

Film review: 'Of Fathers and Sons' captures the moment childhood is lost



- The director captured the spread of extremism at the grassroots level in Syria
- The documentary already scored an award at El-Gouna Film Festival

Nurture plays a hugely decisive role in shaping the personality of a child and this is made shockingly apparent in the hard-hitting documentary “Of Fathers and Sons” by Syrian-born filmmaker Talal Derki.

The film has been nominated in the Best Documentary category at the Arab Cinema Center’s Annual Critics Awards, to be held on the sidelines of the Cannes Film Festival next week.

The director, who now lives in Berlin, traveled back to the war-torn northern part of Syria armed and with a camera to capture how extremism is spreading at the grassroots level.

The documentary, which caused a splash at the Sundance Film Festival and scored a Silver Star award at the El-Gouna Film Festival, minces no words when it shows how a father passes on his radical beliefs to his young sons.

The director pretended to be an extremist-sympathetic war photographer and spent two years with a family capturing moments of sheer violence and terror. The audience is forced to watch as the father teaches his young sons how to shoot rifles, locate land mines and ultimately normalizes violence to such an extent that his son slaughters a bird and relates it to the act of beheading a man. Through the metamorphosis of young children into extremists, Derki shows how pervasive violence can be.

While Derki's work is mostly forthright, there are moments when he is subtle. For instance, we never see the boy decapitating the bird. In the end, the documentary reveals in all its earnestness how the culture of violence, hatred and bigotry spreads. These evils seep into their subconscious mind through the father and the boys do not even realize how cleverly they are being indoctrinated into a murderous, radicalized way of thinking.

The acute danger the director placed himself in to be able to capture such footage is reason enough to applaud this documentary, and its insights into the methods by which extremism is passed from father to son is a valuable tool for beginning to understand the scourge of radicalism the world over.
