



IS NOT A NUMBER

a film by
BABAK PAYAMI

There is no justice without the truth..



OVERVIEW

DIRECTOR, WRITER

Babak Payami

GENRE

Documentary

RUNNING TIME

98 Minutes

LANGUAGES

Farsi, English
(with English sub-titles)

FORMAT:

4K DCP

PRODUCTION COMPANY

Payam Films Inc.

CONTACT

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www.752IsNotANumber.com

The Inspiration

On January 8, 2020, I received a phone call from a friend. “Did you hear about the airplane that crashed in Tehran?” He asked. “Of course I did, we are organizing a vigil at the University of Toronto.” Was my response. There was more to it than just holding a vigil to mourn the loss of so many lives.

Toronto dentist Dr. Hamed Esmailion was on his way to Tehran to bury his wife Parisa and nine-year-old daughter Reera. They were among the 176 victims aboard Ukrainian flight PS752 that crashed 6 minutes after take-off from the Tehran International Airport.

My friend told me that there might be trouble. Hamed has a history of run-ins with the authorities in Iran and things might get ugly. He asked if I could liaise with Canadian officials and help Hamed with communication.

After a stressful two weeks, Hamed finally returned to Toronto with the remains of his family. I knew they needed their privacy amid the intense commotion around the tragedy. By that time we had learned that flight PS752 was shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp of Iran. This was not a simple plane crash. Hamed asked me to help organize and direct the memorial ceremony for his wife and daughter.

A few days after the memorial, Hamed and I met somewhere quiet, alone and away from commotion. He knew of my films, I had only heard of him before, but when we sat across each other at a table in the sparse pub, there was a strange sense of familiarity.

“I am with you Hamed but there are two things I must tell you; there will never be the justice that you deserve and that should not stop you to fight for justice.” My second comment was; “I’m not here for pity or to cry and feel sorry for you, I’m here to help you fight for justice.” That was the beginning of an intense friendship, one I’m sure, both of us preferred never to have formed under those circumstances.

Hamed is a novelist. I am a filmmaker. This documentary is a by-product of our relationship while we were caught up with finding the truth and bringing the perpetrators of that heinous crime to justice.



Ordinary People, Extraordinary Circumstances

The downing of flight PS752 was extraordinary. Never before in aviation history, a country's own military shot down a civilian aircraft leaving its own capital city airport. Amid the sabre rattling between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Trump Administration in the United States, things were heating up in the middle east, yet again. Skirmishes inside Iraq led to direct attacks on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. The U.S. Retaliated by taking out Iranian-backed militia bases in Iraq. On January 3, 2020, the top Iranian General was killed in a U.S. Rocket attack. He was the number two guy in the Islamic Republic power structure. Promises of "hard revenge" filled the rhetoric from both sides.

At 1:20am on January 8, 2020, several rockets were fired at a U.S. military base near Baghdad. Most of the civilian passengers who were getting ready to fly home were unaware of what was going on. The airspace over Iran was not closed. Captain Gaponenko of Ukrainian airlines went about the usual routines of a normal flight back to Ukraine. Parisa Eghbalian and her daughter Reera Esmailion were returning home after a quick, 12 day visit to attend Parisa's sister's wedding. They made one last phone call to Hamed on their way to the airport.

Flight PS752 took off from Tehran at 6:12am. Three minutes after take-off a missile struck the aircraft. Twenty-five seconds later, a second missile was fired just as the aircraft was struggling to turn back towards the airport. Six-minutes and forty-five second after takeoff, Ukrainian flight PS752 crashed in a football field. There were no survivors. This tragic ending to 176 lives that included 29 under-age children, 55 Canadian citizens, university professors, students and vacationers, became the beginning of our story.

Hamed, like so many other devastated families struggled to come to terms with what had happened. After three days of denial, the Iranian government admitted the crash was due to missile attacks by its own military forces. Hamed who was in Iran to arrange for the burial of his wife and daughter, makes a decision. Parisa and Reera must be brought back home. "I will never let these opportunist, criminal generals and mullahs get near my wife and daughter."

Ordinary people who were living their lives, many of them building new lives in Canada, were thrust into extraordinary circumstances. What started out as a typical airplane investigation soon transformed into a fight for justice caught up in a web of geopolitical intrigue, international politics and legal complexities.



Synopsis

“It is difficult for me to talk about it but I will try. Some parts I will but some parts, I may not...”. These are Hamed’s first words when we sat in his car to visit his dental practice for the first time since he returned to Toronto. **752 Is Not A Number** follows Hamed’s journey in the aftermath of losing his wife and daughter. From the moment he heard the news, every step of his painful journey challenged his view of the world and his will to live.

His first step was to reunite with the remains of Parisa and Reera. It was impossible for him to even see their remains and say good bye. Even the coroners didn’t have the heart to put him through the pain.

After three days of denial, the Iranian government admitted to shooting down the plane three minutes after it took off from the Tehran International Airport. Hamed suddenly makes the decision that his beloved wife and daughter must be returned to Canada. That became his mission, a motivation to live and survive the two painful weeks in Iran.

He was sure that upon his return to Canada and after burying his wife and daughter near their home, he can appeal to the law and find justice. He planned to go to get the best lawyers, open a court case and find closure by revealing the truth, in Canada, where the law means something.

His first meetings with lawyers was a rude awakening for Hamed. The PS752 case is not an aviation disaster. It is geopolitical intrigue wrapped in international legal ambiguities, contaminated by domestic realpolitik in several different countries. In fact even the United Nations’ rulebooks drafted over 80 years of post-war aviation history can’t account for what happened to flight PS752!

The orphaned wanderer who lost everything he lived for cannot find closure without fighting like a warrior with no armour or weapon. He must single-handedly take on governments, international institutions, nefarious intelligence operatives and by-standers who either patronize him or demonize him. To become a warrior, he must find solace in the community of many others who share the pain inflicted upon them with the downing of flight PS752.

Hamed’s next challenge is to find unity in the random diversity of the victims’ families who lost loved ones like him. As the spokesperson of the Association of Families of Flight PS752 Victims, he carries the flag, holds the microphone and shouts the screams of so many who share his cause for justice.

What gives the orphaned wanderer a reason to live, is the common pain shared by so many families and that drives his will to fight. Even if the battles are on so many different fronts. Governments, politicians, the United Nations, his own community, informants and detractors and most of all, the agony of loss that can not be remedied.

Like so many other families who lost their loved ones, justice does not mean the same as it does to politicians whose identities are defined by compromise and deal making. For Hamed and the families, what remains of their tormented identities is justice which means nothing without the truth. “What about the truth?” are Hamed’s words to the Canadian Prime minister’s special advisor.

The question is; will he give up his fight for justice even when Ukraine is burning in the flames of a much bigger war that is producing millions more victims?





STILLS





BABAK PAYAMI

Writer, Director, Producer

Babak Payami is an Iranian-Canadian filmmaker born in Tehran in 1966. His work has earned him 7 nominations for best film and over 14 international awards and from top-tier international film festivals including best director from the Venice International Film Festival. His films have been distributed worldwide by major distributors such as Sony Pictures Classics (U.S.), Paramount Pictures (U.S/E.U), Artificial Eye (U.K.) and Istituto Lucé (Italy).

His latest motion picture “Manhattan Undying” starring Luke Grimes, Sara Roemer and Daniel Kash, was produced in Canada and distributed by Paramount Pictures. “Iqbal, the story of a fearless child” is a feature length animation film, a French/Italian co-production released in 2016 which he co-wrote and co-directed with Michel Fuzelier.

Babak Payami has been recognized in leading international film festivals as a potent voice winning numerous awards and acclamations. Throughout the years he has been a jury member at a number of major international film festivals including Moscow, Berlin, Warsaw, Beirut, Hang Zhou etc. .

Babak Payami has taught in leading film schools such as the Ludwigsburg Film Akademie in Germany and conducted workshops and mentorship programs on filmmaking in Europe and Canada.

In addition to engagements as mentor and guest lecturer since 2001, he was the Creative Director of the

Media Studio at Fabrica, a communication arts research facility for the Benetton group in Italy. During his tenure at Fabrica, Payami produced a number of topical documentaries on the Rwandan genocide “Rwanda Now”, establishment of Kosovo as a new country “Branding Kosovo”, modern day Jesus figures around the world “I Am Jesus” among others.

Payami has also contributed to major international charity initiatives and directed a music video with Patti Smith in Senegal in support of a micro-credit charity foundation in association with Fabrica, Italy.

As the creative director of Fabrica’s Media Studio in Italy, Payami has mentored young artists and produced several documentaries on Rwanda, Kosovo and Jesus among others.

He is currently developing a number of independent motion pictures including “The Bishop’s Man”, an adaptation of a book by acclaimed Canadian author Linden MacIntyre, “The Orientalist” and “Rattlesnake”.

In 2022, He completed a documentary about the downed Ukrainian flight in Iran titled; “752 Is Not A Number” with a world premiere at



BABAK PAYAMI

14 awards & 7 nominations

Venice Film Festival

2001

- Won, Silver Lion

Best Director for Secret Ballot (2001).

- Won, UNICEF Award for Secret Ballot (2001).
- Won, Netpac Award for Secret Ballot (2001)
- Won, OCIC Award for Secret Ballot (2001).
- Won, Pasinetti Award Best Film for Secret Ballot (2001). Nominated, Golden Lion for Secret Ballot (2001).

Jeonju Film Festival

2004

- Won, Woosuk Award Indie Vision for Silence Between Two Thoughts (2003).

London Film Festival

2001

- Won, FIPRESCI Prize - Special Mention for Secret Ballot (2001).

Newport International Film Festival, Rhode Island 2002

- Won, Best Feature Film for Secret Ballot (2001).

Rotterdam International Film Festival 2002

- Won, Netpac Award - Special Mention for Secret Ballot (2001).

São Paulo International Film Festival 2001

- Won, Special Jury Award for Secret Ballot (2001).

Tokyo FILMeX

2003

- Nominated, Grand Prize for Silence Between Two Thoughts (2003). 2001
- Nominated, Grand Prize for Secret Ballot (2001).

Tokyo International Film Festival 2000

- Won, Best Artistic Contribution Award for One More Day (2000).
- Nominated, Tokyo Grand Prix for One More Day (2000).

Torino International Festival of Young Cinema

2000

- Won, Jury Special Prize International Feature Film Competition for One More Day (2000).
- Nominated, Prize of the City of Torino Best Film - International Feature Film Competition for One More Day (2000).

Tromsø International Film Festival 2004

- Won, FIPRESCI Prize for Silence Between Two Thoughts (2003).

Valladolid International Film Festival 2001

- Won, Best New Director for Secret Ballot (2001).
- Nominated, Golden Spike for Secret Ballot (2001).