



## **HOMELAND: IRAQ YEAR ZERO**

**A film by Abbas Fahdel**

RIDM, Winner Grand Prize, People's Choice Award

Nyon Visions du Reel, Winner Grand Prize

Locarno, Winner Doc Alliance Selection Award

Yamagata, Winner Prize of Excellent Citizens' Prize

New York Film Festival, Official Selection

**2015 / France/Iraq / 334 min. / Color / In Arabic with English subtitles**

**Press materials: [www.kinolorber.com](http://www.kinolorber.com)**

Distributor Contact:

Kino Lorber

333 W. 39<sup>th</sup> Street

New York, NY 10018

(212) 629-6880

Rodrigo Brandao, [Rodrigo@kinolorber.com](mailto:Rodrigo@kinolorber.com)

## **Synopsis**

In February 2002 - about a year before the U.S. invasion - Iraqi filmmaker Abbas Fahdel traveled home from France to capture everyday life as his country prepared for war. He concentrated on family and friends, including his 12-year-old nephew, Haider, as they went about their daily lives, which had come to include planning for shortages of food, water and power. No strangers to war, the Iraqis thought they understood what was coming, and could even manage to be grimly humorous about what they felt would likely be a major and lengthy inconvenience. And then, the war began.

When Fahdel resumed filming in 2003, two weeks after the invasion, daily activities have come to a near standstill, the city is overrun with foreign soldiers, and many areas of Baghdad had been closed off to ordinary citizens. Iraqis endure, seemingly as unwitting as Americans themselves about what further tragedy awaits. Fahdel's epic yet intimate film paints a compelling portrait of people struggling to survive while their civilization, dating back to ancient times, is destroyed around them.

## **Interview with the director, Abbas Fahdel reprinted from the Montreal Gazette**

Abbas Fahdel's *Homeland: Iraq Year Zero* is a two-part, 5 1/2-hour documentary about the country before and after the U.S. invasion of 2003. But that running time is nothing compared to the 120 hours of footage the Iraqi-French director had to sift through, or the 10 years he waited between shooting the film and embarking on the painful process of reviewing and editing it.

For a long time, it seemed like Fahdel's movie might never get made. The topic was too painful. The film, which screens Tuesday to Saturday as part of the Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal, is an intimate portrait of Iraqi life leading up to and during the U.S. occupation. Therein we are offered a privileged view into Iraqi existence through the various members of Fahdel's extended family, including his ebullient 12-year-old nephew Haidar, who is killed in the film's final scene. The tragedy took place shortly after a moment of hope, which the director initially thought would be a fitting end for his story.

"It was bizarre," Fahdel said, on the phone Friday morning (before the Paris attacks) from Copenhagen, where *Homeland: Iraq Year Zero* was to screen as part of the CPH:DOX film festival. "My nephew's death happened when I felt the film was finished, right after the birth of my brother's daughter. I said, 'We're done. I can go back now and show the film.' Right after that, Haidar died."

Fahdel was devastated.

"I couldn't watch the images," he said. "I had to wait 10 years, until 2013. On the 10th anniversary of his death, I said, 'I have to watch these images, even if it's hard.' I was aware that I had shot a historic moment that had disappeared, an Iraq that no longer exists. I had no right to hide these images, even if it was difficult."

He spent a year and a half poring over his footage, cobbling together a 12-hour rough cut, then a nine-hour one, before arriving at the 334-minute final version. Unsurprisingly, the French producer who financed Fahdel's previous projects was hesitant, insisting that TV would never show such a long film and that no one would have the patience to sit through it. So he financed the project himself.

The gamble paid off when the film won the Sesterce d'or for best feature at the Visions du réel documentary festival in Nyon, Switzerland, in April. That kicked off a run that has seen *Homeland: Iraq Year Zero* play at 26 festivals in 18 countries over the past seven months, picking up six prizes. The film will open theatrically in France in February, and Fahdel's agenda is booked through May.

"It's extraordinary," the director said. "It's encouraging. For me as a filmmaker, it proves that the public is not as dumb as people think. They're tired of formatted films. When you have an idea, you have to see it through."

Fahdel moved to France from Iraq in the late 1980s, at the age of 18, to pursue a career in film. He hadn't been back in 15 years when rumours of an American invasion began to swirl.

Concerned about his family, and with an inkling that their world was about to change dramatically and that he wanted to preserve some small part of it, he travelled to Baghdad in February 2002, and brought along his camera.

He made three trips over the ensuing year, each one lasting one to three months. In March 2003, with no invasion in sight, he returned to France again. Three days later, war was declared. And so he returned, shooting for a few more months, up until the death of his nephew.

"It was physically tiring," Fahdel said of the process. "I didn't want to film. I hadn't seen my family in 15 years. I wanted to be with them and share moments, but I filmed a lot. I had to. ... (I feared that) everything I loved might disappear. I wanted to keep a trace. The culture was in danger of disappearing. I had this superstition that by filming I would protect them."

Fahdel also ventured into different areas of the crumbling city, with his brother or brother-in-law in tow for security, interviewing regular Iraqis about their lives. What we witness in his film is what he witnessed upon visiting these places, he emphasized. "I discover these things with the spectator. What you see in the film is exactly what I saw."

If making *Homeland: Iraq Year Zero* was an emotionally exhausting ordeal, showing it has been no less involving. Fahdel has been struck by the extent to which viewers connect to the movie, and with him.

"People want to shake my hand," he said. "They become very familiar with me. They 'tutoie' me, call me Abbas. I get tears in my eyes when they ask for news about my family. It's very strange. People don't see it as a movie, but as a life experience. For me, it's important. If I do nothing else, I've done my duty as an Iraqi by making this film."

## **About the Director:**

Abbas Fahdel is an Iraqi-French film director, screenwriter and film critic, born in Babylon, Iraq. He moved to France at the age of 18 years-old and studied cinema at the Sorbonne.

In January 2002, he returned to Iraq and filmed a documentary film, *Back to Babylon* in which he asked himself: "*What have my childhood friends become? How have their lives changed? What would my life have been like if I hadn't chosen to build my destiny elsewhere?*" The country's dramatic situation is the background of this introspective investigation.

One year later, in February 2003, when a new war seemed imminent, he returned to Iraq with the intention of filming his family and friends with the hope of protecting them against the dangers threatening them. When the war started, he returned to France and lost all contact with his family. Two months later, he again returned to Iraq and discovered a country shaken by violence, the nightmare of dictatorship replaced by chaos, but a country where, nonetheless, everything remains possible: the best or the worse. This historical moment is the theme of his second documentary film, *We Iraqis*.

In 2008, he directed the feature film *Dawn of the World*, a war-drama in which he gives an unexpected account of the multiple impacts of the Gulf Wars and how they have dramatically damaged an area known to be the geographic location of the biblical Garden of Eden.

His new film, *Homeland: Iraq Year Zero* is a monumental documentary of 334 minutes and recipient of numerous festival awards.

## **Credits:**

Director....Abbas Fahdel

Screenplay....Abbas Fahdel

Producer...Abbas Fahdel

Cinematography....Abbas Fahdel

Editor....Abbas Fahdel