

# WE ARE FROM THERE

نحن من هناك

A FILM BY WISSAM TANIOS



OFFICIAL SELECTION  
INTERNATIONAL  
FILM FESTIVAL  
ROTTERDAM  
2020



WRITTEN, FILMED & DIRECTED BY WISSAM TANIOS WITH MILAD KHAWAM, JAMIL KHAWAM PRODUCED BY CHRISTIAN EID CO-PRODUCED BY GABRIELLE DUMON EDITOR GHINA HACHICHO,  
MATHILDE MUYARD SOUND DESIGNER RANA EID ORIGINAL MUSIC COMPOSER AMINE BOUHAFIA RE-RECORDING MIXER LAMA SAWAYA ADDITIONAL CINEMATOGRAPHY FADI EL SAMRA  
EDITING CONSULTANT NADIA BEN RACHID PRODUCED BY ABOUT PRODUCTIONS IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH LE BUREAU, AL JAZEERA DOCUMENTARY CHANNEL  
WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE ARAB FUND FOR ARTS AND CULTURE (AFAC), FONDS IMAGE DE LA FRANCOPHONIE, THE LEBANESE MINISTRY OF CULTURE

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AL JAZEERA DOCUMENTARY CHANNEL

GLOBAL MEDIA MAKERS

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LEBANESE MINISTRY OF CULTURE

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# We Are From There

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a feature documentary by Wissam Tanios  
Lebanon, France - 2020 - 82min - Color - HD - Arabic

World Premiere: International Film Festival Rotterdam 2020  
Best Arab Film and Best Non-Fiction Film at the 2020 Cairo International Film Festival

Produced by Abbout Productions  
in co-production with Le Bureau, Al Jazeera Documentary Channel



## Synopsis

Two Syrian brothers in their mid 20s take a leap of faith and decide to start their lives from scratch in new cities. They leave everything behind except their passion for life, determination, sense of humor and hope for a better future.

Their closest cousin, Wissam, decides to film their odysseys for over five years, questioning the true meaning of home, bringing back some childhood memories, while exploring the human ability to cope with change as radical as it may be.

## Key Credits

Written, Filmed & Directed by	Wissam Tanios
With	Milad Khawam, Jamil Khawam
Produced by	Christian Eid
Co-produced by	Gabrielle Dumon
Editor	Ghina Hachicho, Mathilde Muyard
Sound Designer	Rana Eid
Original Music Composer	Amine Bouhafa
Re-recording Mixer	Lama Sawaya
Additional Cinematography	Fadi El Samra
Editing Consultant	Nadia Ben Rachid
Produced by	About Productions
In co-production with	Le Bureau, Al Jazeera Documentary Channel

With the support of The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC), Fonds Image de la Francophonie, The Lebanese Ministry of Culture



# Interview with the protagonists Milad and Jamil

conducted by film critic Joseph Fahim

## How did you two get involved with the project?

**Milad:** I honestly didn't know and did not understand what Wissam was doing, or what was he planning to do. I didn't see anything particularly interesting in my story: it was simply a rite of passage to me, moving on with life and relocating to a new country. I didn't find anything special in it; my story was no different than those of many other Syrians. I believed in Wissam's capabilities however, and trusted his intuition.

I didn't predict that the movie would end up being about me and Jamil. I initially thought it was going to be about exile and immigration.

## Were you concerned about how personal the movie is? How it reveals plenty of intimate details about your lives?

**Milad:** I was concerned. I still am. I was quite agitated when I saw the pre-final version of the film because it reminded me of a very tough period in my life. I was unstable in every way back then. When we were shooting, I felt that I should've hidden a lot of things I was feeling and going through.

**Jamil:** I wasn't concerned actually. I didn't mind it at all. Everything I was showing and experiencing...it was normal. It's just my life.

## Do you feel you've changed substantially over the course of those five years?

**Jamil:** I don't think I've changed. I'm a realistic person, adapting to whatever comes my way. I did evolve, however. When I first came to Sweden, I was in a different state; when I started working and got a home and a car, my situation and mindset transformed. I did not change as a person; what did change perhaps are some ideas in my head.

**Milad:** I have changed a lot actually. I became a completely different person. My awareness has increased; my perception of the world has been enriched. My music has changed. My work has changed. My relationship with the city [Berlin] has changed. Deep down, I made a conscious decision to change. I tried to do some things and it didn't work out, and it hurt when it didn't; and that's what prompted me to change. I had two choices: to get stronger and adapt to this new life, or just give up and go back home. I opted for the former.





**You've moved considerably between different places and different countries over the past few years. Do you think you've settled now? That you found your home?**

**Milad:** Since I left Syria, I no longer have a home. I now have a house in Berlin and a group of close friends who feel like family. My life is my work, however; where my music is influenced and colored. And in that sense, Berlin is just a stopover, and I think I'll leave at some point. Maybe I'll go to New York, because the music scene there is different and stronger.

I think I developed this addiction for moving to a new place every few years and start all over again. Although my life is stable in Berlin, I'm not entirely satisfied. I now feel I want more. It's impossible for me to feel at home here.

**Jamil:** There is a chance I could move out of Sweden one day as well, but it's very unlikely now. I do feel at home here; I feel secure. There is one thing I can never get anywhere else though: my family. I could still go back to Syria one day and start a business there if things get stable again.

**What does Syria represent to both of you?**

**Milad:** Nothing.

**Jamil:** Not Syria, but rather Damascus – my father, my mother, the family house, and the carpentry workshop. That's it.

**Milad:** It only represents my childhood memories. They're certainly connected with my present, but that's essentially all what they are to me now: just memories.

**How did you feel when you saw the completed film?**

**Milad:** I was shaken up. I cried for how I was and what I've been through. It felt I was watching someone else, other than myself; a person who no longer exists. I also finally understood what Wissam was trying to do.

**Jamil:** It was painful watching parts of my old life and seeing the wood workshop I can no longer visit; how my life was in Beirut as well.

# Interview with the director Wissam Tanios

conducted by film critic Joseph Fahim

## **Why did you decide to tell this specific story? And how was your relationship with Milad and Jamil before?**

I am born and raised in Beirut to a Syrian mother and a Lebanese Father. I used to see Milad and Jamil every summer. My childhood is closely associated with theirs. I didn't use to see them a lot - two/three times a year. It was in Damascus where I came of age and broke out of my mother's umbilical cord. It wasn't always just fun; it felt like a boot camp sometimes, where I did a lot of manual work at the family wood workshop.

The project wasn't strictly about them at first; it was about different members of my family. Then it became about Jamil and Milad, in addition to their two flat-mates. Then I realized it needed to be more focused and therefore, it became strictly about them. It started like a family diary. I was simply following them at first; I was driven by intuition and the fundamental need to record them. Later, I realized that I was indeed making a film and started looking for producers and applying for funding. And when I met my producer, Christian Eid, it was just few weeks after he decided to leave Lebanon and build a new life in France. He was taking somehow the same path as my cousins which made it obvious for both of us that he should be part of the film.

## **You've shot hours of footage over the period of production. How did you decide on the structure of the film?**

It was very hard to decide on the structure, especially because we didn't want to do another refugee story. Everyone was pushing us to wrap up the film pretty quickly because back then, the Syrian refugee crisis was a "hot topic." I didn't want to make a film bound to a specific time frame or specific politics; I wanted to tell a timeless story that would stand the test of time; a universal story that anyone, anywhere, can relate to.

I filmed Jamil and Milad's last days before their trips separately in different cities; Milad in Damascus and Jamil in Beirut. Since I couldn't be present every step of the way, I asked them to film themselves and recorded our phone and video calls. I felt an incredible urge to film and archive their journey as well as discovering the outcome of their future. I made the first trip to Berlin to film Milad on New Year's 2016 after 4 months of his departure from Syria, then I went back to edit what I shot. One year later, I made a second trip to Berlin and Stockholm where Jamil is living. A lot of updates were taking place in their lives so it was very challenging to decide what to keep in the structure and when to stop filming in the first place. I followed them for 5 years but I could have followed them until now.

We had a complete chronological structure but it felt like something was missing. I started considering using old VHS home videos shot by my uncle (their father). They turned out to be the one element that was missing. In terms of storytelling, it gave depth, history and emotions.

## **Why did you decide to place yourself inside the story? To make your presence visible?**

Honestly, I didn't want to be in the film at the beginning, I was even avoiding voice-overs. But as I proceeded with the filming and editing, I found myself automatically more involved. Milad and Jamil are people I could strongly relate to; their story has elements that resemble mine in different respects. The film became self-reflective. Being someone who always had the idea of leaving the country but never had the courage to do so, my cousins' departure woke something big in me.

The home archives, which had me in them, were detrimental to including myself in the film.

I felt that I was resuming my uncle's work, Milad and Jamil's father, by recording the journeys of his sons. Filming them for 5 years felt like I am doing exactly what my uncle used to do when we were kids.

It was quite tricky deciding on when to make my interference visible or where to keep it hidden. I didn't want to make my interference felt, directorially or physically, if I didn't have a function, or something to say. Unlike my previous short documentary, which was about the loss of my sister and had plenty of voiceover that functioned as some kind of therapy, I wanted to be more reserved regarding the size and role of my presence in the film.



### **How and when did you decide to finish the story where you ended it?**

It was by sheer intuition I must say. I had several questions hovering in my head, mainly related to how each deal with loss and exile in his own distinct way. It was a long journey searching for answers to these questions; but when I finally did find answers, that's when I decided to stop. The second part of the film has little action; it's more focused on the internal journeys of the brothers. Thus, finding a conclusion was unrelated to any major events that happened to either, and I didn't want to direct the attention to any social or political issues - it had more to do with their evolution and development as characters.

### **There's a thin line between the authentic relaying of the stories of your subjects and the kind of exploitation that comes with the fundamental display of their most private moments. How did you manage to tilt your film to the former instead of the latter?**

It was very organic. First, some footage was shot by the two themselves; and in that sense, they have decided on what to show and what not to show in certain parts of their journey. For example, I was amazed by the footage that Jamil sent me from his crossing, I only asked for few shots but he sent me detailed diaries of his crossing. On the contrary, Milad didn't send much about this specific event.

Second, during shooting, it was up to them to choose what they were comfortable saying. There were a number of instances when Milad told me that he wasn't comfortable being filmed; sometimes, he would even ask me to stop filming after we started shooting. Naturally, we'd immediately stop. I was fully aware that I was intruding on their private lives.

Both were not aware of what we were doing until they watched the final cut. I would be lying if I told you that I always knew how to maintain that balance; it was a learning experience for me. What facilitated the process was the fact that both are used to the presence of the camera because my uncle used to film them since they were kids, which made them feel comfortable and more open.

**You had a lot of source materials: from your own shot-footage and those filmed by Jamil and Milad themselves, to the old home videos. Was it difficult settling on a unified visual structure for the film?**

For the home videos, we didn't want to use them as flashbacks; I wanted to use them as a mean of storytelling that exposes information absent from the present. For the footage shot by the pair, we only used those where I couldn't be there with them, and that's the border crossing. Because I was a one-man show - filming, sound recording and directing - a lot of the footage was raw as I was constantly adjusting myself to whichever situation I was in, but that also gave the film a lot of authenticity. It's true that the shooting medium varies, but I think that the hybrid material enriched the film. The rawness of the images gave a different aesthetic to the final outcome; an aesthetic of authenticity rather than one of perfection.

**After five years of filming, what's the discovery you've made having completed that journey now?**

It was an emotional rollercoaster with lots of ups and downs but I'm really grateful for this experience. Nothing in filmmaking you can learn best from other than making a feature film. I was only 25 when I started doing this film. I evolved as a person and as a filmmaker. Following my two cousins whom I used to play with when I was a kid and seeing them grow in front of my camera was an exceptional fantastic experience. I participated in several film development platforms and film residencies that were extremely enriching. I was lucky to have people along the way who believed in the project and helped me finish it. This film is the highlight of my '20ies, which are now coming to an end.

**You are not branding the film as a refugee story. How would you describe it?**

Most Syrian films I saw would end when the characters cross over to Europe; I always asked myself, what happens next? I wanted to dive into that; to see what happens after the crossing is done and how they'd cope with their new lives.

It's about loss; how each one of us deals with it in their own way. Having experienced a lot of loss in my family at a young age, I was indistinctively gravitated towards exploring the big loss my cousins underwent. It's also about coping with loss and building a defense mechanism to be able to go on.

The film deals with saving a memory. My first intuition was to film and archive the journeys of my cousins because I felt that something was vanishing. I wanted to make it immortal.

The film is also about the Arab youth; how we're always searching for ourselves; for a different place. It's a coming-of-age story of two characters transitioning from boyhood into adulthood; of two young people coping with radical changes in their lives and trying to find out who they are...trying to find a home. These existential thoughts are extensions of my own: of my own struggles, of my dilemma about leaving to a new place, and what constitutes home for me. It's about the randomness of life; the strange unexpected avenues it leads us to.

## Director's Biography



Wissam Tanios studied Cinema at IESAV, Beirut. The Cinema that tackles subjects like family, detachment, grief and human relationships is his favorite.

His short documentary *Aftermath* won Best Documentary at the Lebanese Film Festival in 2012. *Departures* his second short film was competing in many film festivals worldwide and won the best narrative short at the 2nd Annual Alwan Awards, New York.

*We Are From There* (World Premiere at International Film Festival Rotterdam 2020) is his first feature film with which he participated in the Global Media Makers six weeks' film residency in Los Angeles in 2018. It was awarded Best Arab Film and Best Non-Fiction Film at 2020 Cairo International Film Festival.

## Filmography

2020                    *We Are From There*, Feature Documentary, 82min  
International Film Festival Rotterdam 2020, The Netherlands  
Cairo International Film Festival 2020, Egypt (Winner Best Arab Film and Best Non-Fiction Film)  
Cinemed - Montpellier, France  
Taipei Film Festival, Taiwan  
Arab Film Fest Collab, USA  
Lebanese Film Festival, Australia  
Festival International du Film Francophone de Namur, Belgium  
Cinemamed, Belgium  
Southern Lights - Frankfurt, Germany

2013                    *Departures*, Short Fiction, 15min  
2nd Annual Alwan Awards, New York (Winner Best Narrative Short)  
MedFilm Festival 2013, Rome  
FID Campus 2013, Marseille  
Lebanese Film Festival Sydney 2013, Australia  
20th Adana Golden Boll Film Festival 2013, Turkey  
Beirut International Film Festival 2013, Lebanon  
Original Narrative Film Festival 2014, Dubai  
Nahal Short Film Festival 2016, Tehran

2011                    *Aftermath*, Short Documentary, 17min  
Lebanese Film Festival, 10th Edition, Lebanon (Winner Best Documentary)  
Arab Film Festival 2012, Lebanon  
NDU Film Festival 2012, Lebanon  
International Oriental Film Festival 2013, Geneva

# Producers' Biographies

## Christian Eid

Christian Eid holds a bachelor degree in Cinema from USEK- Lebanon and a masters in Digital Communication and Project Management from Paris 8- France. Since 2010, he works with Abbout Productions as a Production Supervisor and Associate Producer on several feature films such as *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012) by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (TIFF), *The Valley* (2014) by Ghassan Salhab (Berlinale Forum and TIFF), *Tramontane* (2016) by Vatche Boulghourjian (Cannes' Critics Week), *Amal* (2017) by Mohamed Siam (IDFA), *1982* (2019) by Oualid Mouaness (TIFF) and *All This Victory* (2019) by Ahmad Ghossein (Venice's Critics Week). *We Are From There*, that had its world premiere at International Film Festival Rotterdam 2020, is his first film as a producer.

## Gabrielle Dumon

Born in Marseille, Gabrielle Dumon grew up in Sweden and Germany. In 2001, she started working at ACE, a unique European network of producers providing tailor-made funding and development support services. During her 7 years at ACE, she worked with nearly 130 producers on over 400 feature projects. In 2008, she joined Le Bureau in Paris as development, co-production and post-production supervisor. Made a partner in 2011, Gabrielle has been producing her own projects for Le Bureau since 2014, such as *Sky* (TIFF), *Tramontane* (Cannes' Critics Week), *Sollers Point* (San Sebastian), *Digger* and *Pari* (Berlinale 2020).

# Production Companies

## About Productions

About Productions produces feature films and documentaries with a distinctly Arab voice, expressing the identity of the region. Since 1998, the company worked closely with a prominent network of Arab and international film professionals such as award winning directors (Khalil Joreige, Joanna Hadjithomas, Mohammad Malas, Ghassan Salhab, Vatche Boulghourjian, Ahmad Ghossein, Oualid Mouaness, Mohamed Siam...) and distinguished international and Arab actors (Catherine Deneuve, Nadine Labaki, Nada Abou Farhat, Diamand Bou Abboud, Takla Chamoun...). About Productions has a strong partnership with MC Distribution, a distribution company dedicated to promote new films from the Middle East along with direct and priority access to the sole art house theater in Lebanon, Metropolis Cinema. About Productions' main objective remains to help structure the Lebanese and Arab cinema craft into a solid industry.

## The Bureau

**The Bureau** is a BAFTA winning, César and Academy nominated production and sales company. Producing from London and Paris, The Bureau has produced over 40 feature films. Committed to working with the best filmmakers from around the world, our philosophy remains to discover, and guide talent towards the global recognition it deserves. The Bureau has worked with directors such as Asif Kapadia, Andrew Haigh, Rachid Bouchareb, Erick Zonca, and Roger Michell.

Recent productions include Jessica Hausner's first English language film *Little Joe* selected to compete for the Palme d'Or at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, starring Emily Beecham who received the Best Actress award at Cannes and Ben Whishaw, Peter Mackie Burns' second feature *Rialto*, selected in Venice 2019 official selection, starring Tom Vaughan-Lawlor and Tom Glynn-Carney, Eva Riley's debut *Perfect 10*, produced as part of the iFeatures programme and selected at BFI London film festival or *Supernova* by Harry Mac Queen, starring Colin Firth and Stanley Tucci, currently in post-production.

Previous films include Andrew Haigh's Academy Award® nominated *45 Years*, which premiered at Berlinale, winning two Silver Bears for the performances of Charlotte Rampling and Tom Courtenay, *Lean On Pete*, which premiered in the main competition section at Venice before continuing its festival run through Telluride and Toronto, Harry Wootliff's *Only You* starring Laia Costa and Josh O'Connor, and *A Little Chaos* by the late Alan Rickman, starring Kate Winslet and Matthias Schoenaerts.

## Al Jazeera Documentary Channel

Al Jazeera Documentary Channel is the first of its kind in the Arab World. It is dedicated to documentary film making in the Middle East, exploring a wide range of contemporary topics and it offers a wide range of high-quality documentaries.

## Sales Contacts

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