

REVIEW: Red Sea title 'Harka' takes a disturbing look at Tunisia's tragedies



JEDDAH: “Harka,” which premiered earlier this year at the Cannes Film Festival in the Un Certain Regard category and has now been featured at the ongoing second edition of the Red Sea International Film Festival in Jeddah, takes a poignant and gut-wrenching look at Tunisia, a decade after the Arab Spring.



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The film deftly handles heavy themes like abject poverty brought on by unemployment, corruption and, more importantly, the absence of hope.

Little has changed for Tunisia since the Arab Spring. Vivien Yee wrote in The New York Times: “A new constitution and several free and fair elections have failed to deliver the bread, jobs and dignity that Tunisians demanded after ousting a longtime dictator.”

Good times still elude the nation, as we see in Lotfy Nathan's unforgettable "Harka" — which can mean either "to burn" or "migrate illegally across the Mediterranean by small boats," a journey where danger and death await.

Compelling French Tunisian actor Adam Bessa plays Ali, who dreams of better times, and after his father's death, has to take on the responsibility of caring for his two younger sisters. His older brother, despite a steady job at a seaside resort, refuses to help Ali, who is further burdened by a debt his father left behind. With their house being taken over by the bank, Ali and his sisters are pushed to the streets.

With little hope left despite his risky job of selling contraband gasoline on the border, Ali as a character comes alive after the Arab Spring, which started with the immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in 2010 and spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Syria and other countries.

What do you do when life keeps hitting you? That is the question Nathan poses in a very disturbing sort of way.

With several non-professionals in the movie, the director skillfully weaves his plot through a maze of tragedies, and presents a climax that is at once hopeful and horrifying. What appears so ruthless here is the complete callousness of the people who walk by even as a tragedy unfolds in front of them.

Maximilian Pittner's camera takes you close to Ali and others, helping us to watch their anguish in great detail. Nathan's background has been documentaries, and here in his fictional "Harka," he masters the art of mixing the two genres into a gripping narrative.