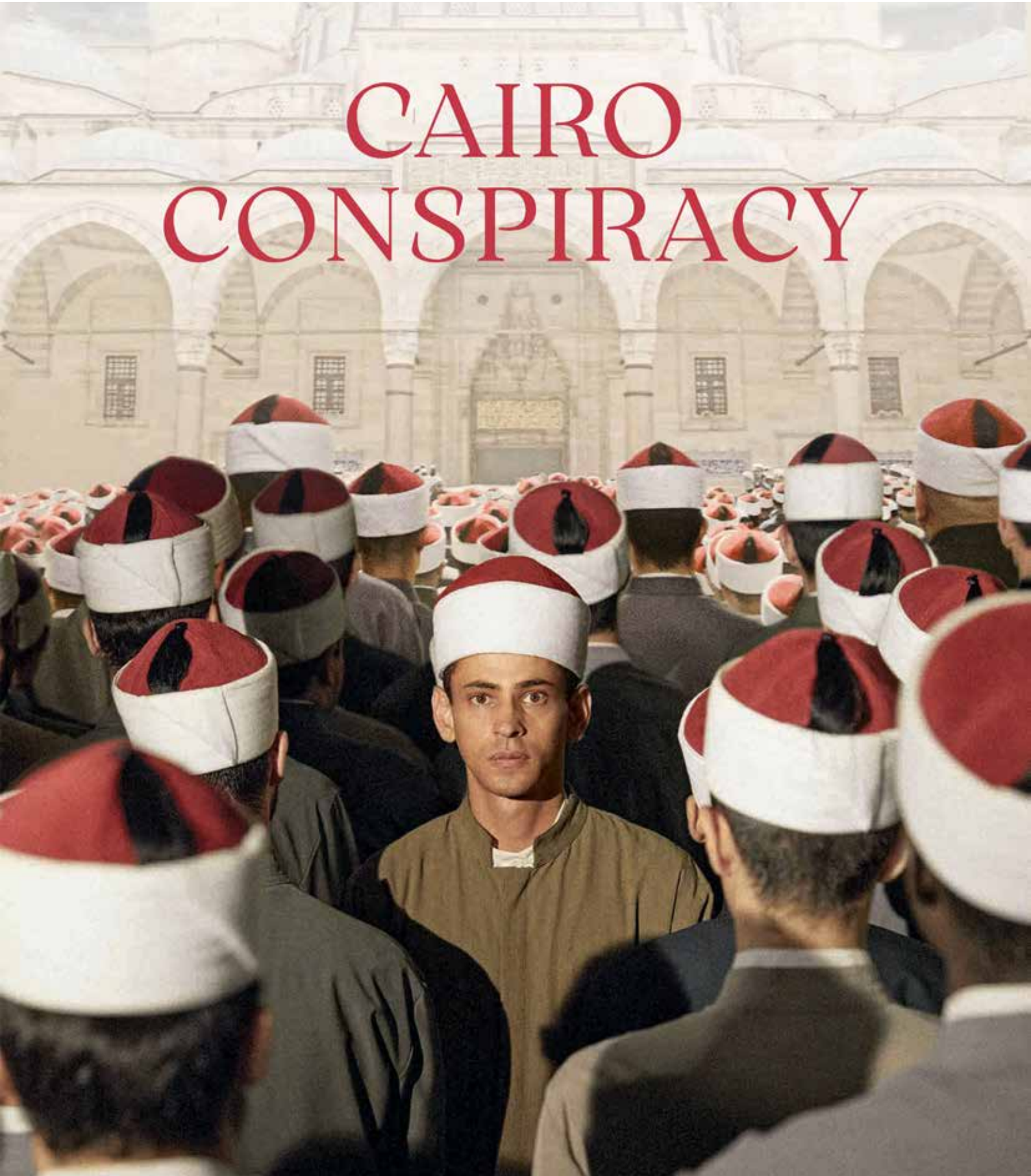


cinéart
PERSMAP

CAIRO CONSPIRACY



CAIRO CONSPIRACY

EEN FILM VAN TARIK SALEH



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2022 OFFICIAL SELECTION



Drama - 2022 - SE - 125 minuten

Bioscooprelease: 27 april 2023

Meer over de film: [Cineart.nl/films/cairo-conspiracy](https://www.cineart.nl/films/cairo-conspiracy)

Persmaterialen: [Cineart.nl/pers/cairo-conspiracy](https://www.cineart.nl/pers/cairo-conspiracy)

Distributie:

Cinéart Nederland
Herengracht 328-III
1016 CE Amsterdam

Contact:

Julia van Berlo
M: +31 6 83785238
julia@cineart.nl

SYNOPSIS

In CAIRO CONSPIRACY maken we kennis met Adam, die verstrikt raakt in een machtsstrijd binnen de religieuze en politieke elites van Egypte. De nieuwe film van Tarik Saleh (THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT) is een spannende spionagethriller die een inkijkje geeft in een verborgen wereld.

De eenvoudige vissersjongen Adam (Tawfeek Barhom) wordt toegelaten op de prestigieuze Al-Azhar Universiteit in Caïro, baken van de soennitische islam. Als de grootimam plotseling overlijdt, blijken de moslimbroeders en de Nationale Veiligheidsdienst tegengestelde belangen te hebben. Zonder het te weten wordt Adam gerekruteerd om de keuze voor de nieuwe grootimam te beïnvloeden. Als hij achter de waarheid komt, zit hij gevangen tussen twee vuren.

CAIRO CONSPIRACY werd bekroond voor het beste scenario op het Filmfestival van Cannes. De film is door Zweden (thuisland van regisseur Saleh) ingestuurd als Oscar®kandidaat voor Beste Buitenlandse Film.



BIOGRAPHY OF TARIK SALEH

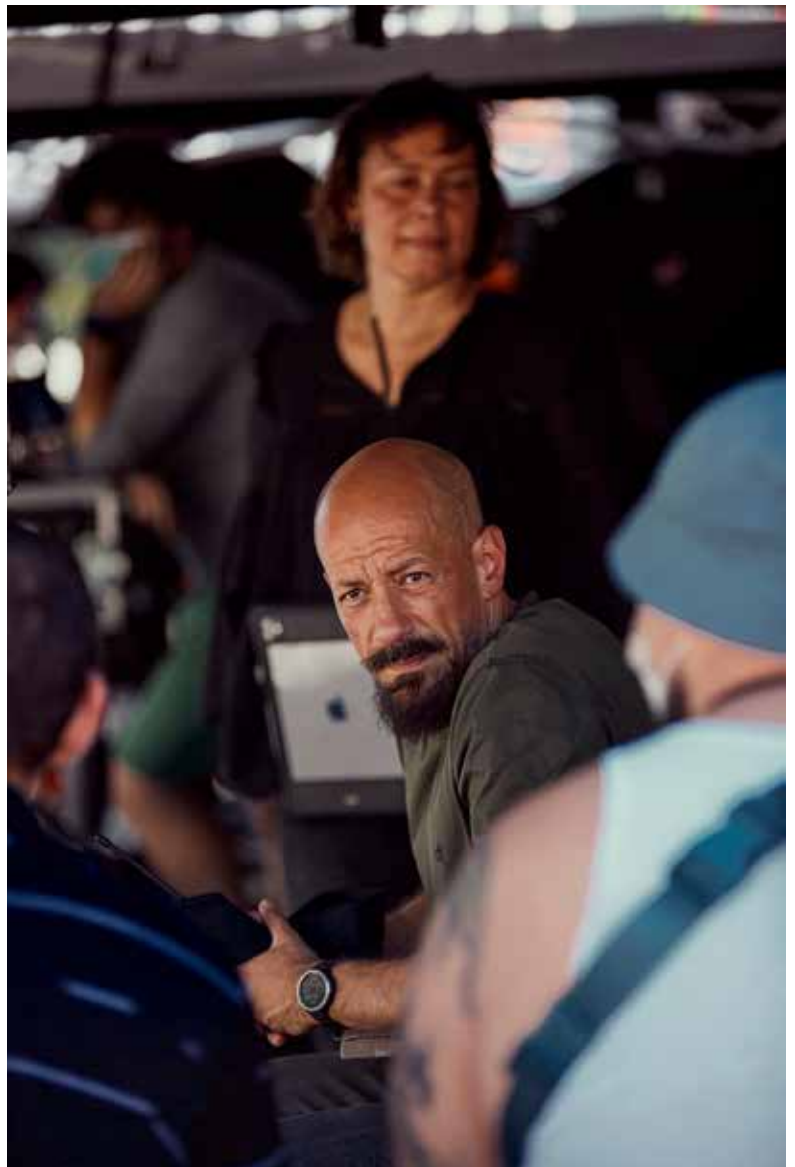
Tarik Saleh started as one of the top graffiti artists in Stockholm in the 80's.

He directed and wrote the screenplay for *THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT* that won 'The Grand Jury Prize' at Sundance 2017, received a Guldbagge Award for 'Best Film' in 2018, was nominated as 'Best Foreign Film' at the César Awards and was a box office hit with more than 400,000 tickets sold in France.

He also directed action thriller, *THE CONTRACTOR* (2022) starring Chris Pine, Ben Foster and Kiefer Sutherland; several episodes of the futuristic HBO-series *WESTWORLD* (2018) and Showtimes-series *RAY DONOVAN*; the thriller *TOMMY* (2014) with Ola Rapace, Moa Gammel and singer-songwriter Lykke Li for whom he also directed the music video *I Follow Rivers* that has about 80 million views on YouTube.

His film debut came with *METROPIA* (2009), a dystopic animation with Stellan Skarsgård, Juliette Lewis, Vincent Gallo and Udo Kier. The film premiered at the Venice Film Festival as the opening film for Critics' Week. Tarik Saleh also directed the documentaries *GITMO: THE NEW RULES OF WAR* (2005) and *SACRIFICIO: WHO BETRAYED CHE GUEVARA* (2001) together with Erik Gandini.

Tarik Saleh founded the production company Atmo with producer Kristina Åberg.



A FEW WORDS BY TARIK SALEH

MY GRANDPARENTS

This film is a political thriller set in Al-Azhar, a mythical university in Cairo. Al-Azhar is the epicenter of power in Sunni Islam. It is also a place where the past and the future intersect. My grandfather, who was born in a small village called Fisha Bana, in the heart of the Nile Delta, was admitted to Al-Azhar University, at the time the most prestigious university in Africa and the Middle East. He was the first in his village to receive a proper education, which was not common in his time.

Al-Azhar was built by the Fatimids in the 10th century and was, from the beginning, the essential place of Islamic studies. The Fatimids were Shiite Muslims, but when Salah ad-Din – known as Saladin in Occident – ruled over Egypt in the 12th century, his first decision was to convert Al-Azhar into a Sunni institution. Egypt has always been occupied by foreigners. The longest period by the Turks, then the British, followed closely by the French. Despite this, Al-Azhar has always managed to coexist with the political power in place. This is understandable since the university has always been respected and considered the most important source of knowledge on Islam in the world.

My grandmother was also educated. Although she didn't get to go to Al-Azhar, it was still very impressive for the time. My grandparents both came from remote villages and in one trip they made this huge leap from a quasi-medieval place to the modernity of the city. I wanted to show the stakes involved in leaving a village to study. What is the price to pay? What do you get out of it?

THE PLOT

I was re-reading *The Name of the Rose*, the medieval thriller by Umberto Eco, which takes place in a monastery. As I often do, I played with this idea: "What if I told a story like that but in a Muslim context? Would that be possible? Would I be allowed to? Is it dangerous?" The same feeling as playing with fire as a child. Once I started following this thought, I couldn't stop. Not only could I do it, I had to do it. I started to imagine a story set in our time. I imagined a young man, Adam, the son of a fisherman, getting a scholarship to study at Al-Azhar. He is convinced that his father will object because he needs him for his daily fishing. Finally, to his surprise, his father accepts because he sees it as the will of God against whom no one can fight, not even him, his own genitor.

Adam leaves his village for the first time and goes to Al-Azhar, which has changed a lot. Today, the university gathers over 300,000 students and 3,000 professors. The Grand Imam who is the head of the institution is the equivalent of the Pope in the Catholic religion: he is the highest authority in Sunni Islam. His fatwas - which are very powerful recommendations - are of the utmost importance. Any Muslim, even a moderate one, will always listen to what the Grand Imam has to say. Any leader in Egypt should take note of his recommendations when deciding to enact new laws.

Adam had only recently arrived at Al-Azhar when the Grand Imam died. In this situation, a council of 27 imams meets - the Supreme Council of Scholars - and elects a new imam. Across the street - I didn't make this up! - is the headquarters of State Security. So, on one side the religious power, on the other the state power. The head of State Security then gathered all his officers and explained: "The Grand Imam is dead, so we have to make sure that the person who is going to replace him shares our ideas." An experienced officer is appointed for this task. They have no one inside Al-Azhar, no informant inside the institution. So, the officer has to find one, if possible with few contacts outside and who cannot be traced back to him. The old officer recruits Adam, the young student. Adam cannot object, because in Egypt, State Security is feared by everyone. To put it simply, if they catch you, you're finished. It's a bit like the Stasi system in the former East Germany. So, Adam and this officer, Ibrahim, get in touch and start a kind of chess game. And Adam begins to understand the power issues. Adam is an exceptionally gifted person, born in the wrong place. Everyone he meets underestimates him because of his simple background.

EGYPT

It was not possible to shoot CAIRO CONSPIRACY in Egypt. I haven't been able to go back there since 2015 when, three days before we were to start shooting The Nile Hilton Incident, the Egyptian security services ordered us to leave the country. Since then, I have been on a list of undesirables who, if they set foot on Egyptian soil again, would be immediately arrested. The decision was even made public on Egyptian television. It's unfortunate, I love this country, I've spent time here, I have friends and family. My mother is Swedish, my father Egyptian, I consider myself an Egyptian from Sweden. I am not a nationalist, but it is a country I would like to show my daughters, and my love for it is not rewarded. I have more freedom than Egyptian filmmakers to describe facets of this country, which is complex, which cannot be reduced, like all countries, to one truth. I believe that all filmmakers have a dual position, internal and external to the story they are telling and to the world it describes. Filmmaking is almost an occupation for migrants! Many great directors are immigrants or the sons of immigrants, whether it's Martin Scorsese, Milos Forman or Billy Wilder.

We shot CAIRO CONSPIRACY in Turkey. To represent Al-Azhar, we were able to shoot in the Süleymanye Mosque in Istanbul, a magnificent building built in the 16th century, whose master builder, Sinan, trained the architect of the Blue Mosque. In Sunni Islam, there is no representation of human beings, so the visual motifs are geometric figures, distributed in an almost mathematical way. I liked the graphic power they offered, especially in the scenes in the university courtyard. Someone pointed out that they are reminiscent of a chessboard on which the different currents of Islam are confronted. That's exactly right! One of the references I gave to the director of photography, Pierre Aïm, and the set designer Roger Rosenberg, was the "prison movie", as a genre. In Al-Azhar, as in a prison, there is the courtyard, the canteen, and so on. All the usual places of the genre.

I don't know what the Egyptian authorities and the people studying and teaching in Al-Azhar University will think of the film. The official and unofficial opinions will probably be very different. The Nile Hilton Incident was officially seen as an attack on the Egyptian police, but I received a lot of letters from Egyptian police officers who loved the film...

ISLAM

I know, of course, that when I mention Islam, one immediately thinks of the news and all the terrifying things shown everywhere. Islam is everywhere on the news and yet people don't know about this religion, which is practiced by more than a billion believers and is part of their daily lives.

Islam is the youngest religion in the world, it is pragmatic and it uses a lot of stories, fables for educational purposes. I grew up with these stories. In the film, we hear Ibrahim and Adam discuss the historical figure of Tariq Ibn Ziyad, the military leader who set out to conquer Spain at the beginning of the 8th century; then, in his conversation with the Blind Sheikh, Adam talks about the debate among Mohammed's followers after his death.

Often these fables remind us of humility before God. Even the preacher must remember that he is only a man, as God himself reminded the prophet. We think that 'Allahu Akhbar' means 'God is great', but this is a mistake, it is 'God is greater'. Greater than any person, greater than the king, who, like the others, must bow down, face on the ground, before Him. This is a revolutionary idea and a liberating thought: you are not the center of the world, which would be much too heavy to bear.

It is clear that my film is not a criticism of Islam. It is not about exposing some dark side of the religion, but rather about understanding the power of knowledge - either as a liberating or an imprisoning force. I understand perfectly well why Muslims are suspicious of the representations of their religion in the West. I myself grew up surrounded by malicious prejudices and attempts to portray us as monsters. Nevertheless, I don't think Islam needs to be defended. I've never seen a film about Islam that is simply a film - there is always an opinion, for or against... I wanted a film without judgement or blinkers. I've always been fascinated by Al-Azhar University and its history. I want to take the audience on a journey.

COLONEL IBRAHIM

In all state institutions - Swedish television, for example - there is an incredible character, a guy who has been through all the changes of management, who even managed to hide when they were trying to fire the old employees. A guy you don't know how to get rid of, who knows too many things, and who maintains that the institution will not survive his departure... That's how I saw Ibrahim. He was already there under Mubarak, he was probably trained by the Romanians of the Securitate, at the time when Egypt was making deals with the Eastern bloc; his superior, Sobhy, was trained by the Americans, by the CIA, and he is much more brutal. Egypt has always aligned itself with the highest bidder...

Fares Fares worked on the look himself, inspired, he told me, by an uncle of his. I asked him if he was sure he wanted to go that far, and then I loved the result. When you see Ibrahim, you immediately imagine that he has high blood pressure, maybe he's had a bypass operation. As with Adam, everyone underestimates Ibrahim. He looks like someone who doesn't know what he's doing. But he understands the Blind Sheikh's strategy before anyone else, and he's willing to let him do it because deep down, this may be his last mission. Of course, he doesn't say so... I'm a fan of John Le Carré, I like it when characters hide the real motives of their action.

POWER WITHIN AN INSTITUTION

So this is a story about power and authority, not specifically about Islam, because Islam is basically like any other system. Whether it's a political system or a religious system, it's made up of laws that govern everything but which can also be easily changed and broken by those in power, in order to satisfy their own interests, or even to strengthen their power. This is something that interests me enormously, a theme that recurs in all my films, and which stems, no doubt, from my own problems with authority. When I was writing CAIRO CONSPIRACY, there was a scandal at the Swedish Academy, which awards the Nobel Prize for Literature, among other things. I was very interested because here was an institution in which a small group of people had immense power: the power to choose the best writer in the world. Unfortunately, these people abused this power, thought they were above the law. People started to criticise them and very soon the institution was on the verge of collapsing. The way people reacted inspired me to imagine the situation at Al-Azhar.

POWER WITHIN AN INSTITUTION

What happened in Egypt politically is another source of inspiration. One of the Egyptian revolutions, the one that brought Field Marshal Sisi to power, was seen as a military coup, although it was actually supported by the people. Once he became President, Sisi, who has ruled Egypt for eight years, decided to confront the Al-Azhar institution directly. His first decision was to visit the University on the Prophet's birthday. His speech said in essence: "Either you contribute to the problem or you contribute to the solution. We need to fight terrorism, which you have not done so far. There are even books in your institution that promote terrorism and this must stop." This speech was a way of saying to the members of Al-Azhar: "I am the new leader of Egypt, you had better fall in line". He had just dissolved the Muslim Brotherhood, a sect within Islam, and he wanted to say firmly: "This is what Egypt is today". In Egypt, there are Christians and Muslims, there are religious minorities and everyone lives together. They are all Egyptians above all, just as Al-Azhar University is Egyptian. At first the Al-Azhar leaders seemed to want to play the game, and then Sisi asked for help on some constitutional issues. The Grand Imam, Sheikh el-Tayeb, a very intelligent man, replied: "I am only the Grand Imam, my only privilege is to give recommendations from the Qu'ran. You, Sissi, make the law and I do not interfere with that." The President wanted the Qu'ran to support his proposed laws. The Grand Imam replied that he could not because it is impossible to change the Qu'ran. The conflict between the two leaders became public and all around the world the Imam gained popularity as he faced the tyrant whom no one dared to challenge. So, surprisingly, the conflict I had imagined in my script started to happen in real life.

THE CAST - SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

TAWFEEK BARHOM - ADAM

- 2022 THE WAY OF THE WIND by Terrence Malick
- 2020 THE RHYTHM SECTION by Reed Morano
- 2020 THE LETTER FOR THE KING - Netflix series by William Davies
- 2020 BAGDAD CENTRAL - Channel 4 series by Stephen Butchard (Bafta Nominated)
- 2018 THE LOOMING TOWER - Hulu Originals series by Dan Futterman
- 2018 MARY MAGDALENE by Gareth Davies
- 2015 THE IDOL by Hany Abu-Assad



MAKRAM J. KHOURY - SHEIKH NEGM

- 2022 THE WAY OF THE WIND by Terrence Malick
- 2020 MESSIAH - TV-series by Michael Petroni
- 2018 TORNET by Mats Grodrud (voice)
- 2015 HOMELAND - TV-series
- 2015 MUNICH by Steven Spielberg

MOHAMMAD BAKRI - GENERAL AL SAKRAN

- 2020 HOMELAND - TV-series
- 2018 TORNET by Mats Grodrud (voice)
- 2017 LE BUREAU DES LÉGENDES - TV-series by Eric Rochant
- 1983 HANNAH K. by Costa-Gavras

FARES FARES - IBRAHIM

- 2022 THE CONTRACTOR by Tarik Saleh, with Chris Pine
- 2019 CHERNOBYL - HBO series
- 2018 WESTWORLD - HBO series
- 2017 THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT by Tarik Saleh
- 2016 ROGUE ONE: A STAR WARS STORY by Gareth Edwards
- 2016 WESTWORLD - HBO series
- 2016 THE COMMUNE by Thomas Vinterberg
- 2016 THE DEPARTMENT Q - Trilogy by Mikkel Nørgaard
- 2015 CHILD 44 by Daniel Espinosa
- 2014 THE DEPARTMENT Q - Trilogy by Mikkel Nørgaard
- 2013 THE DEPARTMENT Q - Trilogy by Mikkel Nørgaard
- 2012 ZERO DARK THIRTY by Kathryn Bigelow
- 2012 SAFE HOUSE by Daniel Espinosa with Denzel Washington & Ryan Reynolds
- 2012 EASY MONEY II: HARD TO KILL by Babak Najafi and Phillip Argeadson
- 2010 EASY MONEY by Daniel Espinosa



MEHDI DEHBI - ZIZO

- 2022 THE WAY OF THE WIND by Terrence Malick
- 2020 MESSIAH - TV-series by Michael Petroni
- 2018 TORNET by Mats Grodrud (voice)
- 2015 HOMELAND - TV-series
- 2015 MUNICH by Steven Spielberg

SHERWAN HAJI - SOLIMAN

- 2017 TOIVON TUOLLA PUOLEN BY AKI KAURISMÄKI

BEHIND THE CAMERA

DIRECTOR TARIK SALEH
WRITER TARIK SALEH
PRODUCERS KRISTINA ÅBERG and FREDRIK ZANDER

CINEMATOGRAPHER PIERRE AÏM — Has worked on Tarik Saleh's THE CONTRACTOR (2022) and THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT (2017). He also shot BABYCALL (2011) with Noomi Rapace in the leading role and has been nominated for three César Awards for the films POLISSE (2011) by Maiwenn, MONSIEUR N. (2003) by Antoine de Caunes, and LA HAINE (1995) by Mathieu Kassovitz. Other credits include BIENVENUE CHEZ LES CH'TIS (2008) by Dany Boon and PARIS I LOVE YOU (2006) by Olivier Assayas.

PRODUCTION DESIGNER ROGER ROSENBERG — Has worked on Tarik Saleh's THE CONTRACTOR (2022), THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT (2017) for which he received a Guldbagge Award for "Best Production Design" and TOMMY (2014). He has also worked on Joachim Trier's Oscar nominated film THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD (2021), THELMA (2017) for which he was Amanda-nominated, and on BABYCALL (2011) by Pål Sletaune starring Noomi Rapace, and Daniel Espinosa's SNABBA CASH (2010).

COSTUME DESIGNER DENISE ÖSTHOLM — Has worked on numerous TV-series such as KÄRLEK & ANARKI (2020), GÖSTA (2019), THE LAST PANTHERS (2015) and ETTOR NOLLOR (2014). She has also worked on Axel Petersén's AVALON (2011), Daniel Espinosas EASY MONEY (2010), and MAMMOTH (2009) by Lukas Moodysson.

MAKE-UP ARTIST PIA CORNELIUS — Has worked on a great number of feature films and TV-series such as Indian director Shoojit Sircar's films SARDAR UDHAM (2021) and GULABO SITABO (2020) and in Bille August's GOODBYE BAFANA (2007) for which she was nominated in the category "Best Achievement in Make-up and Hairstyling" at the South African Film and Television Awards (SAFTA).

MUSIC COMPOSER KRISTER LINDER — Has worked with Tarik Saleh on THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT (2017) and METROPIA (2009) for which he received the "Jameson Music Award" at the Stockholm International Film Festival, among other documentaries and TV-series.

EDITOR THEIS SCHMIDT — Has worked with Tarik Saleh on THE CONTRACTOR (2022), THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT (2017) and TOMMY (2014). He has also edited films such as Samanou Acheche Sahlstrøm's TIL VI FALDER (2018), Axel Petersén's UNDER PYRAMIDEN (2016), and several Snabba Cash productions of which SNABBA CASH – LIVET DELUXE gave him a nomination to a Guldbagge Award for "Best Editing" in 2014.

CAIRO CONSPIRACY is produced by Atmo/Kristina Åberg and Fredrik Zander, in co-production with Memento Production, Bufo, Film i Väst, Sveriges Television, Mikael Ahlström Films, Haymaker, ARTE France Cinéma, Post Control, Final Cut For Real, in association with Memento International, Memento Distribution and Movies Inspired, with the participation of Canal+, Ciné+, ARTE France, YLE and DR, and with the support from Svenska Filminstitutet, Eurimages, Aide aux Cinémas du Monde, Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée – Institut Français, Region Île-de-France, in partnership with CNC Finnish Film Foundation, Business Finland - Audio Visual Production Incentive, The Danish Film Institute, Creative Europe Programme - MEDIA of the European Union and DR.