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## 10 Directors to Watch

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### Cherien Dabis

'Amreeka' unveils Arab-American life

By ALI JAAFAR

Arab-American helmer Cherien Dabis' life and career often has been shaped by events outside of her control.

Born in Omaha, Neb., to first-generation immigrant Palestinian and Jordanian parents, Dabis witnessed up close the vilification of Arabs in some U.S. media circles after the outbreak of the first Gulf War in 1991.

That experience, coupled with the backlash her own family faced in rural Ohio as her physician father lost his patients and her 15-year-old sister was investigated for allegedly threatening to kill the U.S. president, pushed her toward a career in the arts.



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"I saw the way the media was stereotyping Arabs and I decided I wanted to have a hand in changing that," Dabis says. "Ten years later I enrolled at Columbia University to study filmmaking. I have a foot in both the Mideast and the Midwest. It gives me a unique perspective."

Dabis found herself in New York only days before the 9/11 attacks. The tragic events of that day had a huge influence on her student work, as did the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

Now Dabis finds her first full-length feature "Amreeka" -- a gritty dramedy about a struggling Palestinian single mother who escapes life in Ramallah to immigrate to America -- bowing in competition at Sundance in the wake of Israel's military campaign against Palestinian militant organization Hamas.

"It was like history repeating itself," Dabis says. "Palestinians need to be humanized. There is an urgent need for that. 'Amreeka' is as much a mother-son story as it is about life under occupation. I want to show the universality of an average Palestinian family. The film is also about hope, and we need that right now more than ever."

Dabis raised the pic's seven-figure budget from a variety of private sources in the U.S. and brought onboard two of the Arab world's biggest media orgs, pay TV net Showtime Arabia and Prince Waleed bin Talal's multimedia titan Rotana.

"We believe that this story will help in bridging some of the misunderstandings between the Middle East and the Western world," says Showtime Arabia chief Marc-Antoine d'Halluin. "From our perspective, this is where cinema plays its most noble and essential role."

**Age:** 32

**Home base:** New York

**Inspired by:** Mike Leigh, John Cassavetes and Robert Altman; favorite pics include "The 400 Blows," "The Bicycle Thief," "Ali: Fear Eats the Soul," "A Woman Under the Influence," "Working Girl," "Midnight Cowboy" and "In the Mood for Love."

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