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PRESENT



# NEZOUH

A FILM BY SOUDADE KAADAN

2022 – UK – SYRIA – FRANCE – QATAR – DRAMA – ARABIC – 103'

**mk2**  
FILMS

## SYNOPSIS

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14-year-old Zeina and her family are the last to have stayed in their besieged hometown of Damascus in Syria. A missile rips a giant hole in their home, exposing them to the outside world. When a rope is mysteriously lowered into the hole, Zeina gets her first taste of freedom, and an unimaginable world of possibility opens up for her. As the violence outside escalates, the family is pressured to evacuate, but Mutaz, her father is adamant that they stay, refusing to flee to the uncertain life of a refugee. Faced with a life-or-death dilemma, Zeina and Hala, her mother, must make the choice whether to stay or leave.

## INTERVIEW WITH SOUDADE KAADAN - Director

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**NEZOUH is not the common film about Syrian refugees. How did you come up with this unique metaphorical approach?**

At the time I started writing *Nezouh*, there was a certain expectation as to how a Syrian film should look – it was mostly informative, with a first-degree narrative to explain and simplify the complexity of a Syrian war for a white Western audience. Most of the refugee films about Syria were either trying to present us as victims or heroes, in a black and white narrative. But of course, we are neither one nor the other, like any human being. In all my films, I wanted the audience to feel that Syrian refugees were their equals. The family in *Nezouh*, could be any family around the world who is facing a dilemma of whether to stay or leave everything behind.

Lately, I've begun to believe that the more immersed a story is in the local reality, the more universal it suddenly becomes. Symbols, metaphors, and a tale-like approach elevate and transcend the local reality to the universal. That's why I chose the simple metaphor of a family house that endures changes in Damascus. In this city, houses are usually closed: the curtains try to hide the interiors from the neighbours. With the bombing, you could see, unfortunately, for the first time, open ceilings as open windows facing the sky and the stars. I wanted to show that not only the physical houses changed in Damascus, but also that the family's dynamic changed when Syrian women started to take the lead.

**What were the most important challenges in writing the script?**

Our challenge usually is finding financing for our films in Arabic language, not writing our films! I usually write as a writer director based on an image I see, and it becomes the core of the film later. For *Nezouh*, I first saw a little girl looking at the stars from an opening in the ceiling. And then, the characters led me to their story. Later, the challenge became to balance personal stories, fictional plot, war reality and magic realism in a film. How to express war without the usual action bombing scenes we see in films with similar topics. How to show the danger approaching the house without seeing it. And how to discover the horror of war without being graphic.

Since the war in Syria was not a normal war, and since it lasted 10 years, normal people did find and invent ways to resist and survive the war reality by making daily life as normal as it could be. So, you see someone listening to music, enjoying those precious life moment while everything was destroyed around them. I wanted to show those most unique and cherished moments.

**How would you describe the special link between the mother and the daughter? What are the differences between the two generations of women?**

I tried to show the symmetry between the daughter and the mother and their journey together. The first opening shot of *Nezouh* shows Zeina hiding under her bed, trying to hide

her body while drawing, and the last shot of the film sees her smile under the sun, wearing a dress, holding a fishing rod as a symbol that she is not afraid anymore and that she can do anything. Mother and daughter both change after the bombshell partially destroys their house: the girl decides to discover the outside world, and the mother decides to leave the city. They both decide to leave almost in the same moment in the dancing scene: the mum prepares the bag to escape with her passports, and the girl climbs the rope even though she is afraid of heights. I tried to show that they both take the most important decision in their life during this moment of dance. The most important decisions we take in our life are often taken in the most ordinary daily life settings.

Even if they have different reactions – as two different generations –, and even if the mother Hala is trying to protect Zeina's future so she would have a different life than her, they both have a lot of moments of resonance during their journey. They both look at images of the sea (on the house roof and later in the school roof) and start to dream about exciting new projects, a new life, even if it looks impossible as there's no sea in Damascus. Between their reality, their hopes, and their dream, what's obvious is that neither of them would accept to go back to the previous traditional dynamic of Damascus patriarchal society.

### **The filmmaking is very rich and creative. What was your goal in cinematic terms?**

I tried to show visually three phases in the film: before the bomb, after the bomb and through the streets of the city. In the prologue of the film, before the bombing, we are in darkness, with a circular camera movement to show how they are trapped in this house. After the bombing, the light invades the house, the colors are more vibrant, and the camera movement is tilting up to the sky in vertical movement between the house and the sky as a symbol of Zeina aspiration and dreams. Once we leave the house, the color palette is paler, the city is desolated, destroyed, and the camera is in traveling, steady cam in horizontal movement. I had an amazing grip and camera team, and with H  l  ne Louvart's lens, we achieved both poetic images and lighting, with an authentic setting and context.

The film shifts to magic realism from Zeina's POV after the bomb has fallen on their house. It starts with her illusion of seeing her father swallowed by the house, and then she gradually starts to see the sea in the sky. Once her mum Hala starts changing, and decides to leave the house, she also starts to see Zeina's fantasy moments, but she doesn't succeed as an adult to be fully in her universe. That's why she can see the pigeon at the window, but she can't skim rocks in the sky.

As much as the film is poetic, with magic realism moment, and a fairytale approach, it's deeply anchored in Syrian reality. It was important for me that the audience wouldn't feel the difference between VFX shots, SFX and the production design of the film. Even in the magic realism moments, we tried to make the effects subtle and as integrated as possible. I am grateful that we had a great team who believed in the story and my vision and went beyond everything to achieve this. Production designer Osman   zcan, SFX Serdal AteŐ, and VFX supervisor Ahmed Yousry made long research about Syria, based on archive material and their own photos. It was important for me to represent my city subtly, with authenticity. Ahmed Yousry – who usually works on Hollywood big budget films –, managed to make the VFX for our film within our budget and with the same quality. I think with those passionate projects, you can bring the best of talents if they enjoy making it and believe in the necessity and urgency to tell this story in this approach.

**You have assembled a great cast which works perfectly as a family. What did the actors bring to the film?**

I love working with actors, I believe they are the spirit of the film. This is why I take a lot of time during casting. I like to mix between stars, professional actors, and first-time actors in the cast. I believe each one of them can bring something new to the film.

In *Nezouh*, the only two professional actors were Kinda Alloush and Samer Al Masri, who are two big stars in the Arab region. The fact that this film is about the Syrian war, with everyone in exile now, made the four actors feel like a real family. It made them feel as if they were back in Syria, their home.

I confirmed Kinda Alloush first as I saw she could play Hala and her subtle but radical transformation along her character's journey. The biggest issue was to find an actress for Zeina, the daughter. It's not easy to find a 14-year-old Syrian actress, it really took us months! But once I saw Hala Zein, I knew immediately that she would be able to play the role. Our casting director noticed her in a restaurant. She had never even thought of acting before. But after one month of rehearsals with Nizar Al Ani – who plays Amer, her neighbour – on voice, improvisation, climbing ropes, she completely changed and proved that she is a brave, smart, talented actress that can do anything. She continuously amazed me and pushed herself further and went beyond our expectations.

**What was it like winning big in Sundance and Venice with *Aziza* (2019) and *The Day I Lost My Shadow* (2018) and did this noticeably open more doors for making *NEZOUH*?**

I was so grateful and proud to win these awards for two films which are so different in genre, mood, and storytelling. These awards opened amazing opportunities to me in different styles as a director. They also helped me find the best partners to make *Nezouh*, which gathers the BFI, Film4, Starlight, mk2 films and Mad Solutions.

**What do you hope that the audience will take away from this film?**

Firstly, I hope that the audience will enjoy the film on two levels: cinematically and for the story it tells. Then, I want them to really think about how difficult it was for this family to take the decision to leave. *Nezouh* tells the story of a family before they leave the country and become refugees, who will still have a long journey ahead of them.

On the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, displaced people are simply seen as refugees. People cannot understand how difficult it was for them to take the decision to leave. No one wants to leave everything – homeland, memories, identities – to become a stranger, burden with stereotypes, unless there's a real threat on their lives. That's why I decided that the character of the father would firmly refuse to leave the house, even when things become dangerous, so as the audience would end up feel how mad it is to stay. At this moment, I hope they would realize why people become refugees.

## ABOUT SOUDADE KAADAN - Director

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Soudade Kaadan is a Syrian director, born in France in 1979, based in London. She studied theater criticism in the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Syria and filmmaking at Saint Joseph University (IESAV) Lebanon. Her first feature fiction film *The Day I Lost my Shadow* was awarded the Lion of The Future for best debut at the 2018 Venice Film Festival, and the jury prize for directing at the LA Film Festival, and screened at various festivals including TIFF, BFI London, Busan and IFFR. Her short film *Aziza* won the Sundance Grand Jury Prize in 2019.

### FILMOGRAPHY

<b>2022</b>	<b>NEZOUH</b>   Feature, 103'
<b>2019</b>	<b>AZIZA</b>   Short, 13'
<b>2018</b>	<b>THE DAY I LOST MY SHADOW</b>   Feature, 95'
<b>2017</b>	<b>OBSCURE</b>   Documentary, 67'
<b>2016</b>	<b>BESIEGED BREAD</b>   Short, 12'
<b>2010</b>	<b>DAMASCUS ROOF AND TALES OF PARADISE</b>   Documentary, 52'
<b>2008</b>	<b>TWO CITIES AND A PRISON</b>   Documentary, 39'

## CAST

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Zeina

Hala

Motaz

Amer

Woman In Black Haja

Abu Muthher

Abu El Sheeb

Hala Zein

Kinda Alloush

Samir al-Masri

Nizar Alani

Darina Al Joundi

Nabil Abousalih

Samer Seyyid Ali

## CREW

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Writer/Director	Soudade Kaadan
Producers	Yu-Fai Suen Soudade Kaadan Marc Bordure
Executive Producer	Yuan Zhang Alaa Karkouti Ben Coren Daniel Batsek Donna Gigliotti Farhana Bhula Lizzie Francke Peter Luo
Associate Producers	Amira Kaadan Yuxin Liu
Co-Producers	Nancy Xu Lizzy Yang Liu
Director of photography	Helene Louvart Burrak Kanbir
Editors	Soudade Kaadan Nelly Quettier
Production designer	Osman Ozcan
VFX	Ahmed Yousry
Key Grip and SFX	Serdal Ateş
Line Producers	Emre Oskay
Chief Lighting Technician	Salih Murat Aşık
Re-Recording Mixer	Steve Single
Sound Designers	Thomas Robert Paul Davies
Costume Designer	Selin Sözen
Composers	Rob Lane Rob Manning
International sales	mk2 Films



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