History of the Slemani International Film Festival: An Interview with Hemn A. Hussein, Director of Communications for the Festival

Alan Ali Saeed
University of Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan

ABSTRACT

This interview with Hemn Hussein presents a history of the Slemani International Festival from its inception to the present. The interview looks at the practical issues of funding and running the festival. Attention is focused on its particular context of being a Kurdish yet international festival and its significance within Kurdish cultural aspirations.
Kurdish Cinema: From Yılmaz Güney to the Slemani International Film Festival

While the discussion about the beginning of Kurdish cinema remains ongoing, one can state with little controversy that Kurdish filmmaking in general has tended to emerge from nontraditional places: within prison, from the widespread diaspora, and in exile. In the case of one of the earliest Kurdish filmmakers, Yılmaz Güney (1937–84), it came from all three of these places during the course of his career.

It would also be noncontroversial to trace the beginning of Kurdish cinema to Güney, whose later films from the late 1970s and early 1980s were set in Kurdistan and dealt with the marginalization of the Kurds. Güney made his initial fame as an action hero in low-budget films in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and he took part in hundreds of films over three decades as an actor and director. Although his name was only allowed to be mentioned as a Turkish director throughout his lifetime and for years after his death, in reality he was a socialist director from a Kurdish background who employed a Third-World social realist approach in his cinema. Ironically, he spent one of the most productive periods of his life in prison in the early 1970s. Güney was imprisoned for his political views and writings and for harboring leftist leaders of the student movement. Beginning in the late 1960s and continuing through the 1970s and early 1980s, a number of films made by Güney in some way relayed aspects of the ongoing plight of the Kurds and their suffering, although at the time, making films in Kurdish—let alone openly mentioning the Kurds in film—was impossible due to Turkish political repression. These films were Seyithan (1968), Umut (Hope) (1970), Endişe (Worry) (1974), Sürü (The herd) (1978), and Yol (The road) (1982). Despite the harsh restrictions he faced, Güney chose to focus on Kurdish characters and tell primarily Kurdish stories, and this approach buttresses Güney’s credentials as the founding father of Kurdish cinema.

Fast-forward fifty years: in 2016, with the help of various city bodies and many inspired volunteers, Danar Omer created and founded an international film festival to allow Iraqi Kurdish audiences to see the best of world cinema and to allow the same audiences to see the variety of Kurdish cinema created across the greater Kurdistan region. Set in the city of Slemani, the festival can be considered both international and specific to Kurdish cultural development (because there is no Kurdish state). The Slemani International Film Festival (IFF) is probably the largest film festival in Iraq and lasts for one week. The festival is divided into two sections and accepts films shot in any format. The World Cinema section shows a series of feature films and short films from all over the world. Kurdish Cinema presents Kurdish films—featuring films and short films—made in the broad Kurdistan region, including Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. There are a number of awards and prizes. In the international competition, there are awards for Best International Feature Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Jury Award, Audience Award, and Best International Short Film. In the Kurdish competition, awards include Best National Feature Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Documentary, Jury Award, Audience Award, and Best National Short Film. The current artistic director of Slemani IFF is Omer and its program director is Lina Raza.
Introducing Hemn A. Hussein

Hemn A. Hussein is a Kurdish self-taught artist and painter from Iraqi Kurdistan. Born in 1991 in the city of Sulaymaniyah (Slemani), he received his bachelor’s degree in English linguistics and literature from the University of Sulaimani (a different anglicization for Slemani) in 2014. He also received a master’s degree in political science and international relations from the University of Wroclaw, Poland, in 2019. Being an actor, he has participated in a few short films and worked in production management in Kurdistan and Poland. His first official art exhibition was held in the city of Reykjavik in Iceland where he currently resides. Hemn has been working with the Slemani IFF since the year of its creation in 2016, as director of communications.

This interview was conducted by email on September 20, 2021.

Alan Ali Saeed: I wanted to begin by asking you about the festival’s background. Who originally came up with the idea? What made people think something so novel (for Slemani) was possible? How did the idea develop and who in the city government was involved, as presumably you needed permission? What kinds of local and international agencies were involved?

Hemn A. Hussein: Cinema is the pretense of movement by the recording and subsequent rapid projection of many still photographic images on a screen. Stepping into the twentieth century and beyond, film came to be a medium of mass entertainment, social interaction, and communication. That is how The National Science and Media Museum [Bradford, United Kingdom] describes it.² Film has operated as one of the most influential and comprehensible platforms of cultural diplomacy for the last 120 years, allowing a particular national culture to be seen and understood by those from different cultures. Film, in my view, promotes intercultural understanding. However, for films to be seen, a platform is a necessity, and history has proven that one of the most effective platforms for showcasing films are film festivals.

Annabelle Pangborn writes: “Film Festivals importantly offer a platform for [...] filmmakers to
present their creative ideas; their singular stories and storytelling; their talent and skill in their making and, not least, their passion to communicate how they feel and think about the world they live in.” Reflecting on statements like these, the idea of creating the Slemani International Film Festival was born.

Seven years ago, Danar Omer, a graduate of the college of fine arts, filmmaker, and film producer, visited Germany to attend the Berlinale (Berlin Film Festival). This is one of the oldest and most prestigious film festivals in the world. After meeting the organizers of the festival, he had an idea. He said: “After I came back from Germany, I said to myself, that we can do this too. Thus, I put together the first draft and shared the idea with close friends, to which many showed their full support and some turned down the notion, which was a complete disappointment.”

This proposal was shared with some members of the government and the private sector. Omer, the founder and artistic director of the Slemani IFF, found that Masti Film Co., a private film and TV production company in Slemani city, loved the concept and decided to cooperate with him to bring the project to life. In 2016, The Slemani International Film Festival was born. For it to be created in Slemani makes sense, as Slemani has always been the capital of culture in Iraqi Kurdistan.

To answer the last part of your question, once the creation of the festival became a de facto probability, while no one in the city’s government was involved in its creation, they showed their support and gave us permission and help. Indeed, they welcomed such an innovative idea. In the first festival, several local and international organizations and entities were involved in the sense of sponsorship, including the University of Sulaimani, the French Institute in Erbil, the Goethe Institute of Germany, and the US embassy, to name but a few. In addition, several local companies, as well as government and nongovernmental organizations, sponsored us.

Alan Ali Saeed: Did anyone on the team have experience in film festivals? Did you get help from elsewhere from people who had organized film festivals previously? What kind of interest did the proposal generate in Slemani and Kurdistan more generally?

Hemn A. Hussein: Most of the team were young Kurdish intellectuals who loved the project, the city, and cinema in general. Although they had no experience, they researched and learned everything required to make sure the first Slemani IFF held was a success. If by help from elsewhere you mean obtaining training or workshops from people who had organized film festivals previously, then no, there was none. I believe the success of the festival has been based on the enthusiasm and passion of its creators, staff, crew, and volunteers for bringing such an innovative idea into existence. The proposal later generated all kind of interest in Slemani, Kurdistan, and internationally, in terms of possible cooperation, collaborations, and more.

Alan Ali Saeed: How did you go about finding financial support for such an impressive undertaking? It still seems to be amazing something so international could develop here in Slemani.

Hemn A. Hussein: Finding financial funds for any large-scale project is one of the most crucial points of guaranteeing its success, but it is also the most difficult step on the way to its
realization. At the Slemani IFF, financing the project on such an enormous level has been our greatest challenge. However, once you have a powerful original idea, that takes everything to the next level, to the international arena and beyond, and then you find that people and organizations do tend to want to get involved and fund such an idea, and that is how it became possible.

I have asked the same question to Mr. Danar Omer, and he replied: “In the first edition, the challenge of bringing about the necessary funds that we were looking for, was really made possible when we involved politicians or government representatives who were interested in our idea. I would like to name one who has genuinely made the festival possible by creating a lobby throughout the Iraqi Kurdistan region to get the required funds. This is Mr. Hikmat Mohammed Kareem, known as Mala Baxtyar, a member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party in Slemani. He was later offered the position of the president of the festival in honor of his outstanding contribution. I cannot thank him enough for his crucial role.”

Alan Ali Saeed: Could you talk me through the team please? Who have been the key people over the years and what kind of skills and knowledge do they each bring to the festival? Did everyone know everyone else before, through other projects, or was there an actual recruitment of individuals?

Hemn A. Hussein: Although the festival has several departments within it, such as film programs, media department, advertising, marketing, hosting staff, and volunteers, it might come as a surprise, if I say, I could count the team of the festival in 2016 on the fingers of my hands! The key people though are the following: Danar Omer, the founder and the artistic director of the festival; Mala Baxtyar, the festival president; Fuad Jalal, the festival manager and owner of the Masti Film Co.; Lina Reza, the program manager and host of the ceremonies; and myself. I have been honored to serve as the director of communications of the Slemani IFF since its creation.

To answer the last part, some of the key figures knew each other before the festival, and their enthusiasm for the project gathered them together once more, but other than that, there has been an actual recruitment of individuals based on such features as their education level, office skills, experience of organizing events, language proficiency, and computer abilities.

Alan Ali Saeed: Film festivals are both about showing films and about categories/genres of film and prizes within each category. How did you come up with the categories and how do you go about selecting suitable juries? What are the categories/genres and which films have won over the festivals held so far?

Hemn A. Hussein: Yes, film festivals not only offer a platform for films to be seen but [also] create a practical competition through the different categories which eventually encourages filmmakers to thrive and make better films. One of the biggest challenges for new talent is obtaining funding for the filmmaking process. Film festivals facilitate that with their awards, which come with a monetary renumeration as well.

Slemani IFF since its first edition had international standards in terms of its categories, which include: feature film competition; short film competition (with subcategories, which are national short film and international short film); documentary film competition; and animation
competition. It is worth mentioning that in the national short film competition, films that have been produced in each of the four regions of Kurdistan have been considered as national, which creates a beautiful sense of the unity of Kurdistan through the Slemani IFF.

Regarding the jury selection, we have a policy of choosing the juries based on their profile, background, and experience, and throughout the editions we have had an incredible list of juries for all the competitions, and many of them have served as jury members in the most prestigious film festivals worldwide. Some of our previous juries and attendees include: Maori New Zealand actress Rachel House (from Disney's *Moana*), who worked with the Oscar-winning director Taika Waititi; Australian filmmaker Rhys Graham, a director of a Netflix series; award-winning Kurdish Iranian actor Navid Mohammadzadeh, who won Best Actor 2017 in the Venice Film Festival; multi-award-winning Iranian director Majid Majidi and Academy member; Linda Olszewski, award-winning producer/director; and Carolyn McDonald, producer of several Hollywood feature films. A list of winners and full details about the nominees, winners, and the juries of all the editions can be found on our official website (www.slemanifest.com) and/or on our official social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram (https://www.facebook.com/SlemaniIFF). If you are interested in films and cinema then please connect with us.

**Alan Ali Saeed:** COVID-19 disrupted life and film festivals everywhere. However, before COVID I wondered what the team had found to be the largest challenges and difficulties and how the festival team managed to overcome them. Please be as detailed as you wish.

**Hemn A. Hussein:** Film festivals, like any other large projects, usually face several challenges. The biggest challenges and difficulties for Slemani IFF have circulated around getting enough funding for each year’s plan and agenda. Finding professional and standardized cinema venues that could screen the films with the highest quality has also been an issue for us in Slemani. Travel issues for the international guests and attendees who have traveled from all over the world can be problematic, considering Slemani’s small airport and the limited flights to the whole Kurdistan region. That was another major challenge.

However, the organizers of the Slemani IFF have always believed there are no challenges that cannot be overcome, there are no issues that cannot be solved, and there are no difficulties that cannot be mastered with perseverance. We have worked with such a pragmatic and enthusiastic spirit and always made the festival work with what resources we possessed at that time. We can proudly say that despite all the challenges, all four editions of the Slemani IFF have been held successfully, based on the personal feedback we usually get from our attendees and the audience of the festival each year.

**Alan Ali Saeed:** How has the film festival developed over the four years it has run, before COVID interrupted it? What do you think are the reasons for these developments?

**Hemn A. Hussein:** The festival has developed a great deal over the four years of its existence. The development can be seen in every aspect of the festival, for example, in its programs, which showed the increase of several key festival activities, including workshops, seminars, master classes, panels, and so forth. Not only that, but the agenda or the theme of the festival has developed over the years, focusing on global issues, such as women’s rights and world
crises, such as that of climate change. This has given the festival a real and I believe significant international image.

Furthermore, the Slemani IFF’s objective is to become an Oscar-qualifying film festival. This shows the development in the festival as a whole and the fact that the Slemani IFF has established worldwide collaborations and partnership with several well-known international film festivals. For instance, for the past four editions Slemani Fest has attracted filmmakers, actors, film journalists, and programmers from other international film festivals, including Oscar-qualifying festivals, such as Nashville, Atlanta, Rio De Janeiro, Tampere, Docville, Krakow, and Animafest Zagreb. This is just a short list.

To give a further example, the Slemani IFF is an official partner of the Tampere Film Festival (FF) (https://tamperefilmfestival.fi/en/), which is one of the oldest film festivals in Europe. In fact, in the Tampere FF’s fifty-year-anniversary edition, the Finnish festival created a Kurdistan program within their edition, showcasing a package of Kurdish film festivals from all four regions of Kurdistan. They also had some of the Kurdish films in their official international competition, which proves how the Slemani IFF is aiding and facilitating the Kurdish film industry, as well as showcasing Kurdish film culture in a global context.  

Alan Ali Saeed: I often think film festivals exhibit a tension between local and international agendas. For example, world cinema is important and prize-winning films often come from all manner of countries, which lets local audiences enjoy films they might never get a chance to see otherwise (as well as to see international directors and actors). On the other hand, film festivals also have the role of promoting the local film industry and in this case Kurdish-language cinema and Kurdish-created films. How do you think Slemani IFF deals with this tension between local and international agendas?

Hemn A. Hussein: Personally, I would not call it a tension. Film festivals usually exhibit an opportunity for local cinema and cinephiles as well as the international community. This turns out to be mutually beneficial in the sense that you have mentioned. It offers the local audience a chance to see films that might never be possible otherwise, but it also gives foreign filmmakers an opportunity to exhibit their films in a completely different and new geographical location. For Slemani IFF, we have dealt with the issue by separating national and international short film competitions, which is our main category in the festival and our main focused category to become Oscar qualifying (as discussed above). This separation gives a fair chance to the Kurdish filmmakers to have their own competition and prize-winning trial, which is as valid as the international competition, but it also considers the challenges that Kurdish filmmakers face in terms of having enough funds to make films and operating in countries whose attitude to Kurdish culture varies greatly.

Alan Ali Saeed: Kurdish cinema is a difficult thing to define as it spans different countries, different dialects, and, like Kurdish nationalism, comes with different and varying political assumptions and principles. These different countries where Kurdish cinema happens are often places where Kurds are marginalized and treated with deep suspicion, if not actively oppressed by the government. How does the Slemani IFF deal with the issue of Kurdish cinema?
Hemn A. Hussein: This is a very good question. I believe the Slemani IFF has dealt with this topic quite properly. We have united all the Kurdish regions together in one category. This means it does not matter which region of Kurdistan the Kurdish film is from: whether it is from Rojawa [the Syrian Kurdish-populated area], Bakur, or northern Kurdistan [Turkey’s Kurdish-populated area], all the way to Roj Helat [the Iranian Kurdish region], eventually to Bashur, the Iraqi region of Kurdistan. Films originating from these areas are all considered Kurdish films and fall into the national category that gives them a sense of belonging to Kurdistan as a whole.

Alan Ali Saeed: My students often ask me about internships at the festival. Are there such things available and what kinds of skills would students who wish to be interns need?

Hemn A. Hussein: Until now, the Slemani IFF does not have any kind of internships for students, but it should and will be considered in the future. Thank you for the suggestion. However, we have always publicly showcased that we need volunteers and there have been many students and volunteer groups that have participated within the Slemani IFF and contributed to its success to date, including students from the University of Sulaimani, as well as students from the American University in Sulaimani. Ordinary film fans and cinephiles, whether students or otherwise, have shown great interest in volunteering for the festival over these years. In fact, as the organizers of the festival, we have been extremely grateful for all the volunteers, and we believe organizing the festival on such a great scale would not have been possible without them. I would like to thank them here.

Alan Ali Saeed: Finally, if your plans are not too secret, how do you think the film festival might develop in the future? Will we see more connections between the different film festivals in Iraqi Kurdistan for instance?

Hemn A. Hussein: One thing I can share with you in terms of our plans and development of the Slemani IFF is our objective to become an Oscar-qualifying film festival. We have already started the early steps toward that process. The pandemic situation has been a big push back to the entire film industry and especially festivals worldwide, including ours. But we are dealing with what we have now, and it is certain that Slemani IFF has come a long way within just four years and four editions. We have achieved more within this short period than many other international film festivals have achieved in decades. Considering this, we believe the Slemani IFF is looking forward to a very bright future and very soon will be one of the most well-known film festivals, not only in Iraq or the Middle East but [also] in the whole of the world.

Alan Ali Saeed: Thank you for such an informative interview. I am sure that I and everyone reading this wishes the Slemani IFF every success in the future. I cannot wait for what the fifth edition will bring to our city.
AUTHOR BIO

Alan Ali Saeed, the interviewer, lectures in English literature at the University of Sulaimani in Iraqi Kurdistan. His website is: https://sites.google.com/a/univsul.edu.iq/alan-ali-saeed/.

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