Palestinian Apocalypse

Paradise Now
A Film by Hany Abu-Assad
Warner Independent Pictures, 2005,
90 minutes.

Reviewed by Anselma Dell'Olio

The first thing that strikes one about the film *Paradise Now*, co-written by director Hany Abu-Assad and Dutch producer Bero Beyer, is that the voice of non-violence is assigned to the cleverly conceived character of Suha, the daughter of a Palestinian patriot and martyr. In light of the generally reduced role of women in Muslim cultures, it is not insignificant that the auteur chose one to be his philosophical and political mouthpiece. Suha, played by the skilled actress Lubna Azabal, is a warm, appealing, and very attractive human rights activist who has just returned to her home in Nablus from work abroad. At the film's opening, we watch her arrival at a checkpoint, and the unflinching hostility with which both she and the Israeli soldier in charge stare at each other during the routine baggage inspection. The scene speaks volumes for the enduring rage and bottomless mistrust on both sides of the barricades. Yet there is something else at work here: Abu-Assad makes clear that his heroine is no patsy to the Israelis, yet he has cast in the brief, non-speaking role of the "enemy" soldier a handsome, even sensual actor most females wouldn't mind meeting under different circumstances.

This is not to say that Abu-Assad is determined to present a politically fair-minded film: Not at all. For starters, he does not address, even glancingly, the internecine conflict, malfeasance, and long-term corruption of the litigious groups that constitute the Palestinian leadership—the film world still awaits such a depiction from a Palestinian director. What *is* unusual, even extraordinary, for this genre, is that the film combines its willfully ahistorical account of the Israeli occupation with a penetrating,

artful, and articulate critique of suicide bombers. Israel, in Abu-Assad's view, is the all-powerful, invincible monolith that has monopolized the roles of both oppressor and victim, and that bears sole responsibility for the murderousness, injustice, and chaos that define Israeli-Palestinian relations. The opening scenes establish, through telling details, the effect of this situation on Palestinians: The claustrophobic, wrecked landscapes of Palestinian life; the stuck-open window in a taxi that cannot be repaired because no parts are available; the perennially rubble- and garbage-strewn streets of the Palestinian cities; and the ever-present background noise of sirens and explosions, all a continual reminder that life in the territories is cheap, nasty, and brutish.

It is clear that, on account of its depiction of Israel and Israelis, *Paradise Now* will infuriate, in a rising crescendo, those on the political Right with regard to the war on terrorism and related issues. Conversely, it is likely to be of great appeal the farther to the Left one is, especially for the pacifists. Yet to leave it at that would be a mistake. Despite the film's flaws—most notably the insistence on humanizing its suicide-bomber protagonists—there is something here worth watching.

The film centers on what are meant to be the last forty-eight hours in the lives of two young Palestinian men, childhood friends and members of a terrorist cell who have been chosen to carry out suicide missions. Of interest is the way in which the film contextualizes their humanity: They are surrounded and imprisoned not just by the many limitations and humiliations imposed upon them by the occupation, but also by the far more insidious cordon of their manipulative terrorist handlers and "brothers," and the demonic philosophy of murder and self-murder they espouse.

Khaled (Ali Suliman) is the more exuberant and hotheaded of the two. We first meet him when he is fired from his job at the auto-repair shop where they work when his boss disputes the evenness of a newly installed fender; exasperated, he finally takes a monkey wrench and whacks it off, hissing "there, now it really *is* crooked!" Said (Kais Nashef) is the quiet, introspective one who keeps his job, just as, we learn later, he follows through with the last job he will ever have, as a suicide bomber. It emerges that he comes by his soulfulness on account of his tragic past: His father was executed as a collaborator when he was ten. When we finally learn this fact, well into the film, everything we know about Said

makes perfect sense: His resigned self-containment, and his initally puzzling reluctance to engage fully with the desirable and clearly smitten Suha, who enters his life when she comes to his shop to get her car fixed. He tells her that he sees her more at the wheel of an Alfa Romeo than in the jalopy of a car he has just repaired for her. Suha loves the name "Alfa Romeo," and softly croons the euphonious words.

Thus begins the first of several long conversations they have in the course of the film, each of them revealing more and more about their respective worldviews. When, for instance, she asks him what genre of movies he likes, Said at first doesn't understand. It transpires that the only time he has ever been in a movie theater was during a demonstration: He and his friends burned the theater to the ground because the owner was an Israeli. She replies that perhaps the kind of movie that most resembles his life would be in the Japanese minimalist mode. Eventually, flirting gives way to a disclosure of Suha's father's identity, and Said tells her that she must be proud to have a hero for a father. Suha replies that she would rather have a living father than a dead hero. By way of reply, he offers the standard rhetoric of terrorism as "the only way," but Suha contests him word for word, asserting that there are, in fact, better means of improving their lot than murdering, dying, and triggering the endless cycle of violence. Neither succeeds in convincing the other, however, and finally Suha concedes that the conversation is going nowhere. Who among us has not also had some version of this kind of dead-end argument, this dialogue of the deaf?

When Suha asks Said not to laugh at her accent—she was born in France and raised in Morocco—she reveals an important reason for her abhorence of violence: Living abroad gives one a new perspective on one's own culture. Abu-Assad similarly claims that expanded perspective as his own: He was born in Nazareth, and now lives in Holland. Surprisingly, however, he has managed to maintain a narrow perspective on Israel's conundrums and motivations. In an appearance on an Italian talk show, he resolutely refused to admit that there was *any* historical context or justification for the Israeli occupation. He also insisted that Mohammed Bouyeri, the Dutch Moroccan who brutally murdered Theo van Gogh because he directed a film denouncing the treatment of women in Muslim culture, was a lone criminal whose misdeed could not be ascribed to Islamist terrorism. Even the show's leftist host and guests were shocked at this willfully obtuse display.

Yet, gazing through the narrow end of the telescope paradoxically grants the director a certain clarity and depth of perception about his own people. We see this when the schoolteacher Jamal (Amer Hlehel), a messenger for the terrorist organization, arrives to tell Said and Khaled that "tomorrow is their lucky day": The friends exchange a glance that is anything but joyful. You can almost hear their heartbeats accelerate, their throats constricting. This, we are told, will be the first "operation" in two years. The subtext here is that the two friends—really no more than boys—have had time to develop the wishful, unspeakable hope that their turn might never come. As Jamal attempts to bolster their morale with too-hearty congratulations and reiterative religious bromides, we clearly perceive the dread that overtakes the two young men. When Khaled finally manages to croak out a "Really? Tomorrow?" the effect is tragicomical.

Both Jamal and the terrorist group's leader, a lean, feral type with high cheek bones, are superficially sympathetic, but there is no doubt that at heart they are cold, manipulative men who have no plans to die themselves; they have the good fortune of being higher up in the terrorist food chain. Once Said and Khaled have been notified of their "glorious day," the handlers never leave their side. They pretend that the road home has been closed, and ask for hospitality at the houses of their sacrificial lambs—hospitality that is willingly and lovingly granted by the men's unsuspecting parents, who are told that the handlers have secured their friends with hard-to-get work permits in Tel Aviv. The handlers stick to their victims' sides like burrs, both to stiffen their spines and to make sure they don't bolt. It's creepy, to say the least.

During Said's last evening with his mother, he asks her to tell him about his father, the collaborator, while Jamal listens in from the other room. His mother, played by the beautiful and tragic actress Hiam Abbass, tells Said how much he resembles his father, stirring up the lacerating conflict in her son's heart. She looks him steadily in the eye and says, "Anything your father did, Said, he did for us." She is moving; the eavesdropping Jamal, sinister.

Critics have noted Abu-Assad's use of visual quotations and irony to subvert the portentousness of the preparations for the men's "mission." The long table at which the men and their handlers take their last meal together is a transparent homage to Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. In one of the film's most comical scenes, Khaled, in full *shahid* paraphernalia, black and white checked headband, and rifle at the ready, reads his

solemn oath and declaration to the camcorder for posterity and later sales in the video stores. What is meant to be a dramatic moment utterly deflates, however, when the cameraman says, "Sorry, didn't get that, we have to do it again." The second time Khaled promises to blow himself up for the Cause, two of the arrantly bored handlers munch placidly on the pita sandwiches Said's mother has prepared for them. On the third and final try, Khaled pugnaciously tags on a reminder to his mother about a store where she can buy water filters at a good price. When the handlers look at him quizzically, Khaled shrugs and deadpans. "I forgot to tell her before I left."

Later, while Said and Khaled are being ritually bathed and shaven, the explosives expert prepares the "belts." The telling detail here is that the bomb-maker has hooks for hands: He reaches for a handkerchief to mop his dripping brow with one of the prostheses as he works, a chilling reminder that he has good reason to sweat. Once the young men have been wrapped in the explosives, they are advised that due to a "new and improved" system, should the mission abort for any reason, they must not under any circumstances attempt to remove the belts themselves, or they will automatically explode. In other words, there will be no unauthorized "second thoughts" on this mission. After the two sacrificial lambs have been dressed up in white shirts and black suits—they are ostensibly going to a wedding in Tel Aviv—Khaled turns to Jamal and says: "What happens… after?" Jamal replies flatly: "Two angels will come down and take you to heaven." After a pause, Khaled looks him in the eye and says, "Really?" Finally, the two walking bombs are instructed not to let themselves get caught under any circumstances; if they are spotted by the military, they must blow themselves up quickly rather than be shot at a distance by the Israelis, a dishonorable and useless way to die. Khaled then practices whirling around and grabbing the explosives cord in John Wayne fashion, beating "the other guy" to the draw. In case we had forgotten, Abu-Assad reminds us that really, these suicide bombers are just kids—kids playing at being cowboys, or, in this case, martyrs.

Khaled and Said are told to blow themselves up separately, first one and then the other, with a fifteen-minute interval to allow for the rescue workers and military personnel who flock to the scene to be killed as well. When Said and Khaled cannot decide who should go first, Jamal flips a coin. But the mission goes awry: On account of a problem with their driver,

the two would-be kamikazes are separated. Khaled returns to his handlers, and Said arrives at a bus stop where a group of Israeli settlers are waiting, one of them holding a baby girl in a broad-brimmed hat. After everyone but Said has climbed onto the bus, the driver looks at him interrogatively: On or off? Said is about to get on when the baby girl appears in, and then disappears from, the frame. Said shakes his head no, and the driver closes the door and drives off.

Meanwhile, back at command headquarters, the terrorists fear that Said has betrayed them, and decide to abandon their hideout. Khaled begs them to let him have a car to go search for Said; he is sure that his friend has not ratted them out. They give Khaled a car, then tail him in another. Meanwhile, Said has returned to Nablus, finds the headquarters cleared out, and goes to the autoshop to look for Khaled. Suha turns up while he's there, her car in need of fixing yet again. Said helps her, then accidentally smashes his watch as he slams down the hood. Suha insists on driving him to a watch repair shop, which also happens to sell kamikaze videos. Suha is even more revolted when she discovers that the store sells videos documenting collaborationists' confessions and assassinations, as well. When she asks if people really want those, too, the merchant says, "Sure, fifteen shekels to buy, three to rent, for you. I could sell the collaborationists' videos for more—but that would mess up my accounts." Said then tells Suha that his father was executed for collaborating; when she expresses her sympathy, he insists that "It's not as bad as you might think," a statement that is clearly a lie. After a first and final kiss, the pair separates; it is clear that Said's feelings for Suha may cause him to reconsider the act he has sworn to undertake. It is only later, when Suha runs into Khaled—dressed exactly like Said—that she realizes what's going on, and bursts into impotent rage.

Khaled finally finds Said lying on his father's grave. After a final encounter with the terrorist group's leader—a one-man tribunal—Said gives the standard speech about being born in a refugee camp—a life worse than death—and growing up as the disgraced son of a traitor; he also explains how the occupation is responsible for collaborationists. Israel, in this construct, has forced Palestinians to become murderers in turn: It is the only way to resist, to wash away the shame. "I would rather have paradise in my head than live in this hell," he intones, begging to be given a second chance to prove his loyalty. In what is the most ambiguous part of the film, Abu-Assad shows that he truly deplores the manipulation of

these young men, yet in giving Said an uninspired, boilerplate peroration, implies at the same time that the son of a collaborationist has no choice: He must go through with both self-immolation and mass-murder if he is to wash away his father's sin—that is, with a far greater one of his own. In a sense, Abu-Assad wants it both ways: He pacifies his people with the vaseline of rhetoric, slipping in his own moral judgment at the same time.

There is at least one major piece of the suicide-bomber puzzle missing from *Paradise Now* that begs portrayal, however, especially by so gifted a filmmaker as Abu-Assad. This is the indoctrination process by which young Palestinians are persuaded to become mass-murderers through self-immolation. Yet it cannot be denied that Abu-Assad has achieved something significant: A serious, perhaps overly compassionate yet nonetheless penetrating criticism of the terrorist organizations operating in the Palestinian territories, and by extension in the Islamic world in general. The brilliance of *Paradise Now* is that it works as a movie—that is, as a suspenseful thriller—while its philosophical plea for non-violence is all the while communicated with subtlety, irony, humor, and depth of feeling. Here the artist trumps the propagandist.

The film's severest limitation, of course, is its dogged insistence on portraying Palestinians as blameless victims in the conflict. This is no small flaw. But one can rightfully ask if we can expect any more self-criticism than we get in this movie from that side of the argument. I doubt it, but I would love to be proven wrong. And I choose to hope that *Paradise Now* is only the beginning of wisdom in an area that has long lost its moral bearings, a wisdom publicly expressed by those elusive, "moderate" Muslims.

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