

Global criminality

Syriana, written and directed by Stephen Gaghan

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Syriana, written and directed by Stephen Gaghan, based on *See No Evil* by Robert Baer

Syriana, which opened across the US on December 9, is a serious and audacious film. A collaboration between writer-director Stephen Gaghan, producer-actor George Clooney and executive producer Steven Soderbergh, the film is a thoughtful, coherent and genuinely frightening portrait of the ongoing struggle of giant US corporations and their CIA sponsors to establish a stranglehold over the world's oil supply. Though a work of fiction, *Syriana* gives a truer picture of life in the Middle East—as well as in the political and financial centers of the US—than the sum total of all the broadcast news in the United States since the start of the “war on terror.”

Syriana is composed of several interconnected stories. In the US, a giant oil firm, Connex, is poised to merge with a smaller rival, Killen, that has recently acquired rights to fields in Kazakhstan. Token opposition to the merger is expected from the US Justice Department. Due diligence of a very limited sort must take place to placate expected public opposition. The oil executives bring in leading lawyers from Sloan Whiting, a big firm in Washington. Sloan Whiting is expected to “fix” any problems.

Dean Whiting (Christopher Plummer), head of the firm, is, the viewer assumes, a former CIA agent, and is also involved in other criminal conspiracies to further the interest of US oil companies. He is a member of the “Committee to Liberate Iran” as well an instigator of a coup against a small Persian Gulf emirate (unnamed in the film).

When the emir's elder son, Prince Nasir (Alexander Siddig), decides to award an oilfield development bid to a Chinese company, Whiting helps the CIA attempt his assassination. If the plot succeeds, power will fall to Nasir's venal younger brother, Meshal. CIA case officer Bob Barnes (Clooney), told by his superiors that Nasir is financing terrorism, is sent to Beirut to arrange the prince's killing. (The film's title, it should be noted, is CIA jargon for the type of “ideal” state that it would like to arrange in the Middle East, presumably through such methods.)

An important element of the film is its thoughtful and sympathetic portrayal of the oil workers whose lives are upended by the merger. A young Pakistani immigrant oil

worker, Wasim (Mazhar Munir), loses his job and immigration status in a mass sacking that follows the Connex-Killen deal. Unable to find any work, even unpaid, that will allow him to remain in the emirate, and after being brutally beaten by military thugs while in an immigration queue, Wasim accepts the invitation of a friend to come with him to a local Islamic school. There, notwithstanding his initial skepticism about the prevailing dogma (“That's a lot of shit,” he replies to his friend who tells him that doubt is actually a paradoxical sign of deep faith), he is pressured to accept an Islamicist-inspired suicide mission aimed at one of Connex-Killen's oil facilities.

Wasim and the other oil workers are portrayed as admirable, intelligent human beings overwhelmed by their situation. They live in fairly squalid conditions in trailers right beside the oilfields. As immigrant workers in the emirate, they have virtually no rights and are subject to deportation if they lose their jobs. The portrayal of Wasim belies the typical propaganda about Arab and Asian youth caught up in the dead end of Islamicist fundamentalism. Wasim is relentlessly pushed to the madrasa by social conditions, not drawn to it by unexplained and mysterious ideological affinities. To put it somewhat differently, Wasim's inexorable tragedy is not of his creation; it is made in the US. In this regard, *Syriana* demonstrates something of a renaissance in social sensitivity in American filmmaking. It is the first film in a considerable period that has examined the working class with something approaching objectivity and compassion.

The film has a kaleidoscopic character, switching quickly between the different plot lines. No scene seems to last more than a minute or two. In opting for this effect, the producers may have sacrificed some depth for breadth. But, it might be argued, they are also able to maintain the interconnectedness of the plot's essential elements in shifting rapidly between them. The film is not a series of essentially disconnected “narratives.” No part seems extraneous and the viewer does not have the impression that the filmmakers set out to confuse in some sort of pretentious manner. The story's many connections have an inner logic. Once the stage is set early on, the tale seems nearly to tell itself.

Significantly, none of the reviews which complain of the film's complexity argue that the construction of the story is

somehow unbelievable or unreal. In *Syriana*, one actually senses something of a revival of plot construction, a skill that has been in decline in American films for some time.

Unfortunately, perhaps in attempting to try to explain the more complex elements of the plot to the audience, the writers introduce a rather weak character, an oil securities analyst, Bryan Woodman (Matt Damon). Here there is a limitation of character, though not of acting. Woodman is taken in as an ad hoc adviser by Nasir following an accident that causes Nasir to feel indebted to him. At no point does Woodman's character seem to rise above the level of a pedagogical prop. His conversations with the prince and others serve principally to explain the political context of the unfolding drama.

It is to the credit of the producers, however, that they do something rather unfashionable in film today: make real demands on the viewer's attention and thought. They assume, if not extensive historical knowledge, at least appreciable interest in history and politics. Woodman's remark to his wife that Nasir may become "the next Mossadeq," for example, does assume the audience will recognize the name of the Iranian leader deposed with CIA support in 1953. Or that it will be spurred by the comment to find out about this crime.

The actors' performances are noteworthy. Christopher Plummer is masterful as Dean Whiting, the legal and diplomatic powerbroker. Chris Cooper is highly believable as Jimmy Pope, the angry, but cagey, head of Killen, ready to hand over associates for prosecution if it will assure government approval of the merger. Jeffrey Wright has the role of Bennett Holiday, a competent yet corruptible lawyer who, though never to be quite accepted in the upper echelons of the petrochemical-military establishment, is both intimidated and impressed by its opulence. Though allotted briefer parts, admirable performances are also given by Sonnel Dadra as Farooq, Wasim's friend who leads him to the Islamic school; Shahid Ahmed, who plays Wasim's father; and William C. Mitchell, who plays Holiday's embittered, alcoholic father, resentful of his son's position and associates.

Clooney, in particular, leaves the impression of becoming a very interesting actor. His performance in *Syriana* follows quickly upon his remarkable direction of and performance in *Good Night and Good Luck*. He is establishing himself as a leading man who thinks and feels, rather than functions as a sex symbol. He seems to have invested a great deal of effort in the making of the film. Perhaps he even went a bit too far in his zeal in making the movie: he was severely injured in a scene in which his character is tortured. Clooney required spinal surgery and was reportedly still suffering terrible headaches a year after the event.

There are many chilling aspects to *Syriana*. One of Barnes's superiors, Fred Franks (Tom McCarthy), leaves early from the meeting discussing Nasir's assassination; his child has a soccer game. The same character is just back from shuttling kids in his minivan when he tells Barnes that he is being scapegoated for a

failed operation. Later Franks orders (and supervises) a political killing via guided missile from a CIA command center. A logical comparison might be made to another character, Mussawi (Mark Strong), a rogue CIA officer who actually conducts torture himself. Is Mussawi any more deplorable than Franks? The CIA-killer-as-soccer-dad jars more, or at least it should. And Franks seems a highly plausible character, as do the other CIA figures.

The film's success in its US release seems to be an indication of both a continuing political shift to the left among broad sections of the people and a growing recognition of the criminality of US foreign policy. *Syriana* takes its place among a recent crop of more serious and critical antiwar films that have appeared in the United States, that include *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Fog of War* (2003), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *The War on Iraq* (2004), and *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004). Given its scathing portrayal of the corporate world and the CIA and its rather sympathetic portrait of Wasim, one expects to find a number of hostile reviews in the US. In actuality, it is difficult to turn up a really negative and reactionary critique of the film.

One line, pronounced by Nasir near the close, seemed particularly significant: "A country with only 5 percent of the people but doing 50 percent of the military spending is a declining [moral and political] power." This idea seems to effectively capture the situation that confronts the political establishment in the United States.

Notwithstanding the film's somewhat simplistic political conceptions, particularly evident in the character of the "reformist" Nasir, *Syriana*, in its totality represents a genuine indictment of the entire social system. In this regard, the following comments of Gaghan are significant, though perhaps more as indications of a changing climate than for their particular insight. He told indystar.com: "We're looking at a big system. That was my experience, coming out of *Traffic*, is that when you try to talk about a system—like if the system is the bad guy—the whole movie is all gray area; there are no good guys or bad guys. The system itself is what you're indicting."



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