

‘Beirut’ is a Superbly Tense Geopolitical Thriller

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 11, 2018 - 9:11am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The psychological desperation of life-or-death decisions are in play within “Beirut,” the new geopolitical thriller featuring Jon Hamm (“Mad Men”). The various mazes within the story, set during the Lebanon civil war of the 1980s, is comparative to “Casablanca,” especially through the world-weary expression of Hamm’s character.

The writer is Tony Gilroy, who specializes in creating story mazes within films like ‘Michael Clayton’ and the Jason Bourne series. “Beirut” works primarily on an emotional level, with flecks of revenge, sorrow and time-bomb-ticking personal connections that are destined to explode. The geopolitical nature of the film is rooted in the 1982 Jordanian conflict, which split the decimated title city into “zones,” that placed enemies literally blocks from each other. Like Rick in the film “Casablanca,” the character that Jon Hamm portrays is motivated outside of any heroism, but is eventually brought into a situation that makes his assignment a saving grace. Rosamund Pike, who had a previous 2018 political role in “7 Days in Entebbe,” excels as a cool CIA operative that never shows her hand. The film is complex, precisely performed and artfully rendered by director Brad Anderson.

In the early 1970s, Mason Skiles (Jon Hamm) is an American undersecretary assigned to the powder keg of Beirut, Lebanon. He is the toast of the town, with his wife Nadia (Leila Bekhti) even fostering a local boy named Karim (Yoau Saian Rosenberg). One of his colleagues, Cal (Mark Pellegrino), interrupts a lavish party to warn Mason of a threat from Abu Rajal (Hicham Ouraqa), an Islamic terrorist who turns out to be Karim’s brother. The threat is carried out when Rajal suddenly shoots up the party, kidnaps Karim and kills Mason’s wife.



Rosamund Pike and Jon Hamm in ‘Beirut’

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

Mason leaves his post after the incident, and returns to the U.S., becoming a low level union negotiator. In 1982, he is recruited by the CIA to return to a Beirut that is in the midst of a civil war. Karim, now a young adult, has abducted Cal and now demands his imprisoned brother in an exchange... but he will only negotiate with Mason. This exchange will also involve the Israelis, the CIA (with Rosamund Pike as a street level operative) and the hope that a cease fire will hold while the negotiations take place.

Like the film “Casablanca,” the story takes place during a war, and the only hope comes from someone who doesn’t want to be involved. Hamm is perfectly suited to the tragic Mason character, with a world-weary alcoholism due to his stolen life. The scenario also reinforces his unlikely negotiation, and the U.S. spooks inside Beirut are angry that they even have to deal with him. But Mason also knows the territory and the players, and Pike’s character becomes a convincing go-between in a delicate dance.

There is plenty of 1980s-era geopolitics in the film, and the story uses them effectively. The city of Beirut was divided by the warring Christian East and Islam West factions, with the “green line” in the once-thriving downtown area. The Israelis are also pummeling West Beirut, and acts of terrorism are taking place against the U.S. and French troops assigned there. The kidnapped character of Cal represents all the secrets and his information is desired by all the factions. This tension is in place while these negotiations are going on.



1970s Mason (Hamm) and Cal (Mark Pellegrino) in ‘Beirut’

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

The movie has not been without controversy, as the portrayal of Islamic characters – which includes Karim and his brother – have been criticized as particularly harsh. My take on that critique is that it’s really about the chaos of the city and its warriors – which included the Israelis – than any particular group. The Jon Hamm character is more of a representative of all outsiders, and his return exacerbates an already dangerous time and place, which gives the film its desperation and thrills. This is a story about a sorrowful era, where the events affect even more sorrow to come.

The challenges of the Mideast conflicts, which arose back then, rises now and seemingly goes on forever, is coming down to what the factions are willing to understand the meaning of peace, amongst the unending attitude of conquering. “Beirut” is Tehran which is Baghdad which is Damascus which is Jerusalem, a constant wheel turning towards more death and destruction, leading to nowhere.

“Beirut” opens everywhere on April 11th. Featuring Jon Hamm, Rosamund Pike, Mark Pellegrino, Dean Norris, Shea Whigham, Hicham Ouraqa and Idir Chender. Written by Tony Gilroy. Directed by Brad Anderson. Rated “R”



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