Interview by Nowhere to Hide director, Zaradasht Ahmed, to Dimitra Kouzi

Nowhere to Hide follows young male nurse Nori Sharif through five years of dramatic change, providing unique access into one of the world's most dangerous and inaccessible areas – the "Triangle of Death" in central Iraq. Initially filming stories of survivors and the hope of a better future after the American and Coalition troops retreat from Iraq in 2011, Nori begins to find himself trapped between ISIS and the different Iraqi militias, and needs to save his own family. Forced to flee his home to survive this "new war" that has become the norm, where the enemy is invisible and there is nowhere to hide, he turns the camera on himself.

The film premieres at IDFA 2016 main competition, for feature-length documentary.

Dimitra Kouzi: How did you get involved with this story?

Zaradasht Ahmed: The idea started in Afghanistan, back in 2008. The mainstream media was not telling the whole truth about the American and Coalition invasion of Afghanistan and its fight against Al-Qaeda and Taliban, so together with Dr. Husum (a human rights activist and war surgeon), we worked to recruit local medics and journalists to document first-hand information from areas where most of the media did not have access. We initially wanted to make a film on this "new war". We called the project "the new war machine". We focused on exploring the type of war: what it is; is it different; is it between countries (a frontal war); or is it transborder warfare without fronts. Two years later, in 2010, we moved the concept to Iraq. I was sure that this "new war" would emerge in cities there.

That was our main intention. We started with that idea, but gradually we ended up with a character-based, very intense film about Nori. In this case, it was the situation that drove me to change the direction of the film, and not the other way round.

How did you meet Nori?

Nori was one of the twelve medics we trained in Iraq. He singled himself out by being very interested in documenting and filming in the areas called "no-go zones"; places

organisations, doctors and journalists do not have access to. He did not know much about filming to start with, but he was interested, and he had the will. That is how it started. Nori comes from one of these “no-go zones” – a town called Jalawla, in Diayala Province in central Iraq.

Your origin is Kurdish and you live in Norway. How did you get there?

We eventually moved our “base” to Sulaymaniyah in Northern Iraq, where I originally come from. Diyala Province is three and a half hours from where I lived, and it is my mother’s home town. The medical organisation led by Dr. Husum and the local Kurdish doctor, Dr. Modhafar, was based in Sulaymaniyah, so it was natural that we ended up there. In addition, Sulaymaniyah is a safe base to work from.

You don't live in Sulaymaniyah anymore. How many years have you been living in Norway?

I have lived in Norway for 22 years.

Do you feel privileged because of that, or do you feel in as if you are still in exile? What is your relation to your home country?

After getting Norwegian citizenship I can move freely, and that makes me feel privileged. I have been living in exile since the early 1990s, soon to be 26 years now, so it is difficult to compare my situation to Nori’s. Nori has been forced to leave his home and has been placed in an IDP camp (a camp for Internally Displaced People), and it is important not to mix the terms “Internally Displaced People” with “people in exile”. I chose to leave because of the political situation in my country; Nori was forced. Therefore, my interest in following Nori’s story is not due to our similarities, to be honest. My other film, *Fata Morgana*, was about exile and the desire to seek a better life elsewhere.

You worked on this film for five long years.

I like long-term documentaries. I like to spend years on my films, on my subjects, on my characters because I believe that film is storytelling. It is also about some unique

moments that we call the moments of truth. These moments won't happen unless you spend a lot of time with your characters, you have to get behind many layers to reach the heart of what the feeling is; and the truth is often found under all these layers.

How much is your original footage in the film, and how much is Nori's footage?

When it comes to the footage, the entire shooting of the film has been a complicated process spanning over five years. We started with collecting material from several sources. Following the dramaturgy of the film, you could break it up simply like this: The first act is shot mainly by me, but when Nori starts to be trapped in Jalawla, he is on his own, and the first-hand accounts from the fall of the town, the collapse of the hospital through the fleeing all the way to the IDP camp was shot by Nori. Towards the end of the film, the scenes of returning to the hospital and the entire final act are mainly shot by me again.

How much material did you have?

300–400 hours.

How did you manage to make this storyline emerge out of all this material?

It is really difficult to answer that question. It is the result of team work. By being open to the changes, allowing me to go further, to focus more on Nori and his personal point of view. We went from a story with questions such as: "Is it possible to live in a war without fronts, without a visible army of only faceless solders?" to a personal story of one man and his family trying to survive a highly brutal warfare, told in a dramatic film. That was a major change for us. One of the toughest challenges making the film was not the material itself, but the need to pursue that material further, because once you start following a character you have to put all your effort into him, and you need to build the scenes that will enable you to create that storyline.

In the middle of this process, Nori's town became a living hell; suddenly ISIS came and the hospital was being bombed, he was targeted and had to flee with his family.

At this point we could not leave him there, we had to keep following. I found myself sitting for days and nights in Iraq because I had no access into the area, as it was controlled by ISIS. So I was calling, directing, helping, cheering him up and constantly talking to him, because he felt really down during that phase.

This must have been very challenging. What decisions did you have to make while editing the film?

Editing was extremely challenging, and on so many different levels. In addition to all the dramatic changes happening in Nori's life, I also had to change the perspective of the film to Nori's personal point of view. Much of the material we were working on was taken from another point of view; from ours.

But, we also found that we could actually tell the story of the region and this "new war" through Nori, as well; through this microcosm we could see the region as a whole, the whole Iraq. After three years of filming, Nori started to understand my plan for him, and why we had to keep repeating shots so many times.

You said it was important to you to find Nori's motivation. What did you find out his motivation was?

We needed to clean up the story and tell it from his point of view, and this point of view should not be magnified, should not be like he is trying to talk to the world; his point of view was suddenly more about the consequences of the war for him and his family, representing the civilian perspective. The war was not over for him. He was always saying that the war was not over, there were explosions, there were people getting hurt, so we went back to the very beginning. That was his motivation, and that helped us a lot, finding this true point of view. That was the key that helped us solve the beginning of the film. The biggest challenge was removing my point of view as a filmmaker and melt it into one point of view, make it Nori's point of view; starting with the end of the American invasion, going through the escalation of the security situation, then the bombing of the hospital, Nori in danger, and having to flee with his family. Life after losing everything.

With over 300 hours of film, I bet you have a good editor.

I have a very supportive team to back me up, and they didn't let me down. I have a beautiful editor, with a beautiful heart. I see this quality in all the films I have worked with her on.

We, sometimes, were both editing, and I was translating everything on top of that – can you imagine? It was important to enable the editor to understand the whole material in order for her, too, to make decisions, to be part of it. It has been a huge job, a huge effort. When I work with my editor, Eva Hillström, it works perfectly for me not to have a clear scene, just an idea of what we could make. I knew the material very well, which allowed me to explain an idea, and from this she would sometimes create something totally unexpected, which was brilliant. One example is the wedding scene, or the one with the shepherd kid dancing to the music.

The shepherd boy, this is so nice, I cried during that scene.

It is beautiful. I was originally going for something else; it was an improvisation. But then it suddenly became a scene, a beautiful scene. It can function the way it is in the film; you don't need to have more.

How do you feel about the general situation in this region today and how is it affecting the rest of the world?

As you can see all around you, coming from Greece, since World War Two there have never been so many people in need of shelter. I don't know how many – with Iraq, Syria, the whole refugee situation has never been this desperate. Yet, this is a global phenomenon. It doesn't matter if one comes from the Middle East, or South-East Asia, or America, or Europe – we are all connected, and we are going to be even more connected, whether we want to or not, through the climate conflict, the refugee conflict, the economic conflict, and so on. The hard truth is you cannot turn your back on this problem; we need to sit down together, and solve it together. We need to take care of the people in need, because without kindness our civilization will collapse.

Your other film, The Road to Diyarbakır*, is not filmed in the same region, but you seem to return to the region for all your films, even though you don't live there anymore.*

I come from the Middle East, and it will always be a part of me. But *The Road to Diyarbakir* was about the musician Ciwan Haco reuniting with his people after 25 years of being in exile. It was a film about living those moments with him, and it was interesting for me because I kind of felt it was a little bit about me, too.
The whole film was about identity, and the pain that comes from being caught between two cultures.

Do you have family in Iraq now?

Yes, my whole family still lives in Iraq. They live in Sulaymaniyah, in Iraq's Kurdistan, which is relatively safe compared to the rest of Iraq.

What are your expectations from the IDFA festival and the premiere?

Nowhere to Hide is a powerful film. What makes this film unique is the human angle, which makes it not another war film. The characters maintain their dignity throughout. They are not weak; there are powerful moments when everybody can identify with them. I am very proud of the film. For me, it is enough that it got into one of the biggest and perhaps most important festivals in the world. The rest is a bonus.

What kind of an audience would you like the film to have? Would you want the film to be screened in the U.S.?

I think Americans are an important audience because the subject is relevant to them. In the film, we avoid the direct political question of how much the U.S. is responsible for Iraq today. We don't place any blame, but the subtext is that everything has its consequences. The political mistakes made earlier have had fatal consequences on civilians, later, which is the case of Iraq today, represented through Nori. But, in the end, an audience is an audience – the more international the better. The European audience is also very important to me, as is the Middle Eastern.

When I watched your film, I thought: look at these people in Iraq. The same is going to happen in Syria. We must reflect on what is going on in Iraq, with respect to what is going on in Syria and many other places today.

Yes, what happened in Iraq is repeating itself in Syria. It is important to reflect on that. We cannot stop caring. For me it is not about how many minds I can change through my films – at least not anymore; it may have been when I was younger. Today, it is easy to manipulate people's minds through technology and the social media, but what I am concerned with is not the number of minds that will change, but how many are willing to think differently and to see the truth differently. If I manage to inspire just a few minds to see this, that is enough, because at least I tried.

What do you think about the refugee crisis we are facing in Europe?

I don't want to call it a refugee crisis, because there is nothing called a refugee crisis. It is more like an economic crisis, a political crisis, a war crisis, a power crisis – all these things, but not a human crisis, not a refugee crisis. Refugees are victims of other political mistakes that have been made, and we are all part of it. I don't want to talk as if we have a conspiracy, but we see the situation, we see the war, the devastation, we see all that happening in front of us, and still we don't act. Instead, we build higher walls and stronger fences, and we are too scared of losing our privileges in order to help someone else. This is how we think today. I hope this film makes people here in Europe and elsewhere see refugees in a more humanitarian manner, perhaps reflect a little bit about the human consequences of war. Tomorrow, Nori's situation could be yours. I hope not, but it is possible.

I would love to hear more about your connection to music, because music plays an important role in your film.

I am happy to hear that because that has also been a very challenging subject. I had worked with Ciwan Haco before, and I know Ciwan's music very well, but he is not a film musician. He is a musician, but his music was right for this film. Ciwan's music has all the components I needed for the film, both emotionally and visually. The

music used in the film is all improvisation. We recorded it in a little studio in northern Sweden. Ciwan watched the film together with another musician, Rasmussen, who is a good bass player and a brilliant sound mixer. It was difficult to improvise because the saz is a very complex instrument. It has quarter-tones, rather than half tones as western instruments do. But we all worked well together. In the end, they managed to make the music, and it was beautiful. For several of the pieces that needed another feel we used the Norwegian composer Gaute Barlindhaug, who also did an excellent job.
All in all, I am very happy and pleased with the music. I think it adds an important layer to the film, without pushing itself. It is beautifully made, passionate, and simple.

There is a scene that stayed in my mind: the scene with the three men dancing.
The wedding scene. Nori is dancing with his brother and another relative. The brother was later killed by ISIS. It is sad, but Nori and his family still appreciate this scene. I thought maybe they would ask us to pull it out of the film, yet they didn't; the mother was very happy that at least it was documented. But yes, it is a nice scene, full of energy.

It's a scene full of hope – of course, if you know the story it is tragic, but it's a scene full of hope, and again the tradition and the identity theme is there; it is very touching.
Good to hear that. It is powerful; I am happy with it. One of Nori's ambitions is to be heard abroad so his voice does not vanish in this world. Now I am very pleased; I feel I have fulfilled a great obligation; the job is done – at least this time around.

Did Nori watch the film?
Nori has watched an older version of the film.

Where did he watch it?
I was in Iraq, shooting the last parts…

… You went to visit him and showed him the film.

Yes, there is a town midway between Sulaymaniyah and the IDP camp that has a good connection and where we are both safe. It's been a great help for us to meet there.

And did you meet there often?

Yes. Of course I invited him and also his family several times to Sulaymaniyah in order for them to have a change of air, as they spend all their time in the IDP camp. We would work, record the voice-over, go back to meet with people, do some reshooting. We often met also in a town in the middle called Kalar. Sometimes, with the help of ambulance personnel, I would enter these so-called "no-go zones", but I would never spend the night there, otherwise it would have been very complicated for us. Nori would be in danger because of what he was doing and be under the suspicion of being a spy for the ISIS or the anti-ISIS – we had to be very careful so as not to jeopardise his own or his family's safety, and also, of course, my own.

How is Nori today?

He is still in the IDP camp with his family, along with a couple of hundred other families. He cannot return because his house was demolished during the fights in 2014. Unfortunately, Nori recently lost two of his brothers – one of them in a car accident and the other one to ISIS; he was in the army. Today, his situation is that he lives in constant insecurity and fear. But the most important thing for Nori is that he still has his family – his wife and children – around him.

A lot of people will ask, what can be done to help?

We wish to get the film to the European Parliament and apply some pressure there. We wish to express our solidarity. I don't know how, perhaps by trying to do as much good out of it as possible.

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