

al-sabbar

kaktusfeigen / figues de barbarie / cactus

a documentary film by **patrick bürge**

featuring **zuhaira sabbagh, hans bernath, rim banna**

camera **steff bossert/patrick bürge**

sound / executive producer **max fahrni**

editing **thomas bachmann**

sound mix **zone 33, rolf büttikofer**

graphics **regardez! bart wasem**

assistant postproduction **mano khaliil**

music **rim banna, mustafa al-kurd, marwan abado**

archive films **nat and nettie mcgavin**

production **yak film gmbh**

coproduction **alain bottarelli**

tv-coproduction **srg/sf drs paul riniker and madeleine
hirsiger**

producers **max fahrni and patrick bürge**

97min., colour, original version: arabic, english, hebrew, swiss
german, french
with subtitles (english/french or german/french) (52min available)

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Synopsis

Zuhaira Sabbagh, a Palestinian girl with an Israeli passport, runs a youth group in Nazareth during her free time. "Armed" with nothing more than photographic equipment, the group goes looking for the ruins of Arab villages destroyed by the Israeli army in 1948. The investigations are the way these young Arabs have chosen to peacefully resist Jewish attempts to impose their version of history and obliterate all traces of the time when the land was home to an Arab population. The Arab group's efforts meet with strong opposition from the Israeli inhabitants. During her investigations Zuhaira Sabbagh runs into Swiss doctor Hans Bernath and his wife Madeleine, who have been in Israel for 50 years as delegates of the International Red Cross, living through all the most important phases of this Middle East conflict at first hand.

Political Starting Point

After the foundation of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent wars, over 400 Arab settlements in Palestine were destroyed. The land was annexed by the state of Israel.

The majority of the Palestinian population fled to the neighbouring Arab countries. There, they have been waiting for over 50 years in refugee camps to return to Palestine.

A minority of Palestinians, however, stayed in Israel. Many of them settled in cities near their destroyed villages. Today, they are Israeli citizens.

These people too demand that they be given back their land. Unfortunately, this land lies within the internationally recognised borders of Israel, and therefore, the requests of the Palestinians are regularly hushed up in Near East peace negotiations.

Historical-Social Background

The film shows aspects of Israeli reality, which are often concealed on the occasion of the festivities for the 50th anniversary of the foundation of Israel. It is about the situation of Arabs in Israel meaning these Palestinians who stayed in their country and today hold an Israeli passport. The film is neither about the state of affairs in occupied areas or in Jerusalem nor about the question of the settlers or the Palestinian autonomy.

During the confusion due to the war of 1948 (which the Israeli call the “War of Independence”, the Arabs “Al-Naqba – The Catastrophe”) 254 men, women and children were massacred in the village of Deir Yassin (west of Jerusalem). The massacre, which was confirmed by representatives of the IRC, was the main reason for the subsequent mass exodus. Other villages and cities were bombed and destroyed by the Israeli army. The majority of the Arab population left Palestine after that and fled to West Bank, to Gaza, Jordan, Syria or to the Lebanon. Vast parts of their land were confiscated.

In 1953, the “Land Acquisition Law” a new law, came into force in Israel. According to this law, Arab property may be confiscated if the owner is absent or if there is a higher interest on the part of the state . Even Jews fight against this law in the senate – without success. As a result, Palestinians who had fled Israel lost every right to their land. The wars which followed resulted in even more floods of refugees: Suez War (1956), Six-Days War (1967, exodus of 500'000 Palestinians), Yom-Kippur War (1973).

Part of the Arab population, however, stayed in the newly founded state of Israel. Some fled to Nazareth. In the holy town, they hoped to be safe from Israeli attacks. While Nazareth numbered 7'000 inhabitants in 1931, in 1956 the number had rapidly increased to 27'000. Today, Nazareth is the biggest Arab city with over 60'000 inhabitants (60% Muslims, 40% Christians), many of whom call themselves “internal refugees” – refugees who have lost their land, but still stayed in Israel.

Ever since they were driven out of their homes, they have tried to reclaim the confiscated land by way of litigation. While in few cases, the highest court met their demands, the court orders were never carried out, on account of “higher military interest”.

Although the Arabs in Israel hold an Israeli passport by now, they remain second-class citizens. A considerable imbalance between Jews and Arabs persists, for example, when it comes to higher education: Only 2% of all students in Israel are Arabs, even though Arabs make up 20% of Israel's population. There are also big differences in income between Jews and Arabs. Moreover, in principle Arab institutions are not supported by the government. The

infrastructure in the cities inhabited by Arabs is extremely poor. There is no active town planning in Nazareth, and support from the government is not to be expected.

In contrast to that stands "Nazareth Illit" (= higher situated Nazareth), a Jewish town, which was added to Nazareth in 1957: Typically, the new town was built in such a way that it cut off the people of Nazareth from their confiscated land.

Today, the Arabs in Israel are frustrated. Their position, "in between front lines", causes above all disadvantages: To their families in occupied regions or in refugee camps, they are traitors, even collaborators and "hostages of their wealth" (the living standard of Arabs in Israel is significantly higher than in occupied areas). To many Israeli Jews, each Arab is a potential terrorist, whether he be an Israeli or not.

Since the beginning of the nineties, a group of Jewish scientists (the "New Historians") endeavour to question the myths of the foundation of Israel. Special attention is directed toward the suffering which was brought upon the Arab population. The ideas of this movement are also reflected in the movie "cactus figs".

"The voice of the heart forbids us to do without what belongs to us, but the voice of reason tells us that we must not hope to ever return to our villages and towns, which are in Israel now. But how can we give up everything? Our memories have not faded yet, we have not lived in exile for 2000 years. Our homes, our land – all this is within reach."

Alain Gersh,
Mahmud Darwisch, Palestinian poet (quoted in:
WoZ – Le Monde Diplomatique, 14.12.1998)

"I could not sleep the whole night. What happens here hurts me, my family and everyone in the soul (...). Now the Jews act like Nazis and that makes me fear for my existence ."

Aharon Zisling, Israeli Minister of Agriculture,
during a cabinet
Session, 17.11.1948"

"We, the Palestinians should (...) demand consideration and compensation from Israeli Jews, without trivialising their tale of woe and the genocide that was done to them in any way. (...) Who wanted to morally equate mass extermination with mass dispossession? The mere attempt would be foolish."

Edward W. Said, Professor at Columbia
University of New York
(in: Tages-Anzeiger, 9.2.1998)

"Only few people admitted that the story of return, deliverance and liberation of their fathers is also the story of conquest, expulsion, suppression and death."

Yaron Ezrachi, Jewish author in "Rubber
Bullets" (in: Le Monde
Diplomatique, 16.12.1997)

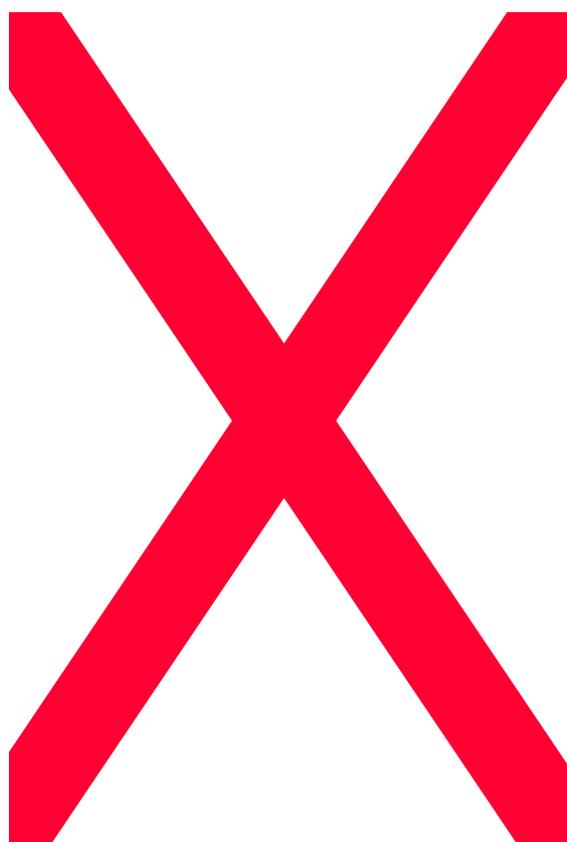
Statistic Detail

Where are the Palestinians today?

	Palestinian population: refugees thereof:	Palestinian
Israel	953'000	200'000
Gaza	1'000'000	766'000
West Bank	1'590'000	650'000
Jordan	2'328'000	1'741'000
Lebanon	430'000	408'000
Syria	465'000	445'000
United Arab Emirates	379'000	379'000
other arab. Countries	120'000	110'000
other Countries	463'000	393'000

How many Palestinian are in refugee camps?

Lebanon:	200'000	of that 40'000 in Ain el hilwe
Jordan:	272'000	
Syria	107'000	
West Bank:	152'000	
Gaza:	428'000	
total:	1'159'000	



Director's Statement

No other region in the world is as full of tension as the Near East. From the beginning, our intention to produce a documentary with a political and historical background – and thus to hold up a mirror to Israeli historiography – aroused suspicion. The fact that we are Swiss did not help. After all, the relationship between the Swiss and the Jewish people is not unproblematic – on account of our own history.

We did not want to throw a balanced and neutral glance at the expulsion of the Palestinians from Israel. We were more interested in the subjective feelings of the Israeli Arabs – people, who are told that „falafel“ is an Israeli speciality and who are led to believe, even in history books, that their grandparents never lived in Israel. While people elsewhere throw stones and even bombs, these young Arabs take cameras and try to investigate the past and the culture of their people. It is their goal to confront the official historiography.

The complex relationship between the Palestinian photographer and the 80-years old Swiss doctor who, as a IRC representative, had become a witness of the expulsion of the Palestinians from Israel, we considered as especially interesting. While she sees in him her last chance to get first-hand information, he has great difficulty to wipe of the corset of the officially imposed confidentiality.

Finally, the film contributes to the careful re-establishment of relationships between those Palestinians who have stayed in Israel and those who live in refugee camps in the Lebanon. While it is impossible for Israeli Arabs to visit their relatives in the camps, with their photos they reach out beyond the front lines. By means of these photos, the refugees are made aware of the fact that they are not alone with their dream of return.

