

Home Movies: Oscar-Nominated Syrian Director Feras Fayyad Is Ready for His Next Film

Amid the glare of flashbulbs at the 2018 Oscars in Los Angeles, Feras Fayyad and Kareem Abeed walked down the red carpet into film history. They made the harrowing documentary *Last Men in Aleppo*, the first Syrian film ever nominated for an Academy Award. Directed by Fayyad and produced by Abeed, the documentary follows members of the White Helmets, a civil defense organization whose volunteers rush to pull survivors from the rubble after airstrikes in Syria.

The award went to another film, but Fayyad didn't stick around long enough to be too disappointed—he had work to do. Soon after the Oscars wrapped up, the 33-year-old boarded a plane for Turkey, and from there crossed the border back into Syria.

That's where Fayyad was this past June when he spoke with *Forbes Middle East* from a safe house. It was late on a sweltering evening, the only time he could access an internet connection strong enough for a Skype call, and electricity only available for a few hours a day.

Fayyad, who lives between Copenhagen and Los Angeles, returned to Syria to finish his next documentary, *The Cave*, which follows a group of women running a makeshift underground hospital in Eastern Ghouta, a former rebel stronghold near Damascus recently retaken by the government. He had visited the area in 2013 to investigate a chemical attack, and while there met a young doctor called Amani, who leads the hospital and its staff of 150. She had witnessed the attack and treated victims.

Hailing from a conservative community, she occupies a position of leadership that would normally be filled by a man. But with many doctors fleeing the war-torn area, Amani took charge as one of the few physicians left. "It's kind of like a gender study in the war zone," says Fayyad.

The Cave is filmed in the same *cinéma vérité* style as *Last Men in Aleppo*, avoiding voiceovers and interviews in favor of candid moments with its subjects. Fayyad's nearly done shooting, and will soon head to Copenhagen to finish production with a Danish company. He hopes to release the film in early 2019, and is already pitching it to festivals.

He hopes *The Cave* will have a similar impact as *Last Men in Aleppo*. In addition to the Oscar nomination, it was up for dozens of awards, including a top prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Fayyad has since received offers to direct non-documentary movies, and a Los Angeles-based talent management firm, Black Box Management, recently signed him to its roster.

Motivated in part by his own time as a political prisoner, Fayyad wants to continue

exploring the daily human struggle in Syria—documenting ordinary people doing extraordinary things as they work to preserve their communities, sometimes at great cost. His goal is to complete a trilogy, with a third documentary following *Last Men in Aleppo* and *The Cave*. “I feel the cinema is a way to talk and explain how much you can fight, how much you can change,” says Fayyad.

Following the premiere of *Last Men in Aleppo* in 2017 at Sundance, Fayyad became the target of an online smear campaign from Russian and pro-Assad media. Russian outlets published reports questioning his credibility, painting him as a terrorist sympathizer with links to Al Qaeda, while his Twitter feed was filled with trolls. Russia’s UN Mission even released a statement labelling the film as propaganda.

Fayyad expected some backlash in Syria, but was taken aback by the larger campaign to discredit him. He began fearing for his own safety, and that of his family. “I don’t have another passport,” says Fayyad. “If I disappear, I disappear.”

He hasn’t weathered the onslaught alone; the film community has provided support. The International Documentary Association put out a statement in his defense, and he also went on the offensive, authoring an op-ed in *The Guardian* pushing back at the campaign.

It’s not the only challenge. It’s gotten harder to operate in Syria, where he’s a target for kidnapping, or worse. He moves frequently, switching accommodations every few days, and is careful about who he works with.

Not surprisingly, film has been a lifelong passion for Fayyad. He was born and raised in a small town in the countryside near Aleppo, and grew up loving foreign films. Alfred Hitchcock was an early favorite, but he also devoured books, and counts Shakespeare and Fyodor Dostoevsky as major influences.

Fayyad’s father was a teacher and a writer, but he didn’t publish his work for fear of getting into trouble with the regime. “All the time, my father told me ‘be careful,’” he says.

Fayyad eventually moved to Paris to attend university, majoring in audio-visual arts and filmmaking at the international film and television school EICAR. Upon graduation in 2006, he returned home and worked in Syrian television. “In Syria they just do the TV drama. So if you want to do something, you just go make a TV series,” says Fayyad. He quickly grew bored with the formulaic style, and started working on TV documentaries for the BBC and Al Jazeera as a freelancer.

That sparked an interest in exploring his own documentaries, a pursuit that soon got him in trouble. On the eve of Syria’s civil war, Fayyad was developing a film about Syrian poet and dissident Ja’far Haydar. It attracted the notice of the authorities, leading to his arrest in early 2011. “As a prisoner of the Assad regime, you are treated as someone who does not exist at all,” says Fayyad. “You are nothing there.”

While detained, he was moved by how his fellow prisoners found ways to resist, even when facing torture and death. He spent nearly a year in prison, and upon his release fled to Jordan and then to Turkey. His hometown was bombed, and his family displaced.

He felt the international media and filmmakers weren’t properly covering the war. “In all their stories something is missed: the empathy with the characters,” he says. It’s something he tried to address with *Last Men in Aleppo*.

The roots of the film go back to 2012, when Fayyad began filming Raed Saleh, a founder of the White Helmets. A charismatic man, Saleh travelled around the Aleppo area coordinating civilian rescue efforts, and Fayyad followed.

He planned initially to make a short film about Saleh, but instead used the footage to attract funding for a larger project, and teamed up with Abeed. They had met at a media conference in Turkey, and became friends. An engineer by training, Abeed was running the Aleppo Media Center, an organization founded in 2011 to bring together local citizen journalists to document the conflict, primarily through video and films. "I try to make everything for the cinema," says Abeed, who's 32. "It will last forever."

As producer, Abeed helped handle logistics, including connecting Fayyad to a cinematographer. The project got funding from a number of backers, including the Danish Film Institute, U.S. film foundation Cinereach, the Sundance Institute and Beirut's Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, among others. It wasn't easy getting them on board, says Fayyad. As a condition, the Danish Film institute installed an editor, Steen Johannessen, as a co-director on the project.

Fayyad wanted viewers to feel like they were there everyday, at all hours. "I'm not day by day there, but I try to give this feeling," says Fayyad. Instead of following Saleh, who still leads the White Helmets today, the film focused on three of the group's other founding members—Khaled, Subhi and Mahmoud. Khaled in particular stands out. As a father of two daughters, he spends the film torn between an urge to flee with his family to safety, or stay and support his community. It was a dilemma Fayyad thought would affect any parent watching the film, and one with tragic consequences. Khaled chose to stay, and was later killed in an airstrike before the film was completed.

Consultants, editors and producers advised Fayyad to cut back on disturbing footage, but he refused. "I wanted to show it, what Khaled saw," says Fayyad.

Although he was already in the U.S. to attend the Oscars, Abeed almost didn't make the ceremony, when the Trump Administration imposed a travel ban on Syrian citizens. Fortunately, he got a last minute waiver.

Many expected the film would win, but Fayyad is happy with the nomination. It brought global attention to the plight of civilians, a feat he hopes to pull off again with *The Cave*. "I want people to react and do something," says Fayyad.

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