



Recycle City



Mahmoud Massad has never been afraid to focus on the underbelly of contemporary Middle-Eastern life. In his latest documentary, he explores the poverty, piety and politics of his hometown of Zarqa.

Words: *Eddie Taylor* Pictures: *Sabri Hakim*

“It doesn’t matter how many times you tell people,” complains filmmaker Mahmoud al-Massad, “they can’t comprehend that I have absolutely no connection with Musab Abu Zarqawi. Not one. Not ideological, not political, not religious, not even family. I’m not even remotely interested in him. But that’s not the story people want to hear.”

Massad had just been interviewed by a TV station in Holland, where he lives with his wife and young son, about Zarqa, the brutally misnamed Jordanian town of ash-grey streets and desolate tenements where both he and the now deceased Zarqawi were born and raised. In his gentle, considered manner, he discussed the frustrations and hardships in the town that, when intermingled with devout faith, have created a community squarely at odds with the breathless Westernisation of Amman – the same themes he had been capturing for his latest documentary, *Recycle*. Later that evening, though, he discovered his insight had been used merely as a voiceover to footage of Nick Berg’s gruesome beheading. The implication was clear, this was an apologist for terror.

“I couldn’t believe it,” says al-Massad, who was confronted the next morning by an irate local, screaming at him to leave “his” country. “I now understand how the news works. *Recycle* is about the people of this town, my town, and the often unbearable lives they are forced to lead. But because I tried to get to know some of these people, that instantly implicates me.

“Just think about it, if someone on the street walks up to you and punches you in the face, isn’t your first reaction to ask him why? That is what I wanted to see in

Zarqa; what are the realities of this place, what is it like to live in such an environment, what are the stories that are not being heard? People don’t want answers anymore, they want condemnation.”

A press momentarily blurring the distinction between explanation and endorsement wasn’t the only problem Massad faced during the completion of *Recycle*. In Zarqa, a population already deeply suspicious of cameras and questions during Zarqawi’s rise to – and subsequent fall from – prominence, were well policed by a blanket of intelligence officers not exactly renowned for artistic latitude. Those with direct connections to Zarqawi, meanwhile, could be openly hostile. Fights actually erupted in a mosque when the imam suggested the Koran doesn’t sanction Jihad, and Massad himself received direct threats as he raised his camera to his shoulder once too often. “There were times when I was genuinely scared talking to Zarqawi’s cousins,” he says, now back in Amman and clearly pleased to be picking over fried chicken from his favourite First Circle restaurant. “But I had to keep reminding everyone that I am a filmmaker not a news reporter – and that I was not making a film about Zarqawi.”

Recycle, though, wouldn’t be quite so extraordinary if its making had been remotely straightforward. The bleak, suffocating portrait of life in Zarqa, seen through the eyes of Abu Turk, an amateur Islamic scholar struggling to raise an army of children on increasingly meagre earnings from his job retrieving cardboard boxes, is brutally honest, frequently uncomfortable and nothing less than compelling. Using rich, penetrating colour, the beguiling set pieces drag the viewer as much into Massad’s world as that of his subject.

Abu Turk is a former Jihadi, a father of seven and husband of two, who has authored a book on Holy War in attempt to reconcile the realities of contemporary politics and his faith. With little or no money to achieve his aim of having the work published, despite glowing praise from Koranic academics in Saudi Arabia, he is left to recount the passages to small gatherings of friends in his front room – and worry about where his next meal is coming from. “I met him when I was doing research on another film entirely,” Massad explains, describing how he originally wanted to examine the current cultural conflict between Islam and the West. “I was looking for people in my town who could explain their relationship with Jihad, investigate why extremism seems to breed

so easily in my hometown. I spoke to many members of Zarqawi’s family, and people from Hay Massoum who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq with him. But then I met Abu Turk, a neighbour of my father’s, and the focus of the film changed entirely.

“He was honest, direct and logical – he had a real wisdom to him. He talked about Jihad, its connections to the Koran, about his Islamic studies and his findings. But how he was dealing with daily life was painful; he was struggling and suffering so much. Most of the time I just wanted to put the camera down and help. To see people living like this, with these pressures, with the impossibility of life in this town, you realise Zarqawi is nothing. “What is a filmmaker compared to this?” asks Massad, who became the first Jordanian to be shortlisted for the Cannes Film Festival for *Shatter Hassan*, his 2001 account of a homeless Tunisian musician in Utrecht. “It’s a joke, really. Stay two weeks here, a month, and just living is horrible. I felt as though my heart was not beating, I felt dead.”

It’s a helplessness he more than succeeds in capturing throughout *Recycle*. Lingering shots of a child stirring coffee in a spartan, rust-coloured kitchen lit by a solitary bulb, or of dawn settling on the rooftops, with only a circling flock of birds to suggest any life at all in the town, frame Abu Turk’s day. From late nights in a van, scouring the streets for the boxes he needs to earn a living, to early mornings in the countryside of Khaladeeyeh trying to lay his hands on equally elusive camel’s milk for his sick mother, the subtle pacing and wondrously accomplished

photography unfurls a narrative of desperate simplicity.

Much of that narrative is interspersed with Abu Turk’s relationship with his youngest son, 4-year-old Abu Bakr. It underlines the message of the film’s title; the social, economic and religious circumstances that created Zarqawi, and the hundreds of mujahadeen from Zarqa’s claustrophobic streets that came before him, will produce more and more in the same mould if so little continues to be invested in the Middle East’s poorest communities. “This man is my age,” Massad adds. “His youngest son is not much older than my own boy, Milad, and when he started to talk about being a father, he would stop and cry. He knew how hard his future was going to be, and from his own experience, was obviously frightened for him. The tension every day was incredible.”

Over the next 12 months, Abu Turk evolves – or regresses, depending on your interpretation – from bearded bedroom imam, asserting that no Muslim should ever move to a non-Muslim country, to a clean-shaven, suited and introspective figure seeking to find opportunities for a better life for his family abroad. It was, for Massad, an unexpected outcome. The man who used his faith to deal with endless daily trials, who never used to utter a word of complaint about his life, suddenly loses the overtly outward Muslim appearance and seeks solutions elsewhere. “He definitely changed in the short time I knew him. Actually, the process was two-fold; while he changed personally, in the professional sense, he gained a real understanding of the film-making process. He was even suggesting lighting positions and perfecting his delivery! I wished we could go back and re-shoot some of the scenes when I first met him.

“Ultimately, though, his change was simple; he just wants to have a simple life and feed his kids, and he cannot do that here.”

Although *Recycle* is most definitely not about Zarqawi, his shadow looms unmistakably across the town and, as a result, much of the landscape of the film. When Abu Turk reads aloud the results of his scholarship, repeating with force that Iraq will not be liberated by individual Muslims but by Muslim states, many of the assembled audience are members of Zarqawi’s family. Conversations with shopkeepers, mechanics and taxi drivers all carry his name, while the town, Massad says, even has started to develop a Zarqawi industry. ▶

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Recycle stills: Abu Turk’s young son Abu Bakr (top); Abu Turk scours Zarqa’s streets for cardboard (middle); searching for camel milk (bottom)



Certain people were almost professional interviewees, lining up to be grilled by international news crews, or, for a few dinars, showing curious journalists where the al-Qaeda operative went to school, played football or worked – as if the clues to Jihad are to be found in a dust-coloured classroom or narrow lane.

“Everywhere now you find people claiming to have fought with him in either Afghanistan or Iraq,” Massad explains. “This is the interesting thing for me is that he never used to be taken all that seriously here; he was seen as a latecomer to Jihad, going to Afghanistan at the very end of the campaign, when most of the fighters here had come back and returned to a normal life with no great fanfare. But with all the attention that he has brought to the town, in a way he has become a sort of Robin Hood figure to the younger generation – a part of local folklore as opposed to someone with civilian blood on his hands. “It’s almost as if the Amman hotel bombings last November failed to touch a lot of people in Zarqa, that what happened wasn’t really a tragedy compared to what they have to endure. It’s almost as if they already believed they’re dead.

“Iraq has replaced Afghanistan for many of the people in Zarqa,” he continues, in reference to Zarqa’s notoriety as a heavy recruiting ground for mujahadeen in war against Soviet occupation in the 1980s. “But it’s a thousand times worse in my opinion. When people went to Afghanistan 20 years ago, there was so much left behind to worry about. It was, in many ways, a golden time for Jordan. These days, I don’t think it is. There is a sense in Zarqa that there is really very little to lose by going to fight.”

It’s just one of many observations that placed an increasing distance between Massad and the currents and communities of his hometown. After spending the longest period in Zarqa since he left for Romania and Germany in his early twenties to pursue his film career, he was relieved to retreat to first Amman and then Utrecht, where confrontations were, the odd artist aside, restricted to television debates and op-eds. “In many ways, I feel as though I don’t come from anywhere anymore,” he says. “I certainly don’t recognise myself as being from Zarqa. But this is my town, my city, these are my people and the situation is hideous. It really doesn’t surprise me that someone like Zarqawi came from here.”

Massad’s harsh critique is not born of privilege. His own father lost a succession of businesses in the town to crippling debts, and Massad funded the film from his own pocket, even having to borrow money to ensure its completion. He doesn’t hide the strain it placed on his marriage. “It was definitely a hard movie to make,” he admits. “Financially it was tough, too, especially with a wife and child to support. I stayed with my family, who have their own problems, and for my Dutch wife, who doesn’t speak Arabic, that was particularly hard. Just being in that environment, I was so grateful I was out working every day.”

When *Recycle* is released, which Mahmoud is targeting to coincide with the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam, it might make less than enthralling viewing for those in Jordan eager to promote only the gleaming modernity of western Amman, new bridge and all. Mahmoud is not only completely unconcerned about any the potential for negative feedback – “I don’t do propaganda for anyone” – he actually believes his film can help his country. Showing a truer picture of Jordan to those with influence, both inside and outside the country, is a greater service than any number of spiralling overhead videos of the country’s historical treasures.

“Of course, there will be people who only want to show the beautiful side of Jordan, with Petra and Jerash and the Dead Sea,” he says, getting increasingly animated about the direction his country is heading. “I just hope someone here with some vision sees it, understands what I have done, what I was trying to achieve. This is a country where we have nothing, but we our lavish food and hospitality on our guests. It’s weird, wonderful, beautiful, ugly, desperate.

“I hope people will see that there is genuine need here,” Massad concludes. “I am not worried about criticism. I made a film, not a bomb.” ■