

Red Path [15]

2024 Tunisia/France/Belgium/others 97 mins

UK released	20 June 2025
Director	Lotfi Achour
Screenplay	Natacha de Pontchara
Cinematography	Wojciech Staron
Music	Jawhar Basti; Venceslas Catz
Cast	Ali Helali (Ashraf); Yassine Samouni (Nizar); Salha Nasraoui (Asraf's mother); Wided Dabedi (Rahma, Nizar's girlfriend); Younes Naouar (Mounir, Nizar's brother); Lalifsa Gafsi (Nizar's mother)

In the unforgiving landscape of Mount Mghila, Tunisia, a young boy's life is irrevocably altered by an unexpected and brutal act of violence. Thirteen-year-old shepherd Ashraf (Ali Hlali), who was innocently playing with his cousin Nizar (Yassine Samouni) in a forbidden area, is ambushed by a group of jihadists. The tranquillity of their play is violently shattered, and the attackers show no remorse. Ashraf is sent home with a harrowing message: his cousin's severed head in a bag.

Lotfi Achour's *Red Path* presents a unique coming-of-age tale, beginning with a traumatic event that casts a long shadow over the story's development and resolution. Set in November 2015, during a politically turbulent period in Tunisia, the film is grounded in the socio-political tensions of the time, marked by a fragile coalition between the Islamist movement and remnants of the old regime. Although *Red Path* is inspired by real events – the children involved in the true incident are acknowledged in the final credits – Achour's dramatisation takes a more empathetic approach, emphasising Ashraf's journey back to his rural community and his efforts to adapt to a new, harsh reality, while processing severe trauma.

Achour, a seasoned director with a background in theatre and film, frequently explores themes of trauma, resilience and social disparity. His previous works, such as the short *Law of Lamb* and the feature *Burning Hope*, reflect a commitment to untold stories, carried over into *Red Path*.

Achour delves deeper into the psychological impact of violence on children, portraying the stark reality of rural Tunisia while contrasting it with more introspective, ethereal moments. This juxtaposition reflects the protagonist's psychological dissonance as he attempts to make sense of the brutality he has witnessed and find ways to cope. The initial brutality of the attack is tempered by Achour's poetic realism, which underscores the psychological turmoil experienced by Ashraf in the aftermath. Upon returning home, and faced with the indifference of the local authorities, Ashraf must rejoin his relatives in retrieving his cousin's body for burial.

Achour approaches the story by striking a careful balance, avoiding exploitation while not shying away from the grimness of reality. The film makes a potent political statement about the abandonment and isolation felt by rural communities in the face of terrorism and political machinations and highlights the bleak reality of jihadist dominance. At the heart of *Red Path* is a focus on human resilience, particularly the ability of children to transcend unimaginable horrors through their inner strength and imagination. The film's naturalistic mise-en-scène is counterpointed against surreal, dreamlike sequences, creating a sensory experience courtesy of Polish cinematographer Wojciech Staroń. Achour merges the real with the dreamy, intertwining the personal with the political, and the individual with the communal in a coming-of-age drama that attempts to find redemption for the protagonist while giving us a stark reminder of the fates of children in conflict zones.

Martin Kudláč, *Cineuropa*, 13 August 2024 (abridged)

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