

## Film Review

### GUY RITCHIE'S *THE COVENANT*

Jonathan Lighter

In 2009 – eight years into the Afghan war – the U.S. State Department established a Special Immigration Visa (SIV) program to grant refuge in America to Afghan interpreters and their families who feared for their safety after providing “faithful and valuable service” to the United States. Some 50,000 local interpreters and guides worked for U.S. forces between 2001 and 2021.

The need to escape the Taliban was real, sometimes urgent. As Ritchie tells us in this frequently gripping action film, some 300 interpreters are known to have been murdered; all, in principle, were marked for death as traitors by Taliban edict. According to one estimate in 2014, “an Afghan interpreter was being killed every 36 hours.”<sup>1</sup> Processing of visa requests, however, was agonizingly slow: by the end of 2020 the *average* visa might be held up for two years owing to the usual inefficiency, “extreme vetting,” COVID, and the Trump administration’s cutbacks to the program. Between 2009 and the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, only some 22,000 Afghan interpreters, plus their immediate family members, had succeeded in emigrating to the U.S. under the SIV program.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of the American withdrawal in 2021, many thousands of interpreters and their families had been unable to reach the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Guy Ritchie’s *The Covenant* is all about an Afghan interpreter and his American sergeant, and it sports the name of its English producer-director in part to set it off from earlier, unrelated

*Covenants*. Ritchie in a long career has been known for the frenetically inconsequential. The title of *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*, his first hit (1998), fairly suggests his devil-may-care brand. But with co-writers Ivan Atkinson and Marn Davies, a less flamboyant Ritchie this time puts together a double-barreled survival-and-rescue thriller hitting all the requisite notes but exhibiting, amid gunfire and explosions, unusual sobriety and substance. *Covenant*, Ritchie's fourteenth picture, is his most accomplished.

It's 2018 at Bagram Air Base, in the seventeenth weary year of the Global War on Terror. Jake Gyllenhaal, last seen in battle dress in *Jarhead* (2005), is paired with Iraqi-born Dar Salim – once the sadistic Qotho in *Game of Thrones* and a familiar presence in European films. They're perfectly cast as indomitable characters, delivering strong, convincing, and now and again subtle performances (Salim is especially good at nuanced physicality).

Gyllenhaal, as Master Sergeant John Kinley, leads a six-man team that ferrets out and destroys Taliban munition sites and bomb factories, an endless task he compares to "moving sand around in a sandbox," a clear if oblique nod to the quagmire of Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> The taciturn interpreter Ahmed Abdullah (Salim) joins Kinley's team after his predecessor was killed by a truck-borne IED. Ahmed, it develops, was once in the Taliban-sponsored heroin trade, but that was before the jihadists killed his son: for five years now he's worked for the Americans to support his family. The strong-willed Ahmed can read the locals and the landscape in ways his wary-at-first sergeant can't. ("You're here to translate." "Actually, I'm here to interpret.") Nor is he reluctant to challenge the frustrated, by-the-book Kinley – to the benefit of both. Kinley is tough, but Ahmed, the second lead, is possibly tougher, and it takes a gunpoint facedown to prove the sergeant is the alpha dog in fact as well as in principle. That (because it's a movie) is

the first step to their becoming real comrades in arms. But *Covenant* never turns into the sort of lightweight buddy film one might have expected from Guy Ritchie at war.

Then comes a disastrous raid on a Taliban arms warehouse and bomb factory in an old mine whose outdoor steel structures dwarf men and vehicles. The extras on Kinley's team are soon wiped out in a cruel and adroitly filmed firefight, but John and Ahmed escape to the tall timber with the Talibs in hot pursuit. The desperation of their headlong run is enhanced considerably by impeccable direction and by cinematography from Ed Wild's handheld cameras and flying drones.

The ensuing do-or-die endeavors could succeed only in fiction. In the first and most agonizing, Ahmed hauls a gravely wounded, semiconscious Kinley on a *travois*, then concealed in a pickup, and finally hidden in a big two-wheeled handcart a hundred clicks back to base through the forbidding and Taliban-heavy Hindu Kush. Wild's airborne cameras circling over the wilderness make emphatic the pair's isolation and vulnerability. Ahmed's feat is possibly superhuman, but he's up to it. That's because, besides directing attention to the unsung interpreters who risked their necks for the U.S., *The Covenant* is at heart a survival actioner: there are the hairbreadth escapes, billowing blasts, and faceless bad guys mowed down like dominoes. But nobody over the age of twelve should be seduced for long by the action thrills: the unglamorous one-on-one violence, when it happens, is believable and brutally impactful.

Guy Ritchie's *The Covenant* is heavy with atmosphere: sandy plains, mountain forests, and impoverished cities, with the Taliban threat everywhere. Complementing Wild's fluid cinematography are music director Chris Benstead's somber bass fiddles and swooping, atonal cellos, breaking now and again into drum-backed, vaguely Asian passages. Benstead's score keeps the occasional cliché mayhem, from detracting from the film's brooding tone.

As for Ritchie's Taliban fighters, they're exactly the adventure villains the story demands: implacable, numerous, and interchangeable behind their turbans and bandit head scarves. But for a change, beyond sheer malevolence, they exude actual dedication rather than the trance-like fanaticism of puppets or orcs.

Ahmed delivers John to Bagram Air Base. After a comatose hospital stay, Kinley comes home for convalescent leave to his wife, kids, and family business in Santa Clarita. Restless and haunted by survivor guilt, however, his (overlong) flashback nightmares won't let him resign himself to either home life or stoicism. They're not PTSD, though: they're hero-level pangs of conscience, loyalty, and gratitude. Adversity has made John and Ahmed closer than brothers – as Kinley fully understands when he's told that Ahmed and his wife and infant are now in hiding to stay alive. His bone-deep sense of responsibility is a "curse," because it equals his love for his family. Kinley spends weeks on the phone on hold, slowly going crazy from failing to get clueless bureaucrats to act on the Abdullah family's life-or-death visa request. His supportive wife (Emily Beecham) suggests mortgaging the house to finance a private return incognito to Afghanistan, because "We *all* owe this man your life." And they do.

Kinley's sense of honor alone forces him to clear a moral debt that Washington is too bollixed up to redeem. Kinley's CO, Colonel Vokes (Jonny Lee Miller with a Yank accent) helps the scheme along because (remember, it's a movie) Kinley once saved *his* life and now emphatically reminds him that the colonel too is "a man who pays his debts." Speaking slowly as his eyes pop with angry determination, Kinley vows, "I will get that man and his family out of the position we have put him in."

Kinley's loyalty and determination prove as extraordinary as Ahmed's, and his second journey through Afghanistan, incognito, is as gripping as the first. Their reunion on a dusty street is maximally understated. There is, however, still runnin' and gunnin' ahead.

Vokes comes through with the SIVs and (still a movie) U. S. passports, delivered by a private contractor's attack helicopter moments after a climactic gun battle atop the Darunta Dam.<sup>5</sup> Vokes's influence over the State Department, in other words, is quite as epic as Ahmed and Kinley's capacity to save each other.<sup>6</sup> Though Vokes's wire-pulling produces documents for Ahmed and his family in comparatively no time, the tension generated by Kinley's quest makes it feel like forever. In a good way.

Virtually silent are the final, slow-mo sequences of the pair, along with Ahmed's wife and child, airborne to the United States, as though words could express nothing worth saying, but a solemn nod says everything. These brothers in arms are bound by such mutual respect and accord they may never need to speak words to each other again.

The end credits roll past photos of GIs and their interpreter allies – some of whose faces must now be obscured for their protection. This is one more touch that makes *Covenant* so cinematically convincing: many viewers assume it's a "true story" or at least based on one. "Surely," writes one IMDb commenter, "there are real events similar to what we see in the film." "We know the story is true," says another. "An incredible true story," says an established reviewer.<sup>7</sup> Well, no. But the assumption reveals a latent, romantic faith in the prevalence of dauntless altruism and extraordinary devotion.

The bond forged between those who have repeatedly faced adversity and death together is said to be one of the strongest humans can feel. Few films have dramatized this

bond as intensely as *Guy Ritchie's The Covenant*, in which it is war's sole redeeming quality – and sometimes its most lingering curse.

Possibly the earliest film to portray a veteran heading on his own for a war zone to rescue a comrade was Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978). The genre continued (with more veterans) in Ted Kotcheff's *Uncommon Valor* (1983) and Joseph Zito's *Missing in Action* (1984). The first one-man rescue in Afghanistan was pulled off against the Soviets by Sylvester Stallone in the fantastical *Rambo III* (1988), "dedicated," says a title screen, "to the gallant people of Afghanistan." In that picture the mumbling Green Beret superman rescues his former CO (Richard Crenna), in country to aid the *mujahadin*. Rambo alone wreaks more havoc on the enemy than could most infantry companies. Blessedly, Ritchie's *Covenant* – a far more sober fantasy – ain't that kind of picture.

Because for a modern adventure film, *The Covenant* is more or less restrained. Ritchie walks the mandatory line between realism and melodrama: a paradigm case of that approach is John Sturges's *The Great Escape* (1963). You're pretty certain to suspend your disbelief in Ritchie's film, at least if you've never been in the military. And for those willing to suspend disbelief, *Covenant* is a human, relentless, compelling fiction.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>T.A. Frail, "The Tragic Fate of the Afghan Interpreters the U.S. Left Behind," *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 2016, <https://smithsonianmag.com/history/traigic-fate-afghan-interpreters-left-behind-180960785>.

<sup>2</sup>Rahim Faiez and Ben Fox, "Afghans who helped U.S. now fear being left behind," *AP*, May 17, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-immigration-lifestyle-travel-government-and-politics-20a9a1cae472008c1384caac4a1eb1b9>; Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of State, "Information Report: Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Metrics," September 2022, <https://www.stateoig.gov/report/aud-mero-22-38>); Sayad Jalal Sajjan, "Betrayed: The Afghan interpreters abandoned by the U.S.," *Aljazeera*, June 13, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/6/13/betrayed-the-afghan-interpreters-abandoned-by-the>; Maureen Groppe, "Pence aide blames Stephen Miller for 'devastating' visa system for Afghans," *USA Today*, August 21, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/08/21/mike-pence-aide-blames-stephen-miller-wrecking-afghan-visa-system/8228495002/>; Mark C. Storella, "How Trump broke the system that offers protection to Afghan allies," *The Hill*, August 31, 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/570076-how-trump-broke-the-system-that-offers-protection-to-afghan-allies/>."

<sup>3</sup>Yet by 2023, more than 88,000 Afghan refugees were reportedly resettled in the United States under a variety of programs. Aline Barros, "Tens of Thousands of Afghans Work Their Way Through US Immigration System," *VOA*, Dec. 25, 2022, <https://wwwvoanews.com/a/tens-of-thousands-of-afghans-work-their-way-through-us-immigration-system-/6868891>.

<sup>4</sup>Kinley's team, woefully understrength for real life, appears to be an Explosive Ordnance Disposal platoon, like that of Kathryn Bigelow's award-winning but procedurally misleading *The Hurt Locker* (2012); criticizing Hollywood's want of military verisimilitude is rarely worthwhile, but it's hard to brush off the team's two unarmored, roofless HMMVs tooling through ambush country. (None of the flaws should be blamed on military advisor Kawa Mawlayee, who saw 21 years of service as the only Afghan-American Green Beret and appears briefly in the film.)

<sup>5</sup>Actually Spain's Valdorío Reservoir.

<sup>6</sup>Also hard to swallow is the ease with which Sergeant O'Brady (Alexander Ludwig), in California, can contact Ahmed's sleazy, Taliban-adjacent brother who'll direct Kinley to Ahmed's whereabouts.

<sup>7</sup>"Guy Ritchie's *The Covenant*: User Reviews" *IMDb*, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4873118/reviews?sort=userRating&dir=desc&ratingFilter=0>; Dan Mecca, "Guy Ritchie's *The Covenant*," *The Film Stage*, April 18, 2023, <https://thefilmstage.com/guy-ritchies-the-covenant-review-dar-salim-shines-in-military-action-throwback/>.