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This is Home

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This is Home

Abstract

This is a film review of *This is Home* (2018), directed by Alexandra Shiva.

Keywords

Syria, Refugees, International Rescue Committee, Islam, Immigration, Muslim Ban

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Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



This is Home (2018), dir. Alexandra Shiva

Last year at Sundance, films like *Cries from Syria* and *Last Men in Aleppo* told the heartbreaking and horrifying stories of the war in Syria. This year, Alexandra Shiva has made a documentary following a year in the lives of four Syrian families who came to Baltimore in July of 2016. The result is a profoundly humanizing portrait of the struggles and strengths of these brave and hopeful refugees.

The United States has only taken some 21,000 refugees of the estimated 5 million displaced by the Syrian war. Of these, 357 have come to Baltimore. The International Rescue Committee helps these refugees transition to life in the United States, offering services for their first eight months (in accordance with Maryland state law; other states have varying rules). We see their first days here as they learn their first few English words, and the IRC provides classes in which they learn to introduce themselves. The children prepare for school. All of them are excited and grateful to have made it here, but also filled with anxieties about such basics as asking for directions or buying groceries.

One of the first challenges is to find work. This is made difficult by their limited English language skills, so they must learn to accept whatever jobs IRC finds for them, often starting at minimum wage in spite of the fact that they were skilled workers in Syria. The men do not always want their wives working, but the IRC caseworkers explain that it is normal for both parents to work in the US, and that they will have trouble paying their bills unless they do. They accept these cultural shifts, however, as the price of integration into America. Many of the women, however, are excited at the prospect of education and work—or even about learning to drive a car. The children are also hopeful for the chance to build a new life and receive a college education.

The viewer is struck by how overwhelming the challenges are, but also with how resolutely the families face them. They find many people welcoming to them, but not all. One of the women has her hijab torn off her head by a man on a public bus, and after that she wears one patterned like the American flag—to show she is not the enemy. It is sad that refugees have to work so hard for acceptance, often after surviving imprisonment, torture, and war. In the middle of their first year, the first “Muslim ban” appears within days of President Trump taking office in January 2017. They fear that their family members and friends still in Syria who have applied for refugee status will not receive it. Iman, a woman physician, has applied for political asylum but does not know if she will get it. Her grown daughters have refugee status and so are safe, but she still waits for the US government to tell her she can stay.

Besides the IRC workers, others seek to help the refugees. A local church sponsors a dinner for which Madiha prepares over 100 Syrian meals as a fundraiser and a way for the members of the church to meet and hear the stories of the families. It is heartwarming to see Americans so interested and willing to welcome them to their community, and to see Christians doing this work.

One hopes that there will be more churches inspired to do similar work by this film, for while there are some, there are also many Christians who fear and hold prejudices against Muslims or Syrians.

At the Sundance premiere of this film, a warm reception was given to the families, who all came to Utah for the event, as this photo shows:



(Photo by John Lyden, Park City, Jan. 20, 2018)

Princess Firyal of Jordan was also present (above, in pink) and shared a few words on her desire to be one of the producers of the film. An IRC representative urged everyone to look to www.rescue.org to find ways to volunteer in their communities. The film will be shown on Epix, but will also be available for screenings at schools, religious centers, and other community and

cultural organizations. It can be a tool for creating understanding as well as action on behalf of refugees, as it presents their story as sympathetic and compelling.