




January 2024

## In the Land of Brothers

John C. Lyden

University of Nebraska Omaha, johnclyden@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

 Part of the [Ethnic Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Islamic Studies Commons](#), and the [Islamic World and Near East History Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

### Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2024) "In the Land of Brothers," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1, Article 36. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol28/iss1/36>

This Sundance Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

## In the Land of Brothers

### Abstract

This is a film review of *In the Land of Brothers* (2024), directed by Raha Amirfazli and Alireza Ghasemi.

### Keywords

Refugees, Iran, Afghans

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

### Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



**In the Land of Brothers (2024), dir. Raha Amirfazli and Alireza Ghasemi**

This film tells three interconnected stories of Afghan refugees living in Iran. While the stories are fictional, the filmmakers based them on countless real-life stories that they gathered from Afghans in Iran. The result is a film that maps the challenges of refugees and what they must do to survive in a system that is hostile to them.

The first chapter deals with Mohammed, an intelligent 15-year-old boy living and working with a group of refugees at a farm in Iran. He goes to school, but the Iranian police can also impress any Afghan into service cleaning up their facilities, and Mohammed is forced into this servitude and is abused by an officer as a result. He has no recourse, and must bear this in silence, but finds a way to escape the abuse through harming himself physically. A theme that runs through the film is that the refugees are forced to use deceit to survive, and this is the first such example. Mohammed clearly loses his innocence at this point: the year is 2001.

The second chapter deals with Leila, a young woman that Mohammed had befriended in the previous chapter when he helped her with her English homework, and they clearly liked each other—although Leila was already promised to an older man. This section takes place in 2010 at the house of the affluent Iranian family in Tehran that employs Leila and her husband Hossein. When Hossein suddenly dies, Leila is forced to conceal this from the family, as she and her young son Omid will be deported if anyone finds out. Like Mohammed, Leila is forced to suffer in silence and use deceit as she arranges a secret burial of her husband. She digs the grave and recites the prayers by herself, as the rich family enjoy a party with friends on the beach. Although they appear kind to her, the class separations are clearly demonstrated as they dance and set off fireworks while she mourns alone.

The third chapter deals with Qasem, Leila's brother, in 2021. He learns that his son has been killed fighting in Syria, as he had joined the army without informing his family. Qasem struggles with whether to conceal this from his wife, concocting a story that their son is going to Germany for a job, and when a memorial service for Afghan soldiers who have died serving Iran occurs, he attempts to continue the deception. As his wife is Deaf, and those running the ceremony are wearing masks (as this is during the pandemic), she cannot read their lips, and her husband can conceal the truth from her. Once again, a good person is forced to lie to survive and to protect those he loves. The film does present the possibility that he will finally tell her the truth, ironically juxtaposed with the words of the memorial service that celebrate the sacrifice of Afghan soldiers for Iran. We feel nothing honorable in that sacrifice, however, as we have only seen the Iranians treat Afghans as second-class citizens who lack rights throughout the entirety of the film. To die for the country that has accepted you as a refugee might be commendable, but it is hard to see that

the sacrifice has truly been appreciated or rewarded, even when Iran is called “the land of brothers” for Afghans.

The film does indicate that Afghans who have been in the country for decades can finally become citizens, but it is still the case that many Iranian cities do not even allow Afghans to enter. Co-director Raha Amirfazli, who was at the screening, admitted that they filmed in some cities that exclude Afghans, even though they had some Afghan actors—so they already were secretly evading regulations, much like their characters. The filmmakers are also unsure if they will be allowed to release the film in Iran, due to censorship concerns and the subject matter of the film.

There are moments of joy in the film, as it is indicated that Leila and Mohammed do finally marry, and her son Omid is growing into a young man. Qasem’s daughter enjoys boxing, and he gives her new gloves for her upcoming competition. There is some degree of normalcy accomplished, but the fact that the system is designed to disempower them cannot be gainsaid. The film is beautifully made and acted, and I hope that it is distributed widely so that more people can hear the story of the treatment of Afghan refugees in Iran. Refugees in so many places face legal obstacles and discrimination, but they are also heroic in their courage, love, and determination. This film gives us that story as well, and it offers a welcome humanization of them.