

# GAZA FIGHTS FOR FREEDOM - review

“What would happen if thousands of Gazans, most of them refugees, attempted to peacefully cross the fence that separated them from their ancestral lands?”

These were the words of Palestinian poet and activist Ahmed Abu Artema which were voiced on Facebook in 2018, a post that would ultimately inspire the Great March of Return protests across the Gaza-Israel border throughout 2018 and 2019.

Celebrating their decennial anniversary, the Leeds Palestinian Film Festival has this year chosen to extend its typically winter bound festival to a yearlong event encompassing various themes. The first of these themes is ‘People of Gaza’, which aims to look at the individual human lives and stories of those in the Gaza Strip, so often forgotten in the turmoil of the conflict. The first screening of this theme concerns Artema, his words, and the subsequent Great March of Return.

Hosted at the warm and welcoming HEART Centre in Headingley, the night featured a documentary double bill, one feature length and one brief, alongside a Q&A and exclusive interview with Artema acquired by the event’s guest speaker, Juman Quneis – a Palestinian journalist, presenter, and documentarian, as well as a lecturer at Birzeit University in the West Bank.

The first of these documentaries was *Gaza Fights For Freedom*, directed by the American journalist Abby Martin in 2019. Informative and extensive, the film largely focuses on the events of the Great March of Return, its historical and Trumpian contexts, its consequences, and the lives of those unlawfully killed by IDF snipers, highlighting the children, disabled, journalists, and medical personnel. Unlike many documentaries concerning Palestine that cover great swaths of time and people, *Gaza Fights For Freedom* is localised and specific. It analyses and exposes the IDF perpetrated injustices throughout the event with surgical detail, all while deconstructing criticisms and misrepresentations of the protests levied by the established politico-media class. Martin selects the abuses committed at the Great March of Return as a graphic sample of a much larger history. The protests become a microcosm for the Palestinian struggle as

a whole, whilst simultaneously never losing focus of the isolated lives routinely lost.

The second documentary of the evening was the 2018 short film *Between Fire & Sea*, directed by Karim Shah and provided to the festival courtesy of Al Jazeera Media Network. The mini-doc concerns Artema himself, following the poet as he professes his thoughts on Palestine, Israel, the Great March of Return, and critically, what it means for man to be free. In contrast to the precision of the first film, this documentary instead acts as a fleeting snapshot of the lives of several Palestinians through the gentle humanitarian philosophies of Artema. The poet approaches the conflict on an individualistic level, peeling back the statistics from the tragedy and appreciating the human life that lies just underneath. Artema's attitude of peace, unity, and hope in the face of oppression and genocide is inspiring. Just as the injustices carried out in *Gaza Fights For Freedom* act as a microcosm for the wider conflict, so too do Artema's values throughout the film act as a microcosm for the wider Palestinian attitude of resilience and faith.

As a prelude – and chronologically an epilogue of sorts – to the film, the festival debuted an exclusive interview conducted for the event by Quneis with Artema. The activist movingly and pointedly detailed his thoughts on the conflict since 2018 as well as the nature of resistance during the current war – allowing for an insightful and largely tragic retrospective on the mini-doc.

The night concluded with Quneis' Q&A, when the audience had the opportunity to engage directly in these concepts themselves. Quneis answered a range of questions and thoughtfully illuminated on various topics including the nature of life within the Palestinian diaspora in the UK and abroad; the blooming nature of social media in the conflict and how it acts as both a force for exposure and misinformation; and the unfortunate innate limits of true journalistic impartiality. But as always at events like these, the pressing question was asked, 'what can we all do to help?'

And this was ultimately Quneis' most simple, most obvious, and yet most poignant answer. For the people of Palestine, keep talking about it. Keep educating yourself. And crucially, keep attending events just like this one.