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The Wanted 18: Interview with Director Amer Shomali



🕒 October 8, 2015 👤 Palestine Square 📁 Culture & History



(Photo Credit: Just Visions)

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Palestine's submission for the Best Foreign Language Film category at next year's Academy Awards is the animated documentary *The Wanted 18*. The debut film of Palestinian

artist Amer Shomali centers on the town of Beit Sahour and their valiant determination to overthrow Israeli occupation during the first intifada. Civil disobedience was one part of the effort—refusing to pay taxes to the occupation authority, for example. The heart of the film, however, is the townspeople's herd of 18 cows, purchased from a lefty Israeli kibbutz. Local milk and produce cultivation was part of a widespread Palestinian boycott of Israeli products.

Israel responded with petty repression: destroying backyard gardens, expropriating property for unpaid taxes, arresting community activists and imposing curfews. But the people of Beit Sahour were not easily cowed. During curfews, they took to their balconies and toasted their adjoining neighbors with arak to mock the Israeli soldiers patrolling the streets below. When Israel closed schools and universities, they organized classrooms in their homes. But, as the IDF is notoriously imaginative, even the cows were branded a national security threat to the State of Israel.

The momentum of the intifada was eventually snatched by the Oslo "peace process," which conveyed false hope for an end to the occupation. Still, Beit Sahour continues to resonate as an exemplary model of resistance against an unjust order. At a time of fractured Palestinian politics which sorely lacked a vision for self-determination, Shomali's film is an endearing example of what renewed civic activism might achieve for the Palestinians.

Palestine Square recently sat down with Amer Shomali at the Washington, D.C., premiere of *The Wanted 18* (October 1), the opening night feature of the 5th Annual DC Palestinian Film and Arts Festival.

It's clear this is a very personal film about an exemplary model of resistance in Beit Sahour. How do you as a Palestinian fit, so to speak, in this story?

I grew up in Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria and I came back to Palestine after the [first] intifada was long over. I came back in 1997, so it was after the signing of the Oslo Accords. I didn't experience the first intifada. When I was in the refugee camp, I built this utopian image about what Palestine looked like and how the Palestinians are—an image created from posters I used to see, comics I used to read.

I structured the film starting from that experience—what I was expecting of Palestine, recreating the imagination of my childhood in animation. So we started to do the film from that point of view: the way I used to see Palestinians as superheroes and cows as talking animals.

In 1997, when I came back to Palestine, I was shocked by how much things on the ground are different than what I imagined. I was expecting to find a community that is aware, politically involved, engaged, and active. Instead I found people who are like any other people: obsessed with materialistic stuff, money, salary, cars, and mobile phones. I was disappointed.

Later, I met one of the individuals you see in the film who told me, "Whatever you imagined about Palestine was true, but you just missed it all. You came at the wrong time. You missed all the action during that moment of the first intifada."



(Photo Credit: Just Visions)

Is this because of the Oslo “peace process” and the neo-liberal model imposed on Palestinians by Israel and the United States in the hopes of effectively buying them off? Trading self-determination for economic prosperity.

This is one part of it. The new generation did not want to grow up to be their parents because they began to see their parents as losers. In the first intifada, your value as a human being came from how much you were involved in the intifada, how many creative ideas you suggested to make your community a better place. If you went to prison for your political work and managed not to confess in the interrogation, this gave you status in the community. After the peace agreement and the introduction of the neo-liberal system to Palestine, your value became about how much money you have in the bank, what kind of car you’re driving, how much your salary is. The new generation started to feel that their parents were losers because they had nothing based on the new system— money and things like that. So they focused on having a good career and plenty of money. They don’t want any trouble with the Israelis and they don’t want any trouble with the Palestinian Authority. They just want to build their careers and make money.

When members of the new generation come to see this film because they want to see Palestine's pick for the Oscars, they realize that maybe we have better salaries than our parents, maybe we have better cars, maybe we travel more, maybe we have a higher standard of living, but we are missing an important thing, which is dignity. They start to look differently at the first intifada and the generation that almost managed to get them freedom and independence. The new generation is living in a bubble based on neo-liberal standards, but those standards do not give them minimum dignity as human beings.

Is Palestinian society more de-politicized than ever before and more narrowly focused on individual gains rather than collective aspirations?

Exactly.

How has the reception to the film been?

The reception depends on the audience. Western audiences, in general, usually comment saying, "We never saw this side of Palestinians, or this side of Israelis." I find that interesting and sad at the same time. After sixty years you never thought of Palestinians as people who can speak English, dress well, and go through non-violent civil disobedience to resist the occupation? Mainly in the West they do not expect this kind of story or this face of the Palestinians and Israelis.

In Palestine, the old generation – the generation of the intifada – is always excited to see this story. After the screening they usually say, "I have a similar story, such-and-such happened during the first intifada if you want to make another film about it." They recognize that, as I said earlier, that the definition of the hero changed after the first intifada. People who represent Palestine in the media and international forums are not the heroes of the first

intifada. Much of that generation stopped seeing themselves as heroes as well. But when they see this film, they think “Ok, maybe my story is worth telling.” As for the new generation, they realize that they are living an unfulfilling life in Palestine under neo-liberal occupation.



(Photo Credit: Just Visions)

In the Arab world, they like the film but they're most confused with the image of Palestinians as activists laughing about the occupation, drinking arak to tease the Israelis while they are under curfew. They are used to seeing the Palestinians as victims with broken bones who are crying, whining, and dying—that's what they usually see about Palestine. They are not used to seeing Palestinians alive. They want us always dead just to feel sorry for us.

In general, I think audiences are interested in seeing this fresh new perspective about the Palestinians living under occupation.

What was your experience of directing a film under occupation?

Making this film was challenging on different levels. Financing the

film was an early challenge. It was a hassle to get money to make a political film about the first intifada. We had to turn a lot of funds away because funders wanted to be involved in the making of the film and to propose their own agenda.

There were two challenges when directing the film. One was that I was afraid of being an Orientalist making a film about Palestinians—I had always had this fear of being an Orientalist. I wanted an authentic Palestinian voice in the film. Beit Sahour is a small town. A town resident who doesn't like the film could go to my father and say, "F*** you! Your son did this film and it's not an authentic, honest film." So I was panicking all the time about making a film where those "characters" portrayed in the film would like it. So I went back-and-forth as a director, imagining myself in the audience's seat, watching this film and asking, "Am I going to like this film as a Palestinian from Beit Sahour or not?" Changing my perspective between the director and the audience, and back again, I think, improved the film a lot and made it more authentic.

The other main challenge was the archive: the representation of Palestinians. This is a documentary film so you need a bit of archival footage and all the archival footage we found in the Associate Press or Magnum was either pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli. In most cases, footage is focused on the violent side of the intifada, so it was mostly Israeli soldiers breaking bones, killing Palestinians, and burning their houses; mothers crying; or Palestinians throwing Molotov cocktails and breaking the glass of an Israeli Egged bus. You never find archival footage of a Palestinian teaching his kids because the schools were closed by Israelis forces, or a Palestinian milking a cow or planting his backyard to produce his food as part of the boycott of Israeli products. That image of Palestinians was not on camera and we wanted to create an alternative archive so we used the animation to create that alternative archival footage. We also asked actors to

reenact the stories we heard in Beit Sahour because of the image we wanted to portray about Palestinians.



(Photo Credit: Just Visions)

And at the end of filming, we asked the people of the town to please provide us with any footage from the first intifada if they had it. People started to bring home videos. For instance, one woman provided us with footage of her family-in-law that she filmed after her marriage, introducing them to her family living abroad in France. That kind of footage is shot with love, to represent Palestinians. We used this kind of footage instead of the footage shot by the media because the media is two-dimensional – only showing the violence – and you cannot sympathize with the Palestinians you see in the news.

[During the post-screening audience Q&A, Shomali further explained his collaborative process. Many scenes were spontaneously added after hearing the personal stories of people on-set. Shomali often staged scenes with the children of the women and men who, nearly thirty years before, took part in the actions now dramatized by their children.]

This film has been met with extraordinary excitement. Tonight's event

is sold out! I'm sure many new fans would like to know what your future plans are.

I'm thinking of two films: one of them is sci-fi and about Palestine in the future. The other is about a Swiss artist named Mark Rudin and his experience working with Palestinians. I'm still thinking about whether or not I want to do another film. Maybe I don't have to direct it, maybe I'll just write. Making films is a tough job. This film took five years. I come from a different background—I'm a cartoonist. I do posters, comic books, art, paintings, installations, which are all usually short-term projects: two months, six months, one year maximum, and then you produce something and show it to the world. In films, you spend five years working in silence. People ask you what you're doing and you say "I'm making a film!" After five years you can show them what you're doing. I'm not used to that. Meanwhile, I'm going to keep working on my other projects, including art, paintings and installations. Hopefully next year I'm going to have a big solo exhibition in Dubai also about the first intifada.

Check out *The Wanted 18* trailer below and [Amer Shomali's other projects at his website](#).

[youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIKZ8daLtOo>]

Further Reading: [The Wanted 18: A Documentary Movie](#).



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