**Refuge**
**Canada's Journal on Refugees**
**Revue canadienne sur les réfugiés**

# Sky and Ground by Tayla Tibbon & Joshua Bennett

Neda Moayerian and Max Stephenson

Volume 37, Number 1, 2021

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076815ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40872

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University

ISSN

0229-5113 (print)
1920-7336 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Moayerian, N. & Stephenson, M. (2021). Review of [Sky and Ground by Tayla Tibbon & Joshua Bennett]. *Refuge, 37*(1), 81–82. https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40872

 http://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40872

# Film Review

## *Sky and Ground*

Directed by Talya Tibbon and Joshua Bennett
Humanity on the Move, 2017. 86 minutes

Various community groups have engaged in online political and social activism to bring their messages to a broader international audience since the outset of the civil war in Syria—"the most socially mediated" conflict in history (Lynch et al., 2014). Citizens, journalists, artists, and activists have taken tremendous risks to document civilian deaths that have occurred during the Syrian conflict, yet only a select portion of those efforts have found a wide audience (Lynch et al., 2014). Among the underrepresented narratives of ethnic minorities affected by the war, the film *Sky and Ground* (initial release, 2017) offers a compelling account of the perilous experiences of a Kurdish Syrian family, bombed out of their home in Aleppo, seeking to migrate to Berlin to join family members already settled there. Financed by four American filmmakers and directed by Talya Tibbon and Joshua Bennett, *Sky and Ground* has garnered awards and nominations at international film festivals.

Fleeing from the Assad regime and Islamic militants, the Nabis clan planned their risky journey by sea and land in search of a measure of peace and a new beginning. The movie opens with a series of short videos documenting atrocities committed in Aleppo in 2012. The videos were produced by one member of the family, the favourite uncle, dubbed Guevara, for his admiration for the Argentinian Marxist. Like thousands of other Syrian refugees, the family began its journey by travelling 571 miles, much of it across Turkey, to embark from Izmir on a dangerous passage across the Aegean Sea in a small smuggler's craft to Greece, and then travelled overland to the Idomeni refugee camp in Paeonia (Malek, 2016). Macedonian authorities captured the family on their first attempt to trek westward from the difficult conditions of that camp. Not long thereafter, the group set out once again to journey the 2,000 miles across Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, and a share of Germany to reach their final destination. The film traces their odyssey, which involved hiking, hiring a car, and stints on trains and buses, in an itinerary designed foremost to avoid police or local citizen scrutiny.

The documentary's dialogue is replete with characters' longing for "home," with several family members suggesting that if they were not keen to protect other relatives, they would have stayed in Syria, a contention that Müller-Funk (2019) also observed during interviews with Syrian refugees in Turkey. The group carried only survival basics throughout their journey, with one exception: a doll belonging to 9-year-old Rita. As the film and the family's trip unfold, Rita's doll comes to symbolize the enduring power of artifacts and memories of home amidst the group's travails. Müller-Funk has suggested that life satisfaction, images of the future, and hope are among the major factors that influence refugees' decisions to seek a new home. The tension-filled and often hazardous travels of the Nabis family and those of other Syrian refugees they encountered on their journey underscore the fact that even on their safe arrival in Germany, the refugees were forced to consider the long-term viability of their choices.

The family's experiences also highlight the fragile normative foundations of civil and human rights. Indeed, the suspense of their story concerned whether the nations whose boundaries they had to traverse would honour their rights. An inhumane police confrontation with refugees peacefully requesting the reopening of Macedonia's borders; the lack of even basic services at Idomeni and the Kelebija camp in Serbia; and Guevera's detention and investigation

as an allegedly threatening criminal in Tompa, Hungary (Palickova, 2019) were examples of European governments' choices to violate human rights that they had sworn to uphold. As a reflection of this cruel reality, at one point in the film, Heba, a member of the family who had studied law at the University of Aleppo, observed, "I don't believe there is such a thing as human rights. I don't think it exists at all."

*Sky and Ground* questions dominant, reductive, and binary images of refugees by portraying their lived realities and deeply fraught choices. The audience observes multiple examples of independent women making decisions for themselves and their families. Aside from challenging "oppressed Muslim Women" stereotypes, the documentary also deftly illustrates the heterogeneity of choices and representations among female Islamic believers. Throughout the film, the Nabis mother and her daughters adopted strategies of self-representation in claiming their "politics of belonging" (Es, 2019). By choosing not to wear headscarves, the daughters rejected the stereotype that all "Muslim women wear hijabs." On the other hand, even when the family was trying to look "normal" to avoid drawing attention of the Austrian police, their mother wore her hijab (perceived by many as a symbol of Islamic devotion). Nonetheless, her self-assured and friendly conduct deflected suspicion and conveyed that "being a pious Muslim is not mutually exclusive with being an emancipated woman" (Es, 2019, p. 383).

While many European leaders have claimed that their nations' values were at risk with the large Syrian migration in recent years, this documentary demonstrates that this family and its hopes and desires were more similar to than unlike those who so feared them. The common humanity and shared dreams, fears, determination, and love of the Nabis family belie their supposed Otherness and reveal their very human ties with those whom they now call neighbours.

## *References*

Es, M. A. van. (2019). Muslim women as "ambassadors" of Islam: Breaking stereotypes in everyday life. *Identities, 26*(4), 375–392. https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2017.1346985

Lynch, M., Freelon, D., & Aday, S. (2014). *Syria's socially mediated civil war.* United States Institute of Peace. https://www.usip.org/publications/2014/01/syrias-socially-mediated-civil-war

Malek, A. (2016). *The road to Germany: $2400.* Foreign Policy. https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/29/the-road-to-germany-2400-refugee-syria-migrant-germany-nonfiction-comic/

Müller-Funk, L. (2019). Adapting to staying, or imagining futures elsewhere: Migration decision-making of Syrian refugees in Turkey. *International Migration Institute, 154,* Working Paper.

Palickova, A. (2019, July 19). UN expert describes Hungarian migrant camps as places of detention and deterrence. Euractive. https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/un-expert-describes-hungarian-migrant-camps-as-places-of-detention-and-deterrence/

---

*Neda Moayerian is a postdoctoral research associate at the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance and Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development. She can be reached at mneda14@vt.edu.*

*Max Stephenson Jr. serves as professor of public and international affairs at Virginia Tech and director of the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance. He can be reached at mstephen@vt.edu.*