



Fadia's Tree

Director: Sarah Beddington

Country: UK

Date: 2022

A review by Danny Leigh for *The Financial Times*:

A hot-air balloon descends over Beirut early in Fadia's *'Tree*. It isn't the last time this remarkable documentary trains a camera on the sky. Most of all, director Sarah Beddington shoots birds in flight, high above the bomb-scarred Lebanese capital. On the ground, the film settles on Palestinian refugee camp Bourj el-Barajneh. Here we meet Fadia Loubani, a vital, unbreakable woman who has lived amid the ragged concrete long enough to raise two children. Now she teaches at the camp kindergarten. She still doesn't see it as home. Limbo is at the heart of this haunting story.



The film has history from the start, 15 years already passed since Loubani met British film-maker Beddington. The real timeline is longer still. The women talk of Sa'sa', the village where Loubani's grandparents lived when it was part of Palestine. A mulberry tree of supposed spiritual powers stood near their house, she has been told, a symbol of her lost belonging. Was it real? Might it survive? As a refugee, Loubani is barred from visiting what is now an Israeli kibbutz to find out. Beddington becomes her proxy — an arboreal detective.

But another inquiry opens up as well. Running into a Palestinian ornithologist, the director grows fascinated with the billion birds that pass over the Israeli-Lebanese border annually, and the community who chart their migrations. The link between the narratives seems simple — a sad celebration of free flight while Loubani is stuck fast. But the parallels go deeper. Beddington learns about the wonders of avian memory; birds retain the detail of vast intercontinental odysseys — down to, yes, a single tree.

Twentieth-century history ties together the landscape that shadows each side of the film. The territory was un-bordered during the Ottoman Empire. Beddington notes the casual presumption with which Anglo-French diplomats Sykes and Picot carved up the modern Middle East in 1916; the Palestine they drafted was remade as Israel in 1948. Sa'sa' ended up just a mile from the Lebanese border that Sykes-Picot created with "two blunt crayons". The basic geopolitical stuff of national borders starts to seem jarringly haphazard — as jerry-built as Bourj el-Barajneh.

For the birds, the metaphorical weight gets heavier. An Israeli researcher explains that a blackbird whose nesting site is lost can't share that of another. But the damage is literal too. Passing through Jerusalem, Beddington shoots the deathly loom of the Israeli West Bank barrier. In Bethlehem, a Palestinian environmentalist suggests the wall is a mortal threat to wildlife.

What elevates Fadia's *'Tree* isn't just the connections it makes. It is how gracefully it makes them, how Beddington seems simply to let them fall into place. The film is not so artful as to affect perfect neutrality. Back in the kindergarten, the children are taught they are citizens of Palestine, whose capital is Jerusalem. But the pulse of the story is that rarest thing in 2022 — internationalism. It thrums with quiet rage at how diplomats' crayons cause the sky to fill not just with birds and balloons, but rockets.

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