

## ***Intelligence in Public Media***

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### ***Beirut***

Radar Pictures, released 11 April 2018. Screenplay by Tony Gilroy; directed by Brad Anderson; starring Jon Hamm and Rosamund Pike. Running time one hour, 49 minutes.

### ***Reviewed by Brent Geary***

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It must be terribly difficult these days to finance and produce an intelligent film that tracks closely to complicated historical events while remaining both plausible and entertaining. It probably was never exactly easy to thread that needle—with studio chiefs demanding more explosions, car chases, and gratuitous sex and violence—and the instant gratification of smart phones and on-demand entertainment: our shortening attention spans have undoubtedly made things worse for serious filmmakers. However, smart, sophisticated and enjoyable films do occasionally make it to the big screen and while far from a classic, *Beirut* is a refreshing example of how good writing and directing combined with solid performances can still deliver strong historical dramas that many will pay to see in the theater.

A taut political thriller short on the kind of cheap “jump scares” common to its genre and long on dialogue, *Beirut* is not for everyone. Its narrative may be difficult to follow for viewers who know little about the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), the Middle East, or the businesses of intelligence and diplomacy. It would also have benefited from more character development for the principal antagonist, an emotionally conflicted young terrorist seeking the return of his terrorist brother. But if you pay close attention and have enough patience, *Beirut* delivers.

The movie’s strengths are found in the mature ways the writers and directors have approached the story’s characters and context and the excellent work by its actors, especially Jon Hamm and Rosamund Pike. The filmmakers largely get out of the way and let the realities of the time and place be the primary sources of tension driving the story, and *Beirut* is the better for it. There are also a few twists that are neither contrived nor implausible—a rare and welcome feat.

*Beirut* is set primarily in 1982 and is centered around the kidnapping of the local CIA station chief, mirroring real events from 1984 when Lebanese Hezbollah abducted and later killed CIA officer William Buckley. In

an opening sequence from 10 years earlier, US diplomat Mason Skiles (Hamm) and his Lebanese wife host a cocktail party for a visiting member of Congress at their beautiful home in the hills overlooking Beirut. This scene, occurring three years before the outbreak of the civil war, features guests who are all well-dressed and well-fed as they peer down on a city bathed in sunshine, lined with palm trees, and cooled by sea breezes. Everyone is having a fine time and differences are secondary to the partying at hand. To illustrate the point, Skiles tells his wife he has “the Christians in one corner, the Muslims in another, and Jack Daniels in between.”

In an ominous, foreshadowing moment, though, Skiles is asked by the visiting congressman to “sum up Lebanon in one minute.” Skiles says that Lebanon is like a boardinghouse with no landlord, where all the inhabitants share a talent for betrayal but usually find a way to make it work. To illustrate, Stiles tells a story: one stormy night, there came a knock at the door. No one wanted to answer it, but finally someone did. It was the Palestinians, looking for a place to stay. Again, no one wanted to let them in, but quickly some saw an opportunity to use the Palestinians against their rivals to reshape the local balance of power. What no one understood, according to Stiles, was that all the Palestinians wanted was to burn down the house next door, where the Israelis lived.

One *Beirut* reviewer writing for a prominent newspaper interpreted Stiles’s vignette as evidence of the way US diplomats in the film are depicted as “dismissive” of the complexity of the situation on the ground.<sup>a</sup> I disagree: as a career intelligence analyst, I thought it was exactly the kind of story that policymakers would remember and reference long after they had read an intelligence or policy paper that told them the same thing in more words.

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a. Ann Hornaday, “In ‘Beirut,’ Jon Hamm is a beleaguered US diplomat drawn into the Lebanese civil war,” *Washington Post*, 11 April 2018.

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Unlike the case of Bill Buckley, the CIA officer in *Beirut* is kidnapped not by Lebanese Shias but by a Palestinian splinter group—the same group responsible for killing Skiles’s wife at the cocktail party that, 10 years earlier, had begun so auspiciously.

Skiles, long since having departed the State Department and working as a labor-management mediator in Boston, is requested by name when the terrorists holding the CIA station chief want him to serve as the negotiator for the station chief’s release. The White House arranges Skiles’s return—to a very different Beirut from the one he left. Both Skiles and the city he once loved are shells of their former selves. Skiles, by this time an apathetic alcoholic, witnesses a shooting just steps outside of the airport—an event that passersby hardly acknowledge. Hamm, made famous by his role as Don Draper in the acclaimed TV drama, *Mad Men*, gives a strong performance, deftly managing the story of a seasoned expert and former player—established early in the film, *vis-à-vis* a photograph of him alongside Henry Kissinger—who has come unmoored and struggles mightily to salvage a terrible situation.

The view from Skiles’s dilapidated hotel is of buildings ravaged by years of artillery barrages and bombings, and the dimly lit hotel lounge features thick cigarette smoke, drawn curtains, a third-rate cover band, and large amounts of cash changing hands between armed men. A drunken Skiles plays poker with a senior Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) member, and his local handlers have to traverse open-air checkpoints manned by teenagers with assault rifles sitting on tanks and living room furniture, listening to reggae music. Later on, Skiles wanders through a no-man’s land neighborhood in search of a meeting with the hostage takers and stumbles upon a couple—in a tuxedo and wedding gown—having their portraits taken amid the rubble. These images felt as though they were lifted directly from Thomas Friedman’s classic account of the Lebanese Civil War during these years, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), right down to the nonchalance with which the city’s dwellers had grown to accept their situation by 1982 and their efforts to get on with their lives.

We learn that the kidnapped station chief was once Skiles’s good friend and that the two had parted on bad terms following the death of Skiles’s wife, a side story that injects Skiles’s mission with enough meaning to lead

him to work around the acting CIA station chief—and a representative from the National Security Council (NSC) sent to manage the crisis—and to take major risks to ensure his friend’s release. Additional context and tension is provided by the NSC official, Gary Ruzak, an Army colonel portrayed by Shea Whigham who viewers of a certain age will associate, probably by design, with Oliver North, the Marine colonel who spearheaded the disastrous Iran-Contra scandal during the Reagan years.

Though ostensibly leading the effort to safely return the station chief, Whigham’s character—like the financially corrupt deputy chief of station Donald Gaines, played by Dean Norris—may be conflicted about his mission. Through contemporary news reports and subtle cues, we learn that the Israeli government by this time was seeking a pretext to invade Lebanon and eliminate Palestinian terrorist organizations operating there, and though it is not stated plainly, Ruzak appears to favor an Israeli invasion and may see the kidnapping—or even killing—of a CIA officer by the Palestinians as the pretext Tel Aviv desires.

In reality, Israel eventually did invade Lebanon later that year, as actual news reports from that period attest at the film’s end. Whigham’s depiction of Ruzak, like Norris’s of Gaines, is refreshingly subtle where other films might have made them outright villains. They appear to want to free their man from captivity and do not actively plot his demise, but both may not lose any sleep either way. It is a credit to writer Tony Gilroy (of *The Bourne Trilogy*) and director Brad Anderson (*The Machinist*) that such nuance is allowed to flower, adding to the intrigue without dumbing it down.

As Skiles’s primary CIA contact, Sandy Crowder, Rosamund Pike delivers an excellent portrayal of a level-headed and highly professional intelligence officer that brings to mind Joan Allen’s character from the Jason Bourne franchise. She speaks both French and Arabic with confidence, is brave but not reckless, unwaveringly loyal to her colleague, and possessing just enough hope to keep doing a dangerous job with no guarantee of success. In short, she is what we should all hope for in CIA operations officers.

In addition to providing a nuanced depiction of the time and place, Gilroy and Anderson deserve credit for including details that make this film even more enjoyable as historical fiction. For example, elements of the film are based around the American University of Beirut (AUB),

depicted accurately as struggling to maintain operations in the midst of war. In 1982, Professor Malcolm Kerr—father of American basketball player and coach Steve Kerr—became AUB’s president. Two years later, Lebanese Hizbollah assassinated him in his office, and Beirut provides viewers a scene that highlights AUB’s fraught existence at the time. Another side story in the film, about Israeli involvement in Beirut’s intrigues, could have been excerpted from Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman’s recent, excellent book, *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History*

*of Israel’s Targeted Assassinations* (Random House, 2018). In his biography of CIA Middle East expert Robert Ames, *The Good Spy* (Crown, 2014), journalist Kai Bird highlighted the ways in which the PLO was willing to work with the Americans in the late 1970s and early 1980s in ways that would have been unthinkable to most outside observers at the time. It is a credit to *Beirut* that its filmmakers appear to have taken the time to learn from such accounts and incorporate them into this memorable thriller.



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