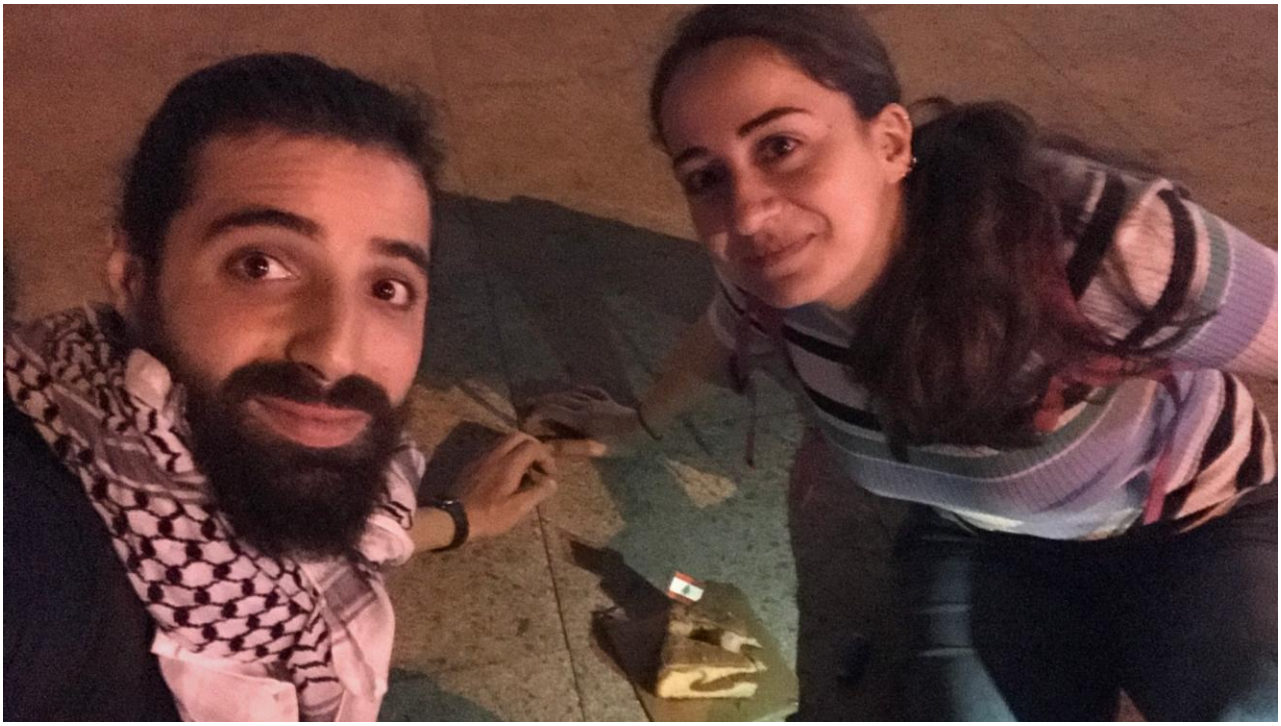
WINNER
WORLD CINEMA DOCUMENTARY SPECIAL JURY AWARD
FOR JOURNALISTIC IMPACT
sundance
film festival 2026

Screen Scotland presents
a Habak Films
and
Sonja Henrici Creates production

# BIRDS OF WAR

**a film by**
Janay Boulos &
Abd Alkader Habak



*Supported by*
*the National Lottery through Screen Scotland, Connected Foundation, IDA and the Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, Inmaat Foundation, IMS, Women Make Movies, Docsup, Catflap*

*Produced by Sonja Henrici, Janay Boulos, Abd Alkader Habak*

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# BIRDS OF WAR

## Press Quotes:

"Like a flower that somehow emerges through concrete, love can blossom even in a space of unfathomable violence." - Deadline

"Charming…Birds of War is a touching love story that finds hope and heart in the bonds that bring people together, even during conflicts designed to keep them apart" - POV Magazine

"A compelling film… a message of hope… a beacon of light emerging from within the chaos." - Playlist

"An Engaging Portrait of Journalism Turned Love in Wartime" - Awards Buzz

"... The first great film I saw in 2026, BIRDS OF WAR is a must see.." - Unseen Films

"An echoing reminder that love and the resilience of the human spirit knows no barriers" - Next Best Picture

"…Birds of War successfully immortalizes a beautiful, almost unbelievable love story that blooms in the wake of violence." - Loud & Clear

"A deeply absorbing and moving account of two lovers whose lives are defined by their commitment to shedding light on the truth." - High on Films

"There is no better reminder of the simple power of love and hope than Birds of War." - Geek Vibes Nation

## AWARDS

**Sundance Film Festival 2026**
*World Cinema Documentary Special Jury Award for Journalistic Impact*
**28th Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival**
*Winner, Silver Alexander*
*Winner, FIPRESCI Award*
*Winner, Human Rights in Motion Award*
*Winner, WIFT GR Award*

# BIRDS OF WAR

## Log Line

The love story of London-based Lebanese journalist and Syrian-based activist/cameraman over thirteen years of revolutions, war and exile.

## 50-word Synopsis

From besieged Aleppo to the confines of a London newsroom, Lebanese journalist Janay Boulos and Syrian activist /cameraman Abd Alkader Habak retrace their love story, using their vast personal archives stretching over 13 years of revolutions, war and exile. Can their love survive distance, danger, and differences?

## Tech Details

| | |
|---|---|
| Country of Origin: | UK, Syria, Lebanon |
| Runtime: | 85’ |
| Screening Formats: | 4K, DCP |
| Aspect Ratio: | 1.85.1 flat |
| Camera: | Canon C70, Canon 5D IV, Canon 60D, iPhone |
| Sound: | 5.1 Surround Mix, Stereo |
| Spoken Language: | Arabic, English |
| Subtitles: | English |
| Closed Captions: | yes |
| Lens used: | 24-105 Canon & others |
| Principal Locations: | Aleppo, Idlib, London, Beirut, Jbeil |

# BIRDS OF WAR

## Long Synopsis

**BIRDS OF WAR** follows London-based Lebanese journalist, Janay, and Syrian activist Habak over 13 years, using personal archives to tell a love story across war, revolutions and exile.

Young BBC reporter Janay Boulos first contacts Syrian cameraman Abd Alkader Habak ("Habak") for footage during the final months of the four-year battle for Aleppo in 2016, one of the bloodiest and most decisive turning points in Syria's brutal civil war.

Their professional relationship deepens as Janay discovers more about the extraordinary young man documenting the violence for her reports. Through texts, video exchanges, voice messages, and shared moments from afar, the bond between them strengthens, while at the same time Habak's world becomes increasingly perilous amid chemical attacks and continuous bombardment.

When an act of compassion puts Habak in danger and he is forced to flee Syria, he and Janay's relationship enters a new phase: for the first time, they meet in person, in Turkey. Distance, war, cultural differences and familial judgements temporarily fade as the two wrap themselves in a cocoon of safety, away from the terror back home.

Still, they are never far from the question that would soon enough come to haunt them: *Would it be possible for two people from such disparate worlds to build a life together?*

# BIRDS OF WAR

## Artistic Intent / Directors' Statement –
## Janay Boulos & Abd Alkader Habak

In crafting **BIRDS OF WAR**, we embarked on a journey that transcends borders and political narratives, weaving our love story through the wars, revolutions, and shifting realities of Lebanon and Syria.

The film mirrors the complexities of the region we call home, yet it is ultimately a deeply human exploration of connection, an insistence that love can grow even in the most fractured landscapes.

Both of us lived through turbulent times shaped by forces beyond our control. Janay grew up in post–Civil War Lebanon, under the shadow of Syrian occupation and recurring wars with Israel that displaced her family from the South and scattered their sense of rootedness. Habak grew up under the Assad family dictatorship, followed by the erupting hope of revolution, then the devastation of war, the siege of Aleppo and displacement.

These histories of rupture and resilience drive us to tell our unlikely love story while confronting the political machinery that has shaped, and often broken, our worlds.

This story feels urgent now because the world is increasingly dividing people, building barriers, and telling us who does and doesn't belong. Borders harden, rhetoric sharpens, and societies become quicker to label than to listen. **BIRDS OF WAR** fights back against the manufactured distance between us.

Our improbable, cross-border and cross-trauma relationship models what happens when people choose to understand rather than fear, to connect rather than retreat. In a moment when polarization dominates public discourse, our film offers another path: one where compassion disrupts the logic of conflict.

We want audiences to walk away with a simple but profound understanding: love wins, but not because it is easy, because it demands the harder work of empathy, listening, complexity, and coexistence. Division is effortless; understanding is an act of courage.

Our film is shaped by our distinct lived experience as journalists, activists and filmmakers. We tell our story using the tools that once helped us

document our regions' struggles: vérité footage, mobile videos, voice notes, text messages, and mixed media spanning 2011 to 2025.

These aesthetics reflect the fragmented worlds we come from, and form a mixed image between private and public, intimate and historical, accidental and deliberate.

Rather than imposing a cinematic polish, we honour the rawness of lived experience. Journalism becomes both form and philosophy: a mechanism for truth-telling, a resistance to erasure, and a way to reclaim narrative power.

The visual language in this documentary is grounded, observational, and hybrid. The audience sees our relationship unfold through the same lenses we lived through: shaky handheld videos, hurried recordings from conflict zones, screenshots, and late-night voice notes. The film's rhythm is shaped less by traditional editing patterns and more by the organic, sometimes chaotic flow of real life.

One of the hardest creative challenges was navigating the immense archive of our lives. Over a decade's worth of personal and journalistic footage became both a blessing and a burden. We had to excavate not only what happened but what mattered: what held emotional truth, what shaped us, what formed the spine of the story. The process forced us to confront memories we had avoided or misremembered, asking us to choose vulnerability over distance.

The film evolved constantly because reality refused to stay still. What began as one kind of documentary became another as political events shifted, as our personal lives changed, as the region's story continued to unfold beneath our feet. We learned to let go of rigid ideas and instead follow the living pulse of the present. The world surprised us, and those surprises deepened the film's honesty.

Through the process, we discovered new layers of our history and new parts of ourselves. Documenting our relationship revealed how deeply storytelling had shaped our identities and how it became our form of survival, our evidence against forgetting, our insistence on witnessing. The film taught us that memory is not fixed, but it is a moving negotiation between who we were and who we are becoming.

**BIRDS OF WAR** is unique because it is told by two journalists who are not only covering history, but also living it. We are both the subjects and the storytellers. Our relationship embodies the contradictions of our region, yet

also its untold possibilities. We capture the fear in a voice note sent during bombing, the hesitations in text messages across a border, the humour that breaks through tragedy, the quiet resilience of choosing love when the world has taught you to brace for loss.

At its core, **BIRDS OF WAR** is a film about challenging the narratives imposed on us by states, history, and war, and choosing connection despite them. It is an act of resistance, a testament to survival, and a celebration of the possibility that lives on the other side of fear.

In a world that insists on separation, we offer a different vision: that borders may define nations, but they do not have to define people.

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# BIRDS OF WAR

## Producer's Statement -- Sonja Henrici

What drew me to this story is how Janay and Habak use their intimate archive to tell stories that news coverage simply misses. When we started talking about the film, Syria had vanished from headlines; by the end of 2024, Assad was toppled, providing an unforeseen narrative arc for the story.

Janay and Habak have always documented their lives, both separately and together. When IDA Logan Elevate, InMaat Foundation and Screen Scotland came on board, we began building a structure from **24 terabytes of footage**. We shot a two-day interview where they told each other their stories for the first time on camera - the famous "interview" they allude to in the film; material we initially used as a structuring device, though we have since shifted to a more pointed voiceover approach and a chronological structure that gives the film greater emotional cohesion.

The production has been shaped by unfolding events. In summer 2024, Habak spent nearly three weeks trying to enter Syria via Turkey to see his family - our most anxious moment as producers. He didn't make it across. For months, Janay and Habak filmed each other processing what it meant to watch their countries unravel from London - unable to return, unable to look away. Then Israel attacked Lebanon in September 2024 and Janay flew immediately to be with her parents. On the very day of the Lebanon-Israel ceasefire, 27 November, HTS started its march on Damascus and toppled Assad on 8 December 2024. Habak immediately seized the chance to return to Syria, finally reuniting with his family for the first time since 2017.

The Scottish team has been essential: Edinburgh-based editor Will Hewitt has been cutting since our first development funds came through, occasionally filming moments where we needed both Janay and Habak in frame.

With Janay and Habak also producing, I haven't attended every shoot, which, of course, enhanced the intimacy of what they captured, mostly self-shooting on Canon C70 cameras.

In the summer of 2025, our Supervising Editor/Exec Producer Claire Ferguson joined us to whip our edit into shape.

One of our biggest early challenges has been implementing trauma-informed editing practice. Habak's archive also documents war crimes, and he hadn't been able to look at his hard drive since arriving in London.

# BIRDS OF WAR

Working with Rebecca Day at Film in Mind, we used DART guidance to create a system for Habak to finally sit down and review his drive, colour-coding footage as Red, Orange or Green. We initially excluded Red footage, and our editor blurred certain material to protect himself and the translator from exposure to the most graphic images. Sometimes we would only send audio clips to the translator.

Security has been a constant consideration. We worked with specialist high-risk advisors (ex-military, ironically, but useful for conflict zone protocols). Habak underwent HEFAT training. When he returned to Syria in early 2025, Israeli bombing near Damascus sent our insurance premiums soaring.

Through their personal footage, voice messages, and frontline reporting, Janay and Habak's story explores how journalism can be both a tool of truth as well as a weapon of power. And how love can challenge the divisions imposed by sectarianism, colonial legacies, and authoritarian regimes.

Ultimately, the film challenges viewers to rethink what it means to tell a story; who gets to tell it, and how storytelling itself can be a tool for healing, accountability, and change.

**BIRDS OF WAR** reveals how news gets made, how corporate media shapes perception, and how local voices might get exploited. Janay and Habak come from opposing religious and political sides of the region, yet their relationship exposes the reductive narratives pushed by both Western media and regional propaganda.

Working with Janay and Habak has shown me that examining your own life honestly - especially when it means to challenge your family's beliefs - is a radical act. Their thirteen years of footage prove that personal stories can change understanding in ways political analysis cannot.

If this film inspires others to tell their own stories truthfully, particularly those caught between opposing sides, that would be its real impact.

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# BIRDS OF WAR

## Film Team

**Janay Boulos**, **Director/Producer**
Janay Boulos is a Lebanese journalist and filmmaker with extensive experience documenting the Middle East. From 2012-2021, she worked for BBC News across television, radio and digital platforms. In 2021, she founded Habak Films with Syrian filmmaker Abd Alkader Habak. Janay has produced documentaries for BBC News and Al Jazeera Arabic, bringing Middle Eastern stories to global audiences. Her professional development includes IDFA Project Space, Documentary Campus Masterschool, and Sheffield DocFest's Future Producer School. In 2023, she received the IDA Logan Elevate grant.

**(short)** A Lebanese journalist and documentary producer based between Lebanon and London, she has extensive experience across news, broadcast, digital, and field production. She is producing several documentaries for international outlets, including Al Jazeera and The New York Times, as well as her second feature documentary, Until the Buzzing Stops.

**Abd Alkader Habak ("Habak"), Director/Producer**
Abd Alkader Habak ("Habak") brings first-hand experience as a Syrian cinematographer who documented the Syrian conflict over six years (2011-2017). Working in dangerous environments, he collaborated with BBC and CNN as cameraman and field producer. His work during the siege of Aleppo—before fleeing in 2017—resulted in extraordinary archive footage documenting the Syrian revolution and war. Now London-based, Habak continues in documentary. His recent short "Syria's Last Chapter" was commissioned by Al Jazeera Witness (December 2024). He is also in production with a feature documentary called “Until the Buzzing Stops”

**(short)** A Syrian cinematographer, activist, and documentary filmmaker, he documented six years of the Syrian revolution. Based between London and Syria, his work blends journalism and human rights storytelling, exploring identity, exile, and return. Currently, he is working on two short documentaries and his second feature, Until the Buzzing Stops.

**Sonja Henrici, Producer**
Sonja Henrici is an international BAFTA-nominated producer of multiple international feature documentaries: including the acclaimed MERKEL (Telluride / Netflix), TRACING LIGHT (DOKLeipzig Opening Film 2024), THE OIL MACHINE *(*IDFA / BBC), BECOMING ANIMAL (CPH DOX 2018); TIME TRIAL, a film with ex-cyclist David Millar (IDFA / SXSW); DONKEYOTE (2017) (EIFF Best Feature Documentary); SEVEN SONGS FOR A LONG LIFE

(SXSW); "One of the year's most moving films." (Hollywood Reporter): I AM BREATHING (2013). She is an innovative and creative producer with deep knowledge across the whole value chain. She joined Scottish Documentary Institute at its inception in 2004 and was instrumental in developing SDI into a flourishing talent hub for creative documentary, renowned world-wide. She founded SDI Productions (2007) and was co-director of the Institute from 2013-2020, leading it to its charitable status. She was a founding trustee of the charity until 2020. In 2021 she set up Sonja Henrici Creates Ltd for all her creative and production work. As German-British she loves to collaborate internationally from her base in Edinburgh. FRSA. AMPAS, BAFTA Member.

**Will Hewitt, Editor**

Will Hewitt is an Editor based in Edinburgh, who specialises in creative documentary. He cut and co-directed the Royal Television Society winning feature 'Long Live my Happy Head' and the BAFTA Scotland winning short film 'Harmonic Spectrum'. Recent feature edits include the Sundance selected 'BIrds of War' and the upcoming documentary 'Thorntree'. He is a recipient of the Grierson/Netflix DocLab scheme, Broadcast Magazine Hotshot and SONY Future Filmmaker finalist. Will is also the Co-Director of the Scottish cult classic 'Sink or Skim', a film about the World Stone Skimming Championships and an avid stone skipper himself. Additionally, he is a passionate teacher of documentary storytelling at the National Film & Television School Scotland.

**Claire Ferguson: Executive Producer / Supervising Editor**

Claire Ferguson is a documentary filmmaker with over 25 years of industry experience. After starting in drama features, her documentary career began editing Nick Broomfield's multi-award-winning *Aileen: The Life and Death of a Serial Killer*. Her many editorial credits include the GRAMMY-winning *Concert for George*, International EMMY-nominated *Growing Up Down's*, *The End of the Line* (SUNDANCE 2012), the BAFTA-winning *The Islands and the Whales* and the IDFA-winning *Much Ado About Dying*. Her recent work includes the BAFTA-nominated four-part documentary series *The Enfield Poltergeist* for Apple TV+and *Tommy Jessop Goes To Hollywood* for BBC 1. She has acted as Consulting Editor on a wide range of documentaries, including the BIFA-winning *If The Streets Were On Fire* and *Is There Anybody Out There?* (BAFTA-nominated, SUNDANCE 2023).
Claire's directorial work includes *The Beatles in Help!* and *The Concert for Bangladesh Revisited*, both for Apple Corps. In 2017 her feature documentary *Destination Unknown* was nominated for a Grierson award and was named by The Guardian's Peter Bradshaw as one of his "documentaries of the year". Claire teaches documentary at the National Film & Television School, and convened the Grierson DocLab editing course with Netflix.

# BIRDS OF WAR

**Additional Editor: Tanya Singh**

Tanya Singh is an editor in drama and creative documentary. Recent credits include A Knock at the Door, Two Days on the Interstate, and The Last Gammon. She graduated from the UK's National Film and Television School in March 2025; her student shorts were nominated for two Grierson Awards, a Student Academy Award and an IDA Documentary Award, and screened at festivals worldwide including Telluride, Sitges and LIAF. Before retraining as an editor, she worked for over 15 years in feature production, theatre and artists' moving image. Originally from Chandigarh, she is now based in London. www.tanyasingh.co.uk

**ORIGINAL MUSIC BY: Harpal Mudhar & Darren Sng**

**Harpal Mudhar**
Harpal is a London-based composer and music producer whose work can be heard in films, television, documentaries and video games. His most recent works include Red Egg & Ginger which premiered at Tribeca Festival and A Good Question which Premiered at Doc Edge Festival. Harpal's career began as a session drummer and music producer. He has worked as an orchestrator for The Darkest Universe (dir. Tom Kingsley, Will Sharpe) and BBC's Ghosts. Harpal is known for his emotionally driven and cinematic approach to scoring, with a keen sense for storytelling through music

**Darren Sng** is an award winning composer, conductor, and orchestrator. His work spans various genres of film and television, including the scores to the BAFTA Yugo nominated film '*Orchids: Darwin's Conundrum*', and the International Documentary Award winning documentary '*What A Day, What A Life*'. He has also contributed orchestrations to films such as '*H Is For Hawk*' (Claire Foy, Brendan Gleeson), and has recorded and conducted at venues such as AIR Lyndhurst Studios and Abbey Road Studios. Darren is a graduate of the National Film and Television School, where he received the AVID Award For Excellence In Composition.

# BIRDS OF WAR

## Production Companies

**Habak Films Ltd**
info@habakfilms.com
www.habakfilms.com

Habak Films is a documentary production company founded in London in 2021 by Janay Boulos and Abd al-Kader Habak. Specialising in stories from Lebanon and Syria, the company creates compelling documentaries for leading international outlets such as Al Jazeera and The New York Times.

Habak Films also produces feature-length documentaries, including *Birds of War*, selected for the World Documentary Competition at Sundance 2026, and *Until the Buzzing Stops*, currently in production.

With a strong foundation in cross-cultural storytelling, Habak Films serves as a platform for international collaboration, bridging the West and the Arab world.

**Sonja Henrici Creates Ltd**
contact@sonjahenrici.com
www.sonjahenrici.com

Sonja Henrici Creates Ltd was established in 2021 by Sonja Henrici for all her creative and production work across documentary and fiction. She works with new and established talents and collaborates and partners with diverse filmmakers and companies across the world. She develops thoughtful and gripping stories to make you see differently. Stories that ignite our imagination to live and love better and to transform our worlds.

Recent credits:
BIRDS OF WAR (2026 Sundance Competition)
DOUGLAS GORDON BY DOUGLAS GORDON (forthcoming)
TRACING LIGHT (2024 DOK Leipzig Opening Film, ZDF/PIFFL).
LOVE & TROUBLE (2024 Dokumentale, SWR/ ARTE)
MERKEL (2022, Netflix, Telluride),
THE OIL MACHINE (2022 BBC, IDFA, CPH DOX)

# BIRDS OF WAR

**BILLING BLOCK**

Birds of War
عصافير الحرب

A love story.

A film by Janay Boulos & Abd Alkader Habak

Screen Scotland presents a Habak Films & Sonja Henrici Creates Production supported by Connected Foundation, IDA and the Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, Produced by Sonja Henrici, Janay Boulos, Abd Alkader Habak, Executive Producers Claire Ferguson, Mark Thomas, Cinematography Abd Alkader Habak, Janay Boulos, Editor Will Hewitt, Additional Editor Tanya Singh, Story Consultant Jonathan Key, Original Music by Harpal Mudhar & Darren Sng, Re-recording Mixer George Foulgham, Supervising Editor Claire Ferguson, Line Producer Nadja Lapcevic, Associate Producer Sam Payne

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