

## Telling Our Story as Iranian-Americans Ourselves: Lila Yomtoob's America 1979

From *Argo* to the *300* series to *Dracula Untold*, Hollywood movies have become major box office hits due in part to skewed storylines that feature absurd and questionable portrayals of marginalized peoples. Left unchallenged, these biased notions become engrained in popular culture and embedded within societies.

To counter these narratives, targeted communities have usually had to rely on the artists among them to accurately and vividly portray their traditions and perspectives.

To this end, a new short film by Iranian-American filmmaker Lila Yomtoob, titled *America 1979*, attempts to tell the story of the Iranian hostage crisis from the perspective of an Iranian family living in the United States.

With an Emmy to her credit for sound editing work on the HBO series *Baghdad ER*, Lila both directed and produced *America 1979*. Encouraged by other Iranian-Americans and motivated by her own childhood memories of the event, Lila felt compelled to produce the film. "I was six years old and feeling the heat of racism," she [told Muftah](#) last summer, and "I strongly feel that the way the event was handled by the media affected the way my identity formed."

Her influence and experiences as an Iranian-American are visible throughout the cinematic production. The film's main character, Regina (Solya Spiegel), is in some ways modeled on Lila's own childhood. "The little girl in the script is very much me," Lila [said](#) last year.



Nine year old Regina (Solya Spiegel) feels the heat of the hostage crisis at school (Credit: Lila Yomtoob)

The story is not, however, a purely autobiographical one. Set in the early days of the November 1979 crisis, much of the film navigates how Regina's family confronts the challenges posed to their Iranian identities. Against the backdrop

of political turmoil, the children remain preoccupied over the whereabouts of eldest brother Bobby's (Nico Pollack) secret savings. The gulf separating revolutionary politics happening a world away and the mundane, everyday lives of the film's characters helps emphasize the absurd nature of biases and stereotypes against the Iranian-American community during this period.

As the two siblings engage in their petty sibling rivalries, the indirect impact of the hostage crisis quickly hits home. Regina receives a nasty note from her classmates at school. Given her young age, she struggles to reconcile the complications of her dual-nationality, as she is increasingly marginalized by her fellow students. "I never told anyone I was anything," she insists when her parents discover the note she was given in class. The father (Ali Reza Farahnakian), a trained engineer, is shafted at his new job as a taxi driver and given a rancid smelling cab to drive. Feeling alienated from mainstream American society, the family searches for a solution. To deflect further mistreatment, Regina's mother (Soraya Broukhim) suggests a nominal change in their identity, from the vilified "Iranian" to the harmless "Persian."



Bobby (Nico Pollak) finds solace in heavy metal following a major disappointment (Credit: Lila Yomtoob)

The film is beautifully shot and captures the essence of the era it represents. Wood panels cover the walls; acid colors dominate the design, doilies litter side tables, and the carpets look so shaggy you could lose your toes in them. The couches are upholstered in velvet and the cars seem plucked straight from a vintage auto show. The characters wear tinted prescription glasses with high waisted bell-bottoms and massive hair to boot. Nearly four-decade old radio sound bytes help the audience maneuver the era's political landscape, including one report about increased calls for the deportation of all Iranian immigrants in the United States.



Bobby (Nico Pollak) and his parents, played by Soraya Broukhim and Ali Reza Farahnakian, find a note handed to Regina (Solya Spiegel) at school  
(Credit: Lila Yomtoob)

“I am kind of a private person and am not that interested in telling my life stories, but am more interested in telling stories people can relate too,” Lila [told \*Muftah\* last year](#). In one scene, the camera pans to reveal Regina tracing a peacock pattern on a traditional Iranian tapestry with her fingertip, a scene that carries with it nostalgia Iranian audiences will easily relate to. Sincere additions like this help elevate the film and tell a deeply personal story that will resonate with the Iranian-American community at large.

The 1979 takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran marked an extreme shift in U.S. policy. Its memories remains firmly embedded within American society to this day. In the hopes of further understanding the cultural impact of the hostage taking, Lila is in the early stages of creating a video archive of interviews with Iranian-Americans about their perspectives on the crisis as it unfolded. “Everyone has a story about this time and a lot of people seem to really want to talk about it,” she told me in a recent interview, and “it proves to me that the incident is still very much in our consciousness.”