

## **Ajyal Film Festival screens *Captains of Zaatari*, a powerful call to create meaningful opportunities for refugees**

- *8 years in the making and edited from 700 hours of footage, 'Captains of Zaatari' underlines the need for the world to improve the empowerment of refugees*
- *Through the real lives of Mahmoud Dagher and Fawzi Qatleesh, director Ali El Arabi creates a world that moves you with their determination and passion for their first love, soccer*

**Doha, Qatar; November 10, 2021:** Some films bring fiction to life, others take life to fantasy. And then there are films that capture a true slice of reality without frills to deepen understanding of the wonder that is life in itself.

***Captains of Zaatari*** (Egypt/2021), which marks its Middle East Premiere at the ninth Ajyal Film Festival, presented by the Doha Film Institute, is a film that moves you with its raw energy and multi-layered subtexts. There is much more you will take away from the film than the coming-of-age story of its two real-life protagonists – Mahmoud Dagher and Fawzi Qatleesh.

What makes the movie even more rich is that it charts the evolution of Mahmoud and Fawzi from two wide-eyed teenagers to adults who are now role models to the hundreds of thousands of young people whose lives revolve in and around refugee camps.

As refugees themselves at Jordan's Zaatari Camp, the incredible story of these two friends has gained the attention of organisations from the United Nations to the Arab League calling both of them to present their stories to inspire other young people in similar situations, in a contentious existence outside of their control.

But weaving a magic wand and bringing their lives to cinema is more than filmmaking. It is a director's passion for the medium that the to invest eight years of his life into making this film.

And that makes the words of Ali El Arabi, the director of *Captains of Zaatari*, who spoke to the media at Ajyal 2021, ever more compelling.

"The film has evolved as a tool to educate the world differently about refugees," he says, "not only in meeting their basic needs, but that the world must create real opportunities and empower them in a way that they can realise their aspirations much like any other individual in the world."

El Arabi eloquently communicated the need for the world to look at refugees not just with empathy but as complete human beings that deserve to be uplifted.

In preparing and making the film, El Arabi undertook 21 trips to refugee camps across the region. For one year, at Zaatari, he just let the camera roll for some 80 odd hours, when Mahmoud and Fawzi were impressionable teenagers. "I played a lot of football with them and used practically nothing of the footage we shot because my goal was to build a strong relationship with them so that the presence of a camera would not become a distraction."

The hard work that El Arabi and his team put in did not go in vain: It has already been at 85 festivals and played at theatres in the US and Russia, with more markets opening up. The filmmaker explained that the film was commercially successful but also helped raise significant funds for refugee support.

But there has been a larger impact at an individual level for the two protagonists: Mahmoud says his dreams about being a footballer have changed. He believes he has a responsibility towards refugees, especially youth who look up to him and Fawzi as role models. "I feel like I am their spokesperson," adds Mahmoud, who continues to live in Zaatar.

"What we want is for the world to change the rules that apply to refugees; we must look beyond meeting their basic necessities – which of course matters – but that must not be the end goal. Let us stop looking at refugees as statistics. They are people who have dreams and our film's message has no ceiling, no borders. It is a call out to all – me, you and everyone – that it is our responsibility to ensure their upliftment," concluded El Arabi.

The film will be screened again on Saturday, Nov. 13, 4.30 PM at Vox Cinemas. Tickets for Ajyal 2021 and can be purchased at [www.dohafileminstitute.com/filmfestival](http://www.dohafileminstitute.com/filmfestival).

The seven-day festival until Nov. 13, 2021, has a diverse mix of virtual and in-person events including film screenings, interactive discussions, multi-media art exhibit, Qatar's largest pop-culture event Geekdom, and a drive-in cinema as part of a multisensory experience for all ages.

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## About Doha Film Institute:

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute's platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar's 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

## Doha Film Institute:

Twitter: @DohaFilm; Instagram: @DohaFilm; Facebook: [www.facebook.com/DohaFilmInstitute](https://www.facebook.com/DohaFilmInstitute)

## About Ajyal Film Festival:

Ajyal Film Festival is an annual celebration of film designed to nurture young minds and support the development of mindful global citizens and thoughtful future leaders. 'Ajyal', Arabic for 'generations', brings people of all ages together through screenings and events that inspire creative interaction and stimulate cinematic dialogue.

Ajyal Film Festival builds on the Doha Film Institute's history of community-based programming. Through its jury programme, youth between the ages of 8 and 25 are given an opportunity to watch, analyse and discuss global cinema and culture, developing self-confidence, independent critical thinking skills, self-expression, and an appreciation of cinema, while making new friends and discovering global cultures.

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For more information, please contact:

**Rania Aissaoui**

[Rania.aissaoui@bluerubicon.qa](mailto:Rania.aissaoui@bluerubicon.qa)

**Ajyal Film Festival**

**مهرجان أجيال السينمائي**

+974 3111 5779