

“Where Should the Birds Fly?”

a NSPE / [Social Justice](#) film-screening and discussion with documentary filmmaker Fida Qishta and NSPE School of Media Studies Professor [Nitin Sawhney](#)

by Nicholas Allanach

The unflinching documentary [Where Should the Birds Fly](#) (2012 - [DeepDish TV](#)) looks at the lives of two young Palestinian women, the filmmaker, Fida Qishta, and Mona Samouni, as they experience life within the Israeli blockade of Gaza. Qishta’s film is the first by a Palestinian to recount the stark realities of life in Gaza: the grueling, inhumane wait (sometimes for weeks) at checkpoints, farmers and fishermen ducking bullets while being shot at by Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), and most graphically, a video recount of the premeditated twenty-two day land, air, and sea assault on Gaza and the West Bank in 2008 by the IDF known as [Operation Cast Lead](#).

The first thirty-minutes of Qishta’s sixty-minute documentary is, as NSPE, School of Media Studies professor, Nitin Sawhney warns, “Difficult and disturbing for most Americans to digest.” Nevertheless, the footage is important to watch, enough so that Professor Sawhney even risked arrest to bravely and commendably assist in getting this young filmmaker’s rare footage out of Rafah and to New York.

Where Should the Birds Fly could arguably serve as a visual documentation to prove civilians were indiscriminately targeted by the IDF in 2008. These crimes against humanity were the subject of a 2009 UN’s Human Rights Council fact-finding mission. The resulting [Goldstone Report](#) shows [evidence](#) that Israel and Hamas both had rockets “purposefully and indiscriminately aimed at civilian targets.” Qishta’s documentary recounts these war crimes, but exclusively from the perspective of the Palestinians who experienced the assault firsthand and subsequently continue to suffer through the ongoing state-sanctioned occupation of Gaza.

“My camera is my only weapon.” Fida narrates as the viewer witnesses a massive bulldozer pulverize small cinderblock homes and buildings that once constituted the neighborhood of her youth. Women and children helplessly scream-out in terror, while

young boys feebly pitch rocks at grumbling, coughing machinery unaffected by the suffering below.

After screening the film, Qishta told the audience at The New School, “For the sake of filming, I kept my tears back.” Qishta’s determination and resilience is a quality shared by any truly engaged documentarian, in which there is a real need to report the story as is, so that others can better understand the realities surrounding the story itself. Such a sentiment to report the realities of life under occupation, in which the abnormal has become normal, is a sentiment shared by many Palestinians; however, very few stories make it outside the blockade, which is what makes Qishta’s film so unique.

In *Where Should the Birds Fly*, we see children playing beside the crumbled debris of what was once a home, walking along tracks from IDF tanks, and drawing pictures of family members killed in airstrikes. Rockets obliterate any semblance of an infrastructure, white phosphorous burns through skin, and infants lay motionless under piles of concrete. Wailing sirens. Billowing smoke. Terrified faces. The viewer is overwhelmed by an onslaught of injustice; consequently, how can one then honestly entertain an “even-handed” dialogue regarding this “complex” issue when the horrifying images unfolding on screen are so blatantly heavy-handed? It is difficult to rationalize or understand any justification for these brutal, unremorseful techniques.

Despite these atrocities, the filmmaker does not want us to walk away from her film with anger or hate. When asked from a member of the audience, “How do you leave hate aside?” Qishta responds, “I never let hate control my heart or mind, because with hate you lose your judgment...all of us have good and bad within us, but it is love that is precious. Hate will not solve the issue. So, I refuse to let hate control my heart.”

Accordingly, as unnerving and aggravating the scenes from *Where Should the Birds Fly* are, what becomes most remarkable and inspiring about Qishta’s film is the stories of resilience from both the filmmaker and the then ten-year old Mona Samouni. Mona, in a distant, but nevertheless matter-of-fact way, reflects on the night her life changed forever: “The soldiers broke the wall and entered our house...they took the most precious beloved of my heart - Mama and Papa.” As the missiles fell on Mona’s neighborhood, she remembers saying, “They will keep firing at us until all of us die.”

Mona struggles with her story and admits, “I don’t know how to express myself,” which is understandably a common reaction felt by anyone coping with [posttraumatic stress disorder](#); nevertheless, Mona, like the filmmaker, finds a way to tell her difficult story. We see drawings of flowers, trees, and of Mona’s family. We hear Qishta’s voice reminding the viewer, “Mona has her markers and I have my camera.” And thankfully so; after all, if it weren’t for these two mediums of expression and documentation, we would have little to no evidence of these injustices. Whereas, a fact-finding report is legal and presumably unbiased, it is also as equally sterile and disconnected from the real experiences of suffering it investigates. Qishta’s documentary on the other hand is visceral and human. In *Where Should the Birds Fly*, we are shown the realities and hear the stories from the lives most affected by the occupation.

Emotions and opinions surrounding the larger [Arab-Israeli conflict](#) remain divided; unfortunately, such extremes make it increasingly difficult to engage in a rational discussion so we regrettably remain at a dangerous geopolitical impasse. Some universities have either tried to avoid or even totally given into pressure from local politicians or donors from [hosting events](#) about the Arab-Israeli conflict, subsequently denying their students academic freedom. Thankfully, instead of avoiding what is difficult and controversial, The New School continues to encourage students to research, understand, and discuss these subjects in order to challenge their own views while also listening and attempting to understand those of others different than their own. Ultimately, I believe no subject should ever be considered taboo at a university, especially in a democratic society.

Beyond the politics, borders, rocket attacks, and extremists, there exist two young women who were directly affected by this conflict, but instead of giving in to anger and promoting hate, they are only trying to live normal, fruitful lives – something we should all be able to understand and encourage. Their story is an important one; after all, it is not only one of suffering but of forgiveness. These courageous Palestinian women could serve as an inspiring example to all those who refuse, or go out of their way to silence others from having this discussion.

Like Qishta, Mona refuses to give in to hate; instead of expressing anger, Mona dreams of one day helping and healing others by becoming a doctor. She wisely states, “You need to take care of everything around you... I lost my mother and father, my freedom and the life I had... people don’t appreciate the blessings they have until they lose them.” Such simple wisdom could not be more eloquently expressed. One hopes that wiser adult voices will also be able to overcome their hate and politics so as to better seek a resolution to this current impasse so that Mona and the generations to come can finally live in a lasting, sustained peace throughout the Middle East.

(If you’re interested in hosting a screening of *Where Should the Birds Fly*, contact NSPE School of Media Studies Student, **Rebecca Centeno**, from Deep Dish TV at rebecca.a.centeno@gmail.com .)