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A Triptych on HUMINT: Bethlehem-Omar-The Green Prince

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, April 2nd, 2014

It is fascinating and no coincidence that right now, there are not one, but three feature films in circulation that concern the relationship between a teenage Palestinian recruit and his Israeli secret service (Shin Bet) handler. Two of the films are narrative features, and one is a documentary. All three are political thrillers. Two are directed by Israelis, and one is directed by a Palestinian. Each of the films has earned impressive accolades. I am referring, of course, to *Bethlehem*, *Omar*, and *The Green Prince*. If you are in search of the truth of the situation on the ground, it certainly is interesting to compare and contrast three such variations on a theme.

Bethlehem was the winner of Israel's Ophir Award for Best Picture, and it was Israel's official submission for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. It is adeptly directed by Yuval Adler, an Israeli Jew who served in army intelligence, and it is based on the screenplay that he co-authored with Ali Waked, a Muslim journalist and activist with ties in Ramallah and Gaza. They researched the story together over many years. *Bethlehem* tells the heart-wrenching story of the relationship between Sanfur, a 17-year-old Palestinian informer, and Razi, his paternal Shabak handler. Razi is so protective of his relationship with Sanfur that the lines between his personal and professional allegiances become blurred. Director Adler recounts that an Israeli secret service agent once told him, "The key to recruiting and running informants is not violence, or intimidation, or money. The key is to develop an intimate relationship with the informant, on a very human level. It's not just the informant who is confused about his identity and loyalties, the agent, too — and especially the good ones — often experience a blurring of the lines."

After watching *Bethlehem*, the dominant impression is one of entrapment — of two ancestral brothers bound by a love of biblical proportions. Like Cain and Abel, their relationship holds the seeds of their mutual destruction. *Bethlehem* builds to a fevered and inevitable conclusion, with a final image so horrific that it will resound in your imagination long after the closing credits.

Omar, from writer-director Hany Abu-Assad, is the Palestinian film that garnered the coveted Academy Award-nomination for Best Foreign Language Film this past year. It is the second time that a film by Abu-Assad has received such recognition; *Paradise Now*, Abu-Assad's controversial film that tells the story about two youths planning a suicide bombing, was his first nomination back in 2006. As a young man, Abu-Assad was impressed by Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and the notion that "while oppressors can make your life difficult, they cannot kill your spirit," as he remarked in a prior interview with Christa Case Bryant for the [Christian Science Monitor](#).

A variant on this theme, *Omar* is Abu-Assad's tale of a teenage freedom fighter who is coerced to collaborate with an Israeli agent. The restless Omar has none of the affection for his Israeli handler, Agent Rami, that Sanfur has for Razi in *Bethlehem*. Omar agrees to collaborate as a necessary means to an end: in order to secure his own release from prison and to return home so that he may protect his beloved, Nadia, whose life, Omar has good cause to fear, he has put at risk. *Omar* is a tragedy that consciously recalls *Romeo and Juliet*, with Omar scrambling up and over the "isolation wall" that divides Omar from his intended. Abu-Assad observes, "Jumping over the wall is part of daily life in Palestine ... the isolation wall is not being built as a border between Israel and the West Bank, but is actually being built in a way that separates Palestinians from themselves, [and] sometimes even divides a Palestinian town into two parts." A confession from a friend about how a government agent had tried to use a personal secret to coerce him into collaborating was the kernel that inspired Abu-Assad to pen this fictional tale of betrayal and Palestinians under attack, besieged by paranoia from without and within. One cannot help but be struck by the remarkable similarity in the endings of the two films, *Omar* and *Bethlehem*.



*Mosab Hassan Yousef aka The Green Prince, and Gonen Ben Yitzhak, his Shin Bet handler. **The Green Prince.***

The Green Prince, from Israeli director, Nadav Schirman, is the real-life documentary thriller profiling the relationship between Mosab Hassan Yousef, the eldest son of a top Hamas leader, and Gonen Ben Yitzhak, his true-life Shin Bet handler. The film premiered on opening night of the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, and it received the Audience Award in the World Documentary Competition. (It has since been optioned to be remade as a narrative feature film, so we can anticipate at least one more film to add to the trove.) Born and raised as a Muslim extremist "to hate and kill all Jews" (Mosab's own words), he was being groomed as his father's successor. Mosab was recruited as a teenager to spy on his own people under the code name of "The Green Prince," and he described his experience as a collaborator with the Israeli government for over ten years in his memoir, "Son of Hamas." As a captive in an Israeli prison, Mosab saw first-hand the randomness of torture perpetuated by Hamas prison leaders, and he began to question his allegiances. He came to fear that "cowards, in the name of courage, were leading an entire nation to [its] death." In recruiting Mosab, Gonen explains, "It was as if we were recruiting the son of the Prime Minister ... He was not just a source; he was there for us all the time." Their unlikely partnership led to the arrest of top terrorist masterminds, prevented multiple suicide bombings, and uncovered critical secrets. "I came to see my recruitment as a chance to be a hero, but Allah had other plans for me," Mosab remarks in the opening of the *The Green Prince*, foreshadowing the strange twists to be revealed.

What differentiates each of the three films most profoundly is the point of view of the various protagonists regarding their allegiances. In *Omar*, the recruit's allegiance is personal, first and foremost; Omar is loyal to his love. In *Bethlehem*, the dual allegiances of the protagonists catalyze impossible conflicts at every turn. Only Mosab and Gonen, the real-life protagonists of *The Green Prince*, somehow manage to escape unscathed from the deadly game in which they were both, for a time, willing players. For Mosab, as well as Gonen, loyalty to personal conscience will come to supersede all other competing loyalties — be these political, professional, or personal. These two men evolve to a place where they are each heeding the directives of their own moral compass. Most surprisingly, having endured such a crucible, their relationship becomes forged as strong as steel.



*Omar (Adam Bakri) and Nadia (Leem Lubany), Hany Abu-Assad's **Omar**. Photo courtesy of Adopt Films.*

The fictional stories leave me feeling empathy and despair, feelings that I imagine resonate truthfully on both sides of the divide for the vast majority of Palestinians and Israelis and their mutual supporters. Ironically, it is the documentary that tells the story that is the most hopeful and uplifting. The documentary uses an exceptional case to hint at the possibility for deep reconciliation that so many of us have discounted as beyond our grasp. So many have come to believe that the prospect of peace in our lifetimes will tragically remain no more than a figment of our dreams. Three stories with similar premises, filtered through three markedly different lenses, provide three unique perspectives illuminating a critical reality for Israelis and Palestinians on the ground in the present time.

*For more information: **Bethlehem** official website, **Omar** official website, and **The Green Prince** on IMDb.*

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*Top Image: Ravi (Tsahi Halevi) and Sanfur (Sahdi Marei), Yuval Adler's **Bethlehem**. Photo courtesy of Adopt Films.*

**HUMINT, or human intelligence, is intelligence gathered by means of interpersonal contact.*

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