39 Arab Revolt, the United Nations at the behest of Great Britain proposed to divide the region into two countries, one Zionist (Israel) and one Arab (Palestine).

The terms of the General Assembly Resolution 181, named the “Partition Plan,” were unsatisfactory to the Zionists and the Palestinians. The Zionists aimed to control all of Palestine. Palestinian opposition was rooted in the fact that the “Plan” only allotted them less than half their former homeland, despite the fact they were well over half the population. And the vast majority of fertile farm and grazing land would be given to Israel and its Jewish-only settlements.

Hence on May 15, 1948, one day following the termination of the British Mandate and the subsequent Zionist unilateral declaration of the Jewish State of Israel, a war erupted between Israeli forces and the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syrian and Iraq, which entered the conflict to support Palestinian irregular forces and the Arab Liberation Army (sponsored by the Arab League). The war ended in 1949, with a Zionist victory that expanded Israel’s borders well beyond those designated by Resolution 181. Palestinians lost more than 500 villages and suffered the displacement of more than 750,000 people. Of the remaining Palestinian land, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan seized the West Bank of the Jordan River and Egypt took the Gaza Strip. Jordan and Egypt were forced to relinquish both Palestinian enclaves to Israel after the June 1967 Six-Day War. Israel then de facto occupied all of Palestine, placing 400,000 additional Palestinians under Israeli administration. But the incorporation of the entire Palestinian population in a land now controlled by Israel was soon perceived as a threat to the Jewish demographic majority, thought necessary to justify the state’s Zionist character. (See: *Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema*, pp. 317-318.)

Gaza (*aka* the Gaza Strip) is a very small territory running 25 miles in length and 7.5 miles in width, with a total area of 141 square miles. Its population is approximately 1.7 million, comprised mostly of post-1948 refugees and their descendants. Because of its small size, Gaza is one of the most densely populated regions on earth. It is surrounded on its landed sides by a border fence/wall heavily monitored by the IDF and containing only four official crossings.

Between Israel's 1967 seizure of Gaza and 2005 Jewish settlements vastly expanded. But in 2005 under a "Disengagement Plan," Israel dismantled the Gaza settlements and moved their Jewish inhabitants back to Israel or, ironically, into new settlements in the West Bank.

After the victory of Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections, Israel sealed off Gaza, turning it into the world's largest prison. The elections gave Hamas, an Islamist political party that was loosely affiliated with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, official prominence in Gaza and numerous municipalities throughout the West Bank.

Whereas the minor yet longstanding rivalry between Palestinian Islamist groups, and between such groups and the largely secular Fatah, had previously been exploited by Israel in the interests of divide-and-conquer, the empowerment of Hamas prompted Israel, with the help of allied Egypt, to tighten its grip on the occupied Palestinian territories (oPts), in what the U.N. would later cite as illegal acts of collective punishment. This involved demonizing Hamas, stoking tensions between Hamas, Islamic Jihad (loosely affiliated with the Lebanese Hezbollah) and Fatah, and increasing military incursions into the territories.

In Gaza in 2007, shortly after Hamas and Fatah formed a national unity government, Israel imposed an economic blockade which prevented the export of Palestinian labor to Israel, the exchange of foodstuffs and other civilian goods between Gaza, Israel, and the West Bank, and the import of fuel as well as educational and medical supplies. Extended curfews and school closures were also imposed.

In response, tunnels were built between Gaza and the Egyptian Sinai for smuggling necessary supplies into Gaza. Little official help came from Egypt, next to Israel the largest recipient of U.S. financial and military aid. After U.S. President Jimmy Carter brokered the 1977 Camp David accord between Egypt's Anwar El-Sadat and Israel's Menachem Begin, the two states openly collaborated to control Palestinian resistance to

Israeli occupation. This cooperation with Israel led to Sadat's assassination by Egyptian soldiers and his replacement by strongman Hosni Mubarak.

In retaliation for the blockade, and in response to the numerous IDF attacks and targeted assassinations of Palestinian political leaders and activists, political groups in Gaza, which for several years had abided by a truce negotiated with a non-compliant Israel, began firing makeshift rockets into nearby Israeli towns. In December 2008, Israel seized on these incidents to justify launching a major military assault on Gaza, which they dubbed Operation Cast Lead. The assault was subsequently deemed an atrocity by the United Nations. The U.S. and Israel condemned the report and tremendous pressure was put on the chairman of the UN investigation commission, Richard Goldstone, to disassociate himself from the report. Nevertheless, the Report, which still bears his name, presents indisputable documentation of human rights violations and crimes against humanity committed during the attack by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF).

Israel again launched a major and quite brutal attack on the people of Gaza in 2012, which they euphemistically named "Operation Pillar of Cloud."

Despite the ouster of Hosni Mubarak by mass popular protests in January 2011 and the electoral victory of a political party aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt has continued to work with Israel to severely restrict Palestinians' exit from Gaza through the Egyptian border crossings and has maintained the wall that blocks southern Gaza from the Egyptian Sinai.

PALESTINIAN CINEMA - A BRIEF OVERVIEW

There were no Palestinian film organizations prior to 1948, and hardly any Palestinian cultural institutions survived the disaster of Israel's victory in the 1948 war (the *Nakba*). Following its establishment in 1964, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), under the leadership of Yassir Arafat, began to sponsor Palestinian film projects, all realized in exile, primarily in Lebanon. After 1967, these projects developed into what became known as Palestinian Revolution Cinema (PRC). Incorporating all Palestinian films made between 1967 and 1982, PRC depicted "from within" Palestinian stories which had previously been concealed or misrepresented by filmmakers and other media operating outside the nationalist struggle.

Palestinian film projects have always been sorely underfunded. Israeli control of the oPts has also entailed restriction and censorship. Palestinians have been compelled historically to make their films outside Palestine. In the wake of the First Intifada (1987-1993), an indigenous uprising of Palestinians against Israeli control, encroachment and mistreatment, Palestinian filmmakers holding Israeli citizenship and able to study in Israel or abroad started making films independently with foreign support, that have garnered significant international audiences. With the rise of internet culture, Palestinian filmmakers in the oPts, or in refugee camps outside Palestine, have made use of relatively inexpensive digital technology to produce films and videos even more widely disseminated via internet services such as YouTube and Vimeo.

Nevertheless, Palestinian films are frequently produced abroad due to IDF curfews, roadblocks and checkpoints and other restrictions throughout Gaza and the West Bank. Palestinian cinema may be considered fundamentally exilic and diasporic, at times transnational. (See: *Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema*, pp. 318-319.) *Where Should the Birds Fly?* is a perfect example of this phenomenon, having been shot by Palestinians in Gaza, some of its footage initially shown in Europe, then edited into a complete film by a French editor at a U.S. production company, and premiered at an international film festival in Doha, Qatar.

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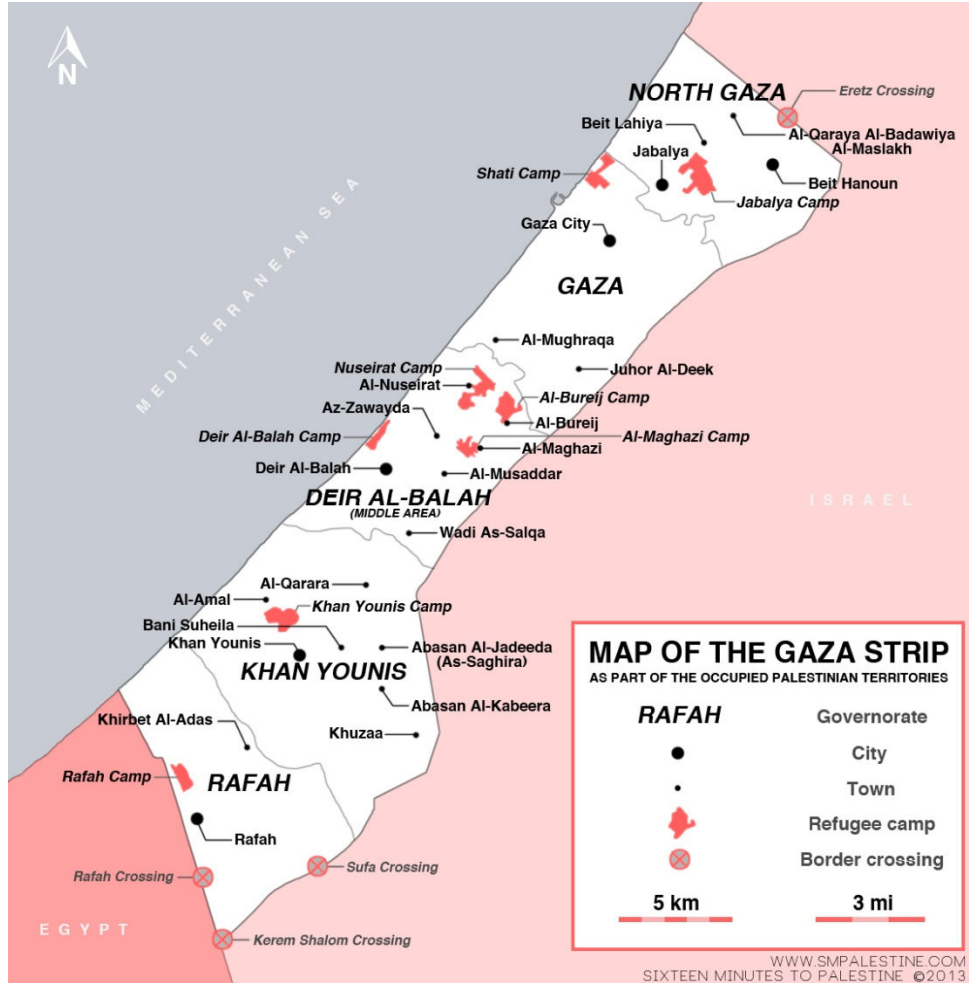
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MAP OF OCCUPIED GAZA



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USEFUL LINKS

Al-Haq - <http://www.alhaq.org/>

Alternative Information Center - <http://www.alternativenews.org/english/>

Applied Research Institute / Jerusalem Society - <http://www.arij.org/>

B'Tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights Violations in the Occupied Territories - <http://www.btselem.org>

Electronic Intifada - <http://electronicintifada.org>

The Goldstone Report - <http://goldstonereport.org/>

Institute for Middle East Understanding - <http://www.imeu.org>

International Committee Against House Demolitions - <http://icahd.org/>

International Middle East Media Center - <http://www.imemc.org/>

Israeli Occupation Archive - <http://www.israeli-occupation.org/>

Middle East Research and Information Project - <http://www.merip.org/>

Palestine Chronicle - <http://palestinechronicle.com/>

Palestinian Center for Human Rights -
<http://www.pchrgaza.org/portal/en/>

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