

# The Lost Souls of Syria.



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# The Lost Souls of Syria.

**Feature documentary / 2022 / 99 min**

German version, original version with German and English subtitles

**Cinema release:** February 2023

**Country:** France, Germany

**A film by:** Stéphane MALTERRE and Garance LE CAISNE

**Directed by:** Stéphane MALTERRE

**Written by:** Stéphane MALTERRE and Garance LE CAISNE

**Historical advisor:** Garance LE CAISNE

**Photography:** Laura SIPAN, Stéphane MALTERRE, Thibault DELAVIGNE, Beate SCHERER BVK

**Editing:** Sébastien TOUTA

**Composers:** Gregor KEIENBURG, Raffael SEYFRIED

**Produced by:** Les Films d'Ici (France), Katuh Studio (Germany)

**Producers:** Sébastien ONOMO, Vanessa CISZEWSKI

**Distribution:** Films That Matter

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**Commissioning editor WDR:** Jutta Krug

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Pappelallee 7-8 | 10437 Berlin  
mail@luftkindfilmverleih.net  
+49 (0) 30 67518050

# Short synopsis.

27,000 photos of civilian detainees tortured to death were stolen from the Syrian regime's secret archives by a military defector codenamed Caesar, and made public in 2014. Director Stéphane Malterre and co-author and historical advisor Garance Le Caisne investigated on what extent international justice proves impotent in prosecuting the criminal Syrian state. As the case seems doomed to oblivion, victims' families, along with activists and Caesar himself, seek truth and justice through state courts across Europe instead. More than five years of investigations and fighting will lead to the first trial against high officials of the Syrian death machine.





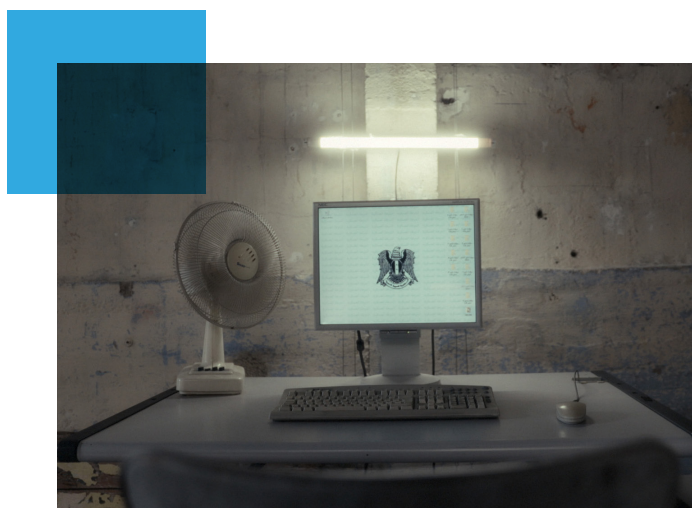
# Long synopsis.

Images of naked, entangled, and starved bodies, tortured to death, are shown in museums and parliaments all over the world. These twenty-seven-thousand images of dead civilian detainees, made public by a military detector codenamed Caesar, bring to mind the legacies of the Nazi or Khmer Rouge systems. One might think such images belong to the past, but they don't. The executioners continue their crimes to this day. Since the revolution of 2011, the regime in Damascus utilized disappearance and torture on an industrial scale to silence its own population. **Over 100,000 Syrians have disappeared in the regime's prisons. No one knows the real figures.**

Back in 2014, when the so-called "Caesar files" – stolen from secret Syrian regime archives – were disclosed, expectations for the Syrians were high. Members of the UN Security Council attempted to pass a resolution that would allow the International Criminal Court to prosecute the Bashar al-Assad regime. But the vetos of Russia and China – staunch allies of the Syrian regime – blocked this path. The story of those murdered in the Damascus detention centers seemed doomed to oblivion.

But two years later, in 2016, several victims' families, helped by international lawyers, activists, and Caesar himself, attempted to push through the doors of European courts by filing lawsuits in the name of their loved ones, against the highest officials of the Syrian regime. They faced both the reluctance of western countries to engage in judicial action against the Bashar al-Assad regime, as well as the ongoing terror of that dictatorship, which spread beyond its borders.

**Filmed over five years with unprecedented access, THE LOST SOULS OF SYRIA shows the behind the scenes developments of these fights in Spain, France, the UK, and Germany.** They eventually led to a trial in German courts, which pronounced a historic verdict in January 2022: the sentencing of a Syrian security apparatus member to life in prison for crimes against humanity. In France, a trial in absentia of two key figures of Bashar al-Assad's inner circle is also expected. This ongoing struggle for justice is about naming and chasing the perpetrators, but it's also about writing the story of a people's tragedy. At stake is not only the memory of the departed, but also the fate of those still detained.



# Authors' Statement.

The authors of this film, Stéphane Malterre and Garance Le Caisne, discovered these photos when they were first made public at the United Nations in Geneva in 2014. The appearance of these corpses in the media and on the political scene was an explosion. But also, already, an impossibility. Inhuman, the corpses stupefy, force us to look away. These revealing images could not be seen. **How can we go beyond, below, past the frame of the pictures, into the corridors of the terror that created them?**

These images came from a country that the authors often visited. For several years, they filmed or wrote about Syria: Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Idlib... These pictures reminded them how much the chaos they witnessed there – the bombings, street fights, and violence of the regime – had erased the origins of this evil. They also provided a clue to an enigma that had long puzzled them.

In 2013, two years after the beginning of the Syrian Revolution, director Stéphane Malterre was in Damascus. The city, under the control of the regime, seemed intact. There was no evidence of the destruction that was devastating the rest of the country. But behind the walls, in the silent houses, something was happening. Something that couldn't be seen. Named. Imagined.

**People were disappearing.** A brother, a father, a son, a sister. What happened to this procession of missing people? Were they alive? Dead? Their relatives had been looking for them for months, sometimes years. Long lines of families met in the corridors of a ghost administration, wandering, searching for information, looking away, keeping quiet; as if being seen talking to a stranger or anyone else, they too risked disappearing. The town was living in fear and paranoia. The words "Assad or death" tagged on a wall foreshadowed the fate of the missing... One year later, in Geneva, in the deserter's photos, the missing were resurfaced.

The man who smuggled this archive out of the shadows had no face or voice. Only a code name: Caesar. **Writer Garance Le Caisne decided to go after him. He was hiding somewhere in Northern Europe. He had never met or talked to a journalist before.** But he did so with her, and at length. The military man confessed to having photographed the bodies of tortured detainees for his administration for almost two years. He thought he was going crazy. Every day, he had to take three photos for each corpse: large, medium, close up. Numbers written directly on the skin of each body indicated where the prisoner was detained. The deserter's voice, which rendered visible the mechanics of a death system, was restored by the journalist through a book that became a reference for those investigating the crimes of the Syrian regime.

At the end of 2015, Stéphane Malterre and Garance Le Caisne decided to work together on this long feature documentary project:

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We thought about a film that, through a cinematographic gesture, could extend the deserter's words, encompassing the specter of terror. At first, the characters and narrative frame escaped us. How to film the unthinkable? We could not go to Syria, to the scene of the crimes. The prisons of Damascus continued to fill. How many people have disappeared since the beginning of the conflict? 100,000? 150,000? How many are dying there as we write these lines?

Our eyes continued to follow the singular destiny of Caesar's photos. Their trajectory had transported reality out of Syria, far away from the crime scene. **By revealing the existence of the death machine, the deserter had imposed on the world an uncomfortable question; one of justice and impunity.** The question would become the film's center of gravity, the theater in which the memory of the dead, the fate of the living, and the perpetuation of a system would play out.

By the time we started our research, the promise of justice had been betrayed. In 2015, the United Nations was unable to apply to the International Criminal Court to prosecute the criminal regime, as Russia, Syria's loyal ally, opposed it. The Caesar case, where every photo bears the signature of assassins, and which some magistrates nicknamed "The Matrix," was silently closed. The tortured and their messenger were condemned to wander in a lonely limbo. The film we imagined was based on this human and moral failure.

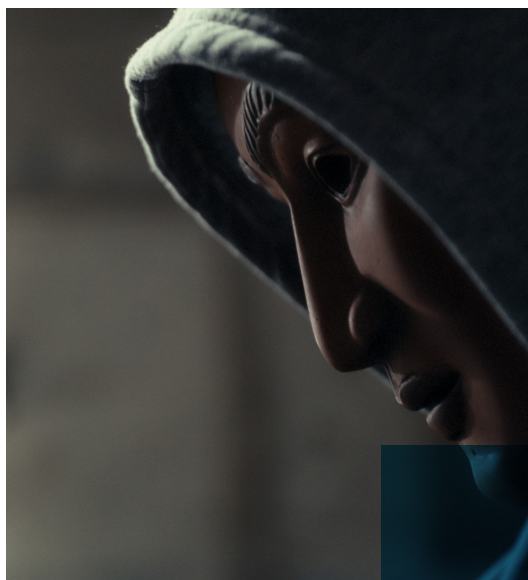
During our research in Turkey and Europe, we spoke with investigators, lawyers, witnesses, and survivors in the swelling flow of Syrian refugees. The pain of the relatives of the disappeared was unending. Scattered families were looking for their dead, for the living. They were afraid, paralyzed by terror of the regime, even outside of Syria. Caesar's photos and name came up repeatedly. We gradually understood that "The Matrix" was guiding the quest of these families. The Caesar file continued to be searched and studied, circulating from one country to another.

In 2016, the failure of international law would lead those we met to seek justice elsewhere. These victims wanted to regain control of their truth, and to press charges against the highest Syrian dignitaries in the courts of Spain, Germany, France, and all of Europe.

*It would be a pioneering move, uncertain and historic. A legal gamble to overcome the lack of power of international justice.*

It would be a pioneering move, uncertain and historic. A legal gamble to overcome the lack of power of international justice, born more than seventy years ago at the Nuremberg trials. To us, it became evident that the film's movement and narrative dialectic would be found in the legal actions taking place across Europe, from Madrid to Paris to Berlin. They would form the cinematographic space in which an existential struggle to represent terror, to name the victims and their executioners, would occur before our camera. In documenting these quests for truth over the months and years, we imagined telling the story – between darkness and light – of an attempt to get out of limbo.

**We are filming this journey with the deserter Caesar, lawyer Almudena Bernabeu, and plaintiff Obeïda Dabbagh. We have accompanied these three from 2016 to 2021.**



## *Protagonists*

# Caesar, the Syrian military defector.

Caesar is the codename of a Syrian military police photographer. His alias was given by the Syrian activist group that supported him and saw him as the “king witness.” For almost two years while working at the Police Military Headquarters of Damascus, Caesar risked his life to secretly copy pictures of thousands of detainees who had been killed in the intelligence services prisons. After being exfiltrated from Syria in 2013, the defector was lauded by experts, politicians, and diplomats. He even traveled to the United States and testified before Congress in Washington DC in the summer of 2014, hidden in an electric blue hooded jacket, which has become his “hero” costume. Caesar thought that the photographs in his possession would help to put an end to the Syrian death machine. But as time went by, his message was left unheard, the Syrian regime was winning the war, and Caesar became a prisoner of his own name and revelation.

Nowadays, the lonely defector hides somewhere in Northern Europe. A very humble and simple man, he describes himself as an “ordinary refugee.” But he knows he’s not. The fear of his former superiors remains intact. Paranoiac, Caesar dismisses any questions about his private life, as if disclosing it would put it at risk. But he comes out of his shell when he describes the details of his “work”: to photograph the dead, file the photos, make up cards... The military man was once a subordinate who just took pride in a job well done.

To collect and film his testimony, the filmmakers had to preserve his anonymity by all means. Caesar agreed to wear a very singular mask created for him, which is an adaptation of an old warrior mask with Arab features. This geometrical, expressionless mask evokes a soldier in a system where silence is everything. Through the years, Caesar would also act as a traveling spokesperson in order to resurrect the case against the Syrian regime. The film crew followed him on those rare instances where he left his home to travel to various European cities and meet secretly with officials whom he thought could change laws or the workings of justice and – more generally – of the world. During his trips throughout Europe, the deserter takes on the role of an unlikely lobbyist; a representative who would come and “sell” the importance of ending a holocaust.

Caesar never expresses any regrets about what he did or why he did it, but this is a man who feels deeply that he, and his people, have been betrayed.





### *Protagonists*

# **Sami, Syrian activist and Caesar's collaborator.**

Sami is Caesar's childhood friend from Damascus. Today he also lives in hiding somewhere in Europe. To protect his identity, he agreed to be filmed from the back with a kind of disguise; a fez and a signet ring. Caesar's collaborator is a former engineer and became an activist with the outbreak of the revolution in 2011. Without him, "Caesar" would have never existed, because Sami is the one who convinced him to copy the thousands of photos of corpses. He's the one who at the time received the material daily, through flash drives, and saved it on a hard drive hidden in his home in Damascus. This partnership – Sami, the activist who wants to change the world, and Caesar, the military photographer who ends up accepting the challenge – is key to understanding the leak.

Sami also carries the weight of the failure of their operation. Yet this relentless messenger and guardian of the hard drive refuses to give up. He ends up handing over the original copy, containing thousands of photos, to a German prosecutor. Years later, in 2022, the full forensic expertise of the Caesar files will play a central role in the historical verdict pronounced by the German court in Koblenz against Anwar Raslan, a former colonel of the Syrian security apparatus.



## *Protagonists*

# **Almudena Bernabeu, the lawyer.**

Almudena Bernabeu is an international human rights attorney, and co-founder of Guernica 37 International Justice Chambers. She is the winner of the 2015 Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award. At once an idealist, competitor, and huntress, she had already helped condemn several war criminals, including the Guatemalan president implicated in the Mayan genocide.

In spring 2016, Syrian activists put Almudena in touch with a Madrid hairdresser who had recognized her brother Abdul among the torture victims in the Caesar files. Even though five-hundred families had already recognized one of their relatives by that point, the hairdresser's Spanish citizenship provided the much sought-after legal loophole needed to open the doors of Spanish courts. Thanks to this dead man in photograph number 69-248-4822, Almudena's expectation was that the Caesar files could be resurrected, and the story of thousands of people could finally be told.

Month after month, the film's creators followed Almudena and her colleague Toby Cadman, a British barrister involved in the Caesar files from the very early days. They filmed the lawyers wherever they went to build the complaint case: business meetings, witness examinations, investigations, trips to Madrid, Amsterdam, and The Haag. They captured every major step of the investigation, along with periods of doubt. Almudena, who describes herself as a "prosecutor at heart", expected that through the case she and her team would be able to prosecute the highest officials of the Syrian regime in charge of the creation and implementation of the death machine revealed by Caesar.

In January 2017, after months of research, and after having exfiltrated the dead man's widow from Syria to protect her from regime retaliation, Almudena filed the first complaint against nine Syrian officials – close to Bashar al-Assad himself – on behalf of the sister, the Madrid hairdresser. But reality got in Almudena's way. The Spanish court eventually dismissed the case and refused to continue this first criminal investigation against top leaders of the Syrian regime. At that precise moment where the truth was about to come out, it was discarded – likely for political reasons. "Spain has no balls!" the lawyer would sum up, with her explicit words. Following this major setback, all her attempts from 2017 through 2020 to re-open the case will fail.



## Protagonists

# Obeïda Dabbagh, the plaintiff.

Obeïda Dabbagh, a Franco-Syrian engineer, lives in Vauréal, a small town in the suburbs of Paris. Obeïda's brother Mazzen (54) and nephew Patrick (20) who are also Franco-Syrian, had been arrested by the regime in Damascus in November 2013 and had then disappeared. Obeïda couldn't understand why the regime would arrest a school administrator and a student. The story of Obeïda's brother and nephew is similar to that of thousands of Syrians whose families hope they are still alive, but whose bodies could very well be in the Caesar file.

Obeïda's story is also the one of families who, despite the distance, remain prisoners of the regime, unable to live a normal life. The painful question of whether their relatives are dead or alive is asked repeatedly. Obeïda's fight and dilemmas shed light on how Damascus terror also ties up the relatives of the disappeared. Thanks to his brother and nephew's dual nationality, he could have taken legal action early on, but Obeïda's fear of retaliation by the Syrian regime on his brother and nephew made him hesitate. It took him time to make the decision to file a complaint of forced disappearance and torture before the French court in 2016, with the hope that it would put the Syrian regime under pressure and lead to the release of his relatives – or at least force it to provide news of them.

Following the lawsuit, Obeïda threw himself into this public battle, helped by his lawyer Clémence Bectarte from International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). The lawyer, looking both for information and proof of life, was trying to find witnesses detained in the same prison as Mazzen and Patrick. She wanted as well to find out who was behind the disappearance of Obeïda's brother and nephew. She recovered official documents from the regime which made it possible to trace the names of those in charge of the prison where they had been detained. On his side, Obeïda wrote numerous letters to French government officials – and to the President himself – asking for help to obtain the release or at least information about his relatives, but he never got any answers. The French state just ignored him.

Eventually, in the summer of 2018, after years of research and fighting, Obeïda learned from official Syrian sources that his brother and nephew had died at the hands of the Syrian intelligence services – no remains, no graves. Three months later, at last, France issued arrest warrants against three of the architects of terror, who were close advisors to Bashar al-Assad. The same criminals that Almudena Bernabeu was trying to prosecute in the case of Abdul, the Madrid hairdresser's brother. Then Obeïda became the public face of the first great legal "victory" against the regime. And the face of criticism towards the French authorities; "Why did you abandon my brother and nephew?"

## *Biography*

# Stéphane Malterre.

## **Director of the film**

Stéphane Malterre is a French director and journalist. He graduated with a master's degree in Language Sciences and worked as a print journalist and as a literary and film reviewer. He then spent fifteen years as a reporter for an audiovisual news agency, while also writing, filming, and directing more than twenty investigative magazine and documentary reports (Canal Plus, France 2, Arte, M6.) Over the years he has investigated political and financial scandals, international arms trafficking, and conflicts in Africa (Ivory Coast, DRC), as well as the Arab spring, with its glimmers of hope and tears (Tunisia, Libya, Syria). Among his achievements: JACQUES CHIRAC: LA JUSTICE AUX TROUSSES (80 min), SYRIE, LA MORT EN FACE (65 min, selected in 2013 for the Bayeux Calvados-Normandy Award for war correspondents). His latest one, THE FATHER, THE SON AND THE JIHAD (2016), was filmed over three years in Syria and was selected for about fifteen international festivals (FIPADOC, Hot Docs, IDFA, The Viennale).



## *Biography*

# Garance Le Caisne.

**Co-author and historical adviser of the film**

Garance Le Caisne is a French author and journalist. She started her career as a correspondent in Egypt, where she lived for eight years. She followed the Israeli-Arab peace process and the rise of Islamic terrorism in the Middle East. As a freelance journalist, she covered Syria from the beginning of the revolution, reporting in the field on doctors in war, chemical attacks, and the destruction of cities with barrels of explosives. All of these were part of the same quest; to understand, through the crimes committed by the regime, the transmission of an amputated memory, the awakening of a part of society, and the desire of Syrians to regain control of their own history. Garance Le Caisne is the author of the awarded book “OPERATION CAESAR: AT THE HEART OF THE SYRIAN DEATH MACHINE,” published by Stock in October 2015. The book has already been translated into eight languages and received the Geschwister-Scholl-Preis Award in Munich, Germany, in 2016. In 2022 she has written the book “OUBLIE TON NOM: MAZEN AL-HAMADA, MÉMOIRES D’UN DISPARU.” THE LOST SOULS OF SYRIA is her first feature documentary.



# Contact.

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Vanessa Ciszewski

[mail@luftkindfilmverleih.net](mailto:mail@luftkindfilmverleih.net)

030 67518050

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