

Festival Review

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Duhok: A Festival Showcasing the Great Souls of Stateless People

12th DUHOK INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2025



Attending the eight-day 12th Duhok International Film Festival from December 9 to 16, 2025 proved to be a profound personal discovery for me. It offered a rare and moving encounter with the noble spirit of the Kurdish people—their enduring yearning for freedom, social justice, and the preservation of a rich cultural heritage. The annual festival takes place in Duhok, a northern city of the Kurdistan Autonomous Region of Iraq and serves as a vital cultural platform for voices often unheard.

The festival stands out as a unique cinematic space for Kurdish filmmakers from Iraq and neighbouring regions of Iran, Turkey and Syria as well as those living in the diaspora. It enables them to express their artistic vision through cinema while forging meaningful connections with global film culture.

Kurdistan spans the historic lands of Mesopotamia—one of the world's oldest civilizations, where writing first emerged and early philosophical thought took shape.

Against this deep historical backdrop, the festival seeks to reclaim and reframe cultural identity by presenting Duhok not as a region defined by political conflict, but as a vibrant centre of artistic growth and creative expression.

The mission of the Duhok International Film Festival is to strengthen ties between Kurdish filmmakers and the global film industry by providing a launchpad for works from all four parts of Kurdistan—East, South, West, and North—as well as films produced in the diaspora. Its core objectives include showcasing innovative films of high artistic value from around the world, promoting a positive image of Kurdistan and fostering a safe peaceful environment for cultural exchange and dialogue.

Politically, the Kurds remain one of the world's largest stateless ethnic groups, forming significant populations in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Their history has been shaped by prolonged marginalization and persecution. While Kurdish nationalism has maintained strong appeal among Kurdish communities across these regions, state authorities have often viewed Kurdish aspirations as a threat to national security and regional stability.

Deeply rooted in a long struggle for identity and recognition, Kurdish culture finds powerful expression in its cinema. Kurdish films frequently engage with themes of identity, political oppression, war, displacement, survival and cultural preservation—offering both artistic depth and historical testimony. In this sense, the Duhok International Film Festival emerges not merely as a cinematic event, but as a cultural

affirmation of a people whose stories continue to seek space, dignity and global recognition.



The eight-day extravaganza in the city of Duhok showcased 110 films from Kurdistan and around the world. The festival adopted “Drought and Climate Change” as its official theme for two compelling reasons. First, it is an urgent global crisis that affects every community and demands collective international solutions. Second, the organisers strongly believe that cinema possesses a unique power to raise awareness of these alarming consequences—not only among local communities but also at governmental levels—thereby serving as a vital call to action.

Spain was honoured as the festival's guest country, presenting a curated selection of 13 classic and contemporary films. The programme ranged from the iconic works of masters such as Luis Buñuel and Pedro Almodóvar to the fresh voices of significant emerging Spanish filmmakers.

The festival comprised six competitive sections: World Cinema (8 feature films), World Documentary (9), World Short (14),

Kurdish Cinema (6), Kurdish Documentary (8), and Kurdish Short (12). Awards were presented by juries across multiple categories, while the prestigious International FIPRESCI Prize was selected from the Kurdish Cinema section by the FIPRESCI Jury.

In addition, the non-competitive sections offered a rich and diverse cinematic experience. These included World Vision (16), featuring *It Was Just an Accident*, the Palme d'Or-winning film by Jafar Panahi; Kurdish Cinema Panorama (18); Special World Screening Cinema, which showcased the restored print of the Iraqi classic *Said Effendi* (1956) by late Kurdish filmmaker Kameran Hosni; Special Kurdish Screening Cinema, featuring *Harsh Land, Distant Sky* (Zewi Sexit U Asmani Dor) by Hawraz Mohammed; and Kids Cinema (4).

All screenings were held at the Convention Hall of the University of Duhok and across three Cinemax screens at Duhok Mall. Beyond film screenings, the festival hosted panel discussions addressing contemporary issues in Kurdish cinema. Another significant initiative, NUHAT, sponsored by the Goethe-Institute Iraq, supported young and emerging filmmakers from across the Kurdistan region and Iraq by helping them develop skills in directing, scriptwriting, cinematography, and editing. The programme culminated in a week-long classroom workshop in which participants transformed their project ideas into film productions through collaborative teamwork.

All six Kurdish films considered by the FIPRESCI Jury for the festival's FIPRESCI Prize were remarkable in their own right, each possessing distinct thematic depth, cinematic language, and aesthetic value. After carefully

weighing these elements—narrative strength, cinematic execution, and artistic vision—the jury awarded the FIPRESCI Prize to *All the Mountains Give* (All the Mountains Give) directed, shot and edited by Arash Rakhsha.

The film follows the harsh life journeys of two close friends, Hamid and Yaser, who grow up in poverty-stricken families in a Kurdish village in Iran. In their search for survival, they become *Kolbars*—Kurdish porters who smuggle goods across the perilous mountain borders separating Iran and Iraq. Through high-risk and immersive cinematography, the film exposes the hidden world of *Kolbari*: backbreaking loads, rugged terrain, extreme weather conditions, hidden landmines, and the constant threat of security forces. Beyond its physical dangers, the film powerfully reveals a human story of resilience, desperation, and survival shaped by structural poverty and political neglect.

Syria-born Swiss filmmaker Ghamkin Saleh's *The Last Word of Bave Tayar* (Gotin A Dawi Ya Bave Tayar) foregrounds themes of national pride and the Kurdish struggle through the deeply personal story of Bave Tayar, a Syrian Kurdish actor and social activist. Set against the backdrop of the ongoing Middle East crisis, the film traces the collapse of his world after his only son Tayaro disappears and two of his sixteen daughters join *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin* (YPJ), the all-female military self-defence force formed to protect the people and women of Rojava.

Deeply wounded in his sense of honour as both a father and head of the family, Bave Tayar summons his wives and daughters and declares his decision to sell everything and leave for Europe in search of his missing son. His journey follows the familiar yet

harrowing refugee routes—from Syria through Turkey, Greece, Italy and finally to Switzerland. Along the way, he is devastated by the news that one of his beloved daughters has been killed in the war.

As the journey unfolds, Bave Tayar encounters families and communities where women and daughters are valued, and where mutual respect defines family relationships. He also comes to understand the profound losses migrants endure in pursuit of the so-called European dream. This transformative journey leads him to a renewed sense of pride in his daughters and their choices.

The film culminates in Bave Tayar's participation in a peaceful sit-in at the Tishreen Dam, symbolising his unwavering commitment to his people. Succumbed to his injuries during a Turkish drone attack, his final words resonate as a powerful testament to resistance and courage: *"We will not stop resisting. We are not afraid. We are here."*

Iraqi Kurdish filmmaker Mohammed Sherwani's *Niqab* (Pece) centres on Noor, a young woman who becomes a poignant symbol of a woman trapped between survival and sacrifice. Living in a refugee camp, Noor struggles to support her family while her father cares for her ailing mother, who depends on oxygen for survival. Desperate for income, Noor attends multiple job interviews but is repeatedly rejected—raising the haunting question of whether her *niqab* is the reason for her exclusion. Left with few options, she ultimately chooses to marry an elderly man to secure her family's survival. The film emerges as a powerful voice for the oppressed, shedding light on systemic injustice, gender discrimination and the ongoing struggle for basic human rights.

Turkish filmmaker Rezan Yeşilbaş's *The Flying Meatball Maker* (Ucan Kofteci) follows Kadir, a determined yet unconventional man whose obsessive dream of flying with a paramotor sets him at odds with his family, community and state authorities, who perceive his ambition as either absurd or threatening. The film gently balances humour and poignancy while portraying an ordinary man's extraordinary longing for the sky, using flight as a potent metaphor for personal freedom, dignity and self-expression.

Iranian filmmaker Salem Salavati's *In the Shadow* (Le Sebarda) tells the moving story of Kavan, a teenage boy with Down syndrome who lives with his mother and elder brother in a society governed by rigid traditional and religious norms. As Kavan faces deep-rooted social stigma, the film sensitively foregrounds the unwavering devotion of his mother, whose compassionate care embodies resilience and unconditional love. Through this intimate family portrait, the film offers a nuanced reflection of Kurdish culture and values, unfolding as a thoughtfully crafted and emotionally resonant drama.

Kurdish-Norwegian filmmaker Brwa Vahabpour's *My Uncle Jens* (Onkel Jens) tells the story of Akam, a young literature teacher living in Oslo, whose quiet and orderly life is disrupted by the sudden arrival of his estranged uncle from Iranian Kurdistan. Though bound by a sense of familial duty to host him, Akam soon finds himself strained by his uncle's indefinite stay and intrusive presence in his shared apartment. Caught between obligation and growing discomfort, Akam begins to suspect a hidden motive

behind the visit, leading to a series of revelations that ultimately offer new lessons for both of them. With a subtle comedic touch, the film—rooted in the experiences of the Kurdish diaspora—skilfully explores cultural differences, personal identity, generational divides and the complexities of immigrant life.

The Duhok International Film Festival (DIFF) has emerged as more than a cinematic celebration, positioning itself as a cultural and humanitarian platform that reflects the Kurdish people's collective voice and aspirations while engaging global audiences through the language of cinema.

In his message to the festival, Ameer Ali Mohammed Tahir, President of the Duhok International Film Festival underlined cinema's growing role in expressing Kurdish identity and history. Opening his statement with the line, "Success begins with a decision and a decisive first step," Tahir reflected on the Kurdish people's evolving relationship with filmmaking.

"As Kurds, particularly those from Southern Kurdistan, perhaps due to the deep history of oppression and violence against our people, we were initially slow to harness the immense power of cinema to convey our message," he said. Tahir noted that this has changed significantly in recent years, with Kurdish filmmakers now using cinema to communicate messages of humanity and to share a history shaped by struggle and sacrifice.

Highlighting the symbolic importance of the festival, Tahir pointed out that Kurdish language and culture were once forbidden, whereas today films are being made in the native language and celebrated annually at an international festival in Duhok. "We may be late to the global cinematic party, but it is certainly not too late," he said, adding that choosing this path and taking the first steps are essential foundations for success.

Tahir also made a broader appeal for cinema as a unifying force, expressing hope that filmmakers and audiences together can serve the art of cinema, promote a culture free from violence and war, and deliver a unified human message to the world.

The festival's humanitarian emphasis was echoed by Dr Ali Tatar, Governor of Duhok in his address at the opening ceremony. Stressing the social responsibility of art, he remarked, "Art exists to serve humanity. Art must deliver humanitarian messages and address global challenges." He urged artists to promote peace, unity, love and beauty through their work and reaffirmed the Kurdistan Regional Government's continued support for cultural, intellectual, sports and artistic initiatives.

With its strong emphasis on human values, cultural identity and global dialogue, the Duhok International Film Festival continues to establish itself as a significant platform for cinema that goes beyond entertainment, advocating humanitarian ideals through the power of film.

Meghachandra Kongbam is a member of FIPRESCI.