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# Cries from Syria

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Cries from Syria* (2017), directed by Evgeny Afineevsky.

## **Keywords**

Syria, Genocide, War, Children, Al-Assad, ISIS, Islam

## **Author Notes**

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (2015). He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



Kholoud Helmi poses for a portrait to promote the film, "Cries From Syria," at the Music Lodge during the Sundance Film Festival on Saturday, Jan. 21, 2017, in Park City, Utah. (Photo by Taylor Jewell/Invision/AP)

### **Cries from Syria (2017), dir. Evgeny Afineevsky**

As the Syrian Civil War enters its 7<sup>th</sup> year, one would hope that the world is aware of the details of this terribly destructive crisis, but some have no doubt become desensitized by the constant barrage of news about it. This film does not permit us that distance; we are denied the ability to ignore the war or the human damage it has caused.

The film accomplishes this through a combination of personal cell phone videos that document the events of the last seven years, as well as contemporary interviews with survivors. Kholoud Helmi (above), who acts as the onscreen narrator of much of the film, was at the screening in Park City where she spoke through tears and anger about the need for others to hear this story. The Syrian people feel abandoned by the world, and as the interviewees tell their stories the

viewer's heart breaks. In particular, when children are interviewed, one is struck by the horror through which they have grown up, and the ways they have been forced to normalize it. The children pump and carry water during the blockade of Aleppo; eat tree leaves when they run out of food; draw pictures of the airstrikes; and recount the deaths of their family members. The now iconic footage of the recovery of the body of three year old Alan Kurdi appears at the beginning and end of the film, and the film does not flinch from showing the devastation that the war has inflicted on the most innocent. A little girl says, "I know God loves children, so I pray to him to help us." All the people pray to God for help, and hold fast to their faith, but they cannot understand why God has not intervened. "Aren't you afraid of God? You call yourselves Muslims?," an angry man cries as he shows the bodies of children; he is addressing Bashar Al-Assad directly. The people interviewed constantly express disbelief that the leader of their country would commit what can only be called genocide upon his own people; he calls them terrorists, and "germs" to be eradicated from the body of the nation, dismissing their humanity entirely. The civil war began from peaceful protests after children were imprisoned and tortured for graffiti criticizing the regime, and as these protests grew the violence with which the regime responded only increased. Members of the military who defected to form the Free Syrian Army are also interviewed, and they indicate that they could not follow orders to torture and murder civilians. We also hear the story of how the tide began to turn in favor of the rebels, but when ISIS gets involved with the war, their initial assistance to the rebels deteriorates as they become a new set of oppressors and murderers of the people. Finally, we see the Russian cluster and phosphorus bombs that have totally decimated the country, adding to the already devastating chemical weapons (including sarin and chlorine) used by Assad on his own people. We may have heard all

this on the news over the years, but seeing it visually and aurally documented before one's eyes in 110 minutes leaves the viewer overwhelmed with feelings of hopelessness and horror.

HBO has purchased the rights to the film for American television, and Content Media Corporation has bought the international sales rights, so we know there is interest in bringing this story to the world. The people of Syria do not believe it is too late, and they are crying for help from the international community in this film. We can only hope that the cry is heard.