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Co-director of prize-winning film Still Recording tells Al-Jumhuriya about filming under chemical attacks in Eastern Ghouta, and the untold stories of life in revolutionary Syria.

In 2015, two years into the Syrian regime's siege of Eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus, Saeed Al Batal smuggled

hundreds of hours of footage depicting life in the rebel-held town of Douma to Beirut. There, together with his partner Ghiath Ayoub, they spent two years editing Still Recording. While Douma was collapsing and the revolution being stifled by intense bombardment, chemical weapons, and forced displacement, Ayoub's and Al Batal's feature documentary became an effort at giving back the voice to civilians and armed insurgents, alternating moments of levity and despair, trying to define what liberation had meant to them and exploring both where it persisted and where it strayed.

Premiering at the 2018 Venice Film Festival, where it won the top Critics' Week prize, the film deconstructs the official lines by depicting the irreducible diversity at stake in liberated Syria. As it progresses, Still Recording becomes a crucial effort at documenting the revolutionary act of filming itself.

Now, a month after its release in France and ahead of upcoming screenings at film festivals in Tunisia and South Korea, Al-Jumhuriya met with co-director Ghiath Ayoub in Beirut to discuss the painstaking process of filming and editing the documentary; the ethics of producing images of war; the ways in which militant filmmaking helps combat propaganda; as well as the directors' desire to keep on working through their archive of footage from Douma to collect evidence of war crimes and continue telling Syrian people's stories. The below is a condensed transcript of our conversation.

Al-Jumhuriya: So where did the idea to make a documentary come from?

Ghiath Ayoub: In 2011, Saeed Al Batal was arrested by the regime. In prison, he saw that the regime treated YouTubers and filmmakers in the worst possible way. So Saeed noticed that the camera was a weapon in the face of the regime's propaganda: he picked up a camera and [uploaded footage to YouTube in order to] show what was happening on the street.

From 2012, when the area started to be liberated, we had the idea to make a longer film to document the liberation, starting from Eastern Ghouta and ending in Damascus. We were filming from Damascus, and Saeed from Eastern Ghouta.

Al-Jumhuriya: Tell us about how you met Saeed. Why was he chosen to be one of the protagonists?

Ayoub: I met Saeed during the revolution and our relationship got stronger after the liberation of Douma. I used to come to Douma a lot when I was studying in Damascus, such as in 2011 for the demonstrations.

[...]

Because we shared our cameras with each other, we mixed five different cameras and made it look like a single one. It would be hard to explain who was shooting every time. It was a choice: we decided that Saeed would be the main character, because he organized the workshop at the very beginning. He's always behind the camera asking lots of questions.

Milad, the artist, I know him since 2007-8, because we studied together at Damascus University. Everyone took a different decision [years later]. I came to Lebanon, while

Milad went to Ghouta.

Al-Jumhuriya: The film begins with the Free Syrian Army liberating the Douma municipality. Why did you start at this point, instead of earlier, when the revolution was not yet armed?

Ayoub: For me, not all films can begin from the start and talk [exclusively] about the revolution. There are even films that speak exclusively about the protests. Any film is part of a big jigsaw puzzle. We had the idea to begin the film like a news report. Then we changed it to focus on characters more.

Al-Jumhuriya: Were you interrupted by bombings?

Ayoub: We lost a lot of resources in the bombing: cameras, hardware, footage, computers. In the 450 hours [of footage from Douma], we have things that start and never continue because the cameraman starts shooting and then has to stop and follow other things. The language of the film came from the daily diaries. The events happened quickly, there wasn't time to think about what the film was. That's where the name "Still Recording" came from. For me, the most interesting thing as a director was the camera protecting the cameramen. It didn't protect them from bombs, chemical gas or hunger, but from something more threatening—madness.

When Saeed was filming at the scene of a massacre [perpetrated by regime forces] at the beginning of the film, he was faced with the question: what can I do? The answer was: share what was happening. Maybe the story [could have been] that the regime destroyed us in Ghouta, but when I spoke with the cameramen, [including those not

involved in the film] from the way they spoke about [art], they seemed victorious. This was art in the face of war, life against death.

Al-Jumhuriya: When did you come to Lebanon? Were Saeed and Milad in Douma all along?

Ayoub: I left in 2013, [around] the time of the Ghouta chemical attack [on 21 August] and came to Lebanon right after. At that time, the government had just besieged Douma, and I had finished university. When you finish university, you have a month before your name is sent to the border [to prevent those avoiding mandatory military service from fleeing]. I came to Beirut and decided to wait there until Ghouta opened up a bit. Milad found a way to smuggle himself into Ghouta. We stuck in those places.

Saeed was in Eastern Ghouta with Milad. He sometimes came to visit in Damascus, but he couldn't [any longer] because of the siege. So he stayed there until 2015, when Jaysh al-Islam started looking for Saeed, so he decided to leave. He is now in Berlin.

Al-Jumhuriya: Was that chemical attack a breaking point for people elsewhere?

Ayoub: Of course. Even people outside Syria felt the effect of it. 1,500 people died overnight. It was the first time these sorts of weapons were used [in Syria]. And the siege happened immediately afterwards. That in itself was a weapon that deprived people of essential things, and from seeing their families.

Al-Jumhuriya: Were there moments when you lost hope and didn't want to carry on filming?

Ayoub: The chemical attack on Ghouta was that point. We were still filming in Damascus, but we stopped filming in Eastern Ghouta. For me as a director, when you see the main character turn off his camera in this scene, this is a way of taking a stance. Our film doesn't actually have footage of one of the most important things that happened during the war. We made the decision to put the date "21/8/2013" on the screen: like with the attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11, if anyone searches for it on Google, they'll find a lot of footage of it.

[Throughout the film] Saeed saw that his role was that of a filmmaker, not of a first respondent. But on that day, he put the camera down and helped people. So I can say that that day was a point of despair. We needed people to see what a horrible catastrophe had happened to us.

Al-Jumhuriya: By refusing to share images which were abundant in the Western media, such as those of the victims of the chemical attack, do you think that your film was giving back dignity to the people that lived in Ghouta?

Ayoub: In the two years of editing, we faced a lot of [tough] questions: both technical and ethical dilemmas. One of them was how to speak about the war, revolution, and violence without including violent images or disrespecting the people and their bodies. There is a scene where a boy finds an arm [after a bombing]. We have images of the body, but we decided that we didn't want that part. For the same reason, when someone who was taken in as prisoner was being beaten, we blurred his face out of respect.

Al-Jumhuriya: These scenes were powerful, because of or in spite of the fact you didn't share the bodies?

Ayoub: It leaves space for the viewer to imagine it. This is what cinema is. Also, [after we edited images of] the massacre, you could maybe see a leg, you see a hand, but you never see blood, or faces. But the news used a lot of these images, which was the exact opposite of what we did. The people didn’t engage with what they saw [on TV or on social media]. They just scrolled past the images, they were used to them.

Al-Jumhuriya: You included footage of several men harassing and beating up detainees, though they were supposedly on the side of the revolution all along, and other scenes casting a shadow on some moments of the revolution. Some fighters also voice criticism of the commanders and their tactics. Did you hesitate to include critical scenes into an otherwise pro-revolution film?

Ayoub: For us, the film was a way to review the past. We were looking back to see our mistakes and the lessons we could learn to improve on what we had done for the next revolution. So we could act on what we had learned. One of our aims was to fight propaganda. In the years that passed since the start of the uprising, we learned how propaganda worked. For me, if we took these scenes out, we’d be making propaganda for the revolution. There’s no such thing as a “clean” revolution and these scenes are as close to reality as possible.

Al-Jumhuriya: When characters tried to tell you when to film, you actually started recording them before they tell you to. Was it a choice to highlight how everyone tried to manipulate images?

Ayoub: There are people who say “don’t film,” and others

who ask to be filmed—it's part of wanting to control what you're shooting. From 2011 onwards, everyone in Eastern Ghouta believed in the necessity of documenting the events through film. We are speaking about the camera and that way you feel like the camera itself is a character. That's why there are also some empty scenes [such as when cameramen try to fix the camera and get it into the right position], if I can say that, which would be unusual for a film.

Al-Jumhuriya: Did the camera presence affect how the characters acted in front of it, even when they didn't directly interact with it?

Ayoub: In the beginning, yes. But then the characters became used to it always being around, it was like an extension of the cameraman's arm. By the end, this formed the unique relationship between the characters, the camera, and the cameramen. There was a scene with two fighters and a cameraman, Abu Kinan, on the roof. A sniper started firing at them, and they decided to throw a grenade. For me as a director it was a very important scene, because the fighters tell the cameraman to get down: "If they fire at us, we are going to die." So the cameraman says, "What's happening to you is happening to me as well."

The fighters throw the grenade and run down, but the camera stays filming until the end and the last one to go down is the cameraman. If a journalist was going to make this film, he would be the first one to run to safety. A stranger, somebody from the outside, they wouldn't put themselves in such danger.

To tell what was important for us, we learned to shoot, to

edit. None of us had studied cinema; we learned on the spot.

Al-Jumhuriya: Speaking of the scene on the roof, the two fighters tell Abu Kinan that maybe they should give him a rifle. Was this a question the cameramen often asked themselves? Did any of them hesitate to pick up actual weapons?

Ayoub: No, they believed that what we were doing was more powerful than guns. Only in the last scene you see that one of the cameramen had a handgun, but this wasn't to fight, this was for protection.

Al-Jumhuriya: Most of the female characters in Still Recording are in Damascus; they are Milad's friends partying with him. And apart from one woman who spoke to the camera towards the end, we don't see any women in Douma. Why is that?

Ayoub: One of the things that was most destructive during the revolution was the generalization or stereotyping. The women we see in Damascus, all of Damascus isn't like that. Showing these women is more about showing who Milad is, showing his personality and who are his friends.

During the revolution in Douma we had a lot of women's voices. Their role was organizing and helping with the protests. And our cameramen were mostly filming later, at the frontline, and there were no women there at that point. When we were in the editing room, we could have edited more women in, but we decided to express the way the society treated women. The society within Eastern Ghouta was quite conservative and the women wouldn't be allowed to [appear on film] in the same way as the men.

We found out later that there were actually a lot of female camerawomen in Eastern Ghouta, as some of them appear in other archives. Some were women filming other women. I believe that soon we will be seeing films from Eastern Ghouta specifically talking about Ghouta's women. There are still a lot of stories within the footage that maybe we can talk about. Our archive is open to anyone else who wants to come and tell a different story. Maybe it can complement another person's footage and complete the story that they are telling about a certain cameraman.

Al-Jumhuriya: What are the purposes of keeping your archive relatively open?

Ayoub: We're starting to gather evidence [of war crimes] against the regime, as the archive has a lot of evidence that can be used. The footage is with us in Beirut and we can share it with those who contact us. We didn't want to put it online, because that would mean that anyone could come and exploit the footage to make a pro-regime film, distorting the events. It would be easy to do.

Our film is a call to everyone who carried a camera from 2011 to open their own archives and tell a story. Now, we are in conflict with the regime about the memory of the war and whose story we are going to tell. We are ready to share the experience in the editing room with anyone who wants to make a film helping to tell the stories of the people.

Al-Jumhuriya: How was Still Recording funded?

Ayoub: We are the "Rousl Group"—"the prophets;" the idea is that many of us should be together, not just one. It was funded in two stages. From 2011 to 2015, we were covering our own costs. I was working in design in Beirut and was

sending money [to our crew in Ghouta]. Between 2011 and 2013 most of the cameramen were also filming for Reuters and other news agencies. Everybody was working on the side to finance the film.

The second part was when Saeed sent me the footage in 2015 and we met Bidayyat, our production company. Bidayyat co-produced it and they continued finding funds for us and gave us a studio for two years with editors and sound. Bidayyat are non-profit producers, which was a really a good mentality, because we could stay independent as much as possible. We wanted a partner, but we didn't want anyone to give us deadlines. We had to extract the film from 450 hours of footage, which was a very long process. When you're looking at that footage, there are a lot of personal questions that you need to find answers to. The role of Bidayyat is very brave and courageous. When we first came there, we told them we had 450 hours of footage, which was a huge amount that most companies wouldn't accept, and we were two directors inside the editing room. And for me and Saeed, it was the first feature documentary film that we'd done, and at the same time we didn't want anyone to give us a deadline. Before we even started, we thought we would never get to the end and that no producer would ever want it. We went on a big adventure.

CNC, Doha, World Cinema Fund, and others did some financing, too. But it was a low-budget film.

Al-Jumhuriya: Given that the film received international attention and acclaim, are you worried that Western audiences will misinterpret it and find some scenes controversial?

Ayoub: The film addresses Syria’s new generation, as it can open doors for them. [We were speaking to Syria’s youth,] either living inside or outside Syria. Still Recording is not for the West, it’s actually quite the opposite. We did a private screening in Beirut with 500 people (Lebanese and Syrians) and the audience felt like the film was speaking to them. We cannot screen the film in Syria yet, because of the regime, but our goal is not to hold private screenings in Damascus. We’ve shown the film in Idlib with friends.

Still Recording is meant to break stereotypes. We wanted to tell the truth about the people living in Ghouta. If the Westerners watch the film and focus on one scene instead of looking at the whole film, it will be their fault. Syria is not just one color, it is full of different colors. You can’t paint it with one brush. The idea behind the revolution was how to accept the others, even when they thought differently from you. In the film, there were more [hard-line and] more conservative Muslims and the more moderate ones, and that’s what Syria is—it’s lots of things and people together.

Al-Jumhuriya: In one of the scenes, a cameraman is criticized by locals for having long hair. Were there other moments when the difference between the artists’ and the locals’ lifestyles became an issue?

Ayoub: Saeed, Milad, and myself, we are not from Douma. We are artists, we have long hair and I even went there with my earrings. Syria is full of different people and we lived there and they accepted us. That’s one of the layers of the film: in the future, we need to have the space to all live together. The idea isn’t that all of the opposition areas are Islamist. It’s the propaganda that [lumps in] all Syrians with Jabhat al-Nusra or Daesh.