



Beit Sahour's first intifada heroes celebrated in intelligent, funny film

[Selma Dabbagh \(/people/selma-dabbagh\)](/people/selma-dabbagh)

[The Electronic Intifada \(/people/electronic-intifada\)](/people/electronic-intifada)

16 April 2015

The Wanted 18 IndieGOGO Trailer



The Wanted 18

Directed by Amer Shomali and Paul Cowan

Intuitive Pictures, National Film Board of Canada, Bellota Films, Dar Films

When I started reading properly about the first Palestinian intifada, it was all over. I had experienced the tail end of it. I lived in al-Eizariya and worked in Jerusalem in 1992, within the then dynamic, yet family-like atmosphere of the

Palestine Human Rights Information Centre, which alas, is no more.

Its demise is a long story involving its support of banned organizations, disputes over funding, restrictions on West Bank fieldworkers traveling to East Jerusalem and the death of Palestinian leader Faisal Husseini. It was finished off by the closure of its offices and raid of its database by Israeli forces almost ten years ago.

When I read about the first intifada, I saw Gaza as the shield, Ramallah the brain and Jerusalem the heart. But there was always a curious little town on the outskirts of Bethlehem that attracted me: [Beit Sahour](https://electronicintifada.net/tags/beit-sahour%E2%80%9D) (<https://electronicintifada.net/tags/beit-sahour%E2%80%9D>), which seemed like a flower.

The stories from Beit Sahour uplifted and charmed: the organized nonviolent resistance, the coordination committees of teachers, doctors and other professionals, the role of women, the drive for agrarian self-sufficiency and the strike actions of the pharmacists. Yet in all this, I found no reference to cows. I, like the Israeli forces, must have been looking in the wrong place.

The Wanted 18 was a surprise. It is a film about a real story that captivated director [Amer Shomali's](https://electronicintifada.net/tags/amer-shomali%E2%80%9D) (<https://electronicintifada.net/tags/amer-shomali%E2%80%9D>) imagination as a child, the story of how the town of Beit Sahour bought 18 cows from an Israeli *kibbutz* in order to start producing its own milk. It tells the tale of a town trying to attain independence by boycotting taxes and produce. It is the story of nonviolent resistance, its heroics and psychology.

Brave men, women ... and cows

I saw the film first at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival in Amsterdam, knowing nothing about it or its makers. I assumed it was about brave men and women, which indeed it was, but the story was told in such a way that one could only comprehend the people if one also understood the cows, their individuality and unexplored potential. "Maybe," says the narrator, "you think cows are lazy, eating all day with nothing in their heads. Maybe you should think again."

The Wanted 18 is a complex story told playfully. There are comic strips, cartoon figures with big lips, animals with long eyelashes, a magical white calf that defies expectations by leaping over a two-meter-high fence, and jokes that rely on exaggeration and irony. Cartoon cows fart in the opening scenes. *Ha ha! It's a laugh!*

After the screening, in a Skype interview from Ramallah, Shomali was sweet, jokey, with a fresh face and a cutely accented voice. "I grew up in a refugee camp in Syria," Shomali's voice chirpily explained. "We could not go out," he added without resentment. "Boring life," he said, disposing of it.

But none of the humor and buoyancy detracts from the force of this film, its intelligence, politics and careful editorial choices. There are no unwarranted digressions. Each character is given their say and their space as the extraordinary individuals that they are. It is the modestly portrayed gravitas of these personalities that make this film such an achievement. Even more so, when set amid what they have been up against.

"The only thing we controlled was the air that we breathed," one interviewee states. The occupation, says another, "put it into your head that you are subhuman, you are not equal." Not subhuman, superhuman. Not unequal, but confidently superior.

These men and women — Jad Ishaq, Siham Taweel, Ghassan Andoni, Jalal Qumsieh, Makram Saad, Anton Shomali and his mother, Ayman Abu Zuluf, Naji Musleh and, importantly, the butcher's wife — were exceptional in not only coping with, but challenging great difficulties, and developing strategies to survive with dignity and humor. As one Palestinian interviewee states, "It was very clear. Mentally we were superior to them."

Good guys, bad guys

For any dramatic story to work, you need heroes and anti-heroes, goodies and baddies. The goodies are those characters listed above: brave, grounded, articulate, clear-thinking people, many now in their sixth or even eighth decade

rewarded.

Shomali told the Amsterdam audience what it was like to show the film in Ramallah and invite the protagonists from Beit Sahour. “They walked out of the cinema like kings,” he said, smiling. And so they should have. They deserve reverence, their names graffitied on walls, a place in Palestinian history and the history of civil resistance, while the rest of us await the return of the white cow, or maybe go out and find one ourselves.

Selma Dabbagh is a British-Palestinian writer. Her debut novel, [Out of It](#), (<http://selmadabbagh.com/novels/>) is published by Bloomsbury (2012).

🔗 [The Wanted 18 \(/tags/wanted-18\)](#) [Amer Shomali \(/tags/amer-shomali\)](#)
[First intifada \(/tags/first-intifada\)](#) [Beit Sahour \(/tags/beit-sahour\)](#) [film \(/tags/film\)](#) [cinema \(/tags/cinema\)](#) [animation \(/tags/animation\)](#)