



**Online Film Screening “Little Palestine: Diary of a Siege”**

**Interview with  
Director Abdullah Al-Khatib**

Interviewer: Hiroki Okazaki

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Co-hosted by

JSPS Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (A) Humanistic and Cross-Disciplinary Research of the Relationship between Humans and their "Homelands" in the Transnational Era

JSPS Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (A) Protest on the Street, and Reconsider the Nation: from the view points of space, violence and resonance

## Abdallah al-Khatib [Director]

He was born in 1989 in Yarmouk Camp, Damascus suburb. He studied sociology at Damascus University. Until 2011, he was a coordinator of SOS Children's Villages and the Yarmouk Camp Youth Support Project of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees).



At the same time, as a cameraman, he was involved in the production of the documentary film *The Shebabs of Yarmouk* (2013) and the short film *Blue (Anā Azraq)*, (2014). In 2016, he received the Per Anger Human Rights Award from the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs for his protection of human rights. His film *Little Palestine* won the Grand Prize (Ogawa Shinsuke Prize) in the 'New Asian Currents' section of the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in 2021 and has also been highly acclaimed at several other international film festivals. He is currently making his new film about children living in wartime.



## Hiroki Okazaki [interviewer]

He was born in 1975. He specialized in modern Arab political thought and contemporary Syrian cultural studies. He lived in Damascus from 2003 to 2009 as a researcher at a French Institute and a political attaché at the Japanese Embassy. While associating with writers who were former political prisoners, he was impressed by their vitality and intellectual honesty, and aspired to elucidate the spiritual history of self-criticism by Arab thinkers since the 19th century. He received his PhD in Sociology from the Department of Arabic Studies at the University of Paris III in 2016 and as of April 2022 is an assistant professor in the Department of Multicultural Communication in the Faculty of International Relations at Asia University.

He is the author of *The Arab critique of despotism in the modern age: between Orientalism and "Orientalism in reverse"* (University of Tokyo Press, 2021), and *History of World Philosophy VI Modern 1: Enlightenment and Human Emotions* (co-authored chapter 8 "Enlightenment Thought in Islam", Chikuma Shobo, 2020, edited by Kunitake Ito et al.). His translations include Yaseen al-Haj Saleh, *Salvation O Boys: 16 Years in Syrian Prisons* (Misuzu Shobo, 2020).

The Watan Research Project is a global study of the relationship between humans and their "Watan/Homeland" from a humanistic perspective. On February 6th, 2022, as part of the project, online screening of Abdallah al-Khatib's documentary film *Little Palestine: Diary of a Siege* was held. After the screening, Hiroki Okazaki interviewed the director (Arabic interpretation by Shintaro Mori). The following is a transcript of the dialogue between Hiroki Okazaki and the director, along with an interview in Arabic that Okazaki conducted with the director prior to the screening.

## Director Abdallah al-Khatib

### *Part 1.* Preliminary Dialogue

[ Interviewer: Hiroki Okazaki ]

**Okazaki** Director Abdallah, you were not originally a professional filmmaker but began to make films at the beginning of the revolution in 2011. In other words, can we understand you as “a filmmaker born of the revolution”?

**Abdallah** The Syrian Revolution gave birth to a different genre of films from the traditional ones. This new genre can be called the “films of war,” for most, if not all, of these films are directly linked to the war in Syria. Films produced by Talal Derki, Feras Fayyad, Waad al-Khateab, and Ziad Kalthoum’s *Taste of Cement* are all about the war and revolution in Syria and the impacts they have on people.

Most of the directors are not of the older generation but newcomers to the cinema. There is a disconnection between traditional and new films. Waad al-Khateab’s *For Sama* was her first film. This is also the case with most of the other directors and me. The event, in a way, helped the creation of films, though I don’t know if “help” is the right word. When many things happened in Syria, people had cameras in their hands, and the regime could no longer forbid them from using them. In other words, for the first time, people could use cameras fair and square. That was different from the situation before the Syrian revolution.

**Okazaki** Nobody had a mobile phone when I started living in Syria [2003].

**Abdallah** Of course.

**Okazaki** However, a lot has changed over the decade since then, and everyone can now shoot with a mobile phone. I think the very decade has created the opportunity to produce new filmmakers.

**Abdallah** There are both positive and negative aspects to that. The positive side you mentioned is that it has made it possible to shoot and produce films, which has allowed us to give people an idea of what is happening in Syria, and people now know what is happening in Syria through these films. Not everyone listens to the news or reads the newspapers, but many are interested in watching movies. The film has become a tool to give people a voice and reveal the problems in Syria.

The negative side, in my opinion, is that there is no clear context for the images of the Syrian revolution and war that are massively spread through the internet. Most of these

images, in my view, lack respect for the victims and the people dying, making them appear as if they are mere figures with no identity and no name. It is disrespectful that images of bleeding faces or other images that offend the feelings of the victims' families are published and spread on social networks. The same scenes are shown over and over again.

Thirdly, such footage cannot explain what is happening. When you search for images with the keyword "events in Yarmouk Camp," it is impossible to understand what happened there immediately. It means that there is no story to reveal the events. That is one of the somewhat negative aspects for me.

**Okazaki** That has to be discussed first. It is an important point. Ms. Waad al-Khateab completed her film three years ago, in 2019. For you, was it between 2013 and 2014 that you filmed?

**Abdallah** Until 2015.

**Okazaki** This film was released last year or the year before. It seems to have taken a long time to complete. Perhaps you faced difficulties completing the footage you shot as film work.

**Abdallah** First of all, I left Syria in 2019.

**Okazaki** Oh, was it in 2019?

**Abdallah** Yes. I was shooting footage all the time between 2013 and 2019, but I narrowed down the events shown in the film to between 2013 and 2015. That was for political reasons, which I will talk about later. I started working on the film after I left Syria in 2019. It was impossible to be in Syria and make a documentary film amid siege and war.

It took me from 2019 to 2021 because I was not initially filming to make a specific documentary film. There was no pre-prepared scenario. That is just because I had a camera and a desire to document people's daily lives in the camps and to shed light on details and perspectives journalists don't often focus on. Then later I started thinking about making a film. I had about 500 hours of footage that I had shot in the camp.

**Okazaki** Wow, 500 hours?

**Abdallah** Yes. I thought about how to offer something through those 500 hours, and my answer was to make a film. It was a difficult task to watch the footage over and over again and assemble a narrative for the film.

Those who have seen the work will know that it differs a bit from the classic type of documentary filmmaking. Usually, there is a protagonist, and they develop in stages from a beginning to a climax and a conclusion, but in my film, the protagonist is the camp. All the inhabitants of the camp are the protagonists. Any person who appears in just one scene

and speaks even a single word is like a protagonist. As proof, when the film is over, people ask questions, “Where is Tasneem? What happened to Abu Ra’afat?” People remember the character even if s/he appears only once, and in people’s minds, s/he is the protagonist. S/he is the protagonist of the piece.

That is important for me for two reasons. The first is that it gives greater credibility and actuality to the reality of the siege. It is not a film of a single director telling the story and presenting it from a clear standpoint of what is constructed on a predetermined position - which is natural, but there are many different voices here. There are older women, children, and men; everyone tells their own story in the place. That is what gives the film reality.

The second point is that we wanted to destroy the idea of a single hero. We didn’t want to say that there was one hero in the camp and everyone else was a coward. It tends to be a story about one hero who helps the people, but in Yarmouk, all the inhabitants were heroes to me. To stay in the camp, to stay in their own house, and to keep trying to break the siege was sufficient to be a hero. So, I made everyone a hero, every single one of them. Not one, two, or three heroes, but every single person in the camp was a hero.

When we constructed the film in this way, there was only one point that became the primary line: the idea of dignity. How can we make a film that talks about people starving to death amid a massacre and a brutal siege while protecting people’s dignity? It means not presenting them as beggars or reluctant victims. Here, reluctant means people who do nothing but give in and wait for death. That is not the case. The people of Yarmouk were trying to resist the siege of the Syrian regime every day.

**Okazaki** You should discuss that with your audience as well.

**Abdallah** Let’s discuss as much as we like.

**Okazaki** So, did you remain in Yarmouk Camp until 2019?

**Abdallah** No, I left the camp in 2015 and moved to Yalda. I don’t know if you know that place. It is near Yarmouk.

**Okazaki** Yes, I know.

**Abdallah** It is almost around Ghouta. It was difficult for me to stay inside Yarmouk because Daesh (IS) came and targeted me. Otherwise, I would have been purged and killed. I was in Yalda, near Yarmouk, until June 2018, when I was forcibly relocated.

Forced displacement is a systematic measure taken by the Syrian regime against areas outside its control. They carried out the strategy in three steps; the first step was to encircle the place; the second step was to bombard it systematically; the third step was to provide an opportunity for negotiations. Then, they gave choices of either belonging to the regime and fighting with them in exchange for remaining in the place or forcibly relocating to

northern Syria.

**Okazaki** Relocated to Idlib province?

**Abdallah** No, not only to Idlib but also to Azaz and other areas. There were two different regions; some people couldn't enter Idlib because of Al-Nusra Front, and neither could I. In the case of Azaz in eastern Aleppo, there was a Free Syrian Army area, so I went there.

Someone like me couldn't stay in one's area without becoming a regime member. Either to become a regime member or to be forced to migrate. I was forced to be relocated to northern Syria and was in a refugee camp for about four months. Then I smuggled myself - like many others - into Turkey, stayed there for a while, and came to Germany at the beginning of 2019, just around this time of the year.

**Okazaki** Because you remained in the country until 2019, you must have taken a more diverse range of testimonies than Waad al-Khateab's film. You filmed all kinds of matters for 500 hours until 2019, which I think is an excellent record.

**Abdallah** We have a tremendous amount of footage, and we actually collected a much more extensive archive with our friends. We have tried to collect all the footage shot in Yarmouk. We have sent some copies of the archive to the UN Truth Commission on Syria and the IIIM (International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism) office for use in trials against Syrian criminals.

In the meantime, we are also working on setting up a platform where anyone can access this archive. People will be allowed to use it under the conditions of the committee that supervises the archive. Certain conditions should always be met, such as making it clear how they will use the footage. Of course, the Syrian regime cannot use the footage to make a film about Yarmouk Camp. We are still working on setting up this platform to make the footage available, especially for Palestinians and Syrians.

**Okazaki** You made this film together with Syrian producer Mohammad Ali Atassi.

**Abdallah** Mohammad Ali Atassi is the first producer, and there is another, a Frenchman, Jean-Laurent Csinidis. These two produced the film.

**Okazaki** Was the support of the two producers helpful?

**Abdallah** Of course. The producers were important, first of all, financially, because film production is expensive. The second thing is that Ali Atassi is Syrian, and for me, his opinion as a Syrian was critical in making this film. Jean-Laurent is French, and his opinion as a foreigner who didn't know Yarmouk, me, and my mother was essential to me. This international team helped me to assemble a film that anyone could understand, be they Arab, European or Japanese. Whether the film is shown, for example, in the very far-

flung countries of Mexico and China or Tunis and Helsinki in Finland, the film's message reaches everyone, and most of the audience's reactions to the film are similar.

A big problem that directors from the Arab and Middle Eastern regions sometimes fall into is that they try to make films for the West, films for the West to understand. The victims are then deprived of their right to understand the film about them, which is an ethical issue. Suppose we make a film because we want to show it at a prestigious film festival like Cannes, and we assemble all the narratives of that film to meet white people's expectations. In that case, we are in a huge problem.

So, it was essential for us, firstly, to convince the camp residents to make a film that truly speaks for and represents them. And secondly, we wanted it to be universal, not just limited to the local framework, because we must communicate to the outside world. I think that job was done well thanks to this diverse team.

**Okazaki** Excellent. The Open Interview with you will be fascinating.

By the way, it appears in the end credits that the government detained your father, Jamal, for two and a half years. Were you the reason for his detention?

**Abdallah** That is correct. The Syrian regime has organised ways of dealing with activists. For example, Abdallah is wanted by the Syrian regime, but they cannot arrest him because he is outside the areas they control, then they arrest his family members. They arrest his brothers, father, mother, and uncles to pressure him. Then Abdallah will give in and stop speaking out against the regime, fearing for his family's safety. The regime has arrested the families of many activists in Syria and used them to pressure them. That is what the regime did against my father.

**Okazaki** How is he nowadays?

**Abdallah** He is fine. He is in Germany with me now.

**Okazaki** Did you leave the country together?

**Abdallah** No, we did not leave together, but later I let him leave Syria. He is fine now.

**Okazaki** I am glad to hear that. Now I think we are ready for the talk session.

## Part 2. Open Interview with the Director

[ Host: Kaoru Yamamoto / Interpreter: Shintaro Mori / Interviewer: Hiroki Okazaki ]

**Okazaki** Thank you all for watching the film.

Today, I would like to welcome the director, Abdallah al-Khatib, and I would like to spend the first 30 minutes or so asking him some general questions, followed by a Q&A session with the participants.

Director Abdallah, you have already given an interview at the Yamagata International Documentary Festival in 2021. Still, since many Japanese audiences are attending today, I would like to ask you to give us a message first.

**Abdallah** Good evening. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you all about *Little Palestine*.

As Mr. Okazaki mentioned, *Little Palestine* is a film about the Assad regime's siege of the Yarmouk refugee camp from 2013 to 2015. At that time, the camp was under the control of the Free Syrian Army. They were the forces that were fighting the Syrian regime. Using the pretext that about 200 armed forces were in the camp, the regime besieged it, where tens of thousands of civilian women and children were. The presence of armed forces is the pretext always used by supporters of the Assad regime to justify the massacre of innocent people, their use of chemical weapons, and the siege.



The problem with the siege of Yarmouk Camp was that the regime surrounded the camp and, at the same time, prohibited the civilians inside from leaving. I took my camera, filmed all the daily life inside the camp, and tried to convey the different voices of the people under siege.

**Okazaki** Thank you. Director Abdallah, you were initially a coordinator of SOS Children's Villages and a staff of the UNRWA's youth worker in Yarmouk Camp, not a professional filmmaker. However, you picked up a camera during the popular uprising, especially after 2011. Could you tell us how you came to make a film?

**Abdallah** First of all, I was a cameraman, not a film director. I didn't intend to make a film in the camp; I just wanted to film the everyday life of the camp's inhabitants. My new role as a cameraman did not conflict with my role as an activist engaging in helping children and other issues. People trusted me because of my work as a social activist, so it was easy for me to film them and listen to their stories. It was after I left Syria in 2019 that



I decided to make a film.

Another point I would like to add is that many people's social roles changed during the war. For example, people who were teachers became farmers, and my mother, who was a housewife, became a nurse. And I used to work with children, but I became a cameraman. Our social roles changed during the war.



Young child playing with balloons in a park

**Okazaki** I heard that you stayed in Syria until 2019 and then spent more than a year making the film with the support of producers. What new difficulties did you face in editing and completing the footage as a film?

**Abdallah** It took two years to complete the film, not one year. There were many difficulties. First, I had difficulty putting distance between the material I shot and myself so that I could analyse the footage. The second difficulty was that the material I shot was not intended to make any particular documentary film, so I had to find a way to narrate this film.

The third difficulty was making a film about hunger, war, siege, and genocide while preserving people's dignity. I wanted to make a film about people's dignity, not a film to make people cry.

**Okazaki** That is an important point. Is there also much footage that you didn't use?

**Abdallah** Yes, of course. We shot about 500 hours of footage, but I used only about one and a half hours in the film, so 498 hours remain unused in this film. You could make another film. Or we could use them later for the prosecution of war crimes.

**Okazaki** I would like to ask you about the film's content. To begin with, about the title, "Little Palestine." I went to Yarmouk Camp many times, but no one called Yarmouk Camp "Little Palestine." If that is the case, is it correct to understand that you gave the title in the context of the flow of events after 2011, in which the Palestinian experiences became connected to the Syrian experience of oppression, which in turn was connected to the Yarmouk Camp experience?

**Abdallah** There are several reasons for this title, the first being political. I gave it this title to remind people that these are Palestinian refugees and that Israel is responsible for the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people in 1948.

The second reason is that in the past, when I asked some of the older people who were born in Palestine and then moved to Yarmouk Camp and did not leave the camp, even under siege, "Why don't you leave?" They said, "We left the "big Palestine," but this time

we would not leave here- “little Palestine.”

**Okazaki** Regarding the very idea of continuity and the “big” and “small,” they have many metaphors, especially in the context of prisons in Syria, such as the “small prison” and the “gigantic prison” of Syria as a country.

By the way, in terms of the Palestinians in Syria, in one scene of the film, after experiencing the carnage and destruction by the barrel bombs, some say, “Syria and Palestine are one,” “One (Wahid), one (wahid)” as a slogan. In contrast, others say, ‘How can you say that Syria and Palestine are “one” when we are having this hard time?’ I think images can express the most severe contradictions on the screen in a multifaceted way. I understand that you have deliberately created images of the contradictions the Palestinian people in Syria face. Is that right?

**Abdallah** First of all, I am glad you asked me a great question. It is the first time I have been asked such a question. It’s wonderful. Thank you very much.

Yarmouk Camp is a Palestinian refugee camp, but actually, half of the inhabitants are Syrians, and the other half are Palestinians. “Syria and Palestine are one” was a political slogan raised by the Palestinians at the beginning of the Syrian revolution to express their solidarity with the Syrian revolution. And it was to punish the Palestinians for taking the position that the Syrian regime surrounded and bombed the Yarmouk camp. Nevertheless, people continued to shout this political slogan during the bombing to express their will to the regime not to change their position even if they were killed.

However, that was not the position of all the Palestinians in the camp. There were different voices and positions. Some said they should not be involved in the Syrian revolution and had nothing to do with it. We tried to include those voices in the film.

**Okazaki** In fact, I have Palestinian friends in Syria, and they all have different positions, and even though they all sympathise with the revolution at an essential point, I could see that the film well expressed the complex contradictions they have.

**Abdallah** Palestinians are not individuals but a society, and within that group, there are various views; some support the revolution, some sympathise with it, and some oppose it.

I participated in the Syrian revolution not simply as a Palestinian but as a Palestinian in Syria. I was born in Syria. If I had been born in the United States, by law, I could be the President of the United States. Because I was born in Syria, I have the right to participate in the Syrian revolution. I am entitled to take part in the Syrian revolution because the dictatorship is oppressing and violating not only the Syrian people but also all the people living in Syria.

**Okazaki** That is correct. As I’m sure this is your frequently asked question, I will ask it beforehand. This film also has a strong focus on children. You have always been active in

supporting children. The film's second half, in particular, focuses more on children. The film is both about the child's power and hope for the future and the contradictions and how s/he manages to hold themselves together like a piece of glass about to break. When and how did you decide to focus on children? And what did you see when you focused on children?

**Abdallah** I decided to focus on children from the beginning, for that was originally my work in the camp.

What I tried to do in the film was to create several narrative lines. The first line was about older people. They are the ones who shape our past and our memories. The second line was about the children; they shape our future. My point was that the Syrian regime wanted to kill and destroy our past, our memories, and our future.

There are two death scenes in the film. One is the death of an older woman, and the other is the death of a little girl. And at the same time, the person in the last scene, Abu Ra'afat, who is singing a song, still hopes to return to Palestine and live a peaceful life there. And the girl, Tasneem, also speaks powerfully about her life, the siege, and the future. The regime has killed many, but still, the memory is in our hands, and the future is in our hands.



There is the stereotypical image of children at war as fragile, weak, constantly crying, wanting their mother to stay, and wanting food, but what I saw in Yarmouk was utterly different. They were powerful, they were resisting, and they had their own view of things about the war and the siege.

I would like to hear what the audience thought about the film.

**Okazaki** Can I have one last question? I also have visited refugee camps myself, and there are many contradictions. As the film frankly depicts, there are the realities that people sell their children's milk to buy cigarettes, and only those with connections receive food distributions. But at the same time, being taken from the inside of Yarmouk Camp, I think the film powerfully captures the people's cooperation and shared pain as you talk as a narrator. I believe that you wanted to preserve this image of people working together amid their suffering.

**Abdallah** That is 100 per cent true. There are contradictions in social relations during wartime, with some people being united and others being egocentric. Japan has its own war experience, and I am sure similar stories have been passed down to you. Some people did great things and helped others, and some did terrible things to make a good living. War erupts all those contradictions in the human mind, whether good or bad.

**Okazaki** Now, I would like to move on to questions from the audience. There is a straightforward question: “What is going on in Yarmouk now?” Could you start answering this?

**Abdallah** In 2018, 80% of the area of the camp was destroyed by the Syrian regime and Russia. There are currently about 3,000 people living in the camp. Originally there were 500,000 inhabitants, but now only 3,000 remain. The camp was destroyed, but those who had no choice remained there.

**Okazaki** I think the next is a common question; it is said internationally that the reason for the blockade is that the antigovernment force with weapons has, in a sense, used Yarmouk Camp. Why you didn’t depict it in the film? What is the intention behind it?

**Abdallah** I saw that question in the chat, and to be honest, it is a strange and provocative question for me. Because even if [IS leader] Baghdadi was in the camp, even if [Al-Qaeda leader] Bin Laden or Zawahiri were in the camp, it would not justify besieging and starving tens of thousands of children and women to death. It is a war crime.

Justifying the Syrian regime’s siege of Yarmouk and the bombing of the Ghouta area with chemical weapons on the pretext of the presence of armed forces is like justifying the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear bombs during World War II just because the enemy of the US was there. If the Syrian regime has a problem with the armed forces, they can fight against the armed forces. What I would like to ask is why they have to besiege civilians.

The simple answer is that, as history shows, all dictatorships do not hesitate to kill thousands of people if it means protecting their position of power.

**Okazaki** The next one is about Tasneem. As she said, “We came from another refugee camp and cannot go to school”, are there various distinctions and discrimination among Palestinians, such as the lack of identity cards or refugee certificates?



Tasneem picking wildflowers for her family

**Abdallah** No, there is no such thing. I said to Tasneem: “Who told you that? I will take you there”.

In my dialogue with Tasneem, I asked, “Why don’t you go to school?” She replied that they wouldn’t let her in, so I said, “Well, I’ll take you.” I knew that there was no discrimination and that anyone could enrol. I had done schoolwork in the camp under siege, so I knew the school was open to all. She did not go to school because she had to get food for her family.

**Okazaki** It is said in the closing credits at the end of the film that your father, Jamal, had

been detained for two and a half years. How is his situation now?

**Abdallah** My father is now in Germany with me. I can't tell you the details, but he is not in good health. But he is with me in Germany. In order to punish activists, the Syrian regime has used the means of arresting their families and pressuring them.

**Okazaki** I did not mention this during our dialogue, but the audience has just raised the question; The piano performance of Mr. Ayham Ahmad is known worldwide, but is that piece of music generally known?

**Abdallah** An important point. The idea of playing the piano by the roadside in Yarmouk had never happened before; it started during the siege. All the songs they sang, including the one in the film, were written during and about the siege.

**Okazaki** Mr. Ayham also came to Japan and performed.

**Abdallah** To be honest, I feel a little uncomfortable about how he was introduced as the pianist Ayham Ahmad because it sounds like his personal story. In fact, it was a band. Some people wrote songs, some people sang with him, and some people died during the siege. So, I wanted to present it as a Yarmouk orchestra. It was not an individual but a joint effort of the band. All carried the piano, wrote the lyrics, composed the music, and Ayham had a talent for playing the piano. Some of them sang, and it was such an excellent band. It was not an individual.



Yarmouk orchestra

**Okazaki** When you started rolling the camera, did you imagine the blockade would be so long and severe?

**Abdallah** Every single day, I thought it would end tomorrow. But it didn't.

**Okazaki** As the blockade continued, did you have any changes of mind, such as wanting to stop filming or never wanting to quit?

**Abdallah** There were times when I had to stop. Sometimes it was so physically painful that I couldn't even hold the camera, so I had to stop.

**Okazaki** What happened to electricity, water, internet, and other infrastructure during the blockade? How were the teachers' salaries and other logistics involved in maintaining the schools?

**Abdallah** For infrastructure, for example, if there was no water, we dug wells; for electricity, we recycled plastic to make fuel for generators; for the internet, we used steel to connect to the Internet; it was a complicated process, so it's hard to explain in a few words, but that is how we devised it. As for the school, almost all the staff were free volunteers.

**Okazaki** This is an abstract question. You use the word "dignity" (Karama) many times, and I would like to hear your thoughts on what human dignity means.

**Abdallah** Oh, that's very philosophical. It's a bit difficult to talk about philosophy, better if about politics or films, but let me try to answer.

It means that when you see a person under siege in a film, it doesn't make you feel sorry for them. That is, I think, human dignity. It makes you feel shame or solidarity instead of pity and makes you think that you have to do something to change the situation.

**Okazaki** That's a great answer. Thank you very much. You also narrated the film with a poetic text that you wrote yourself for the film. Could you explain how you decided to put it in such a poetic way?

**Abdallah** That is a text called "Forty Principles under the Siege," which I wrote during the siege in 2014. I decided to use it in making the film.

I don't know if I will have time to answer all the questions, but I want to answer them all; I will give you my contact details later. If anyone has any questions, I would be happy to answer anything in detail. I can also communicate in English.

**Okazaki** There are still some important questions, so let me continue a little further. How can Syrians and Palestinian refugees reconcile and coexist? If the Palestinians have some kind of hatred or resentment towards the Syrians now, how can they coexist with them, and what hope do they have?

**Abdallah** That is a wrong way of understanding. The question itself is wrong. Think of this diagram as Syrian society. The circles are Palestinians, and the squares are Syrians. They live intermingled with each other. They are not like water and oil but soda water and plain water, which would be mixed if left alone.

My three uncles married Syrians, so their children are Syrians. Not only do we live together, but I live in Syria, and I'm a Syrian. My father was also born in Syria.

**Okazaki** I think it also means that the political level is totally different from the social level. As basic information, where are the Palestinians who were in Yarmouk now? Have some of them headed for Germany, or are some of them still inside Syria? And where have the children gone?

**Abdallah** Some are inside Syria, some in northern Syria, some in Turkey, some in

Europe, Jordan, Lebanon, or all over the world. I don't know if the refugees in Yarmouk have gone to Japan.

**Okazaki** You have been living in Germany for a couple of years; what activities are you doing now, and what do you want to tell or do in the future?

**Abdallah** I am currently studying at a university in Germany. And regarding films, I have a few projects in the pipeline, but the most recent one is again about the siege of Yarmouk.

**Okazaki** We have asked all the main ones for the moment. Ms. Yamamoto, is there anything else?

**Yamamoto** That's the end of the questions, and if the director could give us a closing message, I would like to end with that.

**Abdallah** First of all, thank you very much. It was a delightful set of questions. I saw many questions in the chat, some of which I didn't get a chance to answer.

As I said, if anyone has any questions, I have an Instagram account; though it's closed right now, I'll be back in two days, so send me any questions, and I'll answer them. I have an Instagram account under the name Abdallah alkhatib.

It was a really great Q&A session. They were entertaining questions. Thank you very much. Thanks to you in Japan, I feel like I want to make another new film. And I hope to see you all again.

**Okazaki** Thank you very much. Normally, it would have been possible to come to Japan during the Yamagata Film Festival and talk directly with the audience. Still, in the current situation with coronavirus, although it is online, we had more than 200 people participate today. Although the director conveys what happened in Yarmouk Camp through this film, what we see is still just the tip of the iceberg. Yet, being difficult to reach the rest of the world, the fact that many such people in Japan are interested in seeing the film and listening to the talk will make it possible to create some kind of linkage. Director, thank you very much for today.

**Abdallah** Thank you all very much. Thank you very much to the excellent interpreter, Mr. Okazaki and Ms. Yamamoto.

**Yamamoto** Mari Oka, the leader of the research project team that organised this event, would like to make a final comment.

**Oka** First, I would like to express my profound appreciation to Director Abdallah for showing your marvellous film and participating in today's dialogue. Now, I want to

comment briefly on three points.

First, 74 years have gone by in Palestine since the Nakba in 1948. During these years, numerous place names were carved into the collective memory of the Palestinian people; Deir Yassin, Tantura, al-Dawayima, and Lydda/Ramle are the places where the massacres took place during the Nakba, Kafr Qasim in occupied Palestine in 1956, Tal Za'atar, Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war, Jenin in the west bank during the second Intifada, and Gaza that has been under Israeli siege since 2007. Auschwitz, Hiroshima, or Halabja (in Iraqi Kurdistan); these names identify the locations where the tragedy occurred and are also synonymous with the events themselves. And now, as I watched today's film, I sensed that we should add the name of Yarmouk to the list, and this name will be deeply etched into the Palestinians' collective memory and history.

As the director mentioned earlier, the Yarmouk refugee camp was sealed off and subjected to attacks by government forces, which is collective punishment. That is precisely the same as what is going on in Gaza, which has been under the complete Israeli blockade for fifteen years. The siege, the hunger that the siege brought on to the inhabitants, and the massive bombardments and killings that occur every few years... These are collective punishments for the Palestinians of Gaza because they have not yet surrendered their natural right to an independent, sovereign Palestinian state and their right to return to their homeland. In this regard, Yarmouk is not only "Little Palestine" but also "Little Gaza" at the same time. I see Gaza in Yarmouk. Yarmouk gives a condensed picture of what is happening in Gaza.

Second, let me say this to the Japanese participants who saw the film today. You may feel that the events you saw in the film only happen in Syria, Palestine, and the Middle East, far removed from our reality in Japan. As I watched the film, however, I recalled "Utoro," a small area located in the city of Uji, Kyoto, Japan, where the Korean people have lived since the end of World War II. They came to work in the construction of airfields during the war; they had no place to go and stayed there after the war.

Utoro was neither blockaded nor militarily attacked like Yarmouk, but their life was so hard, especially in the wake of the war; they were so poor that they had nothing to eat. The first generation that came from Korea to Japan held memories of their homelands in Korea, as well as of their lives under Japanese colonial rule, of war, and of how they survived years of poverty and repression after the war.

In the 1980s, the inhabitants of this area were legally declared squatters and then threatened with forced expulsion. During this crisis, the first-generation Korean women at Utoro used to say they were there to stay and fight and would live and die there, just as the first-generation Palestinian refugee women say in the film.

There is no time to get into the details about Utoro. I wish the Japanese people would know that there are people in Japan who have the same thoughts, sentiments, struggles, and experiences as the Palestinian people in Yarmouk. They are living as our neighbours



in our society. That is the point I would like to stress.

And for the final point, as the director mentioned earlier, this film features first-generation refugees and their third- and fourth-generation children. The first generation knows Palestine before the Nakba, how they became refugees in the Nakba, and how they have lived there after becoming refugees. Their memories have been handed down to their daughters, sons, and grandchildren. The Yarmouk refugee camp is where these memories are transmitted from one generation to the next. Yarmouk is a “*lieu de memoir* (a place of memory),” as the French historian Pierre Nora puts it, where the memory of their homeland, Palestine, and their experiences after the Nakba have been passed on and where their collective history and their collective identity as Palestinians have been constructed.

The director mentioned that the Yarmouk refugee camp had been destroyed and that most of its inhabitants had been scattered worldwide. The destruction of Yarmouk does not simply mean that the people who lived there have lost their homes and dispersed, but means they have lost such a unique place; a place that had allowed Palestinians to live with their “Palestinian” identity and with their memories of “Palestine” that had transcended generations. Yarmouk had formed a foundation of the Palestinian identity for the refugees. As a result of the destruction of their community, they have lost that foundation. Thus, the director’s mother says at the end of the film that she wants to “return to Yarmouk” as the foundation for her return to Palestine. Thank you.

**Abdallah** Thank you very much. I am happy. I thought it was terrific that you connected the situation in Yarmouk and the area of Koreans living in Japan. That was precisely one of the messages of my film. People who see the film will think not only about Yarmouk but also about all the regions and people suffering from such inhumane and brutal conditions around the world.

One last point, one question that always comes up after the film, is “What can we do? What should we do?” What I want to say about this is that it’s not about whom you help; it’s about what you do. You don’t have to come to Yarmouk to help people. Looking around you in Japan, you will find people suffering from difficulties. So, you can do something for them.

[Fin.]

Online Film Screening “Little Palestine: Diary of a Siege”

**Interview with Director Abdallah Al-Khatib**

**Interviewer: Hiroki Okazaki / Host: Kaoru Yamamoto / Interpreter: Shintaro Mori**

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