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Foreign Film Friday: Turtles Can Fly review - a brutal but essential must-see

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As part of the ConIFA World Football Cup in London, tournament organisers ConIFA have created a film festival showing films from member associations. The nomination from Iraqi Kurdistan was the 2004 war drama, *Turtles Can Fly*.





The film is set in a refugee camp along the Iraq-Turkey border in the weeks leading up to the US invasion, until just after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

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The story follows a young Kurd, Satellite (Soran Ebrahim), who is nicknamed as such because he goes around the local villages helping to install antennae and satellites, so the local population can keep up with news regarding the upcoming invasion. The village elders are desperate to do so, and also use Satellite for translation, since he has the best English skills in the entire community.

The desperation for news is very clear, though Satellite's insistence that Zinedine Zidane is American questions how useful his knowledge is.

Satellite is also the leader of a group of children who swipe the local landscape for unexploded mines, which they sell for a profit in order to buy clothes and resources to survive. Satellite is somewhat manipulative, but is clearly very sincere to the children, which irks local leaders as he prioritises them.

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His best friend, Shirkooh (Aji Ziburai) has had a foot amputated after a mine explosion.

They spend some of their money on weapons and gas masks, though the authorities remind the people war could happen at any moment, they try their best to prepare.

Early on, Satellite encounters an orphan girl, Agrin (Avaz Latif) and takes a clear liking to her. She is very quiet and reserved and appears to be carrying burdens from her past. She is accompanied by her older brother Hengov (Hireh Feysel Rahman), who lost both of his arms after a run in with Iraqi troops. Hengov can see the future, but it is always a dark future. With them also is their younger toddler brother Riga (Abdol Rahman Karim), who is blind and keeps getting lost on walks. Agrin is startlingly cold and distant towards him.

The story of the camp and the treatment of Kurds during the Hussein regime and subsequent invasion is told through the eyes of the children. Satellite, as he tries to protect the young minesweeping Kurds and hopes for the US to save them, and Hengov as he fights his disability and tries to keep his family together.

Bahman Gobhadi, the director and writer, produces a story which is compelling and heartbreaking. Despite the eventual fall of Hussein, the memories and legacy of war will not fade for the children, who are haunted and reminded every day.

Ebrahim and Latif give wonderfully intense performances. Agrin is never able to recover from the events that made her an orphan, while Satellite despite being full of hope, is ultimately way out of his depth, though he valiantly attempts to make sure the children are provided for.

The story ends with several tragic twists, and my only argument for not watching this film would be due to its immense sadness. But it is after all reflective of the brutal nature of war. The film will show you the stone cold reality that Kurds faced in 2003, trapped in a land that they are unwelcome in despite their historic ties there.

As the film ends, American tanks roll into the area and the Kurdish refugees begin to return to the cities they were exiled from. The fate of several characters remains unresolved, reflecting the uncertain future Kurds faced in 2004 when the film was released.



But the story is a must-see for anyone who can stomach it, and I recommend you force yourself to do so if you cannot. The desperation for information, the burning desire to protect loved ones, and the inability to exorcise one's demons that are seen in almost all conflicts is clearly and honestly on display here.

Scene from "Turtles Can Fly"



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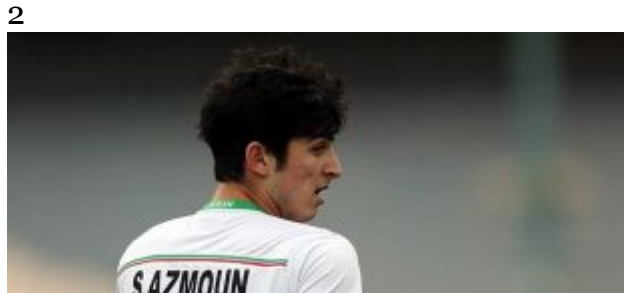
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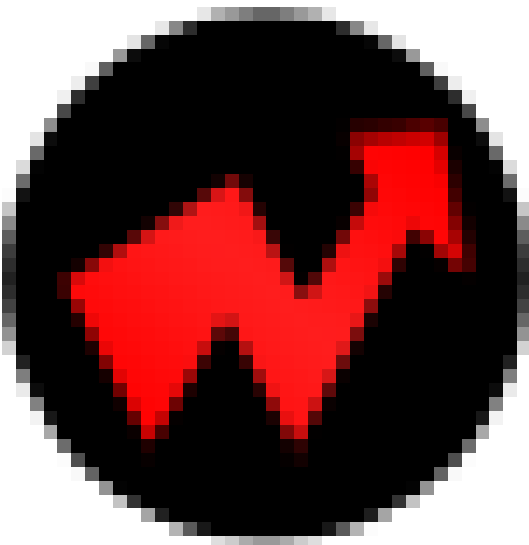
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