

# With Arab-on-Arab Violence on the Rise, One Director Has Had Enough

**In his film, 'Living in the Shadow of Death,' Bilal Yousef dives into the gun violence that has claimed the lives of hundreds of young Arabs**

**Article by Sheren Falah Saab**

In November 2018, Saad Jabali was shot dead at his family's grocery store in the town of Taibeh. His mother, Watfa, witnessed her son's death from her home watching the video feed from the store's security cameras.

"I heard gunshots, I ran to look at the screen, and then I ran down to the street," Watfa recalls in a new documentary, "Living in the Shadow of Death," directed by Bilal Yousef. "I shouted, 'Saad, Saad.' I kept shouting with all my strength and when he didn't answer, I knew he was dead. I heard the bullet that penetrated my son's heart. How can I go on with my life? How can I allow another mother to experience what I have experienced?"

"I gave the police the name of the person who murdered my son and I said to them, 'I called you twice, three times, four times, what did you do?' There is no safe place, not even at [weddings](#), not at mourners' tents, and not at [funerals](#). We feel we are under siege and threatened everywhere we go, all the time. Our homes have become traps. Where shall we go?"

Yousef's film, which is part of the Jerusalem Film Festival's documentary competition this year, shines a spotlight on the issue of violence and murder in Arab society and tells the story of bereaved mothers whose children have been killed by gun violence.

Jabali's loss is just the tip of the iceberg of the most burning issue facing [the Arab community in Israel](#): violent crime. Last year saw 126 murders in the community, an all-time high. Since 2019, 382 Arab citizens have been murdered. Only a small number of suspects have been arrested and brought to trial.

The director, who finds it challenging provide his own young family with a sense of security, documented up close, for four years, the problem of violence in a society that he is a part of. In scene after scene, he opens a window into the stories of the dead – some of them [killed by a stray bullet](#) – as told by the victims' bereaved loved ones.

Yousef, 42, is a director and cinema lecturer from the village of Daburiyya at the foot of Mount Tabor. He is married to Inas and is a father of four children. In his previous documentaries, he also focused on political and social issues among Palestinian citizens of Israel.

In 2007, he won the Spirit of Freedom Award at the Jerusalem Film Festival with the film "Crossing Borders," which tells the story of two feminist Arab women fighting for equal rights with the men in their lives. Two years later, he won a Muhr Arab award at the Dubai Film Festival and the Best Film at the Cagliari Film Festival in Italy for his film "Back to One's Roots," which grapples with the [question of identity for Palestinians in Israel](#).

Contrary to his previous films, in which he remains behind the camera, in "Living in the Shadow of Death" Yousef weaves in his own story as a Palestinian citizen of Israel who is troubled by the violence and murders that occur on an almost daily basis. In the first scene, he recounts an event that affected him personally, the [murder of the Palestinian singer Shafik Kabha](#) in 2013.

"That was in October on the night of elections for the local council," he says. "At first, there were all sorts of reports in the Arab media about the killing of a singer. When Shafik Kabha's name was published, I was shocked. I knew him. I cried, but not ordinary tears. I took it really hard because I felt that it wasn't just that Shafik had been murdered, but that my childhood memories had been taken from me. He was a singer we grew up on as kids. I thought perhaps that Shafik's murder would lead to a significant and widespread response because of his popularity and the large funeral. But I didn't see an appropriate reaction from the leadership or from society.

"From year to year, the number of people murdered just goes up. What led me to make the movie was a process of anger and fear that had accumulated within me. I felt a personal need to express my frustration at the situation. The lives of young people are being taken for nothing. It's frustrating, how simple it is to murder someone. How can this be explained? What I tried to do in the film was to dive into the depths of the pain."

## **No safe place**

The film successfully transmits the feelings of members of the Arab community, how they have no sense of security in the shadow of the shootings and murders. Bilal despairs to the point that he decides to leave Daburiyya and move to the village of Shimsheet, where he believes it is much safer. But there too, his hopes are dashed and Yousef discovers that the possibility of being accepted in a Jewish community is unlikely. In his despair, he even considers moving the family to Jenin.

"I am not some big hero," Yousef says. "I tried to look for a safer place for my family. That is something basic, the need to live. At any given moment, you could be shot because there is no one to enforce the law in the place where you live. It's a terrible feeling. We live in a daily drama. My personal story – the desire to find a home in a Jewish community – reflects the deepest strata of Arab society."

Alongside his personal story, in the film Yousef describes his fears for others and the psychological toll that the violence takes on them. "The people in our society are doubly scared. On the one hand, there is the daily fear of

violence; on the other hand, a fear of the establishment. There is no trust in the establishment in our society. People are afraid to go out and demonstrate, to protest. Many fear they will be fired for a tweet and that explains why there is no appropriate reaction. And then there are [people who shout, 'death to Arabs.'](#) Arab lives are not equal here. And there is no concrete sense of security.”

In September 2021, Yousef went to demonstrate in front of the home of Public Security Minister Omer Bar-Lev alongside other activists and mothers whose children had been murdered. “If we continue to sit with our arms crossed, it will reach every home. What pushed me to demonstrate is the fact that I have children and I do not want to live in a place where the lives of my children are forsaken,” says Yousef.

“The establishment doesn’t want to understand us or to look at our suffering. I am not willing to live in a society where people are afraid to even sit out on their balconies. No one feels safe. When people are murdered sometimes just by a stray bullet, that requires a response from the government. I can guess what the government would do if those murdered were Jews.”

The question of who is responsible for the situation in Arab society arises more than once in the film. Just as he is not afraid to point the blame at the establishment, Yousef doesn’t spare the society he comes from. In one scene in the film, we see Kamel Rayan, who set up the Aman Center to combat crime and violence in the Arab community after his son, Murad, was murdered in 2009. His murder has yet to be solved.

“When we blame the state, we are not saying anything new, because the desire of the state is not to see a single Palestinian Arab here,” says Rayan. “But does that absolve us of responsibility? Does that absolve us from rethinking who we are? We are a society that is marching into the abyss. The fight for life should never be dependent on the enemy or a rival or even a friend.”

Contrary to what many people think, Yousef says that Palestinian society has no problem cooperating with the police, and he is critical of the state’s laxity in dealing with the issue of violence. “Our community is not the police or a law enforcement body that can conduct arrests in order to stop this from happening,” he says.

“When prisoners escaped from Gilboa Prison, the public security minister promised they would be caught. So why doesn’t he act so decisively when three or four young Arabs are murdered in a day? Why doesn’t he feel the same way about it? There is no desire here. It’s not just the police. There are other elements and other factors that have led to the situation in which we find ourselves today – for example, insufficient budgets for education, culture and housing.”

As well as the issue of societal responsibility, the film also touches on the contribution of [Palestinian informants who have been resettled in Israel](#) to the rates of crime and violence. It features an interview with Prof. Menachem Hofnung, a jurist and political science researcher from Jerusalem's Hebrew University, who says, "There is a problem with the integration of informants from the West Bank in Israel, and it is also difficult for the second generation to integrate into society. Because of the background they come from, they have a significant contribution to the increase in violence in Arab society."

Hofnung says a significant number of Palestinian informants were recruited to work for Israel because they had a criminal past. "They take someone who committed a crime and say to him, 'Either we put you on trial or you can work for us. Go choose.' Then when they move to Israel, that's what they know how to do and that's how they know to make a living, through channels they already were familiar with from before. They have experience using violence and won't hesitate to use it again."

Hofnung also notes that most of the informants are sent to live in communities in Israel's so-called periphery. "If you were to send informants to live in north Tel Aviv, there would be a massive uproar. But they are sent to other places where there is less resistance to their presence by the population."

The most difficult moments to watch are those in which we see the great frustration of the bereaved mothers who turn to the police expecting to find out who is responsible for the murder of their children and for the most part, are left without answers.

One of them is [Mona Khalil](#), a resident of the Khalisa neighborhood in Haifa, who in front of the cameras points to the exact spot where her son, Khalil, was murdered. "Do you see the mosque? That's where my son was murdered. And here's the police station; hardly 100 meters away. I would march to the end of the earth to get justice for our children. Why is there no justice for the young men who have been murdered?"

Meeting with the mothers whose sons were murdered was a difficult challenge for the director. "The most difficult thing for me was sitting down with a bereaved mother, a mother who lost her son two or three months ago and talking with her about him and about her feelings. It really tore me up," he says.

"I lost my mother when I was young and every time I sat with one of those mothers, I saw my mother. While my mother's death may have been natural, hearing a mother speaking about loss and bereavement and the loss of her son is something that requires a lot of psychological strength to deal with. Sometimes I cracked."

In the final scene in the film, Yousef returns to the personal, family place where the process of the film began. He documents the moment when his

daughter is born, and through this process poses once again the questions that stands at the foundation of his investigation.

How can one live in the shadow of death? What future awaits these children? He concludes that change will only come when the state changes its policies. "I don't make decisions. I'm not a politician and what is left to me is cinema as a tool through which I can cry out my anguish."