

'Guy Ritchie's The Covenant' sheds light on the war in Afghanistan

Written by gallupsun
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Rating: 3 out of 4

Running Time: 123 minutes

This film from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is scheduled to be released in cinemas on Friday, April 21.

The U.S. fight with the Taliban in Afghanistan came to a grim close recently with little success over the course of a conflict that lasted more than 20 years. Guy Ritchie's *The Covenant* takes a look at one aspect of the conflict that many in this part of the world may be unaware of. The movie addresses reneged promises made between members of the U.S. Army and the Afghan translators who served with them. It depicts an unexpected bond formed between two men from different backgrounds to help bring that idea across.

The story introduces viewers to Army Sgt. John Kinley (Jake Gyllenhaal), who is deeply frustrated by the lack of help from superiors like Col. Vokes (Jonny Lee Miller) in locating and eliminating Taliban weapon-making sites. After bad intelligence results in another failed raid, Kinley agrees to take on new interpreter Ahmed (Dar Salim). Ahmed has a criminal past and isn't the friendliest personality.

The two initially butt heads, but after Kinley learns about the man's past and witnesses his ability to read people, he comes to appreciate his new team member's expertise. Kinley and Ahmed soon find their lives on the line in battle across enemy lines. The horrifying experience that follows burdens Kinley, especially after they are separated and the sergeant learns that the U.S. Visa promised to Ahmed and his family hasn't been delivered.

Early sequences attempt to drop viewers directly into the hectic military world that Kinley inhabits. A great many characters are introduced and technical references are made so quickly and frequently that captions are used to identify individuals and explain what is being discussed.

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Initially, this approach feels too slick and stylized, with the many soldiers trading barbs in between exposition. One understands the need to get things moving in a timely manner, but with all the fast-cutting during the numerous introductions and rapid-fire dialogue it's hard to get on the movie's wavelength and connect to these soldiers.

However, as the story focuses on Kinley and Ahmed and two leads Gyllenhaal and Salim take center stage, things improve dramatically. Both are exceptional and there is plenty of interesting and believable conflict between the men as they try to get used to each other and work effectively together.

Ahmed seems difficult and frustrates Kinley, but there's a reason for his behavior. As Ahmed sharply explains to his superior, he has been hired to interpret and not merely translate those being interviewed. Of course, with everyone's lives on the line, the differing opinions on display add tension to the story.

When violence does break out, it is nerve-wracking to witness. Kinley never knows what to expect from strangers whose sites he is investigating. When the protagonists find themselves suddenly outnumbered and being attacked by Taliban members, the film effectively conveys how quickly things can go south for a small unit.

Additionally, a great portion of the second act depicts a seemingly impossible trudge through hostile territory. It's very effectively conveyed and one feels the literal exhaustion of the figure involved. There are also effective moments with Ahmed and his family on the run after they are left to fend for themselves. All of the action is well-handled and one does experience a palpable sense of jeopardy throughout.

Admittedly, not every aspect about the production is smooth, particularly involving supporting characters. Things are also tied up in a neat manner, but the two leads are excellent and the majority of time that is spent focusing on their particular ordeal is compelling. The movie effectively draws attention to the many Afghans who worked for and helped the U.S. Army, yet have been left behind with their families to certain death at the hands of the Taliban.

In the end, Guy Ritchie's *The Covenant* (or simply *The Covenant* as it will likely be written on the theater marquee), is a solid war film that also sheds light on the bleak horrors that many left

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