
Ameer Got his Gun is an excellent and sensitive documentary that follows Ameer Abu-Raaya, from the Israeli Arab town Sakhnin, in his preparations for recruitment to the Israeli Defence Force and during his service. Israeli Arabs are not drafted to the army like Jewish citizens. They are exempted, based on the assumption that they might pose a security threat. By following Ameer the film shows the impossible reality of those few Israeli Muslim Arabs (about 20 each year) who decide to volunteer to the army. In the Jewish State, Israeli Arabs are second-class citizens and are discriminated against in every possible way. Ameer and his family live this reality on a daily basis and hope to change it. Ameer’s father says at the beginning of the film: ‘I need to give in order to receive. Rights are not given out on a golden platter to people who don’t demand them.’ His sister, Ameera, says: ‘I don’t care if they won’t listen but I want to speak up… I’m crazy.’ Ameer, like his father, is hoping that fulfilling this major civil duty like any other Israel Jew will make him equal to his Jewish peers. Like his sister, he also wants to be heard, and hopes that joining the army will help.

We watch him going back to the Jewish high school he attended to collect his final exam results. One of the school’s admin ladies says about his approaching army service: ‘Just like you discovered yourself in the school trip to Poland, in the army you’ll discover things about yourself that you didn’t know exist.’ The trip to Poland was to the concentration camps. Many Jewish Israeli youth are sent on such trips with their schools in an attempt to strengthen their Jewish identity.

Through the film we also get a glimpse into Ameer’s family and the different roles men and women play. When Ameer tells his father he plans to join the border patrol (Magav) unit in the army, his father says that ‘Magav is for girls.’ When Ameer asks his father how he felt when he fought in the Lebanon war against Arabs, his father replies that ‘there’s no feeling. A soldier mustn’t be sensitive; he needs to do what he’s told.’ His mother is much more reserved about his army service, and through her silences we understand that she isn’t particularly pleased. Is it fear of what will happen to Ameer in the army? Fear of their own community’s response? We don’t know, as she doesn’t say anything about it. Ameer is very much aware of the way his own community perceives his intended move, but is locked by the pressures from his father and uncles into serving in the army.

The family throws a party on the night before he starts his service, but none of his friends arrive. The tables remain vacant and morale is low. Despite this, Ameer sets out to achieve his goal. He is a uniquely likeable person and is accepted by the Jewish soldiers he serves with. Many of them openly express deep dislike of Arabs, if not plain racism. One of his Jewish unit fellows sums it up saying: ‘I have a lot
against Arabs but you are an Ashkenazi Arab. In order to have any options for social mobility, Israeli Arabs must behave not like Arabs but like European Jews. That is one of the conclusions the film leads to.

We follow Ameer as he is posted to serve as part of the border patrol in Hebron, the place he dreads. It is rife with tensions between Jewish settlers and Palestinians. Despite his concerns, his native Arabic language skills and his familiarity with the Arab culture assist him in fulfilling his mission in the best possible way, including catching a young Jewish settler who carries a knife during a Purim march, a time when Jews traditionally took revenge on the gentiles under the guise of being drunk. As his service progress Ameer realizes how deep the gap is between him and the other Jewish soldiers in his unit. He understands that despite his hopes of transcending these barriers, his children and their children will never meet as friends.

One of the main strengths of this film is the excellent access that the director Naomi Levari gained. This allowed her to observe and film very sensitive moments. Because of this there was no need to include narration or captions. We are able to understand all that we need to know from the participants themselves. After watching the film I was left with a feeling of admiration for the courage and emotional adaptability of Ameer. It would be fascinating to know where his journey leads him after the army. This is no doubt that his army service will make a difference. This film has already made his voice loud and clear.

Israeli Ultra Orthodox Jews (Haredi) who for many years attempted to avoid army service have started in recent years discovering its benefits. They follow a religious Zionism that already has very strong presence in all army units. Could it be that despite the immense difficulties, this is also a possible avenue for Israeli Arabs to find their legitimate place in Israeli society?

**Notes**

1. A mostly Muslim town in the Lower Galilee
2. ‘Ashkenazi Jews’ is a descriptive term for Jews who came from Europe or their descendants.

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