

# Out of Place

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**Tariq Nasir turned his back on a lucrative career in international finance in order to pursue a career as a filmmaker – and he did it with an optimism many would envy. Filmmaking is a tough business; successes are few, and failures are many. But it doesn't phase him at all:**

**"I'm very optimistic about the things I do," he says. "I feel like I'm going to be able to do them."**

At the premier of his first film, Tariq Nasir seems nervous, out of place. He's shy of cameras, and seems a bit uncomfortable with his momentary status as the center of attention. It seems odd that a man who has taken the risks that Nasir has should be nervous about an audience of Ammanis gushing over his movie, but so it goes.

*Belonging*, which received its first public screening in June at the Second World Congress for Middle East Studies film festival in Amman, tells the story of how Nasir's family lost their home in Jerusalem. The narrative jumps back and forth through time to give background on various family members, but the bulk of the film revolves around what happened to them during the Israeli invasion in 1967.

This film is not just an impressive first achievement; it is one of the most impressive documentaries we've seen in a long time. Nasir takes a war and makes it personal in the way news stories never do, and describes a national tragedy in a tone more in sorrow than in anger. For once, at least, all the gushing is justified.

Combining footage from hours of interviews, family photographs and documents and archival news footage of the war itself, *Belonging* is visually simple, but still conveys an atmosphere of longing for things lost. The interviewees come across as warm and genuine, the historical background is clear and as sparing as possible, and the haunting score by Nasir's friend, Caroline Maloney, completes the mood.

Nasir has shopped the film around to a number of distributors, he says, notably HBO and PBS in the United States. The film has been well received – one station wanted to pick it up, he said, but asked that more explicit historical narration be added for US audiences. Now, *Belonging* is being submitted to various major film festivals, in the hope that getting some notice will help convince distributors to pick up the project.

It's a good thing for Nasir that the film is good, because he turned his entire life upside down to make it. Before going into filmmaking, Nasir had what many would call a dream job, making deals for a major international finance company. His work took him all over the world, living in 5-star hotels and pulling in a huge salary.

Then, more or less overnight, he quit his job, put down \$25,000 on a Panasonic digital video camera and equipment, took a month-long intensive course at the New York Film Academy, and set out to make a documentary about his family's house in Palestine.

Away from the crowds, in his own home, in Amman, Nasir seems more relaxed, able to explain why he was willing to make such a leap of faith. Of course, coming from a finance background, he's no stranger to risk-taking. And, he suggests, if there's any advantage to being a displaced Palestinian, it is that it confers on one the ability to cope with change and instability.

But growing up, he explains, he had an exaggerated sense of the importance of financial security – something he attributes to being part of a displaced community, with no place he could really call home. Money, he says, was a way to control his environment, a means to achieve the security he lacked. And after years of work, he was able to achieve the security he wanted.

"When I got to that place, I realized there was something missing," he says. His own children, now grown, were also a major motivation. He raised them to think about how they could make a positive difference in the world, he says. But when his sixteen-year-old son asked Nasir what he himself was doing, he decided it was time to make a change.

"We have this responsibility for being part of the good in the world, because there's so much going wrong," he says.

Nasir sees *Belonging* as just that: a way of being part of the good. He wants it to move people, he says – but he wants it to work emotionally, rather than politically, and to be accessible to a wide audience.

"The Palestinians have been mistreated for so long; when they finally do get a voice, so much of that hurt and woundedness comes out," Nasir explains. While Palestinian anger is justified, telling Palestinian stories in a way that engages people with their many tragedies is more important than trying to cast blame on the authors of those tragedies.

For Nasir, telling the story of his family was a way of pointing out the profound effect that events like the Nakba and the 1967 invasion had on even the most "ordinary" people.

"All our stories are important," Nasir says. "These things are life defining just as they are. You get mistreated on the street somewhere, it affects you. You want to be able to grow through these experiences, to define who you are, without being totally shaped by it."

But talking to him, one feels like Nasir's sense of displacement as a Palestinian is intimately linked to more personal feelings about his own life.

"I used to spend a lot of time traveling," he says. "Because of the line of work I was in, I wasn't able to stay in one place for so long." In that sense, *Belonging* is also about his search for a home that he never experienced. "I'm always looking for that place," he says.

Jordan, where Nasir lived most of his life, is the closest thing he has. "It's the place I grew up; the place I feel connected," he says. Locally, he hopes his film will encourage people to make movies addressing social issues, and to take more risks, artistically and socially. In a culture that can often be quite critical of creative effort, that's harder than it seems.

"There's so much talent here. To not have people take risks or challenge themselves seems like a shame," Nasir says. **JO**



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