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# Drama 'The Insult' Throws Light on Divided Lebanon, Gets Oscar Nomination

*Penelope Poulou*

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Ziad Doueiri's film *The Insult* is one of this year's Oscar nominees in the Foreign Film category. The film, largely a courtroom drama, tackles the cultural, religious and political rifts that have existed in Lebanon since 1948. Doueiri told VOA about the film's hard-hitting elements and its message of reconciliation between Muslims and Christians.

Ziad Doueiri is very passionate about his work. His story about the verbal dispute between two men from two different ethnic and religious backgrounds in Beirut, Lebanon, reveals his anxiety about his country, which he feels is fragmented and has not reconciled with its past.

"Lebanon is still a volatile place. Lebanon is so dynamic. But also, we had a past. Beirut, Lebanon had a rough past. We had a lot of conflict with the Syrians, the Palestinians, the Lebanese, the Left, the Right, the Conservatives, the Liberals. The pro-West, the pro-East. Lebanon is such a tiny place, but it really absorbs all those kinds of things," he said.

"So, whenever you have that many conflicts and such a tiny place surrounded by so many countries we are on a hot bed of

problems. Things can get out of hand because since the end of the civil war the Lebanese never sat down with each other to say, 'ok the war is over, let's talk about it.' There is stability, but it can explode any time."

His film *The Insult* conveys this combustible political climate. In the middle of a heated political campaign in Beirut, a small dispute about a drainpipe between Tony, a Christian Lebanese car mechanic and Yasser, a Palestinian construction foreman, takes on monstrous proportions. After Tony's faulty drainpipe gets him wet, Yasser fixes it, only to see it destroyed by Tony, who does not want a Palestinian close to his property. Yasser loses his temper and curses Tony out.

Despite his pregnant wife's advice to avoid a confrontation, Tony goes to Yasser's boss and demands Yasser apologize and be fined for his behavior. Like most Palestinian refugees who've lived in Lebanon since 1948, Yasser does not have a work permit. His boss pressures him to apologize or lose his job. When he goes to meet Tony, instead of a reconciliation, the argument escalates. This time it is Tony who insults Yasser. Yasser punches Tony and breaks two of his ribs. Tony takes Yasser to court.

Filmmaker Doueiri said the idea for his film came from personal experience. "Just like the film starts, I was watering my plants. It's an old apartment so the water leaked and fell on one of the construction workers and he yelled because the water fell on him and we had a heated exchange of words and we ended up yelling at each other," he said.

Doueiri said, thankfully, the argument was settled. "Couple of days later, it started dawning on me, 'What if I start a story where there is such a silly insignificant incident, but it does not get

resolved. And actually, becomes more complicated.' And I start asking myself the questions, 'could such an insignificant problem in Lebanon develop into a national crisis?' It can."

*The Insult* escalates into a serious courtroom drama, as the two men, looking for justice, take the dispute all the way up to the country's Supreme Court and the Lebanese government.

"When the film came out, it split the country in a way, because the Christian population flooded the movie and it became number one, [at the box office] but certain part, a big part of the Muslim community boycotted the movie."

As a filmmaker, Doueiri is no stranger to controversy. His previous film, *The Attack*, was banned in 22 countries, including Lebanon, because he had shot it in Israel. He said *The Insult* has also been boycotted in some Arab countries, including Jordan and the Palestinian territories.

"It is very unfortunate that the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah banned the movie. Even though one of the main actors who plays the Palestinian got a huge award at the Venice film festival, for Best Male Performance," he said.

Doueiri, who was raised by an intellectual leftist pro-Palestinian Lebanese family, said his film offers a balanced study between Christian Lebanese and Muslim Palestinians. His script, part character drama, part courtroom drama, was co-written with his Christian Lebanese partner Joelle Touma.

"She wrote all the scenes of the Palestinian, she grew up hating those Palestinians, but all the scenes where they had the lawyer defending the Palestinian, she wrote them. And all the scenes, the Christian lawyer defending the Christian, I wrote them. So, we crossed," he said.

*The Insult* is an elegantly told story that peers into the psychological makeup of Lebanon and its inhabitants. Despite the controversy it has created, the Lebanese government chose it to represent the country at the Oscars.