

**KINO LORBER**  
i n c o r p o r a t e d

Presents

# OF FATHERS AND SONS

A film by TALAL DERKI

**\*\*Academy Award® Nominee - BEST DOCUMENTARY FEATURE\*\***

**\*\*Film Independent Spirit Awards Nominee - BEST DOCUMENTARY\*\***

**\*\*WINNER: World Cinema Grand Jury Prize, Sundance Film Festival 2018\*\***

**\*\*Official Selection - IDFA\*\***

**\*\*Official Selection - DOC NYC\*\***

**GERMANY, SYRIA, LEBANON | 2017 | 99MIN | COLOR | ASPECT RATIO: 1.85:1  
ARABIC WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES**

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**PRESS MATERIALS:**

<https://www.kinolorber.com/film/offathersandsons>



### Synopsis:

Syrian-born filmmaker Talal Derki (*Return to Homs*) travels to his homeland where he gains the trust of a radical Islamist family, sharing their daily life for over two years. His camera focuses primarily on the children, providing an extremely rare insight into what it means to grow up with a father whose only dream is to establish an Islamic caliphate. Osama (13) and his brother Ayman (12) both love and admire their father and obey his words, but while Osama seems content to follow the path of Jihad, Ayman wants to go back to school. Winner of the Grand Jury Prize for World Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival, *Of Fathers and Sons* is a work of unparalleled access that captures the chilling moment when childhood dies and jihadism is born.

### **Director Biography:**

Talal Derki was born in Damascus and has been based in Berlin since 2014. He studied directing in Athens. Before making his own films, Derki worked as an assistant director on many feature film productions, a director for various Arab TV programs, and as a freelance cameraman for CNN and Thomson & Reuters. Derki's short films and feature length documentaries have received many festival prizes, including the Grand Jury Prize for World Documentary for both *Return to Homs* (2014) and *Of Fathers and Sons* (2018). He served as a member of the International Jury at IDFA in 2014.

### **Director Filmography:**

- 2017 – *Of Fathers and Sons*, feature documentary (98min)
- 2016 – *Ode to Lesbos*, short documentary (5min)
- 2013 – *Return to Homs*, feature documentary (90min)
- 2010 – *Hero of the Sea*, documentary (28min)
- 2005 – *A whole line of trees*, short film, 35 mm (8min)
- 2003 - *Hello Damascus goodbye Damascus*, short film, 16mm (12min)

### **Background on the Conflict in Syria:**

In March of 2011, peaceful mass demonstrations broke out across Syrian cities and towns demanding democratic reforms from the ruling Assad dynasty. The Assads had ruled Syria with an iron grip for over four decades, snuffing out any sign of dissent. The protest movement, inspired by similar uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, offered the first real hope in years that Syria could break out from under the weight of authoritarian rule. But rather than engage with the protestors demands, the regime responded with a campaign of unthinkable brutality. A wave of mass killings, torture and disappearances swept across the country, seeking to crush the uprising with brute force.

As a result, the peaceful movement for change that began in 2011 gradually transformed into an armed rebellion determined to topple the Assad regime completely. A spectrum of armed groups emerged in opposition to the government. Some were nationalist in ideology, while others were religious. Faced with the Syrian regime's well-funded machinery of repression, many of these groups quickly became dependent on foreign arms and financial support for their survival. Support from outside parties like Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States was enough to keep the rebels alive, but not enough to decisively change the course of the war in their favor. The result was a brutal stalemate in which both the rebels and the government inflicted terrible losses on each other. Syrian cities were reduced to rubble and millions fled the country in a mass exodus, but no party to the conflict could claim outright victory.

As the years of fighting dragged on and the fabric of Syrian society was ripped apart by violence, law and order collapsed across the country. Into this void, extremist groups began to emerge. These groups, including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, were able to capitalize on the failures and disunity of other rebel groups, as well as widespread popular hatred of the Assad regime among the Syrian people. They offered protection, discipline, order and a sense of meaning for those Syrians whose communities that had been ravaged by the war. As the conflict devolved into apocalyptic scenes of chemical weapons attacks and mass executions of civilians, the extremists were able to tighten their hold on a traumatized society. Over time they began calling on others around the world to join their utopian project of rebuilding Syria from the ashes as a theocratic state.

Today the war in Syria appears to be drawing close to a conclusion, albeit an unjust one. With the support of foreign backers in Russia and Iran, the Assad regime has reasserted its control over most major population centers in the country. Meanwhile the north of the country has been divided into zones of influence between Kurdish political factions, the Turkish government and some divided remnants of the armed opposition. But while the end of the war may be in sight, the prospects for a durable peace are still remote. The crimes of the past seven years have not been accounted for and the underlying factors that triggered the uprising are more acute than ever. As the world grapples with the massive global impact of the Syrian war, including a refugee crisis in Europe, understanding the roots of the conflict and its ongoing consequences is more important than ever. – Murtaza Hussain, The Intercept

Of Fathers and Sons was shot between Summer 2014 and September 2016. During that time, Talal Derki and Director of Photography spent about 300 days with the family.

Abu Osama died in October 2018 while defusing a car bomb. He leaves behind two wives and 12 children.

### **Director's Statement**

After my film RETURN TO HOMES, which was about the young rebel Basit Sarout and his comrades, I wanted to go deeper. I wanted to penetrate the psychology and the emotions of this war, understand what made people radicalize and what drives them to live under the strict rules of an Islamic state. In the media, war is often portrayed as a chess game and Islam is labeled as evil. If we see the images of war, we get the feeling that it is a unreal parallel world. In OF FATHERS AND SONS, I want to establish a direct relationship between the protagonists and the audience. I would like to take my audience with me on my journey and communicate with them through my camera.

The main characters of my film are Abu Osama (45), one of the founders of Al-Nusra, the Syrian arm of Al-Qaeda, and his two eldest sons Osama (13) and Ayman (12). I have been living with them over the period of 2.5 years and became a part of their family. Although I am an atheist, I prayed with them every day and led the life of a good Muslim to find out, what is happening in

my country. Abu Osama is not only a loving father, but also a specialist for car bomb attacks and the disposal of mines. He deeply believes in an Islamic society under the laws of the Shari'ah, the Caliphate, and therefore he also places his children at its service.

I follow Osama and Ayman to a training camp for young fighters and start to understand how the children are affected, as they really do not have a chance to choose freely. How will I become who I am? Where is hope? What will the future look like? What choices do we have? The children are those who enable us to emotionally experience and understand the complex tragedy of Syria. Often, they are the ones who can look through all the madness, and in their own childlike way, they can save the hope.

OF FATHERS AND SONS is my personal journey through a devastated country and a troubled society, looking for answers to my desperate questions about the future of my country and the future of my family who had to flee into exile. -- *Talal Derki*



## Interview with director Talal Derki:

### **How did you find Abu Osama and how did you gain his trust?**

I was searching for kids who were preparing to be jihadists. We found Osama at a Sharia camp which was supervised by someone I met during the filming of *Return to Homs*. I knew a leader in the Al-Nusra front who knew Osama's father, Abu Osama. When he presented us, I introduced myself to him as a filmmaker and war photographer who sympathized with his ideology. He saw my previous film and liked how I presented my character as a hero. I spent time with him and his family and worked day by day to gain more of their trust.

### **What was it like when you first started filming the family and how did it change over time?**

In the beginning, I was mostly filming the kids playing outside and the landscape not far from Abu Osama's home. Slowly, he agreed to be part of the film and let me follow him. When he had an accident and lost his feet while working with landmines, Abu Osama had to retire. Also, he lost his confidence. At that point, he decided to send his son to the Sharia camp and we began to film there.

### **Was this the original story you set out to tell or did it change along the way? Did you, yourself, change as a result of telling it?**

From the beginning I wanted to capture the life of kids in that region who have a radical father to show how these ideas are passed from generation to generation. But of course things happened that I didn't suspect, such as the father losing his feet.

After making the film, I have a greater understanding of how children are educated, how important it is that kids grow up in a peaceful environment and how simple things can deeply affect their character.

### **Why don't we see the women of the family in the film?**

Filming women was the only thing prohibited in the shooting of the film. In their religious tradition, women are not allowed to be seen or even heard by male strangers. So they are also victims in this society: they don't know their rights, they have to accept that their husbands bring home other wives and are obliged to share their lives with them.

### **You portray Abu Osama as a complex character, showing his clear love for his children, as a father, as well as his complete commitment to his ideology, as a fighter. Why was it important to you to paint a nuanced picture of him as a person?**

It was important to show the strength of his faith and his commitment to his ideology and the caliphate state. There are no limits to his sacrifice. He sends his children to war even before they are ready or eligible.

He is a clear example of the strong father in radical society, how he leads his son through a hard education and teaches him violence.

**You subjected yourself to a number of great risks to make this film. Why is it such an important story to tell?**

I wanted to make a film from inside, to bring more of an understanding of this ideology and of how a person becomes a jihadist. It is important to remember that these terrorists were once innocent children, and from that understanding we can find the key that will prevent this from happening to future generations. And maybe I like the challenge of making difficult films. My previous film, *Return to Homs*, is also an example of that.

**How did it feel to be there while Abu Osama was trying to shoot the man on the motorbike? To witness the children in the training camp? What was going through your mind in many of the extreme scenarios in which you found yourself filming?**

I didn't expect that I would be a witness to that before making this film, nor did I realize the psychological effects of it would have. I am still trying to recover from it.

I am very thankful that I was able to make this film and not be harmed, and the success of the film now creates some sort of balance to these images that are embedded in my memory.

**What do you think causes radicalization? While on some level, it's an individual choice, it's clear throughout the film that many people are responding and adapting to their circumstances.**

That is a question too big to answer here.

In my film, I explore the circle of violence and the situation of a poor country under the authority of a dictatorship. Surrounded with violence, radicalism like this becomes something dangerous and horrifying. Lack of education and injustice creates ideological fanaticism.

The Salafist Jihadi movement is the top of the radicalization movement in the world today. But radicalism isn't only found in religion, it's in politics as well, it's everywhere.

**Credits:**

Director: Talal Derki  
Film Editor: Anne Fabini  
Director of Photography: Kahtan Hasson  
Film Music: K.S. Elias

Producers: Ansgar Frerich, Eva Kemme, Tobias Siebert, Hans Robert Eisenhauer  
Co-Producer: Talal Derki  
Executive Producers: Dan Cogan, Jenny Raskin, Geralyn White Dreyfous

Produced by: BASIS BERLIN Filmproduktion  
In co-production with: Ventana Film, Cinema Group Production  
In association with: Impact Partners

Broadcasters: Südwestrundfunk, Rundfunk Berlin Brandenburg in collaboration with ARTE  
Countries of Production: Germany, Syria, Lebanon, Qatar

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