



## HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS: MY ENEMY, MY BROTHER

In A&E, Latest News by Victoria Davis November 30, 2017 [Leave a Comment](#)

His silver-grey hair, deep brown eyes and joyful toothless grin are just some of the reasons people are naturally drawn to Najah Aboud.

“At any screening, people flock to him because he’s got this warmth,” said Ann Shin, documentary filmmaker and director of *My Enemy My Brother*. “Najah has such an open heart, despite everything that has happened, and he has so much love to share.”

Zahed Haftlang is a quiet, dark-haired man of few words. But when he does speak, the words spring from a place of gentleness and sincerity.

“Hi, how are you?” I asked Haftlang as he sat next to Shin and across the table from Aboud. “I’m still alive,” he said. “How are you?”

Shin’s *My Enemy My Brother* is a 90-minute documentary which premiered at San Diego’s Asian Film Festival earlier this month. The film follows the lives of Aboud and his dear friend Haftlang as the two men strive to find peace after enduring a lifetime’s worth of suffering in the Iran-Iraq war, which lasted from 1980 to 1988.

Aboud was only 19 years old when he was forced to leave his wife and infant son to fight as an Iraqi soldier and Haftlang, at the age of 13, ran away from home to escape the hands of an abusive father, only to fall into the trenches with the rest of the Iranian military. Both men were prisoners of war for a number of years.

“There’s so much about their experience that’s not in the film,” said Shin. Her film won the Grand Jury Award at the festival and received top honors. “I told myself, ‘Even though it’s going to be hard to tell this story, I’m going to do it.’”

The documentary begins 20 years after the war, when these two men, who once fought on opposing sides, meet at Vancouver, Canada’s Centre for Victims of Torture and promise to help each other find healing. Aboud begins a deeply emotional journey to Iraq to find his lost wife and son and Haftlang takes steps to mend a broken relationship with his father.

“There were many parts that moved me,” said Aboud of his experience on the film. “I see my sister after long time, something big for me, touched my heart. I had heart problems because it was so much emotion. I now have a battery here.” Aboud points to his chest.

“I’m drawn to stories where people overcome hardship,” said Shin. “We rarely hear about Iranian and Iraqi soldiers. We only hear about terrorists. It’s important to show how difficult it is to go on with life after experiencing such trauma.”

Filming in the conflict zone of Iraq was “nerve-wracking” according to Shin. “There were people that said we had to have an armed guard for every crew person.”

While on their second day of filming in the barracks with the Iraqi militia—a group of volunteers dedicated to fighting ISIS—the militia’s leader, who had been kind and welcoming to Shin and her team, was killed while on mission in the northern territories. The crew stopped filming to attend his funeral.

“Everyone was wearing black combat wear,” said Shin. “One of the soldiers at the funeral came up to me and said, ‘We lose good men every day.’ It brought it home, what it’s like to live in a war zone.”

Aboud added, “In Iraq, you only see destroy because of the war.”

*Cocolors*, a Japanese, post-apocalyptic animated film, also premiered at the Asian Film Festival. Like *My Enemy, My Brother*, the film’s creator Toshihisa Yokoshima, focuses on how the human spirit is kept vibrant in an underground world filled with destruction, absent from any light. How does a human stay human when they are forced to always be soldiers?

“I, and many young people, don’t have hope for Japan’s future,” said Yokoshima through his translator. “With this story, I am aiming to light a flame in the hearts of people around me. I hope that by showing these films, I can prevent this kind of future for Japan.”

He adds, “Reality is hopeless. It’s all about how we keep hope alive within that reality of a hopeless world.”

Aboud has yet to find his wife and son, and Haftlang still has nightmares about the war. However, both men understand that they are alive and that life is nothing without hope.

“I’m still fighting with the life,” said Haftlang. “Life doesn’t have fair, but I try to be fair person. Without faith, all the human seems like robots.”

Aboud adds, "The story is not finished. I have big hope. I do not know where this hope comes from. But there's a connection between me and my son."