

The Kingdom: Spinning reality any way one wants

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Directed by Peter Berg, screenplay by Matthew Carnahan

Peter Berg's latest film *The Kingdom*, about an FBI investigation into a bombing in Saudi Arabia, has been called controversial in a number of recent reviews, primarily for its treatment of Middle Eastern politics and terrorism. In reality, the film is far from controversial in any meaningful sense. In treating its various subjects, the work represents an adherence to the "official line" of some of the most official sources.

The film takes some of its inspiration from stories in former FBI director Louis Freeh's book *My FBI*, and the Bureau apparently had the opportunity to offer their input during the writing process of the film, as well. Of working with screenwriter Matthew Carnahan, Peter Berg said in an interview with *Comingsoon.net*, "We just talked for several weeks about the basic idea, then I hooked him up with a bunch of FBI agents and political experts and sent him off, and he came back two months later with the script." The level of conformism and groveling to authority is revolting.

And to the extent that Berg's film is an attempt to deal with tensions in the Middle East, it is a very poor attempt. Discussing the subject in an interview with *IndieLondon*, Berg said, "The Middle East has been a big mess since we were born. What we've done in *The Kingdom* is to create a piece of entertainment loosely based on things that happened and we've set it in that world. I don't know why you're not seeing more of that. The idea of doing a bank robbery in Baghdad would be a cool idea to me. There's so many different movies that can be based on the reality of what happened. You can spin it anyway you want."

For Berg, the Middle East is just another exotic locale in which to shoot a movie. It has its peculiar characteristics as a set piece just as the rainforest might,

or the city streets of Hong Kong. Anywhere interesting to set his story.

And what of the story? *The Kingdom* first takes us to a compound in Riyadh where the families of American oil company employees are gathered for a softball game. All of a sudden, two men in a truck drive through the neighborhood gunning people down. A Saudi policeman is able to stop them, but it was only a diversion. In the chaos a suicide bomber makes his way onto the ball field. Dozens are killed in the explosion.

Another explosion will follow in the same area that evening, targeting first responders and investigators. A friend and colleague of FBI agent Ronald Fleury (Jamie Foxx) is killed.

Receiving word of the second attack, Fleury and his colleagues at the FBI aggressively campaign for the right to enter Saudi Arabia and investigate. The State Department has refused, wishing to pursue a more diplomatic approach. Undaunted, Fleury begins some behind-the-scenes maneuvering, threatening to blackmail members of the Saudi royal family if he isn't allowed access to the site of the explosions. With his threats having worked their magic, Fleury and a team of agents not quite having gone rogue and not quite authorized travel to the Riyadh compound.

Given only limited access to the crime scene, the team is constantly chaperoned by Colonel Faris Al Ghazi (Ashraf Barhom). Slowly the FBI agents will win the confidence and friendship of Al Ghazi (in spite of having ridiculed him for the first half of the film), and together they will go in search of the men who ordered the bombings of the compound.

From police procedural to all-out action film extravaganza, *The Kingdom* unfolds in all the ways we might expect. The FBI team, like so many other law enforcement teams in the movies or on television,

comes complete with the heroic lead investigator (Foxy), the surly veteran (Chris Cooper), the forensic examiner (Jennifer Garner) and the wisecracking computer expert (Jason Bateman). All are essentially arrogant and insulting for most of the film, taking every opportunity to mock their Saudi counterparts. These are truly dislikable characters.

There is also an unusual amount of incidental conversation between the agents. At various times, the team members discuss basketball, fishing, necktie fashions and so on. It doesn't amount to anything, and the viewer loses interest quickly.

In similarly ridiculous attempts to humanize its Saudi characters, *The Kingdom* manages only to be condescending. Colonel Al Ghazi and a fellow officer are shown in their respective homes praying or taking care of children or sick family members. Look, says the film, "they're just like us." Berg gives these moments a lot of weight. Slow-motion photography and music cues let us know we should be deeply touched by these mundane proceedings. We do not, however, get a real feeling for the lives of these characters or learn anything at all significant about them. Nothing, anyway, that would truly humanize them.

Berg often uses his technique to create a veneer of realism without bothering to actually explore reality in any substantive way. There is, most obviously, his ever-roving camera, mimicking a *cinema verité* documentary style. It moves first here, then there. Why? No one knows. If one agrees with Alexander Astruc's idea of *caméra-stylo*, that the director should use his or her camera like an author uses a pen, then this is the cinematic equivalent of scribbling all over the page. But Berg, it should be noted, is neither the worst offender in this nor the first. The nauseating and constant movement of hand-held cameras is among the most irritating trends in current filmmaking.

Following the unsuccessful attempts at moments of humanity, *The Kingdom* comes to an end with an all-out violent assault. The FBI team, with the help of Al Ghazi and a few of his men, storm a terrorist compound. Bullets, rockets and grenades go flying by. Faceless terrorists are shot down like characters in a video game. None of the FBI members will even be wounded.

There is a moment during this raid that is especially telling. When a terrorist pops up out of the dark corner

of one room, Fleury and Al Ghazi wheel around in unison and fire on the man together. Berg's camera, briefly but significantly, frames the guns of the two men as they fire simultaneously side by side. Here Berg's film argues for a coming together, not of working people internationally against war, but of official governmental agencies in the successful prosecution of the so-called "war on terror."

Spinning reality in another direction in the film's final moments, Berg leaves us with the message that "we" have to stop killing each other. Or, as the director put it in the previously cited interview with *IndieLondon*, "You can't kill your way through the problem...."

This sudden turn to pacifism is out of place. It just doesn't cohere with the glorious battle of rocket-propelled grenades and the FBI victory in the climactic moments of the picture.

The Kingdom is simply a film that gets it all wrong. Or, depending on your point of view, all right. As Berg told *Comingsoon.net*, "We've had a great reaction from the FBI in particular."



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