
FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2025 OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD
ONCE UPON
A TIME
IN GAZA
كان ياما كان في غزة
DIRECTED BY
TARZAN
& ARAB
NASSER

LES FILMS DU TAMBOUR PRESENTS

FESTIVAL DE CANNES
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ONCE UPON A TIME IN GAZA

كان ياما كان فى غزة

DIRECTED BY
TARZAN & ARAB NASSER

2025 – France / Palestine / Germany / Portugal
With Qatar and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan –
2025 – 1.85 – 5.1

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SYNOPSIS

Gaza, 2007. Yahya, a young student, forges a friendship with Osama, a charismatic restaurant owner with a big heart. Together, they start peddling drugs while delivering falafel sandwiches, but they are soon forced to grapple with a corrupt cop and his oversized ego...

INTERVIEW WITH ARAB & TARZAN NASSER

Your film title juxtaposes 'Once Upon a Time'—suggesting fiction, or fairytale— with 'Gaza', a place of harsh reality. Was this meant to imply that your film offers a perspective beyond what is typically shown in mainstream news coverage?

With our film, we're attempting to present Gaza through a different lens than that of the skewed footage that so frequently comes out of the region. We want to present an authentic portrait of our city, one that's free from the stereotypes and exaggerations that have become the accepted global narrative. We chose the title "Once Upon a Time" because it captures the nature of life in Gaza: one that lacks stability, continuity, and safety. Nothing is guaranteed there. Yesterday's events, whether joyful or painful, can become mere memories the next day—or transform into deeper suffering. Our entire history could be erased in an instant. That's exactly what's happening right now in this war of annihilation.

Nothing in Gaza comes with guarantees—not even life itself, which can end without warning because of devastating wars and an ongoing blockade that continues to crush both lives and the land. "Once Upon a Time" is also a reference to cinema classics like "Once Upon a Time in the West", "in America", "in Anatolia", etc. This time, Gaza takes center stage.Though the war's reality serves as your backdrop, "Once Upon a Time in Gaza" blends multiple genres—thriller, buddy movie, comedy, and even meta-cinema. Did you draw inspiration from any other films? And were you aiming to create a cinematic experience rather than deliver a political statement?

Neither of us had formal film training—Gaza doesn't have a film school—so we learned through trial and error, experience, and intuition. For us, there are no rigid rules for filmmaking—just feelings and emotions that we try to express by using all available tools and possibilities. The result is a mix that closely resembles everyday life in Gaza in all its diversity and richness.

As for politics, no matter how hard we try to avoid it, it seeps into every aspect of Palestinian life. It isn't something we choose; it's forced upon our daily reality—even in the kitchen when all you want to do is make a simple sandwich. We don't feel the need to belabor the political situation or position ourselves as victims. We're humans, first and foremost. Yes, Gaza is experiencing war—but that isn't all there is. We also have lives, and mundane, everyday stories.

Our dream is to someday make a purely Palestinian film completely detached from politics. But that dream will only be possible when Palestinians secure their fundamental human rights and finally live like "normal" people in a "normal" world based on justice, freedom, and dignity.

Your film opens in an unusual way, almost like a cubist painting: we see footage of bombing in Gaza, then an empty screen with color test patterns, followed by what seems like an action movie trailer, before finally launching into the main story. We eventually understand how these pieces fit together, but was this fragmented opening specifically designed to surprise the viewer from the start?

Not exactly—we weren't just trying to surprise viewers, but rather to establish a rhythm that mirrors that of life in Gaza, which often feels like this fragmented series of contradictions. In Gaza, bombings and death coexist with life and resistance, and occupation coexists with a will to survive.

This interplay between life and death, reality and fiction, cacophony and silence—that's precisely what we wanted to capture in our opening sequence. It represents the vortex Gazans have been living in for decades, with no clear lifeline, essentially confined in what amounts to an airtight prison for years on end. Back in 2008, we were at university, it was noon. We were in fine arts creating war-themed graphics when, suddenly, there was a massive explosion. Sixty-six warplanes had bombed Gaza (editor's note: Operation Cast Lead, from 12/27/2008 to 18/01/2009). That day is forever etched in our memories: in a split second, Gaza went underground. All of this to say that life in Gaza can change in a heartbeat—nothing is guaranteed. Opening the film this way was our attempt to prepare viewers for entry into this fragmented reality where nothing moves in a straight line. Everything is tangled, overlapping, and unstable.

What made you set your film in 2007? Was it because this timing coincided with Hamas taking control of Gaza?

Absolutely, 2007 wasn't chosen randomly. It represents a critical turning point that profoundly impacted the course of events in Gaza through to the present day. This was the year after Hamas won the legislative elections—a result the international community refused to accept, thus triggering the military, political, and economic blockade. Israel designated Gaza as a hostile entity and implemented this suffocating, inhuman blockade affecting over two million people.

We chose this year because it represents this brutal inflection point—the beginning of a dark chapter of isolation, crisis, and wars whose devastating consequences are now being felt more severely than ever before.

What was the overall atmosphere in Gaza in 2007?

The situation in Gaza has been challenging since 2000 when the second Intifada erupted, and it's steadily deteriorated ever since, culminating in the genocide currently taking place in Gaza. TV media consistently misrepresent Gaza: watching these reports, you'd think Gaza was nothing but Hamas, militias, and terrorists. They portray it as some kind of Tora Bora, but this image has nothing to do with daily life. Life in Gaza is about getting by, trying to earn whatever money you can, and surviving—it's longing for freedom.

Your three main characters are a young dreamer, a friendly dealer, and a corrupt police officer. Do they symbolize different archetypes of people from Gaza?

These characters aren't uniquely Gazan—they exist all over the world. They can actually be compared to classic Western film archetypes: the good, the bad, and the ugly. The dealer, Ossama, strives to be independent—his power isn't derived from others. He's the opposite of Abou Sami, the cop, who joined the police precisely to have a little power. Without his badge, he'd be nothing. Abou Sami is jealous of Ossama's autonomous power. Meanwhile, Yayah finds exactly what he needs through Ossama—friendship and a job. These characters represent no one but themselves. What makes them unique in the context of Gaza is that, despite their differences, they share one thing: they're all victims of an extremely harsh reality they never chose. Each has followed a path dictated by circumstances rather than their dreams. They didn't choose who they've become—they've simply adapted to the hand they were dealt. And that's precisely what we wanted to emphasize: in Gaza, a person's identity isn't uniquely shaped by individual choices, but largely by external conditions that limit those choices.

Were you trying to suggest that becoming a dealer is an economic necessity in Gaza? And that the Hamas police is hypocritical and corrupt?

That wasn't our intention at all, and we didn't necessarily want to portray the Hamas government as corrupt—that isn't the subject of our film. It's also worth noting that the Hamas government was elected by the people through democratic elections that international observers validated, even though part of the Western community rejected this outcome.

Beyond that, we're portraying an individual, not a governing authority. Every political system contains both ethical and corrupt individuals. The method used for tracking dealers in the film is similar to that used by law enforcement around the world.

The idea behind this authority figure is that in all societies, there are certain weak or cowardly individuals that gravitate towards power structures to gain control and a sense of authority. This contrasts with Ossama, who develops his strength and influence independently, relying on himself rather than on institutional power.

Your film captures everyday life in Gaza—doctors, a pharmacy, a restaurant… Were you trying to show the normal side of Gaza?

Yes, we set out to present Gaza as it truly is—a place that has everything, but is deprived of everything. Gaza's unique circumstance, having been isolated since 2007, has transformed it into an ambiguous space, known primarily through reports and documentaries broadcast by international media, which are often pushing their own agendas.

For those who've never set foot in Gaza, it's easy to make vague and dark assumptions about what life must be like there. That's why we wanted to shine a light on something deeper—the strength of the Gazans and their refusal to submit to the inhumane conditions in which they live. They're constantly finding workarounds just to survive and stay connected with what's happening in the world despite the reality of their confinement. The people in Gaza are incredibly resilient, they never give up. We wanted to show the "normal" side of Gaza. The Gaza seafront, the beaches—it's like being in Nice. Yes, Gazans are victims, but they hate wallowing in the role of victims. They have their dignity. Films like ours tend to catch people off guard with what we reveal about Gaza. In "Dégradé", there's a scene in which condoms are used, which surprised non-Gazan viewers. And in "Gaza mon amour", we portrayed a love story, whereas many thought a love story could only take place outside of Gaza.

Yahya, the dreamer in your film, gets hired to act in a propaganda piece produced by the Gaza's government. As one character suggests, do you think that images and film can be a kind of weapon?

As one of the ministers says in the film, "Making movies in Gaza is like being in the resistance—the tools are different, but the goal is the same." And we firmly believe that. We're living in an age defined by images where visual media have become one of the most powerful tools for influencing and shaping narratives.

We're in desperate need of realistic images—because those images allow us to show ourselves as actual human beings who deserve life and dignity, and not as a threat or danger, which is what the Israeli occupation and their media machine constantly do. This image can act as a powerful shield against the false narrative that depicts Gaza as a terrorist hub that must be eradicated when, in reality, it's a land that's been under siege for decades, and a people simply struggling for life and freedom.

The film producers depicted in your narrative want to portray a heroic fighter, a martyr, but they don't think Yahya fits the part with his long hair and lack of muscles… Were you deliberately taking a shot at how Hamas ideology emphasizes masculinity (which parallels Israeli military ideology)?

Our critique goes beyond the glorification of masculinity to examine the notion of the "heroic martyr"—a figure invested with profound reverence and held as sacred in the Palestinian collective imagination, precisely because they die while serving what is seen as a national cause.

But the irony we were really trying to show is that Yahya's real life actually ends up closely resembling that of the character he was supposed to play.

Both were students full of life and hope who suddenly found themselves trapped in a reality they didn't choose—a reality forced on them by the occupation and colonial siege. Both struggled to hang on despite impossible circumstances, and both met the same fate: a bullet. The only difference lies in appearance, not in essence.

From our perspective, all Gazans are heroes. Their heroism isn't predicated on extraordinary acts—it lies in their everyday resilience, their determination to endure, and their struggle to stay alive.

The film within your film is an action movie with a heroic character. But your actual film takes a different approach: you show more of your characters' inner worlds with these slow, silent scenes. And instead of heroes, your characters are ordinary men. Was it important for you to push back against action movie stereotypes?

The rhythm was absolutely intentional—it was a way for us to create a balance between the brutal pace of everyday life, a reality that often alienates those who live it, and the cinematic rhythm, which can be shaped and controlled to draw the viewer in and immerse them in the experience.

We think that in its essence, the story is actually the same—if you consider cinema as a tool for reshaping reality. The difference lies in how it's told. The film within the film leans into all those clichés of heroism and action, whereas our film chooses to linger on the inner lives of ordinary people. That's because, for us, heroism isn't always about dramatic external demonstrations—sometimes, it's found in patience, in dreaming, in endurance, and in the simple act of surviving.

So, yes, it was important for us to break away from the classic tropes of action films—not just to criticize them, but also to present something that feels more authentic and human to us.

Yahya ends up dying on the film set because they're shooting with real bullets. How should we interpret this tragic ending? Is it saying that in Gaza, reality always catches up with fiction? Or that making fiction in Gaza is impossible because the situation with Israel is too violent and overwhelming?

That's just life in Gaza—it can end in a split second, and in the most unexpected way. Yahya, who was on the verge of becoming a movie hero who represents daily the reality under occupation, ends up getting killed by stray bullets fired by Israeli soldiers during filming—a bitter irony, but one that is not foreign to the reality of Gaza.

Maybe this would have been his fate even if he wasn't in the movie. Yahya is, at heart, a desperate character marginalized, starving for human warmth and living in harsh isolation—one that's made worse by his refusal to leave Gaza, always under the pretext of "security reasons", a term that the Israeli occupation systematically uses to rob Palestinians of their right to move around and actually live.

You could say that the methods vary, but the result is always the same: death. In Gaza, reality constantly eclipses fiction. Sometimes, even attempting to dream or create becomes an uphill battle you can't win against a system built on violence and control.

"Once Upon a Time in Gaza" is a film about men. For them, women are nothing more than fantasy. Is this just specific to the characters in this film, or were you trying to show something broader about male-female relationships in Gaza?

Not exactly. From day one, we built this story around three young men in Gaza, so the absence of female characters wasn't meant to reflect any general social reality, but rather a narrative and artistic choice. The lack of women in the film actually reflects a life that seems unbalanced and emotionally fragmented. We wanted the viewer to feel that absence, to sense the aridity of this life, the emotional emptiness, and the lack of tenderness our characters experience—especially Yahya, whose deeply misses his mother and sister who live in the West Bank, and is really suffering from emotional deprivation without them around. We deliberately kept women out of the film to emphasize this void and make it palpable.

You shot the film in Jordan. Did you think it would be possible to create a believable version of Gaza in another place?

Our biggest challenge was recreating Gaza somewhere else in a way that would convince even someone who really knows Gaza that we shot there. Being from Gaza ourselves, we carry it within us wherever we go—its neighborhoods, its stories, its shape, and its spirit—ever since we were forced to leave. What we're doing with our films is, in many aspects, a way to release this overwhelming reservoir of nostalgia and longing we carry—a constant attempt to bring Gaza to life, because we feel it always deserves more from us. That's why we're so hands-on with everything in the filmmaking process and obsess over every single detail in every shot—from set design to lighting to even the tiniest visual element.

This process gives us the deepest sense of satisfaction and purpose. We don't see ourselves as just making a film—we're building a true cinematic archive of Gaza; a Gaza that the world has grown weary of seeing only as breaking news or in documentaries, while we see it as a place of full and vibrant life that deserves to be shown through the art of filmmaking.

Tell us about your actors—Nader Abdelhay, Madj Eid, and Ramzi Maqdisi. What were they doing before they worked on your film? How did you meet them? Are they living in Palestine or in exile?

We think we really hit the mark with our casting. From the moment these actors got the script, they were incredibly enthusiastic about playing their roles. Each of them was carefully chosen based on how well the character's energy on paper matched their traits and performance style.

Osama (Majd Eid, a Palestinian-Jordanian), who plays the "dealer", was actually chosen for this role during the casting process for our previous film, Gaza mon amour, six years ago. Back then, we were trying to find distinctive actors for smaller parts, and he really stood out because of his raspy voice—which added a sense of toughness and authenticity essential to the dealer character.

As for Yahya (Nader Abdelhay, a Syrian), the desperate student, he was chosen after a friend suggested we check out his photo, thinking he might fit the part. As soon as we saw his picture, we instantly felt that his features held the sadness and helplessness that were perfectly suited for the role. His physique also captured the weakness and sense of loss the character required. It's worth mentioning that we spent a lot of time working with him online—especially since he's Syrian and his accent is completely different from the Gazan accent—before meeting him in person a few months before we began filming.

Our third lead actor (Ramzi Maqdisi, a Palestinian who plays Abu Sami, the corrupt cop) came into our lives in 2017 when we met him at a friend's place. That one meeting was all it took—we immediately noticed his eyes had exactly that look we were picturing when we wrote the character. It was a decisive moment: we felt that his features—especially his eyes—perfectly embodied the sinister essence of the role.

We sincerely believe that all these actors, along with everyone else involved, really brought their characters to life with honestly and professionalism. Their performances added deep layers of emotion and complexity to the film.

How was it working with your cinematographer?

Christophe Gaillot… We'd have to say that our relationship with him is a real love story. It's both a special and bilateral relationship: the first is a deep friendship that we truly cherish and are proud of, and the second is an artistic partnership to create beautiful cinematic work together. We brought Christophe on for our previous film, "Gaza mon amour", and made the conscious decision to renew our collaboration on this new project.

What drew us to him right from the start was his self-confidence and enthusiasm for taking on a visual challenge—creating a fresh, non-stereotypical image of a place that few people know, except for the

details we shared with him. That's where his brilliance really shines through—in how he imagines scenes alongside us. Because of this, making decisions with him never feels like a battle; everything happens in a spirit of full cooperation and shared involvement. That's why we analyze every single detail of every shot together—starting from location scouting, through set design, and finishing with lighting and other elements.

One of the main qualities we appreciate is his absolute openness to the idea of creating something new on set, something that could be discovered for the very first time—even though we spend a lot of time studying and preparing for each scene and every element of the film.

The music is particularly noteworthy. Can you tell us about Amin Bouhafa, your composer?

From the moment we first met, a beautiful friendship took shape, and we immediately started thinking about working together artistically. He's first and foremost a wonderful person beyond being a talented musician distinguished by his diverse and exceptional works, as well as by his unique ability to navigate between various musical genres with creativity and adaptability. From the very start of our collaboration, we were fully convinced that he would deliver something extraordinary, even though he had far less time than composers usually need, even for a short film. Our ideas weren't very clear or easy to put into words—they were more like feelings and melodies we could feel but couldn't really describe. But Amin, with his incredible musical imagination and amazing abilities, was able to grasp those sensations and transform them into sincere music, vibrant with life and full of ideas and emotions.

We firmly believe he has everything it takes to become on the all-time great film composers, which is why we always love working with him, again and again.

In keeping with the title "Once Upon a Time", your film is set in the past, when life in Gaza was tough, but still possible and almost normal despite the siege and bombings by the Israeli army that we see in the film. Today, we're all aware of the terrible situation in Gaza. How do you feel about this, and what's your take on the situation?

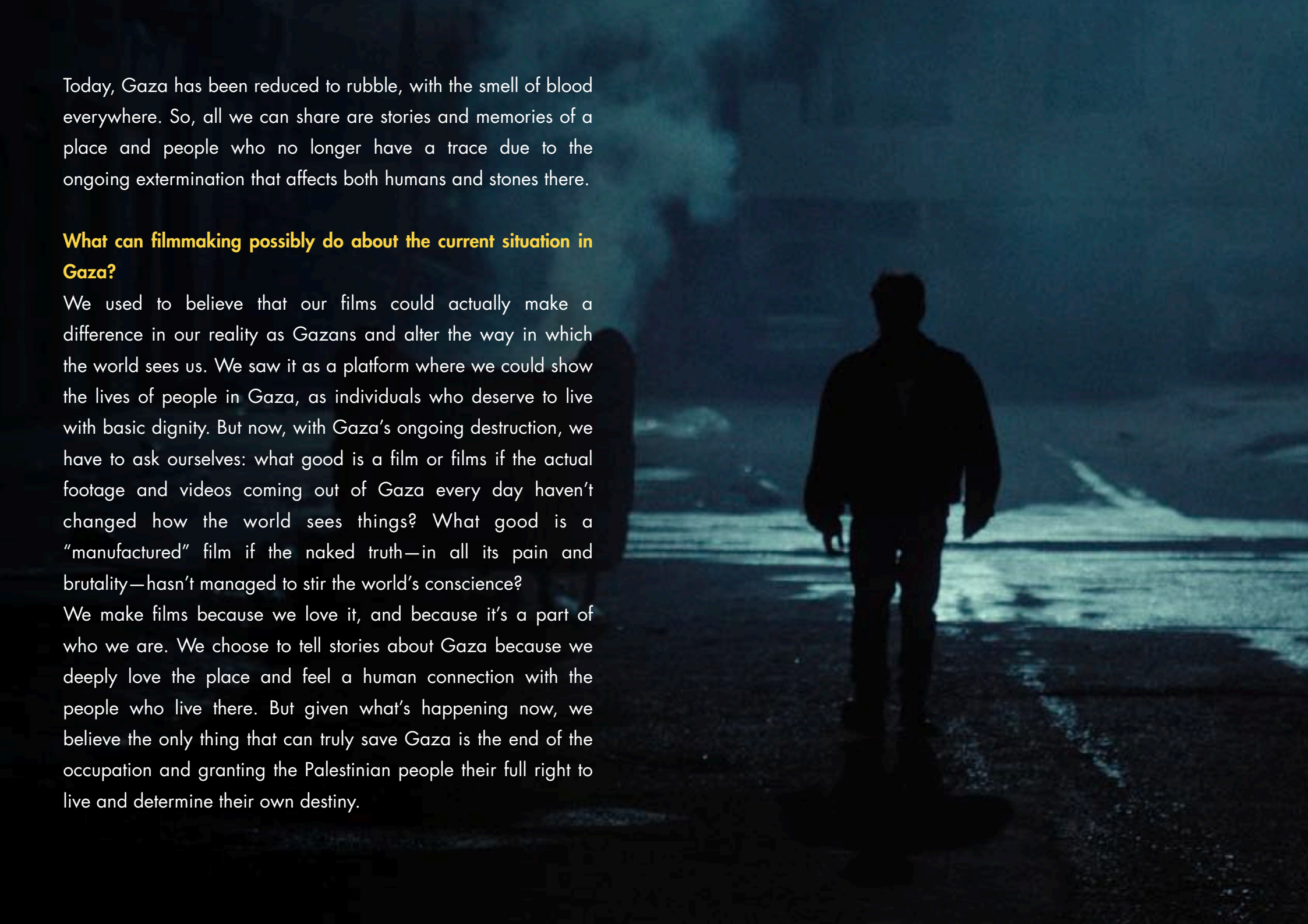
We have no direct comment because what we feel about Gaza goes beyond what words can express; it's far too complex and too overwhelming to wrap up in a quick answer here. What we can say is that what's happening in Gaza right now will forever be a stain on the face of humanity—the so-called humanity that sees Palestinians as persecutors or terrorists that must be eliminated, along with their cause, and not as victims deserving of justice. "Once Upon a Time" isn't just a film title we chose, but also the most accurate—and perhaps the only one—capable of telling the story of Gaza.

Today, Gaza has been reduced to rubble, with the smell of blood everywhere. So, all we can share are stories and memories of a place and people who no longer have a trace due to the ongoing extermination that affects both humans and stones there.

What can filmmaking possibly do about the current situation in Gaza?

We used to believe that our films could actually make a difference in our reality as Gazans and alter the way in which the world sees us. We saw it as a platform where we could show the lives of people in Gaza, as individuals who deserve to live with basic dignity. But now, with Gaza's ongoing destruction, we have to ask ourselves: what good is a film or films if the actual footage and videos coming out of Gaza every day haven't changed how the world sees things? What good is a "manufactured" film if the naked truth—in all its pain and brutality—hasn't managed to stir the world's conscience?

We make films because we love it, and because it's a part of who we are. We choose to tell stories about Gaza because we deeply love the place and feel a human connection with the people who live there. But given what's happening now, we believe the only thing that can truly save Gaza is the end of the occupation and granting the Palestinian people their full right to live and determine their own destiny.



ABOUT THE DIRECTORS

Twin brothers Tarzan and Arab Nasser were born in Gaza in 1988 and started their filmmaking careers with their Cannes-selected short CONDOM LEAD before making their first feature film, DÉGRADÉ, which premiered in the 68th Cannes' Critics' Week.

Their second feature, GAZA MON AMOUR, premiered in the Orrizonti Section of the 77th Venice International Film Festival and was Palestine's submission to the 93rd Academy Awards.

CAST LIST

Yahya	Nader Abd Alhay
Abou Sami	Ramzi Maqdisi
Osama	Majd Eid

PRODUCTION-COPRODUCTION/PARTNERS

Producers	Rani Massalha, Marie Legrand, Muriel Merlin, Rashid Abdelhamid
Delegate Producers	Les Films du Tambour
Co-Producers	Amanda Turnbull, Ziad Srouji, Dorothe Benemeier, Mickael Eckelt, Lena Zimmerhackel, Pandora Da Cunha Telles, Pablo Iraola
Co-Production Companies	Rise Studios, Made in Palestine Project, Red Balloon Film, Riva Filmproduktion, Ukbar Filmes
Executive Producer in Jordan	Khaled Haddad (Jordan Pioneers Multi Media & Slate Films Services)
In Association With	AA Films (Ahmed Amer), Cocoon Films (Sawsan Asfari), Radio E Televisao De Portugal, Kometa Films (Edyta Janczak-Hiriart)
With the Support of	l'Aide aux cinémas du Monde – CNC – Institut Français, Eurimages, Moin Film Fund Hamburg Schleswig-Holstein, Fundo CNC – ICA de apoio a coproducao Franco-Portuguesa, Doha Film Institute, The Jordan Film Fund – A program of the Royal Film Commission – Jordan, Ciclic – Région Centre-Val de Loire

CREW LIST

Screenplay	Tarzan & Arab Nasser, in collaboration with Amer Nasser & Marie Legrand
Photography	Christophe Graillot
Sound	Tim Stephan
Set designer	Tarzan & Arab Nasser
Music	Amine Bouhafa
Editor	Sophie Reine (picture), Roland Vajs (sound)
Costume Designer	Hamada Atallah
VFX	Jorge Carvalho