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Movie Review

First a Bombing, Then a Truth That's Elusive

By [MANOHLA DARGIS](#)

“[The Attack](#)” opens with the image of a man and woman embracing, the world blurred behind them. Her face to the camera, the woman cries as they hold each other, but it's unclear whether he can see her tears. Her unexplained weeping and the ill-defined backdrop make an apt start for this [intelligent, involving movie](#) that's by turns a murder mystery and a politically charged argument about contemporary [Palestinian](#) identity. That it's also about a troubled marriage becomes evident when the man, a successful Palestinian surgeon living and working in Tel Aviv, is awoken one night and discovers that both his wife and his safe, cosseted world have disappeared after a suicide bombing.

Wholly assimilated, at least as far as he's concerned, the surgeon, Amin (Ali Suliman), has risen high in his field, progress that has come with the support of his Jewish colleagues. One token of his success is an Israeli award he accepts soon after the story opens, the first — as he lightly reminds his audience — given to an Arab in 41 years. If he's fazed by this, he doesn't say; mostly he seems gratified, and happy. Whether he means anything substantial by this seemingly casual nod at the past — specifically the 1970s, an era of spectacular terrorist attacks like that of the Palestinian group Black September on Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics — it subtly, and necessarily, widens the movie's historical framework.

Given how skillfully the Lebanese director [Ziad Doueiri](#) navigates the story's political backdrop and its source material, it's a fair guess that he knows the effect raising the past will have. (The movie, which is neither pro- nor anti-Israel, has been [banned](#) in Lebanon.) The genesis for the movie is a 2005 novel of the same title by Yasmina Khadra, the pen name of [Mohammed Moulessehoul](#), a former Algerian army officer living in France. The movie, written by Mr. Doueiri and his wife, Joëlle Touma, retains much of what's good in the book, including Amin's forced confrontation with the past, which begins the night he's called back to the hospital where he works. Minutes later, he is standing in a morgue and pulling a sheet off the mangled corpse of his wife, Siham (Reymonde Amsellem).

The Israeli police, led by the bullet-headed Captain Moshe (Uri Gavriel), believe that Siham was a suicide bomber whose stealth attack on a restaurant left nearly a dozen children dead. Horrified by this accusation, Amin insists that Siham was an innocent victim herself, a belief that crumbles in the face of mounting evidence.

After a period of mourning, he sets off to discover the truth, propelled by skepticism as well as a deep faith in Siham and their love and their marriage. Driven and then possessed by the question of her guilt — and by extension, his own — he heads off on an investigation that, as

he gathers clues, transforms into an inquiry into the burdens of moral responsibility, the costs of political neutrality (or perhaps complacency) and modern Palestinian identity.

Mr. Doueiri, whose films include “West Bank,” manages even the weightiest development delicately. In contrast to the novel, which habitually slips into polemicism and is bookended by a shock that dilutes its punch, Mr. Doueiri creates characters, emotional colors and political contradictions that have the agonized sting and breathe of life.

Using Mr. Suliman’s nuanced turn as ballast — this is what a lonely heart looks like as it shatters — Mr. Doueiri creates a foundation of realism that makes an increasingly meaningful contrast with Amin’s idealized memories of Siham. Seen in flashbacks that will come to haunt this story, she comes across as a woman who at once was a sensual lover, a beautiful bride and a smiling wife, as well as a mystery — if only to her carelessly loving husband.

*“The Attack” is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian).
Gruesome hospital scenes and discreet, adult lovemaking.*

The Attack

Opens on Friday in New York and Washington.

Directed by Ziad Doueiri; written by Mr. Doueiri and Joëlle Touma, based on the novel “L’Attentat” by Yasmina Khadra; director of photography, Tommaso Fiorilli; edited by Dominique Marcombe and Mr. Doueiri; music by Eric Neveux; art direction by Yoel Herzberg; costumes by Hamada Attallah; produced by Jean Bréhat and Rachid Bouchareb; released by Cohen Media Group. In Arabic and Hebrew, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 42 minutes.

WITH: Ali Suliman (Amin), Reymonde Amsellem (Siham), Evgenia Dodina (Kim), Uri Gavriel (Captain Moshe), Karim Saleh (Adel), Dvir Benedek (Raveed), Ruba Salameh (Faten) and Ramzi Maqdisi (the Priest).