



# Cairo Conspiracy

**Director:** Tarik Saleh

**Country:** Egypt

**Date:** 2022

**A review by Jordan Mintzer for *Hollywood Reporter*.**

A compelling if somewhat conventional thriller in a highly unconventional setting, *Cairo Conspiracy* (aka *Boy From Heaven*, *Walad Min Al Janna*) marks another solid entry from writer-director Tarik Saleh, whose 2017 feature, *The Nile Hilton Incident*, put him on the map as a filmmaker deftly using genre to explore the tangled state of modern-day Egypt.

This time, he focuses on the crooked ties between religion and politics, setting his intrigue within Cairo's Al-Azhar mosque and university, one of the world's premier institutions of Sunni Islam teaching and a major facet of Egyptian society for many centuries. The closed-off universe of al-Azhar is a location both photogenic — the film was actually lensed in Turkey and Sweden — and dramatic, with the mosque's inner power struggles, backstabbing (literally at one point) and back-door dealing taking center stage in what's essentially an undercover spy movie dressed in a prayer thawb.



*Boy from Heaven* is also, in many ways, a coming-of-age film, following a promising young Muslim scholar, Adam (the excellent Tawfeek Barhom), as he makes his way on a scholarship from his tiny fishing village to the prestigious, world-renowned school, learning the ropes and eventually getting in way too deep with the powers-that-be. It's a familiar template, and Saleh's direction can veer toward the heavy-handed in places, but it's also an intriguingly damning portrait of the corruption currently hitting Egypt on all levels.

When we first meet Adam, he's a studious and innocent country boy, which makes him a perfect target for Ibrahim (Saleh regular Fares Fares), a world-weary agent of the State Security apparatus who's been tasked with spying on al-Azhar. Just as the film begins, the institution's Grand Imam unexpectedly dies, leaving behind a power vacuum that the Egyptian government hopes to fill with their own sheik, even if the mosque and the state are supposed to remain independent bodies.

Ibrahim, who dresses like a detective from a '70s exploitation flick, wire-rimmed glasses included, already has a spy planted at the mosque named Zizo (Mehdi Dehbi). But the latter's cover seems to have been compromised and he needs to find a successor. After he chooses Adam to replace him, Zizo is killed and Adam has to quickly step up and take over the dirty work, which includes infiltrating a band of radicalized Muslim Brotherhood students who are hoping to put their preferred sheik into the mosque's top spot.

There's a lot going on at once in the story, which was written by Saleh, and it's not always easy to follow the numerous palace intrigues — not to mention the power struggles between Ibrahim and his boss at State Security, Sobhy (Mo Ayoub), who has an agenda of his own. Nowadays, a project like *Boy From Heaven* would probably be turned into a series or miniseries, and while it's nice to see an ambitious thriller like this made as a regular feature, there's perhaps too much stuffed into two hours to make it all palpable.

The best parts concentrate on the hidden rituals of al-Azhar, which functions like a sealed-off college campus guided by strict Sunni custom. The boys — there are no women in the film except for a young mother who becomes a key plot element later on — sleep on bunk beds in crammed dorm rooms and spend their days listening to didactic lectures in the mosque's picturesque courtyard. One standout scene

features what essentially resembles a rap battle between two students chanting verses of the Koran by heart, with Saleh momentarily putting the story aside to let us savor the performances.

Such details enhance a plot that sticks close to Adam as he's obliged to transform into Ibrahim's eyes and ears, the two of them meeting regularly in a Starbucks-type café so they can exchange information. Adam is never fully onboard with the situation, but at first Ibrahim promises to help his father get surgery, and then afterwards things get so bad that Adam has to take more and more risks in order to make it out unscathed.



It's a scenario we've seen in many a movie, and it can be a little too obvious, but it also benefits from Saleh's skillful direction and the sturdy turns by Barhom and Fares, whose characters are constantly playing a cat-and-mouse game with the mosque and the government as they try to save their skin. When things ultimately resolve themselves, the two institutions remain just as corrupt as they were before, and the movie offers up an unsparing vision of Egyptian authority, whether religious or secular.

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