

## Qumra ‘expanded our horizon when the world closed down’ say Arab filmmakers helming feature projects

- *Directors of feature film projects supported by the Doha Film Institute share their experiences of collaborating during the pandemic and the value of Qumra*

**Doha, Qatar; March 18, 2021:** In a tumultuous year for young filmmakers in the Arab world facing the impact of a pandemic, ensuring that their cinematic journey was uninterrupted was not an easy task. For filmmakers in Lebanon, there was the added challenge of the street protests and the blast that rocked the capital city.

For filmmakers who were nurturing their ambition to bring to screen their feature films, the situation could not have been more challenging. To overcome this, they found comfort in each other, with the mentoring sessions of the Doha Film Institute serving as a platform that united them and inspired them to work closer to the goals.

This was the overarching sentiment of the young filmmakers whose feature projects are being showcased at Qumra, the DFI’s annual talent incubator for Arab cinema. Mounia Akl, young Lebanese filmmaker, captured the mood, stating: “Qumra helped expand our horizon when the world was closing down. It gave us the opportunity to continue to have the context to help make things. It led to more profound relationships with people, with an urge to protect each other and connect at a different level.”

Her film, *Costa Bravo Lebanon* (Lebanon, France, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Qatar/Arabic/2022), about a free-spirited family that escaped the toxic pollution of Beirut is a ‘Work-in-Progress’ Qumra Project. She said: “[At Qumra], I feel like I am learning again. I have been most excited about the masterclasses [by the Qumra Masters] and it has been a well-planned online experience for me.”

Ely Dagher, whose film *Waves 98* was awarded the short film Palme d’Or at Cannes Film Festival, participates in Qumra with his project, *The Sea Ahead* (Lebanon, France, Belgium, USA, Qatar/Arabic/2021), a psychological drama about a young woman who returns home after a long absence and finds herself reconnecting with the familiar yet now strange life she had left.

“The pandemic was a huge blow to the cinema world, and it added to the challenges we already faced. Qumra helped us to push our film out there. In fact, a lot of answers [regarding the film’s sales and moving forward strategy] came from Qumra.” He said shooting his film was logistically challenging with the ongoing street protests and then the Beirut blasts happened setting him back again, as he paused to take in the impact of the incident that had resonance in the story he was telling too.

Carlo Francisco Manatad, director of *Whether the Weather is Fine* (Philippines, France, Singapore, Germany, Indonesia, Qatar/ Waray/ 2021) said Qumra was “quite helpful. I was impressed by how it matched us with industry experts, which helps the project in the long-run.” His film follows Miguel after he wakes up in the chaos of Typhoon Haiyan, which destroyed Tacloban—a coastal city in the Philippines, in November 2013.

The sentiment was shared by Amil Shivji, a filmmaker based in Tanzania. “Qumra has done a spectacular job of organising the online event. I have heard amazing stories of the previous editions.” His film, *Tug of War* (Tanzania, South Africa, Germany, Qatar/2021) is about a runaway Indian-Zanzibari bride who forms a strong bond with a young communist in the winding alleyways of 1950s British colonial Zanzibar.

Highlighting the diversity of the feature film projects nurtured by Qumra is *The Pearl* (Qatar/Arabic) about a tech-obsessed Qatari boy who is detached from his family and travels back in time to an era before his technology existed. Its director Noor Al-Nasr said films are her passion and with *The Pearl*, she tells a story that connects her to her own roots. “I had a discussion with my mother to learn that her father was a pearl diving captain and wondered what it would like for my younger brothers to meet him.”

Tunisian filmmaker Youssef Chebbi is the director of *Ashkal* (Tunisia, Qatar, France/Arabic) set in the gardens of Carthage, a new neighbourhood in Tunis where modern construction co-exists with abandoned sites. He said the investigative film drew inspiration from real life, watching a new city develop only to see the construction stop and now remain half-finished.

Lebanese filmmaker Meedo Taha bases his film *A Road to Damascus* (Lebanon, France, Qatar/Arabic) on his novel, about an ambitious policewoman who conducts a murder investigation that threatens to turn her hometown against her. He said the film also reflects the “lifelong struggle” the Lebanese face, “where no decision can be made without politics infiltrating every dark corner of our life. We sit on a ticking timebomb.”

Mahmoud Kaabour, another Lebanese filmmaker, also draws on life experiences for his film, *Handala, the Boy Without a Face* (Lebanon, Qatar/Arabic). “Handala is the most famous character out of the Arab world – a Palestinian refugee whose back is turned to us. I have been documenting the appearances of Handala around the world. He is always ten years old and I was a refugee at his age; maybe we became friends then.”

Public can access Qumra online by purchasing a Qumra Pass that offers the full Qumra Screenings and Qumra Talks programmes. Qumra Pass is open to all citizens and residents of Qatar and the MENA region, and applications will be processed on a first-come first-serve basis. The Qumra Pass is priced at QAR 500; students and Culture Pass by Qatar Museums holders can purchase it for a discounted price of QAR 350.

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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.

#### **About Qumra**

Directors and Producers attached to 48 projects in development and post-production are invited to participate in the event. They will include a number of emerging filmmakers from Qatar, as well as recipients of funding from the Institute’s Grants Programme. The robust programme will feature industry meetings designed to assist with propelling projects to their next stages of development, including master classes, work-in-progress screenings, bespoke matchmaking sessions and tailored workshops with industry experts. This creative exchange will take place alongside a programme of public screenings curated with input from the Qumra Masters.



The event is organised in three main sections: The Qumra Master Classes are daily sessions; each led by one of the Masters. The participating filmmakers have full access to these sessions, which are also open to accredited industry guests to attend in an observational capacity.

The Qumra Meetings are a series of one-on-one meetings, workshops and tailored mentoring sessions between representatives from the selected projects and seasoned industry experts.

The Qumra Screenings are open to the public and feature projects funded by the Institute through its grants and co-financing initiatives, as well as a series of films chosen by the Qumra Masters accompanied by Q&A sessions. The Arabic term 'qumra' is popularly said to be the origin of the word 'camera', and to have been used by the scientist, astronomer and mathematician Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham, 965-c.1040 CE), whose work in optics laid out the principles of the camera obscura.