

The Situation: a drama of the Iraq war

Joanne Laurier
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The Situation, directed by Philip Haas, screenplay by Wendell Steavenson

The Situation by American director Philip Haas is a fictional treatment of the Iraq War and its hellish consequences for the Iraqi population. As one of the very few feature films to treat the occupation, the movie powerfully depicts the results of the US invasion in the Middle Eastern country. It attempts to represent the social actors, American and Iraqi, civilian and military, collaborator and foe, engaged in the unfolding tragedy. Haas and screenwriter Wendell Steavenson have accomplished something quite rare in contemporary filmmaking, creating a living drama out of social and political relationships.

The film opens in the Iraqi town of Samarra with US soldiers throwing two 16-year-old Iraqi boys off a bridge the latter were attempting to cross after curfew. One of the boys can't swim and drowns, and a cover-up is set in motion. (The sequence is a reenactment of an actual incident that took place in early 2004.)

Determined to uncover the real facts, American freelance journalist Anna Molyneux (Connie Nielsen), accompanied by her translator Bashar (Omar Berdouni), enlists the help of friend and trusted source Rafeeq (Nasser Memarzia). Rafeeq is a former Iraqi soldier captured during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and held captive for 12 years—in fact, both sides held thousands of prisoners for years—and who now maintains close ties to the Sunni insurgent Walid (Driss Roukhe).

Rafeeq is also the subject of discussion by American intelligence officers operating inside the Green Zone. At issue is whether the so-called “moderate terrorist”—a supporter of the US operation against Hussein in the first days of the invasion—should be approached to politically assist in quelling the country's violence. Arguing for Rafeeq's cooptation is Dan Murphy (Damian Lewis)—a “liberal” intelligence agent and also Anna's part-time paramour.

Opposing this recommendation is Dan's bowtied colleague, Wesley, a recent arrival to Iraq. Young, unqualified and ignorant, one senses that he has been appointed to his post solely due to his loyalty to the Bush agenda. Never venturing outside the fortified American and Western sector in Baghdad—laid out like a gigantic mall, complete with swimming pool and posh restaurants—Wesley is not reticent about spouting pronouncements on the need for “democracy by force.” However, outside this Green Zone is—as Anna puts

it—“the Red Zone”—that is, the rest of Iraq suffering from the results of this policy.

Also rebuffing Dan's proposal to use Rafeeq for winning the “hearts and minds,” the US ambassador retorts that “there are no hearts and minds” to be won in Iraq any more. It's a crude comment spoken in front of an oversized portrait of the crude commander/ “decider”-in-chief. A nameless officer at an Intel briefing cuts to the chase: “Ain't no point in building jack-shit if we're just going to blow it up!”

The eventual murder of Rafeeq impels Anna and Zaid (Mido Hamada), an Iraqi photographer, to undertake an odyssey that both politically and personally alienates her from Dan and the whole American project. Having initially supported the invasion, her experiences and contact with ordinary Iraqis lead her to conclude that “the situation” is now worse than it was under the dictator Hussein.

“The situation” is the film's euphemism for conditions that almost defy description—endless violence, tension, instability, deprivation, abuse. The phrase is used by the central characters as shorthand for the inhuman and irrational state of affairs, which has not only physical but psychic consequences (Iraqis who can afford it take pills for anxiety).

The Situation makes the implicit case that the Green Zone's isolated occupants have embarked on a course that involves no less than sociocide, the disintegration of Iraqi society. (This has apparently made several critics nervous. It is difficult, for example, to explain dismissive reviews like Manohla Dargis's in the *New York Times*, which can have a significant impact on the film's potential audience, otherwise.)

Haas shows American raids and arrests in the dark of night; the venality of American assets within the Iraqi elite, such as Mayor Tahsin (Saïd Amadis), who runs a police force of thugs and ex-convicts that assassinates at will (ungratefully, his men demand to be paid in euros because of the loss in value of the dollar!); the absurdity of long lines of cars being pushed into gas stations that sit on top of some of the world's largest energy reserves; and the *quid pro quo* between American intelligence and former Hussein Baathists like Duraid (Mahmoud El Lozy), whose “Intel” nearly leads to the death of his son Bashar. Asked what he did to obtain his passage out of the country, Duraid answers that he sold “the other half of [his] soul.”

Hatred for the American military is ubiquitous. Children

scamper amidst the ruins, playing war games. They quarrel because no one wants to play a US soldier in their simulated battles. They are always on the lookout for and suspicious of any Iraqi sporting American paraphernalia.

Furthermore, the war is presented primarily as a fight against the colonialists by an organized insurgency, rather than strife between sectarian divides. (Significantly, Haas refers to Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* as an influence.) This is perhaps because the film takes place before the most lethal Sunni-Shiite violence erupted. Nonetheless, Haas puts the principal blame for the disaster squarely where it belongs—on the US government and military.

He therefore seems to have no qualms about dramatizing the widespread popular support for the resistance. Even those victimized by the Hussein government do not support the Americans. Zaid's parents were communists executed by the old regime, but his grandmother, a Christian, denounces the US occupation. When Anna asks the rebel Walid—portrayed sympathetically towards the end of the film—why he would execute one of Tahsin's men in cold blood, he answers: "You kill murderers in your country"—an obvious allusion to America's brutal use of the death penalty.

An especially chilling moment occurs when an Iraqi adolescent is picked off during a battle pitting American firepower—involving helicopters and Humvees—against a handful of Kalashnikov-armed men and unarmed civilians. As Walid escapes the fighting in a somewhat humiliating fashion, he half-jokingly compares himself to Saddam Hussein in 1959. At the time, the latter was involved in a botched assassination attempt against the left-nationalist prime minister Abdul Karim Kassem and was forced to flee to Egypt.

In one of the final sequences, which vividly illustrates the futility and self-delusion of plans to help the Iraqi people after occupying and ravaging their country, Dan finds equipment intended for a new hospital, a pet project, sitting—broken and abandoned—in the dust. The point could hardly be clearer.

Haas makes his oppositional intentions quite explicit. "A little less than two years ago," says Haas (*Angels and Insects*), "I realized I needed to make a film which might somehow go underneath the headlines of the newspaper, magazine and television reports coming out of Iraq. Like so many others, I was becoming anesthetized to the avalanche of terrible, horrifying and pointless stories. I felt that a feature film, fiction based on real life experiences, much as Graham Greene was able to accomplish in his novel *The Quiet American* [a fictional treatment of CIA machinations in Indochina in the 1950s] would be a very powerful approach to the subject.

"And like the [Bush] Administration's decision to invade Iraq, it was important for me to act quickly, albeit for different reasons."

"There is a tradition in the United States of strong anti-war movies, *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*, to name just two, but they came out years after the events portrayed in them.

I wanted my film to contribute to the current national dialogue, not solely comment on it after the fact." A thoroughly principled, and highly unusual, viewpoint.

The Situation was shot in Morocco with actors from across the Arab world, including Iraq. Wendell Steavenson, an Anglo-American journalist and author who was living in Iraq both before and after the invasion, wrote its screenplay.

In the film's production notes, Steavenson states: "I don't think people understand how bad it is. They don't understand the level of violence and insecurity and instability and corruption and infrastructure degradation and lack of water and electricity and health care that is the situation in Iraq.... Everyone is confounded and confused and appalled and frightened."

In the course of making the film, director Haas told *greencine.com* that he discovered the movie "was really more of a film about the Iraqis than the Americans. Particularly because American films about war...they're always about the Americans—the Vietnamese are faceless."

A number of the film's Arab performers spoke movingly about being given a voice. Mido Hamada, who played Zaid, said, "It was the first role in my career where I was playing an Arab who was really human, and not portrayed as a stereotype." Mahmoud El Lozy commented: "It was clear to me from reading the script that this was written by someone whose encounter with Iraq was not derived from CNN and Fox News."

The film does not say everything. It leaves lots of questions unanswered, particularly historical issues and the war's economic and geopolitical driving forces. But what it shows, it does so effectively and convincingly. When Dan reacts to Rafeeq's murder with the quip, "It's just Iraq," this speaks to the attitude of an occupation force directly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands, as well as the horrific levels of violence and chaos that dominate the lives of millions. In an important and enduring manner, *The Situation* captures this reality. Philip Haas deserves a great deal of credit.



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