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'Fear of Unknown' Enters Pop Culture

by Tom Tugend
Contributing Editor

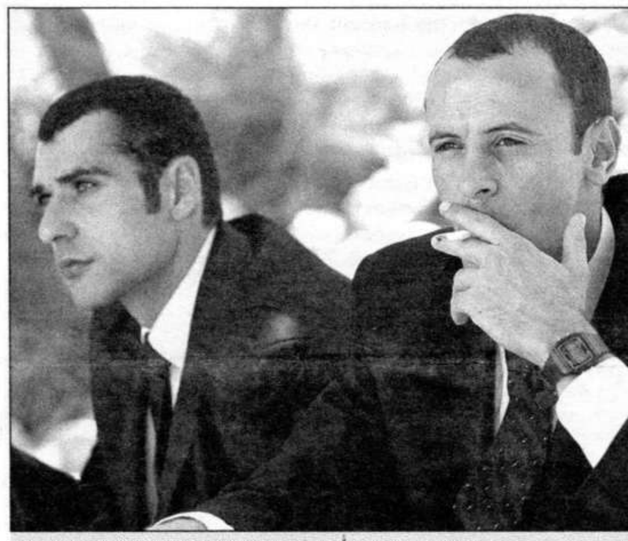
This Sunday, as America commemorates the fourth anniversary of the World Trade Center attack, films, television, plays and books are just beginning to grapple seriously with the phenomena of suicide bombings and terrorism.

The lag time between a cataclysmic experience and its absorption into the popular culture is hardly surprising.

The greatest novel about World War I, "All Quiet on the Western Front," was written 11 years after the armistice. Popular worldwide perception of the Holocaust has been shaped most graphically by "Schindler's List," which came out almost half a century after Hitler's fall.

The defining book or movie about World War II or Vietnam have yet to appear.

An initial serious cinematic stab at exploring the mind and motivation of the Muslim suicide bomber comes not from Hollywood, which has been characteristically timid about tackling Sept. 11 and its implications, but from the Palestinian/Dutch/German/French co-production, "Paradise Now."



Kasi Nashef, left, and Ali Suliman in "Paradise Now."
Photo by Seamus Murphy

When the film opens, two young Palestinian car mechanics from the West Bank city of Nablus are approached by an older man, who tells them that they have been chosen for a major suicide bombing operation in Tel Aviv.

Said (Kais Nashef) and Khaled (Ali Suliman) have been friends since childhood and apparently have been preparing for this mission almost as long.

The motivation for their self-chosen destiny is not clear immediately, but comes out gradually during long conversations and in their last "martyr's" video.

There are recollections of Israeli brutality during house searches and at checkpoints and fanciful tales of water poisoned by Israelis to deplete the sperm count of Arab men, but the overwhelming grievance seems to be an accumulation of daily humiliations.

"Death is better than inferiority," proclaims the men's handler, while also promising, truthfully, that the martyrs will be celebrated as heroes in their hometown and throughout the Arab world.

Their aggrieved feelings of humiliation come to a boiling point through what they perceive as the world's indifference to their suffering, while the Israelis "have convinced the world that *they* are the victims."

As the clock ticks down, final preparations proceed, whose anticipated tension and solemnity is surprisingly marred by touches of near-slapstick by director Hany Abu-Assad.

Bomb belts (which will explode if the carriers try to remove them) are attached to the waists with all the fussiness of a dress fitting.

Worse, while Said delivers his final words to his family and the world, stressing the great honor bestowed on him, his handler calmly munches a pita and the video photographer announced after the filming that his camera wasn't working and the whole exercise has to be repeated.

Once the two friends, bodies oiled, hair cut, wearing suits and ties, start on their mission, the planned logistics go awry. Their contact on the Israeli side, who is to drive them to Tel Aviv, doesn't show up, and the two men are separated.

Now, in what appears to be a bow to Western sensibilities and tastes, a beautiful young Arab woman enters the picture.

Suha is not only the daughter of a legendary Arab martyr who died fighting the French in Algiers, and is therefore untouchable in terrorists' eyes, she is also a sophisticated, European-educated woman active in a Palestinian human rights organization.

Said and Suha fall in love, and slowly the woman's heretical arguments — "What if there is no paradise?" she asks — weaken Said's resolve and faith in his mission.

He passes up a chance to board one targeted Israeli bus because he sees a baby inside, and, in a final nail-biting scene, it is left uncertain whether he will blow up a Tel Aviv bus with Israeli soldiers aboard.

"Paradise Now," mostly shot in Nablus during the height of the intifada, is well acted and produced. At its best, the film gives a believable insight into what makes a suicide bomber, whose supply seems to be unlimited, tick.

That the film fails to follow the protagonists' mission to its logical and horrifying end spares the Western viewer from confronting the ultimate results of the bombers' work in Jerusalem, London,

Baghdad, Madrid and New York.

Other movies, both mainstream and independent, are starting to deal with a world in which the enemy is not a uniformed presence but the shadowy, even invisible, suicide bomber.

Steven Spielberg calls this growing dread in Western nations the "paranoia of the unknown," and infuses this feeling in his blockbuster, "The War of the Worlds."

As the fear of the unknown spreads, so do conspiracy theories to explain the unexplainable.

A historical example is that venerable forgery, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," which posits a global Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world.

The old, discredited tale has been brought up to date by blaming "Jews and Zionists" for plotting Sept. 11. In his upcoming film, "The Protocols of Zion," director Marc Levin explores the old/new hate and zealotry underlying the revival of the worn canard.

Television viewers will get their first sustained, if fictional, look at Muslim terror in December, when the 10-part "Sleeper Cell" debuts on the Showtime cable channel.

Eerily reminiscent of the British-born terrorists who bombed London's subway system in July, the Muslim cell of the TV series is based in Los Angeles and its hit list includes LAX, UCLA, the Rose Bowl and the San Onofre nuclear facilities.

The cell is led by the brutal, yet personable, Farik, played by Israeli actor Oded Fehr. To heighten the irony, Farik/Fehr operates under the cover of an observant Jew, who regularly attends a West Los Angeles synagogue.

However, the cell has been infiltrated by a black Muslim and undercover FBI Agent Darwyn, played by Michael Ealy ("Barbershop").

The plot and cast thus set up a "good" Muslim as counterweight to the "bad" Muslims, and the producers have further hedged their PC bets by making most of the Islamic terrorists Europeans and Americans, rather than Arabs or Asians.

"Sleeper Cell" is likely to generate plenty of heated controversy, as witnessed by the experience of Fox's long-running "24" TV series, starring Kiefer Sutherland as counterterrorist agent Jack Bauer.

In one episode last March, an American Muslim terrorist group gains control of a nuclear plant, causing a meltdown. In the course of the operation, the group's leader fatally shoots his wife, tries to kill his son, kidnaps the secretary of defense and attempts to behead him on live television.

After strong protests by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Sutherland gave an on-air "clarification" to the effect that the American Muslim community had denounced terrorism.

On the theater stage, often the first venue for probing examinations of burning issues, there appears to be a dearth of plays by major writers.

In "Romance," coming to the Taper Forum in October, David Mamet takes a largely farcical look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but without getting deeply into the terrorism issue.

Some of the most intriguing work has been done by British playwright Robin Soans, whose London hit, "Talking to Terrorists," uses the verbatim observations of terrorists and their families to try to get inside the head of the fanatic.

Soans used the same technique in his earlier play, "The Arab-Israeli Cookbook," performed recently at Hollywood's small Met Theatre.

Despite the innocuous title, the play delved deeply into the motivations and price of terrorism.

In Israel, whose artists and writers are more willing to examine the raw wounds of the conflict than their American counterparts, the play, "Plonter" ("Tangle" in Hebrew), is forcing viewers to examine the grievances and miseries of both sides.

Between Sept. 11 and the July 7 subway bombings in London this year, British and American novelists had tried to fathom the emotional and civic impact of terrorism on their societies and peer into the future.

Their prophecies are hardly encouraging as they paint a world of sharply curtailed civil liberties and constant alerts.

To paraphrase Lincoln Steffens, these writers "have seen the future, and it doesn't work."

In a recent overview of the terror-themed genre, The New York Times recommended the following five works of fiction:

"Saturday" by Ian McEwan, "Incendiary" by Chris Cleave, "Specimen Days" by Michael Cunningham and "Ghost Town: Tales of Manhattan Then and Now" by Patrick McGrath.

The fifth recommendation harks back to an earlier terror, the London blitz of World War II, when Graham Greene wrote "The Ministry of Fear." The Times describes the book as a "template for today's anxieties."

Readers have a wider selection among nonfiction books. Amazon.com lists some two dozen works, with such titles as "Dying to Kill," "My Life Is a Weapon," "What Motivates Suicide Bombers" and "Dying to Win."

One of the best, judging by various reviews, is "The Road to Martyr's Square: A Journey Into the World of the Suicide Bomber" by UC Santa Barbara scholar Anne Marie Oliver and Paul Steinberg (Oxford University Press).

Oliver and Steinberg lived in Gaza for some six years, starting with the first intifada in 1987, and managed to interview some of the top Hamas leadership.

They trace the history of suicide bombing from medieval times through Japan's kamikaze pilots in World War II, the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka to the present Middle East and worldwide proliferation.

The motivations of the suicide bombers are diverse, say the authors, and include "religion, nationalism, grievance, fame, glory, money ... and they have to have an entire system that supports their actions."

Whatever the motivation, the effectiveness of the suicide bomber is undisputed. The 160 such bombings in Israel during the past five years constitute only 0.6 percent of all attacks — but half of all Israeli casualties during that time.

"The suicide bomber is the smartest of smart bombs," explains Boaz Ganor, head of the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Israel. "He can look around and decide when he can maximize the terror, maximize the casualties."

"Romance" by David Mamet, Oct. 9-Nov. 13 (previews begin Sept. 29) at the Mark Taper Forum, call (213) 628-2772. "Sleeper Cell" on Showtime, beginning in December. www.showtime.com. "Protocols of Zion" opens Oct. 21. "Paradise Now" opens Oct. 28. ■