

The President's Cake [12A]

2025 Iraq/Qatar/USA 105 mins

UK released **13 February 2026**

Director **Hasan Hadi**

Screenplay **Hasan Hadi**

Cinematography **Tudor Vladimir Panduru**

Music **Angela Asistio; Omar El-Deeb**

Cast **Baneen Ahmad Nayyef (Lamia); Sajad Mohamad Qasem (Saeed); Waheed Thabet Khreibat (Bibi) Rahim ALHaj (Jasim)**

Life in Iraq's Mesopotamian Marshes for nine-year-old Lamia (Banin Ahmad Nayyef) and her grandmother (Waheed Thabet Khreibat) is far from easy. International sanctions on the country are biting deep and fighter jets cutting across the sky in an otherwise idyllic scene remind us that this is the real world, complete with all its dangers.

Dictator Saddam Hussein is a recurring presence in the film, with photos and propaganda paintings of him adorning the walls almost everywhere – just one element of the precise production design from Annmarie Tecu. That, along with a soundtrack featuring music driven by traditional instruments from the likes of Khyam Allami and Omar Bachir, creates a vibrant sense of time and place.

For the kids at the local school, including Lamia and her best friend Saeed (Sajad Mohamad Qasem), Saddam's birthday means their names are put into a tin for a draw that seems as threatening as anything in The Hunger Games. Those unlucky enough to be selected have to provide items for the celebrations or face dire consequences. Saeed is chosen to bring fruit while Lamia finds herself on the hook for the cake. Armed with a list of ingredients, a handful of saleable possessions and the little girl's scene-stealing pet cockerel Hindi, Lamia and her grandma head off to the nearest city.

A ride from a passing, jovial mailman (oud player and composer Rahim ALHaj proving he also has acting chops) is the first of a smattering of

coincidences that pepper the story but these fit well with the drama's more fairy-tale elements and are used sparingly by the director. When Lamia realises her grandma has more than just shopping on her to-do list, she runs off with Hindi and, after encountering Saeed, becomes determined to buy the ingredients, while her ailing grandma attempts to persuade the police to look for her granddaughter.

The buzzing flies in Tamas Zanyi's (*Son Of Saul*) rich sound design are just the start of suggestions that something is rotting. Corruption is rife, whether it's taking apples from children or much worse. The youngsters approach every challenge with a purity that puts them at risk of exploitation, adding tension to almost all their encounters, even those that initially appear benign or helpful, especially when dealing with the patriarchy. The casual way in which they are taken advantage of by adults adds to the sense of the predatory being part of everyday life.

The harsher wider world is leavened by the children's friendship, and the writer/director drawing on his young stars' natural energy as their periodic staring contests become increasingly resonant. Tudor Vladimir Panduru's camera also pays close attention to Nayef, whose engaging performance is as much about her shifting body language and micro-expressions as it is about dialogue.

Hadi has an eye for detail, echoes and lyrical touches. He injects traditional elements with unpredictability that reminds us in the real world happy endings often come with a question mark.

Amber Wilkinson *Screen Daily*, 16 May 2025 (abridged)

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