Eye in the Sky: The liberal war on terror

Joanne Laurier
31 March 2016

Directed by Gavin Hood; screenplay by Guy Hibbert

Eye in the Sky is a political-military thriller in which British and American officials weigh the consequences of a drone strike in Nairobi, Kenya. Directed by South African-born filmmaker Gavin Hood (*Tsotsi*, 2005, *Rendition*, 2007), it is a fast-paced movie resting, unfortunately, on a grossly manufactured and unlikely set of circumstances.

The film's central character is Colonel Katherine Powell (Helen Mirren), a fierce British military intelligence officer, who has been tracking a radicalized UK female citizen and her husband, both leading members of Al-Shabaab, a Somali jihadist group. From a military base in southern England, Powell identifies, via a US drone camera feed, these top Islamist figures arriving in Nairobi and being transported to a compound in a poor, crowded neighborhood patrolled by armed rebels.

When a cyborg beetle—a small surveillance device controlled by a Kenyan intelligence unit—relays imagery of the terrorists preparing a suicide bombing mission, Powell wants to upgrade the order from "capture" to "kill."

Despite her eagerness to call for a missile strike, she must seek permission from her superior Lieutenant General Frank Benson (Alan Rickman in his final screen performance), who is observing from London in a room with various government ministers and legal advisors. The British foreign secretary (Iain Glen) is attending an arms trade fair in Singapore.

Meanwhile, at a US Air Force base in Nevada, two young American drone pilots, who are concerned about collateral damage from such a strike, wait apprehensively for Powell's decision. Both the US secretary of state, who is in Beijing playing ping-pong with Chinese officials, and a US government legal consultant are amenable (to say the least) to destroying the "targets," despite the presence of one US and two British citizens.

The major obstacle is an adorable Kenyan child, Alia (Aisha Takow), selling bread near the targeted house. From Singapore, the foreign secretary observes that should the suicide bombers be allowed to kill scores of people, it would be a public relations gain for England, but if the military were to wipe out the compound, injuring or killing the youngster—especially if the video of the action were to be released by a WikiLeaks-type outfit—it would be a public relations disaster.

Nonetheless, more ruthless heads prevail …

In *Eye in the Sky*, talented actors (and producers such as Colin Firth) lend weight to a movie that is reasonably well-constructed on its own terms. However, the problem is precisely those "terms," that is, primarily the legitimacy of the "war on terror." So, such performance skills serve for the most part to sugar-coat a big lie.

The false presentation of reality involves important plot contrivances. The filmmakers early on remove the possibility of capturing the apparent suicide bombers. Why? There are only a handful of them and they are taking their time making videos and loading their vests with explosives. There is no reason why this should be any more than a Kenyan police matter.

Instead, an atmosphere of hysteria is concocted in line with the scare-tactic scenarios used by proponents of the "war on terror" for the last 15 years or so. In 2005, for example, the ultra-right columnist Charles Krauthammer, writing in the *Weekly Standard*, set out the following circumstances, in order to justify torture: "A terrorist has planted a nuclear bomb in New York City. It will go off in one hour. A million people will die. You capture the terrorist. He knows where it is. He's not talking. … If you have the slightest belief that hanging this man by his thumbs will get you the information to save a million people, are you permitted to do it? … Not only is it permissible to hang this miscreant by his thumbs. It is a moral duty."

This is all a fantasy. No such circumstance has ever arisen, nor will it. This is the argument of those itching for authoritarian rule and the power to dispose of political opponents by the most brutal means.

Eye in the Sky, of course, does not see itself in that light. However, its central motif is nearly as bogus. Such

© World Socialist Web Site

pumped-up dramatic situations serve to shut down the brain and activate the nervous system along Pavlovian lines. Furthermore, the insertion of a beautiful, innocent Kenyan girl increases the ante. There is an odor of manipulation on every side here. (Andrew Niccol's *Good Kill*, although flawed, is a far more scathing film about drone warfare.)

The central questions never broached nor presumably considered by the filmmakers are: Who are these terrorists and where do they come from? What are the social conditions in Kenya and East Africa as a whole? What is the history of the region? What are the British and American military and intelligence doing there? In *Eye in the Sky*, there is no history and no explanation.

First of all, it should be noted that in every major terrorist attack thus far, it has emerged that the jihadist elements had ties to the Western powers and their security forces at one time or another, or were manipulated or under close observation by those security forces.

Al-Shabaab came into being in Somalia in 2006 and has been formally aligned with Al Qaeda since 2012. The organization's ranks are filled with impoverished youth and led by operatives with ties to US-backed Arab regimes.

In addition, the Kenyan government has proven a loyal partner in Washington's drive to maintain its grip over the Horn of Africa. The region is at the center of the new colonial scramble for Africa, where the criminals are returning to the scene of their crimes. And the bloodiest of the old colonial masters in East Africa, from the end of the 19th century, was the British ruling class, whose suppression of the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950s was the one of the most notorious models of imperialist counterinsurgency, on a par with the savage wars in Vietnam and Algeria.

According to Caroline Elkins in *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*, the British colonial government detained vast numbers of people in camps or confined them in villages ringed with barbed wire. "From 1952 until the end of the war in 1960 tens of thousands of detainees—and possibly a hundred thousand or more—died from the combined effects of exhaustion, disease, starvation and systemic physical brutality."

How is it possible for a director—from South Africa, no less—to treat seriously a significant political crisis in a former colonial country without reference to this recent history? How could Hood—with a straight face—possibly portray a panoply of British officials as behaving in the most sensitive, even-handed manner toward the Kenyan people?

Almost inevitably, given this degree of intellectual surrender, the filmmakers end up adopting the viewpoint of the powers that be, the US and UK political establishment, the principal source of global terrorism.

The filmmakers offer certain oppositional gestures. They may not be insincere gestures, but they are weak. *Eye in the Sky* contains a lengthy debate about the rights and wrongs of killing or maiming Alia. (This seems fantastical given the level of destruction perpetrated by the Western powers in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa.) Moreover, the various higher-up government officials in both the US and Britain are not portrayed in an attractive light, while the novice drone pilots are represented as having a conscience. (What does ring true is the apprehension the decision-makers feel about the possibility of the exposure of their war crimes, which Hood, however, tends to alchemize into humanitarianism.) The final images are presumably meant to be disturbing, as is Col. Powell's relentlessness. But this is really not much.

In an interview, the director asserts that "the questions that Guy's [Guy Hibbert's] script has beautifully raised are supported by the fact that he's not reaching for an argument—these are the arguments and discussions that are happening among policy makers, lawyers, the military, human rights organizations … I hope it brings what seems like a mysterious subject to the general population, and we de-mystify it."

This is simply not true. The difficulty is that the filmmakers are so at one with global bourgeois-liberal public opinion that they accept as their starting point an entire series of pernicious assumptions that shape and warmly envelop *Eye in the Sky* from its first moment to its last.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site