

# Karama Human Rights Film Festival in Jordan: “Dignity, where to?”

*Written by Sawsan Darwaza, festival director and Ehab Al Khatib, festival artistic director*

## **The Idea**

The idea for *Karama* (Dignity) Human Rights Film Festival (henceforth KHRFF) came about in June 2009. While many regional and international human rights organisations have created and enhanced the discourse on human rights in the region, no significant public platform existed in Jordan or the neighbouring Arab countries for the discussion of such issues. As most traditional human rights organisations focus their work on monitoring and reporting human rights violations, conducting field or academic research, leading advocacy campaigns mostly at the level of policy and/or providing capacity building for activists and practitioners, the larger general public continues to be excluded from being informed of or engaged in such discourse.

Considering these reasons, the initiation of *Karama* came to address the lack of an independent Human Rights platform that is able to bring complicated notions of human rights issues closer to the public—in addition to other stakeholders in the Arab region and beyond—mainly through films as well as other inter-

related activities such as music events, exhibitions, panels and workshops. The platform created an opportunity for the wider public to get involved with human rights issues by attending, seeing and even participating in the events mentioned above. By using *Karama*'s network and working together with stakeholders such as local NGOs and CSOs, the possibilities grew to truly contribute to the knowledge and awareness of the public and their perceptions on Human Rights. *Karama* promotes essential human rights causes, such as dignity and freedom with tools such as issue-oriented film screenings, press releases, discussions, themed workshops and events.

While KHRFF highlights various themes each year, its primary focus is on human rights issues in relation to the concept of human beings' dignity and with a social, political and economic justice lens. The first edition's theme was the “Contemplation of Human Rights”, addressing questions such as, “How do we gain awareness of our dignity?” and “How do we demand our dignity as a daily human right?”. The next year the theme was “Change. Change for the better and change for all”. Other themes have included “Know...Think...Act” and “General Human Rights”.

This past year's KHRFF theme was "War and Displacement", and focused on the ongoing crises in the region and the state of refugees.

## The Beginning

The first edition of Karama was a call for action towards real dignity and real justice. It was held from the 5th to the 10th of December 2010—a year before the Arab Spring that spread across many countries in the region. Now, Karama is always held at the same dates, every year. The idea for Karama was conceived by three rights and social justice activists, who each had filmmaking experience as directors and producers. The launch of a human rights festival in Jordan was most welcomed in the beginning, and was considered to be a very important step toward changes at both social and political levels.

The choice to name the festival *Karama* seems to have been contagious, as many revolutions to follow in the region were named "Revolutions for Dignity", which helped increase the festival's impact for its second edition, as it intersected directly with public demands.

## Was it Easy or Difficult?

It was easy to launch a human rights festival due to many reasons, including the partnership with the Royal Cultural Centre, which is run by the Ministry of Culture. This partnership provided a very good

umbrella for Karama as a debut festival in its first editions, and helped in with security for screenings and festival activities so that audiences and guests would not be endangered. This step helped to avoid many confrontations, and would be easily applicable for other human rights festivals unless the event is designed to work against the system that rules the country in which the festival is held.

In the beginning, we worked vigilantly to ensure the festival would be welcomed and accepted by the society and the system. The festival's confrontations were done gradually through film, and we chose not to directly confront the social and religious practices that would contradict human rights and values (for example, we do not select films with extreme sexual references or clear images of nudity). In the beginning, we were also careful to only indirectly confront the system that rules the country.

To that end, we selected international films whose topics intersected with local and regional issues, such as political detainees and prisoners, freedom of expression, women's rights and other universal themes; by screening these films and with the discussions that followed, corresponding Arab issues were able to be questioned and put under a microscope by the audience, activists and policy makers. Examples of this were the film *Peace vs. Justice* that deals with the perception of justice and the miscommunication between cultures, and *Camp 14: Total Control Zone* which discusses the rights of political prisoners.



*From the first year, Karama Human Rights Film Festival in Jordan attracted large number of audiences. Photo: Archive of Karama HRFF.*

## What Are The Obstacles?

Karama's target audience is made up of thinkers and workers within the field of human rights, as well as regular guests of the festival who have an interest in human rights. These include human rights activists from Jordan and the Arab world, journalists, filmmakers, concerned officials, as well as researchers and the wider interested public in Jordan and the region. This region is a turbulent one, and its realities are always changing; because of this, expanding a base of spectators is more difficult than it would be in less volatile situations.

Some of the obstacles are financial; available funds often focus on direct humanitarian rescue projects but consider festivals and cultural events to be luxurious, even when they are directly related to human rights issues. Available funds are also scarce, and may not cover the expansion of the festival into other local or regional areas. Based on our previous experience, human rights film festivals are hard to define for donors, in particular because our festival is not purely entertainment but also not only a human rights activity. Still, as the festival expands its activities, the audience's expectations become bigger, as we have found from reports of festival activities as well as surveys we have received from venue supervisors.

Another obstacle arose in 2013 because the region has been through critical periods, and affected neg-

atively by global decisions and some fake attempts to install democracies in its countries. Thus, Arab people widely perceive the term *Human Rights* to be imposed by the West and consider it to be a tool that helps the West achieve its political, social and cultural agendas. Therefore, many people in the Arab region have lost their trust in human rights and human rights defenders and promoters, as they do not see direct results and fruits of these projects that promote human rights in the world and in the region. To change these beliefs, Karama organises a range of activities where different topics can be discussed in a variety of ways; there are some opportunities for the audience to directly participate, and some where they are invited to receive new perspectives to stimulate their critical thinking. Though the discussed themes are complex, Karama seeks to address them in ways that everyone can understand. This means that certain jargons or difficult language is avoided and that general overviews and available, trustworthy statistics are used to introduce the themes.

## The Impact

From our observation, KHRFF has made an impact on many levels and aspects. We have been approached by local and regional NGOs who would like to join the platform of Karama in outreach to its network and local communities. Karama is now known in Jordan and the region for its capacity to influence:

**Individuals:**

Karama influenced local filmmakers who began integrating human rights issues and violations' concerns in their films. Also, members of Karama HRRF team who began as semi-volunteers started to engage themselves either by working in HR fields, by studying HR academics, or by becoming fully engaged in Karama activities and projects though they come from different disciplines.

**The Local Community:**

In order to meet spectators' expectations and to deal with the lack of local Human Rights films, Karama Atelier was created by Karama and Ma3mal 612 Think Factory. Karama Atelier works to address the lack of Human Rights films—films that touch on human rights issues through evident and direct legal and social messages—in the Arab region in general and in Jordan in particular. In the atelier, activists concerned with human rights, justice issues and the art of film can join to co-produce films with Ma3mal 612's team of workers and thinkers. To date, Karama Atelier has produced three documentaries and two short animated films: *Ta'a Marboutah*, *Gaza ... Black & White*, *A Part of Her*, *Growing*, and *Surprise*.

Civil society organisations such as The Seven Villages Association, film clubs including Karak Film Club, schools and universities, as well as youth organisations such as We Love Ajloun have begun requesting to hold additional screenings based on Karama's program. Policy makers including the Ministry

of Culture and the Royal Cultural Centre have been persistent in continuing a partnership with Karama, and are well aware of the project's capacity as a tool for change. They have become more tolerant of our content and freedom of expression when it comes to many human rights issues, even if these issues are local. They also do not mind if the festival uses their logos. They offer funding as well as venues and space for activities. These partnerships help to get the public more involved in the process of promoting human rights and expanding our base to reach the most remote areas in Jordan.

**The Region:**

Affiliates and other organisations have also suggested setting up programs and activities with Karama. For example, ARDD Legal Aid proposed workshops to be held within Karama for both the Karama audience and their audience of Syrian, Iraqi and Sudanese refugees. Cinema Human Rights and Advocacy participated in the 2013 edition by giving a lecture/mini-panel. Local radio stations—for example Amman Net, one of Karama media partners—saw the need for radio shows that tackle human rights and now there are three human rights shows being broadcasted. The French Institute designated a category for human rights in their Franco Arab Film Festival entitled "*Window on Karama*". The Royal Film Commission began holding weekly documentary screenings. In addition, other affiliates have approached Karama for film contributions including the Shoman Foundation, King Hussein Foundation, as



*Karama Human Rights Film Festival in Jordan also uses its festival venue for exhibitions. Photo: Archive of Karama HRF.*

well as other film festivals such as UN Women Festival in Jordan, Kelibia Film Festival in Tunisia and the Middle East Alternative Sound & Arts Festival (MEASAF) in Greece.

Karama established the *Arab Human Rights Film Network* in 2011 within a strategy to promote human rights through films in the Arab region. The Network aims at establishing a number of festivals and spaces for screening human rights films in the region, in collaboration with a number of organisations and individuals who intersect with Karama's vision and goals, such as Karama in Palestine / January 2014, Karama in Gaza / May 2015 and Karama in Mauritania / March 2015. We initiated this "Informal" network inspired by the international Human Rights Film Network (HRFN), to enlarge our base of spectators and our network, and to have a festival with a local and a regional exposure. The Network will be formally effective by December 2015.

Karama also now contributes several "Karama Packages"—sets of themed films—to many other festivals that are not specifically human rights-focused festivals, such as the Franco Arab Film Festival, and the Dubai Film Festival; these packages help promote human rights in other artistic and cultural platforms and festivals.

## **Dealing with Censorship**

Following the Arab Spring, editions of Karama faced greater censorship. In order to screen many impor-

tant films that might be banned by the censorship department in our country, we partnered up with other bodies who could qualify under a non-governmental umbrella, and thus would not be subject to the same censorship laws as bodies within the country. For its 4th edition, Karama partnered up with the French institute, which provided a free venue for its screenings. This partnership has been very valuable and does not mean that the festival was required to include French films. While a partner will sometimes ask for the festival to make compromises in its programming, Karama does its best to maintain creative control of the films it screens.

The festival has to take into consideration the conflicts and controversy that exist among the spectators within the community. To cope with this, the festival practices self-censorship in a way that helps avoid conflicts and security problems. This fact does not necessarily mean to avoid screening any controversial films; indeed, the festival screens at least one shocking film, but doing so means that we must secure the screening venue, carefully present the film, and organise a secured debate.

In previous editions of Karama, some of the debates caused controversial discussions between audiences, especially for films about social, political, and religious taboos. Therefore, it is important for us to take certain precautions when screening these films and during the debates following the films. For example, we invite moderators who are experienced and who

have the know-how to lead these kinds of conversations. These moderators are elected by Karama seniors according to their experience and relevance.

Karama festival and screenings have taught us to diversify our subject matter to cater for an array of audience members with different affiliations and sensitivities. We have always kept our mission sheltered from propaganda or dogmatic discourse. Karama has kept the human being as the region's central hero and his/her basic rights as the festival's focal point.

## Filmography

*Peace vs. Justice* (dir. Klaartje Quirijns, 2011).

*Camp 14: Total Control Zone* (dir. Marc Wiese, 2012).

*Ta'a Marboutah* (dir. Ehab Al Khatib, Karama Atelier, 2013).

*Gaza ... Black & White* (dir. Arab and Tarzan, Karama Atelier, 2013).

*A Part of Her* (dir. Sawsan Darwaza, Karama Atelier, 2014).

*Growing* (dir. Tariq Rimawi, 2013).

*Surprise* (dir. Tariq Rimawi, 2015).