



## PREVIEW

# No Other Land

### No Other Land

*Directors:* Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham, Rachel Szor  
*Production Companies:* Antipode Films, Yababay  
*Produced by:* Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham, Rachel Szor, Fabien Greenberg, Bård Kjøge Rønning  
*Written by:* Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham, Rachel Szor  
*Director of Photography:* Rachel Szor  
*Editors:* Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham, Rachel Szor  
*Music:* Julius Pollux Rothlaender  
Palestine-Norway 2024  
92 mins  
Digital

Courtesy of Dogwoof

No documentarist could reasonably expect their work to change the world overnight. But for the makers of *No Other Land*, the process involved is a much longer one: this collective, two Palestinians, two Israelis, depicts a situation on the West Bank that has been going on for decades and is continuing, even becoming more critical, today. Since they completed the bulk of their film in 2023, events in the Middle East have massively raised the stakes of the situation shown.

*No Other Land* documents the process in which the Israeli military attempt to forcibly clear Palestinian villages by demolishing homes and other buildings. Specifically, the film – which won the Best Documentary award in Berlin in February – shows this practice at work in Masafer Yatta, an area of the West Bank that is home to journalist and activist Basel Adra, one of the film's four directors. He features in *No Other Land* as the voiceover commentator and occasional protagonist, together with Israeli co-director Yuval Abraham. Comprising their own material, as well as phone and other footage shot by Adra et al, the film covers the period from 2019 to 2023. But the final moments observe Middle East history taking a decisive turn, with the Hamas massacres of 7 October and Israel's devastating retaliation in Gaza, all of this placing the film's subject matter in a new, heightened context.

Adra and Abraham talk to me by video link from two different locations; the former from a car in Masafer Yatta, the latter at a petrol station somewhere in Israel (the other two directors are Hamdan Ballal and Rachel Szor, Palestinian and Israeli, respectively).

Adra explains that the Masafer Yatta community has existed for hundreds of years – the film refers to it being inhabited in the 1830s – although its several villages do not appear on any official Israeli map. *No Other Land* shows the Israeli police and army, as well as settlers, arriving in villages with bulldozers and demolishing homes, schools and farm buildings alike, on the grounds that the area has been designated as land for Israeli military training (the film argues that this is a deliberately misleading ploy by a government determined to clear the territory for settler expansion). The drive to expulsion began in 1999 and was then paused during an extended court battle, resuming in 2022. Local residents and Israeli forces, the film shows, have been caught in a circular dance: buildings are demolished, the Palestinians rebuild, bulldozers move in again. Some residents have remained in place, despite this gruelling cycle; others have moved away to nearby towns.

'In 1999,' says Adra, 'there was one day that the Israeli military made 700 residents of Masafer Yatta homeless. This action brought a lot of attention from journalists and activists. One thing they brought to the area is the camera.'

Filming, he says, has been an essential strategy, both for the people of Masafer Yatta and for journalists and activists from outside. 'The camera is really the only tool [we have], beside our steadfastness. Filming our daily life sometimes saves us from charges, from settlers and soldiers who want someone to be in jail – you have a video of an event proving the opposite of what they try to claim, because [otherwise] nobody will believe us. We need this evidence all the time.'

The film shows a great deal of everyday life in the region, including Adra's – old footage shows him at the age of seven – and that of his father, a long-time activist. And it often documents horrors, not least the fate of Harun Abu Aram, a local man who died last year, having been shot by an IDF soldier two years earlier; he was left paralysed, his home destroyed. It is his mother, a key figure in the film, who utters the phrase that provides its title. We also see confrontations between local residents and groups of Israeli soldiers and settlers. Adra talks in the film about his father being arrested many times; we see Adra himself subjected to attacks. Shooting footage in this area is a dangerous business. 'It's always dangerous to film,' says Adra, noting the recent shooting of Turkish-American volunteer Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi, reportedly by the IDF, while she protested against settler expansion. '[The forces] really hate the idea of somebody – international, Israeli or Palestinian – carrying a camera or a phone to film what's happening. We are under military law, so all protests are illegal, and it's always dangerous.'

Abraham explains how he became involved in the project: a journalist who had been writing on the West Bank occupation, he became specifically interested in the Israeli

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programme of demolitions. 'The first time I met Basel, the bulldozers were there, coming to his village to destroy a sheep shelter. It was a defining moment for me – the soldiers threw a lot of stun grenades, it was very scary. Then the entire village came out and there were nonviolent protests that were very inspiring. Me and Rachel [Szor] began to come more and more to Masafer Yatta and we met Hamdan [Ballal], a photographer who lives in the area. After we'd spent about a year together, documenting and writing and protesting, Hamdan had the idea to try to make a film.'

In fact, Ballal is seen in the film questioning Abraham's motives for coming to Masafer Yatta, a sequence that Adra and Abraham insist was spontaneous and not staged, like all the conversational interludes throughout the film. Those sequences constitute a thread that provides both narrative and space for contemplation, as Adra and Abraham talk, joke and muse – sometimes with manifest despair – about the effects that their filming, writing and posting might or might not have. Overall, this gives the film an affirmative thrust, insisting that Palestinians and Israelis can be friends and allies, but it also carries a self-critical element, in that Abraham's motives, and possibly illusions, are questioned. At one point, Adra challenges him, 'You want everything to happen quickly, as if you can solve everything in ten days and then go home.'

The involvement of outsiders like Abraham is essential in the area, Adra says, but controversial. 'This is a serious discussion among us Palestinians – the idea of receiving Israeli activists while the occupations continue. It's legitimate to ask these questions, because Yuval is coming to the area as a journalist and activist, but the money that the system is using, he's part of that.' (It's worth noting that the filmmakers resisted seeking Israeli funding: *No Other Land* is a Palestinian/Norwegian co-production). 'Those [Israelis] have a responsibility also from the other side. It's important that they come and stand with us – but not just for us, I think it's important for themselves.' Abraham agrees: 'That's what motivates me. In a way, I'm not doing this to help Basel: he doesn't need my help. I feel I have a responsibility first of all as an Israeli – things are happening in my name, and I want to change them. I believe that if the Palestinian people do not have freedom, then the Israeli people cannot have security and cannot have freedom. We are interlinked – I don't think either people are going to go anywhere.'

The collective's aim in making the film, he adds, 'is to reach not only the factual truth, but also an emotional truth of what it's like to be there when it's happening, what it's like to be a family that is watching their lives destroyed in front of their eyes – and also the power of the community, [in] the good moments, not only the bad moments.'

The team's intensely powerful, disturbing film has drawn widespread attention, but its Berlin success caused significant ructions in Germany, given that nation's singularly cautious policies about criticising Israel. Claudia Roth, federal commissioner for culture, insisted that when applauding the acceptance speeches – in which the duo called for a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to the occupation – she was clapping only Abraham, not Adra. Various politicians, both in Germany and Israel, called Abraham's protest 'antisemitic' and Berlin's mayor accused the duo of 'intolerable relativisation' for not mentioning the Hamas atrocities of 7 October in their speeches (for the record, the film itself does refer to them). Back in Israel, Abraham faced death threats and members of his family were threatened in their home, but he commented at the time, '[Basel] lives under a military occupation... He is in far greater danger than I am.'

'"Antisemitism" is a word that means a lot to me personally,' says Abraham, who points out that his grandmother was born in a concentration camp. 'If you weaponise it to silence legitimate criticism of Israel and of the occupation, then you are not only silencing important criticism that will lead to change, you're also cheapening the term. You're emptying it of meaning.'

Notwithstanding its warm reception in the film world, Basel Adra doesn't see *No Other Land* as primarily a piece of cinema. 'To be honest, I'm not really a filmmaker. For me, this movie is more about activism – this is not a documentary about something that happened and ended. It's our life, our daily life, it's still going on. What I want from this movie is really to try to achieve some political change in people's minds.'

As for hope in these singularly harsh times, Adra has no illusions. 'Today, it's really hard to talk about hope. What we need is not just hope. What we need is to stop what's going on.'

Jonathan Romney, *Sight and Sound*, November 2024