

From Ground Zero: Palestine's Oscar entry unmasks Israeli genocide in Gaza



By Humaira Ahad / PRESS TV

In *Taxi Wanissa*, a man is seen driving his donkey cart around the city. The scene ends abruptly as the film's director, Etimad Washah, announces the death of her brother and his children on camera.

This seemingly simple announcement grips viewers' attention, exposing the horrors of Israel's genocidal war on Gaza's population.

Taxi Wanissa is one of 22 short films in the 2024 anthology movie *From Ground Zero*, produced by Watermelon Distributions and directed by 22 Palestinian filmmakers living in the besieged Strip.

From Ground Zero was recently shortlisted as a Palestinian entry for the 97th Academy Awards in the 'Best International Film' category - the first Palestinian submission ever.

Michael Moore, a noted American film director, producer and screenwriter of 'Fahrenheit 9/11' fame, has joined the production team of *From Ground Zero* as executive producer.

"No filmmaker, writer, or artist should ever have to tell the story of their own extermination. Yet 22 courageous Palestinian filmmakers found a way to film their story this past year in Gaza, using whatever tools they could pull from the rubble of their homes and cities," Moore wrote in an X post.

"The extraordinary film *From Ground Zero* — for which I am proud to be an executive producer — is the collection of these short films, told all together in under 2 hours. The fact that this film exists at all is a human and cinematic miracle. Go see *From Ground Zero*."

In a more detailed post on his website, Moore slammed mainstream Western media's disregard for Palestinian stories of genocide, suffering, resilience and survival.

"These are stories not being told anywhere. You do not see these stories on the evening news. Military leaders prohibit access so that journalists and filmmakers cannot bring us the truth," he wrote.

The films in the anthology are as follows:

"Selfie", Directed by Reema Mahmoud
"No Signal", Directed by Muhammad Alshareef
"Sorry Cinema", Directed by Ahmad Hassouna
"Flash Back", Directed by Islam Al Zrieai
"Echo", Directed by Mustafa Kallab
"Everything Is Fine", Directed by Nidal Damo
"Soft Skin", Directed by KhameesMasharawi
"The Teacher", Directed by Tamer Najm
"Charm", Directed by Bashar Al-Balbeisi
"A School Day", Directed by Ahmed Al-Danf
"Overburden", Directed by Ala'aAyob
"Hell's Heaven", Directed by Kareem Satoum
"24 Hours", Directed by Alaa Damo
"Jad and Natalie", Directed by Aws Al-Banna
"Recycling", Directed by Rabab Khamees
"Taxi Waneesa", Directed by EtimadWashah
"Offerings", Directed by Mustafa Al-Nabih
"No", Directed by Hana Awad
"Farah and Mirayim", Directed by Wissam Moussa
"Fragments", Directed by Basil Al-Maqousi
"Out of Frame", Directed by Nidaa Abu Hasna
"Awakening", Directed by Mahdi Karirah

These films span various cinematic genres. Some are documentaries and animations, while others fall under the category of storytelling. Cinematic experts have praised the collection as one of the most compelling works depicting the harrowing situation in Gaza.

Most of the footage for these films was captured using iPhones. However, a few professional filmmakers managed to use higher-quality cameras and lenses that were either salvaged or retrieved from the debris of their homes destroyed by Israeli bombardment.

Some stories could not be filmed because the filmmaker's footage, computer, and all their equipment were obliterated by the occupation forces.

In a reality where each day begins with the questions, "Will I survive today?" or "Will I find food today?", capturing enough video to produce a five-minute documentary has been considered nothing short of a miracle by cinematic experts.

A feature film directed by a Palestinian filmmaker portrays tragedies inflicted upon the people of Gaza during an event held in Manhattan.

The film has been shortlisted for an Academy Award in the International Feature Film category.

As many cinema experts have hailed the movie as "a masterwork of great art," *From Ground Zero* has also been declared an "exceptional work" by Academy voters in the early round of voting.

The film, which aims to highlight the tragedies of Israel's genocidal war in the coastal territory, was produced by Rashid Masharawi, a renowned Palestinian film director from Gaza.

From Ground Zero had its official world premiere at the Amman International Film Festival in Jordan. It was initially expected to be screened at the 77th Cannes Film Festival but was later withdrawn.

"We were never accepted in Cannes. We were in discussion with Cannes to try to show even not all of 'From Ground Zero', some films from "Ground Zero" because I was coming to Cannes with films and filmmakers. And I think they don't want to deal with us. Even they say it in the press conference at Cannes before the festival," Masharawi said in an interview on the double standards of Cannes.

"They don't want to deal with the tension or with the politics, with all that's happening in the area. It was only Gaza. It was only Palestine. I remember two years before when the president of Ukraine was having space at the opening of Cannes, making a speech."

"From Ground Zero" depicts the significant role art plays in documenting and presenting the truth to the world. At a time when the disinformation campaign unleashed by the Western media continues, Palestinian filmmakers have tried to preserve and share the stories of Israel's brutality in Gaza with the global audience.

"A large number of the filmmakers had to move from place to place during their projects. Some had their houses bombed, for instance, and had to live in a tent. Others lost half of their family and yet continued the project," Masharawi said about the difficult circumstances of the Palestinian filmmakers while shooting for the film.

The making of the film

The three- to six-minute snapshots in this film were commissioned by Masharawi, who invited Gazan artists to pitch projects showcasing daily life in the Palestinian territory.

"These films were written, filmed, and produced during the war, amid destruction that is still ongoing," Masharawi said. "It was a very difficult period."

Palestinian filmmakers experimented with various storytelling techniques, including artistic testimonies, first-person narration, and stop-motion animation, to depict themes of death, displacement, and survival.

The eerie buzz of Israeli drones serves as an unofficial soundtrack to *From Ground Zero*.

Capturing the horrors of life under Israel's war on the besieged Strip, *Hell's Heaven* follows a narrator who sleeps in a body bag, reasoning that he will end up there eventually and might as well benefit from its warmth while still alive.

In *No Signal*, a man panics after missing a call from a relative buried under rubble—someone who might still be alive.

In *Sorry, Cinema*, director Ahmed Hassouna delivers an apology to the art form, lamenting his inability to pursue his dreams. "Forgive me, cinema. I must put the camera aside and run for my life with others," he says. The climax of *Sorry, Cinema* comes close to unraveling the central motif of the anthology.

Hassouna is seen running alongside other Gaza residents toward bags of rations falling from the sky. They sprint as fast as they can. A couple of small service trucks rush into the frame and quickly disappear into the distance, prompting many of the runners to slow down, exhausted and unable to compete. One of the ration packages splits open on the ground.

Yet, that doesn't stop people from trying to gather whatever remains, highlighting the extreme starvation in the besieged Strip. "As you can see, we are picking up flour and sand," says an unidentified man. "We pick up whatever we find on the ground. We have to eat."

The Palestinian film captures the daily struggles of people enduring genocide as the Zionist regime continues targeting civilian buildings and killing women and children. The regime has forced survivors to scramble for basic necessities like food and water.

In Muhammad Al Sharif's *No Signal*, a heartbreaking scene unfolds as a filmmaker, desperate for firewood, resorts to burning his clapperboard. In Ahmed Al Danaf's *School Day*, a young boy visits his teacher's grave, yearning to study in the presence of academic souls—a moment that leaves viewers in tears.

Hana Eliwa, another filmmaker from Gaza, focuses on the human tendency to seek light in the darkest of circumstances. Her short film *No* features a group of Gazan youths singing songs of resistance and hope, offering an uplifting streak of joy amid a landscape scarred by death and devastation.

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