

Farha: Fictional, not Factual

Farha is a movie released in 2021 and picked up by Netflix in 2022. It reflects some Palestinian narratives about the “Nakba,” which is Arabic for “catastrophe.” This is how many Palestinians describe the founding of the State of Israel, Israel’s victory against invading Arab forces in the 1948 war, and the refugee crisis which took place as a result. While roughly 165,000 Palestinian Arabs stayed in Israel and became citizens, 500,000 to 750,000 left as refugees. Most fled to escape the war, which was launched by Arab forces. A minority were expelled by Israeli forces or left because Arab leaders encouraged them to do so. The refugees suffered personal and collective traumas that remain central to Palestinian identity to this day.

Farha portrays itself as based on true events. This claim, however, is grossly misleading. Few of the film's events actually happened, including several of the movie's most important and gut-wrenching scenes. Despite its claims of authenticity, the movie is not historically accurate. Ultimately, the movie and the character of Farha are works of historical fiction wrongly portrayed as factual, which is deeply misleading to viewers.

The character Farha

According to the film’s director, Farha is based on a girl named [Radieh](#). Radieh was locked in a closet during the 1948 War and later walked to Syria. Once in Syria, Radieh told her story to another girl, who then repeated the story to her daughter and granddaughter (who is the movie's director). While the story of Radieh inspired the movie, the character of Farha is based on multiple stories from the director’s family and friends. From the director:

- Multiple stories were “*patched together to create the character of Farha.*”¹
- On being unable to locate Radieh before making the movie: “*I decided this is a good thing because I needed some distance and have the space to create some fiction.*”²

“True events”

The movie opens with a prologue claiming that the movie is “inspired by true events,” and closes with an epilogue that states, “Farha (whose name is Radiyyeh in the original events) made it to Syria, where she shared her story, keeping it alive for generations to come.” These statements directly contradict those made by the film’s director, who has clearly identified the movie as a work of fiction. There are several ways that these statements mislead audiences:

- They imply that the film’s plot - including the massacre of a family - is based on true events, whereas the director has clarified it is not.
- The film’s director never met with Radieh to hear her story, allowing her to “create some fiction.”

¹ <https://time.com/6238964/darin-sallam-farha-netflix-interview/>

² <https://www.instagram.com/reel/ClvzR8RgW0t/>

- The character of Farha is not based solely on Radieh, but allegedly on the stories of numerous people.

The film's plot

The events shown in the film are extremely disturbing and are all part of what the film claims to be based on a true story. Farha witnesses the execution of a family, including a mother and two children, and the death of a newborn baby, all at the hands of Israeli soldiers. The film portrays the soldiers as irredeemably evil and bloodthirsty. In one scene, the Israeli commander taunts the family and jokes about cutting open the mother, who they believe to be pregnant, to learn the baby's gender. Upon hearing a baby's cries and realizing it was already born, the soldiers execute the family and leave the newborn on the ground to die.

Though the opening and closing credits emphasize that *Farha* is based on a true story, the director has repeatedly stated that the majority of the film's plot is fictional. The horrific events Farha witnesses from that room, which form the crux of the plot, are fiction. The only "true" element of the story is that a girl was locked in a room during the 1948 War and later went to Syria.

From the director:

- *"The only thing that we really took from her [Radieh's] story was that she was locked up in a room."*³

Comparisons to the Holocaust

In multiple interviews, the director has likened the story of Farha to that of Anne Frank, referring to Farha's story as a "similar horrible journey." In this inverted version of history, the Nakba is equivalent to the Holocaust, and Israelis become the Nazis. In reality, there is no comparison between the two events. The 1948 War was launched by Arab leaders, some of whom expressed genocidal intentions towards Jews. Many of the Israelis who fought against invading Arab armies were themselves Holocaust survivors. There was no army that launched a genocidal war against Germany, on behalf of Jews like Anne Frank.

It is true that historians have documented human rights violations committed by both sides in the 1948 War. It is important to acknowledge the suffering of Israeli and Palestinian civilians in that war and all those that followed, as a matter of historical fact and the ongoing trauma people still live with today. However, the ugly truth is that similar acts of violence happened in conflicts all over the world at that time, often on a much larger and more horrific scale than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

There is no reasonable way to equate Israelis with Nazis. It is never an analogy made in good faith, and is an example of blatant antisemitism. Such comparisons exploit the generational trauma of the Holocaust to dehumanize Jews and turn the victims into villains. It is entirely possible to recognize the lasting

³ <https://www.instagram.com/reel/ClvzR8RgW0t/>

impacts of the Palestinian refugee crisis without resorting to inaccurate and antisemitic Holocaust comparisons. From the director:

- “It’s funny because, indeed, a few people made some comparison to Anne Frank. I didn’t think about it when I made the movie, but I can understand why people thought about the horrible story of Anne Frank. My character is going through a similar horrible journey.”⁴
- “Sallam [the director] has also said that while she did not seek to draw a deliberate parallel with Anne Frank, she can see the similarities in the traumatic experiences of the two teenage girls.”⁵

“We have a handful of rusty guns”

Early in the film, Farha’s father tells a group of armed Palestinian militants they have only “a handful of rusty guns” and instructs them to wait for Arab armies to arrive with reinforcements. The implication is that local Arab forces were poorly armed and were underdogs in the 1948 War.

In fact, a civil war had been ongoing between Arab and Jewish forces within Mandate Palestine since November 1947. Fighting broke out after Arab leaders rejected the UN Partition Plan, which proposed dividing the land into two states; one for Jews and one for Arabs. Violent attacks against Jewish and Arab militants and civilians were frequent throughout the region. Irregular armed forces, such as the Army of the Holy War and the Arab Liberation Army, joined the fighting in 1947.

The War of Independence began on May 15, 1948, when the armed forces from five Arab states invaded Israel along each of its land borders. The Egyptians advanced from the south, Syria and Lebanon attacked the north, and Transjordan (now Jordan) and Iraq fought in the center and Jerusalem. Yemen and Saudi Arabia sent additional troops to support the Arab armies. Irregular armed militias fought alongside the invading armies, battling Israeli forces from inside villages and towns. The notion of Arab militias and armed forces only having “a handful of rusty guns” entirely misrepresents the reality in 1947 and 1948.

The Arab armies and irregular forces shared the goal of destroying Israel. Arab forces attacked Jewish communities throughout the country. They besieged Jerusalem, with its 100,000 Jewish residents cut off from water and food. After declaring independence, Israel fought for its very existence against more established armies, some of whom had received training from the British and French. Over several months, Israel’s armed forces successfully fought to repel the invading armies. The War continued into 1949 until Israel and the Arab states signed armistice agreements that ended the armed conflict.

By demonizing Israelis and misleading all viewers, Farha fuels more hatred, division, and conflict. This is a disservice to innocent people on both sides of the conflict who wish for a more just and peaceful future.

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<https://www.filmfestivals.com/blog/red-sea-international-film-festival/interview-with-farha-director-darin-j-s-allam-and-actress-karam-taher>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/30/farha-israel-condemns-new-netflix-film-for-showing-palestinian>

To learn more, read our booklet [*Understanding The Nakba*](#).