

Film Review: ‘Fatwa’ explores extremism through a father’s eyes



CAIRO: Tunisian writer-director Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud’s latest creation, “Fatwa,” which won the Best Film award at the Carthage Film Festival and also the Saad Eldin Wahba Prize for Best Arab Film at the Cairo International Film Festival explores the process of radicalization in Tunisia, as well as its effect on the families involved, in a punchy piece of cinema that is sometimes marred by a winding script.

The film offers a deeply disturbing look at the radicalization of Tunisian youth and sheds light on a system that offers little in the way of reformation — even for former extremists who have had a change of heart, but are thrown in jail with no hope for the future. Actor Ahmed Hafiane plays a father, Brahim Nadhour, who rushes back to Tunisia when he hears that his son has died in a motorcycle accident. Hafiane, who won the Best Actor prize at the Carthage Film Festival for his portrayal of the devastated father, plays the role with believable angst and tension.

The father soon discovers that his son had quit university to join an extremist group, which declared a fatwa on Nadhour's secular and liberal ex-wife, Loubna, essayed by Ghalia Benali. Nadhour is not sure if his son, an experienced driver, really lost control of his motorcycle and crashed or if there is more to the accident than there seems. So, the grieving man sets out on his relentless pursuit of the truth.

The movie unfolds in 2013 — a dark year for Tunisia, with several high-profile assassinations and terror attacks. The director expertly portrays the strange dichotomies inherent in Tunisia by showcasing such horrific events against the backdrop of a largely liberal society and Nadhour, having lived away from his homeland, sees all this with rare clarity.

The film also shines a harsh spotlight on the media's role in perpetuating stereotypes about Tunisia, with its constant focus on all things terror-related, and one lesson audiences can take away from the film is that moderate, liberal Muslims need more attention — Nadhour is an example.

Layered and packed with power, the slightly convoluted script is where “Fatwa” hits a stumbling block that could leave audiences scrambling to follow the narrative. It is, however, a fascinating watch.
